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Sponsor of TikTok Ban & Iran-Palestine Sanctions Gets 1,400% Bump in AIPAC Donations

The 21st Century Peace through Strength Act passed the US House of Representatives on Saturday, as part of a package of bills that also included military aid to Ukraine, Israel and the Indo-Pacific.

US Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX), who sponsored the 21st Century Peace through Strength Act that passed the US House of Representatives, saw contributions to his campaign from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) increase an incredible 1,413% during the 2024 election cycle when compared to the 2022 cycle.

The 21st Century Peace through Strength Act includes the REPO Act, which enables Biden to seize Russian assets frozen in US banks and send them to Ukraine, a provision that will essentially ban TikTok from the US, sanctions against Palestinian resistance groups.

According to a statement released by McCaul when the bill was introduced, it will be “the most comprehensive sanctions against Iran [that] Congress has passed in years.” The legislation is expected to clear the Senate and be signed into law by US President Joe Biden this week.

While it is unclear if, how, or why AIPAC would push for the theft of Russian assets, the other major provisions of the bill are directly related to issues AIPAC and other pro-Israeli lobbying groups advocate for.

The sanction provisions of the bill are self-evidently pro-Israel actions, designed explicitly to harm Israel’s adversaries in the region. The TikTok ban is slightly obscured, but the app has been blamed by politicians and Jewish groups alike for the rise in support among young people for the Palestinian cause.

In late October, US Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) called the app a “purveyor of virulent antisemitic lies,” on Twitter.

Billionaire Bill Ackman, one of Israel’s most virulent supporters who gained infamy last year after publicly doxing Ivy League students who made pro-Palestinian statements, blamed the app directly for the support of Palestine among America’s youth. “TikTok is massively manipulating public opinion," he wrote.

"Compare the generational differences on support for Hamas. 51% of the TikTok generation say that Hamas' barbaric acts are justified,” Ackman wrote on Twitter/X while saying TikTok should “probably” be banned.

Ackman’s sentiments were reflected by McCaul himself in November, when he, too, blamed TikTok and China specifically for young people turning against Israel’s actions in Gaza.

“China controls the algorithms on TikTok, so if you type in Israel or Palestine you are going to get a lot of pro-Palestinian, Hamas material and videos pop up and that's primarily the source of education for our young people,” claimed McCaul.

It is not just politicians blaming TikTok for the rise in support for Palestinians, Jewish groups have as well.

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In December, Anti-Defamation League (ADL) CEO Jonathan Greenblatt blamed TikTok for "intensifying antisemitism" and anti-Zionism.

"TikTok, if you will, is the 24/7 news channel of so many of our young people and it's like Al Jazeera on steroids, amplifying and intensifying the antisemitism and the anti-Zion[ism] with no repercussions," Greenblatt claimed on American television.

For years, McCaul was a non-entity for pro-Israel lobbying groups like AIPAC. Elected in 2004, McCaul received no contributions from pro-Israel groups until the 2020 cycle when another group, Pro-Israel America PAC contributed $32,600 to his campaign, his largest donor that year, according to Open Secrets.

The next cycle, McCaul received $7,900 from AIPAC itself in addition to another $6,000 from other pro-Israel groups. But, it was not until this year that McCaul became the Republican darling for AIPAC in the House of Representatives.

To date, McCaul has received $119,550 from AIPAC in 2024 alone, a 1,413% increase and by far his largest contributor, dwarfing the second place Axxess Technology Solutions which donated $16,600.

Open Secrets lists the "pro-Israel industry," including AIPAC, as having contributed $372,468 to McCaul's campaign overall in 2024, a 681% increase from the $47,673 in contributions he received from the "pro-Israel industry" in 2022.

This cycle, McCaul is AIPAC's top Republican recipient in the House and is the sixth overall House recipient of AIPAC funds. Only Democratic Reps. Ritchie Torres (NY), Hakeem Jeffries (NY), Kathy Manning (NC), Josh Gottheimer (NJ) and Pete Aguilar (CA) sit above McCaul on the list. All of them voted for the bill.

Of the bill's 10 co-sponsors, all Republicans, four of them list AIPAC as their top contributor for this year: Reps. Joe Wilson (SC), Mark Green (TN), Doug Lamborn (CO), and Dan Crenshaw (TX). Another co-sponsor, Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (PA) lists AIPAC as his second-largest contributor. Only Delegate Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen from American Samoa, who does not have voting rights in the House, and US Rep. Maria Salazar (FL) co-sponsored the bill without taking campaign contributions from AIPAC or any other pro-Israel group.

Sputnik emailed McCaul's campaign for comment on the increase in AIPAC contributions, but did not receive a response by press time.

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Privacy Concerns About TikTok Are 'Absurd'

On Saturday, the US House of Representatives passed the 21st Century Peace through Strength act, which will, among other things, force TikTok parent company ByteDance to sell the app or face a ban inside the United States.

The US Government's assertion that its potential TikTok ban is designed to protect the privacy of Americans is absurd, journalist and podcaster Peter Coffin told Sputnik's Fault Lines on Monday.

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“If you’re talking about privacy concerns, our [domestic] social networks are not guarding our privacy. That is a silly, silly prospect. It’s absurd. It’s an entirely hypocritical idea, and I can’t stand the whole thing,” Coffin explained.

On Saturday, the US House of Representatives passed a bill that requires TikTok parent company ByteDance to sell the app within a year or face a ban in the United States.

The primary justification for the proposed ban has been to protect American citizens, particularly children, from the dangers of Chinese data collection and algorithm manipulation.

“All of that data that your child is inputting and receiving is being stored somewhere in Beijing,” Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA) said in 2022.

TikTok has since offloaded user data collection and storage to the US-based Oracle systems in an attempt to placate US lawmakers through a $1.5 billion initiative called Project Texas.

ByteDance is also no longer a Chinese company, with its ownership split between international investors (60%), its Chinese co-founders (20%) and its employees, including roughly 7,000 Americans (20%).

While ByteDance’s headquarters is located in Beijing, the US government has not provided any proof that the Chinese government is tracking US citizens using the app or manipulating what Americans see through its algorithm.

Nevertheless, US lawmakers insist their ban is focused on protecting Americans.

“It’s not just the content you upload to TikTok, but all the data on your phone — other apps, all your personal information, even facial imagery, even where your eyes are looking on your phone,” Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) told US media that same year.

In January, Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) released unclassified letters he received from the Pentagon, confirming that the National Security Agency (NSA) has been purchasing the web browsing history of Americans through data brokers, information they’d normally need a warrant to obtain.

While most American social media companies claim that they no longer sell user data, the reality is much more murky. Meta* for example, gives third-party developers on its platforms privileged access to user data, which is how Cambridge Analytica developers were able to access so much user information on Facebook before the massive data leak scandal in 2018.

Chris Hoofnagle, a Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, compared it to “too clever by half criminals,” that “might ‘sell’ a massage but bestow a sex act, or avoid ‘selling’ drugs by trading them for guns. Such trades for value don’t confuse the police, nor should they fool us.”

Coffin says the privacy issue has “zero” to do with the ban. “Take it back to our social networks. Our social networks don’t care about privacy,” Coffin argues. “The idea that the problem is privacy is absurd. It is [Sinophobia].”

“This bill won’t stop this data sharing, and will instead reduce our rights online,” Jason Kelley and Paige Collings said in an article for the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) in March. “User data will still be collected by numerous platforms–possibly even TikTok after a forced sale–and it will still be sold to data brokers who can then sell it elsewhere, just as they do now.”

Instead, the real reason the US Government is going after TikTok is because it wants to control speech on that platform like it does to entities based in the US.

“Just go back to the Twitter files,” Coffin said. “You have plenty of evidence that they were able to push Twitter to do exactly what they wanted in terms of boosting content or banning content.”

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“I think a lot of this has to do with what is taking place in Israel and Gaza in regards to this push [of] ‘we need more control over this platform.’ But more to the point, they want control. It’s not about protection.”

According to Open Secrets, Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX), who sponsored the bill, has seen a 1413% increase in campaign contributions from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) for the 2024 election cycle compared to the 2022 cycle.

“China controls the algorithms on TikTok, so if you type in Israel or Palestine you are going to get a lot of pro-Palestinian, Hamas material and videos pop up and that's primarily the source of education for our young people,” McCaul claimed in November.

Ultimately the bill represents an assault on free speech, Coffin and the EFF agree.

“We're talking about pointing at a single company and saying you're the problem. We have very little precedent of that with something that isn't violating any explicit laws that is on the books for everyone,” Coffin explained. “That's a big problem in terms of freedom of speech, and the justification is very flimsy because it's a single company,” he said earlier.

“Instead of passing this overreaching and misguided bill, Congress should prevent any company — regardless of where it is based — from collecting massive amounts of our detailed personal data, which is then made available to data brokers, U.S. government agencies, and even foreign adversaries, China included,” Kelley and Collings argued.

*Meta is banned in Russia for extremist activities.

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US Goes 'Slippery Slide' With Sending Its Military Personnel to Ukraine

On Saturday, Pentagon spokesman Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said that the US is considering sending more US advisors to Ukraine in non-combat roles. Anonymous sources told US media the troops will be used to support logistics, maintenance and aid oversight.

Troops from the US and other NATO countries will be in Ukraine fighting Russian troops within a year, security and international relations expert Mark Sleboda predicted on Sputnik’s The Critical Hour on Monday.

“We (The United States) were at trainers and advisers and CIA and special forces [in Ukraine], and now already, we’re at logistics and maintenance personnel. It’s quite clear where this is going,” Sleboda began. “US troops and [troops] from several other NATO member states will most likely be on the ground in Ukraine fighting the Russians within a year.”

On Saturday, the US House of Representatives passed a bill that includes $61 billion earmarked to support Ukraine, however, Sleboda explains that it will not have a major effect on the battlefield.

“It will, maybe, slow Russian forces down a little bit. That's the extent of what the $61 billion [will do]. And, in another six months or perhaps a year, they'll be back, demanding more from the US taxpayer to try to prop up the Kiev regime a little longer.”

One underreported aspect of the bill is that a large portion of it is going towards replenishing US weapon stockpiles and not weapons that will end up on the battlefield in Ukraine.

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"I would say, that of the $61 billion, actually only $14 billion of that is going to go to Ukraine for direct military aid and weapons," Sleboda explained. "It sounds like a lot of money, it's really not considering that just one Patriot battery of 6 to 8 launchers costs more than $1 billion, and they've already lost several of them."

The Patriot surface-to-air missile system is considered the most advanced anti-aircraft system in Ukraine's arsenal. However, the first confirmed Russian destruction of a Patriot system occurred back in May 2023. Since then, several more have been taken out, including two last month.

The reports of an increased US presence in Ukraine were presented as"they're going to be working out of the US embassy," in Kiev, Sleboda said, but that assertion is far from reality, he argued.

"I'm not quite sure how big the US embassy is in Kiev, but I doubt it's enough to set up a maintenance workshop for, I don't know, Abrams tanks or something like that," Sleboda jokes. "So it almost certainly means that these US troops will be out and about in Ukraine, probably not too far from the front line. And you can certainly see the slippery slide."

While the aid shows that, despite some hype in the media, the US is not"giving up on Ukraine," Sleboda notes that it doesn't change the calculus for the Russian government, who expected the aid to pass last year after US President Joe Biden requested it in August.

"You already have Ukrainian military commanders speaking anonymously, of course, to the Financial Times, saying that this isn't actually going to change much," Sleboda recounted. "The reality is, US aid was flowing freely to the Kiev regime, up until this autumn, and that includes the massive build-up of arms trading and everything else that was used to launch the Kiev regime's failed counter-offensive in the South that was just mauled, demolished by Russian defenses without even penetrating one of Russia's defensive lines."

The most the aid will do, Sleboda reiterated, is "protract the fighting and to make Ukraine's agony that much longer and more drawn out."

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Michael McCaul (R-TX) who sponsored the 21st Century Peace through Strength Act that passed the US House of Representatives and is expected to pass the Senate and be signed into law by US President Joe Biden this week, saw American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) contributions to his campaign increase an incredible 1413% during the 2024 election cycle compared to the 2022 cycle.

Elected in 2004, McCaul received no contributions from pro-Israel groups until the 2020 cycle when another group, Pro-Israel America PAC contributed $32,600 to his campaign, his largest donor that year, according to Open Secrets.

The next cycle, McCaul received $7,900 from AIPAC itself (in addition to another $6,000 from other pro-Israel groups). But it was not until this year that McCaul became the Republican darling for AIPAC in the House of Representatives. In 2024 – so far– he has received $119,550 from AIPAC, by far his largest contributor.

In November, McCaul blamed TikTok for the rise in support among young people for Palestinians.

"China controls the algorithms on TikTok, so if you type in Israel or Palestine you are going to get a lot of Pro-Palestinian, Hamas material and videos pop up and that's primarily the source of education for our young people," he said.

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primary justification for the proposed ban has been to protect American citizens, particularly children, from the dangers of Chinese data collection and algorithm manipulation.

But that doesn't hold up to scrutiny, says Coffin.

"Just go back to the Twitter files," Coffin said. "You have plenty of evidence that they were able to push Twitter to do exactly what they wanted in terms of boosting content or banning content."

"I think a lot of this has to do with what is taking place in Israel and Gaza in regards to this push [of] 'we need more control over this platform.' But more to the point, they want control. It's not about protection."

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University of Minnesota Police Arrest Nine at Pro-Palestine Encampment

WASHINGTON, April 24 (Sputnik) – The University of Minnesota police arrested nine protesters on Tuesday night at an encampment set up in support of Palestine, the university confirmed on Wednesday.

"The group was asked to disperse by 7 a.m. and told they would be arrested if they chose to stay past that time," the university said in a statement. "Some of those present chose to disperse and continue peacefully protesting, but nine chose to remain and were arrested without incident," the university said in a statement, as quoted by Star Tribune.

The university police removed the tents at the encampment and the nine arrested people were charged with trespassing misdemeanors, The Star Tribune reported.

Ilhan Omar, the representative for Minnesota's 5th congressional district, made an appearance in support of the campus protests on Tuesday night. Omar's daughter Isra Hirsi, a student at Barnard College, was among those arrested last week at the Gaza Solidarity Encampment at Columbia University. Hirsi was also suspended.

Students at various private and public universities across the United States have organized pro-Palestinian protests and encampments in solidarity with their Columbia University counterparts, who first erected tents last week Wednesday to form a "Gaza Solidarity Encampment" as Columbia President Minouche Shafik testified at a congressional hearing on anti-Semitism.

The following day, Shafik authorized the New York Police Department in a controversial move to clear out the encampment, which also involved the suspension and arrest of more than 100 people. Columbia students have since resurrected an encampment and are currently facing off with the university administration.

Other universities have followed in kind by resorting to law enforcement to shut down student-led protests. On Monday night, arrests were seen at various campuses. The NYPD arrested 133 people involved with protests at New York University, including both students and faculty. Yale police arrested 47 students at an outdoor protest, and three students at Cal Poly

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Humboldt were also arrested at a student occupation of a campus building.

In general, students are calling for their universities to condemn Israel's US-backed military campaign in Gaza, to divest from companies linked to Israel, including defense manufacturers, and to discontinue study abroad programs at Israeli universities, among various demands.

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Cuba Apologizes for Sending Wrong Body After Canadian Man Dies on Vacation

WASHINGTON, April 24 (Sputnik) - Cuba apologizes and vows to investigate an incident in which the island nation mistakenly sent the wrong body to Canada instead of the body of a Canadian national who died while vacationing on the island, Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez said on Wednesday.

Canadian citizen Faraj Allah Jarjour died of a heart attack while swimming during a family vacation in Varadero Cuba on March 22. After the body was repatriated, the funeral home that was to prepare Jarjour's body for the ceremony noticed that the individual did not match the photograph provided by the family and was instead a man some 20 years younger, media reported.

"I spoke by phone with Foreign Minister [Melanie Joly] about an unfortunate incident with the transfer of the remains of a Canadian citizen who died in Cuba … Cuban authorities are investigating the case to clarify it. I conveyed my apologies and heartfelt condolences to the family and relatives of the deceased," Rodriguez said via X.

Joly wrote on social media that during the call she expressed Canada's utmost concern for the "unimaginable situation" that Jarjour's family faces. She also spoke with the family and promised to continue to assist them until the situation is resolved.

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US Senate Passes $95Bln Aid Package Bill for Ukraine, Israel, Initiatives in Indo-Pacific

WASHINGTON, April 24 (Sputnik) - The US Senate passed a foreign aid package with some $95 billion in funding for Ukraine, Israel and the Indo-Pacific region, sending the legislation to President Joe Biden's desk for finalization.

Senators passed the legislation on Tuesday evening in a vote of 79 in favor and 18 opposed.

The US House of Representatives passed the legislation on Saturday. The legislation includes approximately $61 billion in Ukraine-related funding, $26 billion in Israel-related funding and $8 billion for Indo-Pacific security initiatives. The legislation also includes measures to transfer frozen Russian sovereign assets to Ukraine and restrict access to TikTok unless it splits from its Chinese parent company.

The legislation now heads to Biden for final approval. The Biden administration is reportedly

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readying a $1 billion military aid package for Ukraine sourced from the legislation.

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FBI Director Says Chinese Government Able to Compromise Devices, Collect Data With TikTok

WASHINGTON, April 24 (Sputnik) - The Chinese government has the ability to compromise devices and collect data using the social media application TikTok, FBI Director Christopher Wray said in an interview with NBC News.

US national security officials are concerned about Chinese intelligence services collecting data and manipulating the platform's algorithm to push pro-China narratives, Wray said on Tuesday.

The Chinese government has the ability to "technically compromise" millions of electronic devices with TikTok, Wray said.

The US House of Representatives passed legislation on Saturday to restrict access to TikTok in the United States unless it divests from its Chinese parent company, ByteDance.

The US Senate is set to hold a passage vote on the legislation as soon as Tuesday evening.

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Trump Says Meeting With Ex-Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso in New York City

WASHINGTON, April 24 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump told reporters that he was hosting former Japanese Prime Minister Taro Aso in New York City for a meeting on Tuesday evening.

"We'll be talking about Japan and the United States and lots of other things also," Trump said alongside Aso.

Aso is reportedly a senior figure in Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

Trump has held a series of meetings with current and former world leaders over the last several weeks, including from the United Kingdom, Poland, and Hungary, to discuss global issues.

Trump is currently the unofficial Republican nominee for the 2024 US presidential election vote in November. He already secured the delegate votes needed during the Republican primaries to become the party's nominee, which is expected to be made official during the Republican National Convention in July.

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US Intends to Continue Sanctioning Russian Energy Sector to Dominate Market - Antonov

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WASHINGTON, April 24 (Sputnik) - The United States' intention to continue imposing sanctions on the Russian energy sector demonstrates their desire to dominate markets and prevent any possible competition, Russian Ambassador in Washington Anatoly Antonov said.

"American officials will not let up. At any occasion, they threaten us with restrictions," Antonov said. "The conclusion suggests itself. For Washington, energy security is simply the desire to dominate markets, total subordination of satellites and stopping any competition. We doubt that such approaches are viable in a multipolar world."

Earlier on Tuesday, US Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Geoffrey Pyatt said the United States will continue imposing sanctions on Russian companies involved in the country's key energy projects. Pyatt also said Washington will seek to ensure Russia has "very limited opportunities" to secure new energy markets, as European importers turn to new suppliers.

Antonov pointed out that the United States has stopped hiding the true intent behind putting pressure on Russia via these restrictive measures.

"We are not talking about any mythical aspirations to resolve the conflict in Ukraine, but about banal opportunistic and predatory ambitions," Antonov said. "There is a trivial scenario: if the Americans cannot withstand fair economic competition, sanctions are coming."

Antonov also said that the US authorities are hypocritical when they talk about an existential threat from global warming and pressure other countries to abandon fossil fuels while the United States rapidly increases production of raw materials.

"They are hooking the allies on their own gas for decades to come. At the same time, of course, such a situation is not called 'unacceptable dependence.' This, they say, is different," Antonov added.

European countries' transition to new sources of energy had progressed more quickly than expected, with Russia supplying about 40% of the European Union's natural gas in 2021 compared to 13% in 2023. That figure has since further declined.

The European Union has been facing inflation and a massive energy crisis as part of the post-pandemic global economic recession. The situation has further exacerbated against the backdrop of the Ukraine conflict and comprehensive Western sanctions against Russia, leading to supply chain disruptions and energy price spikes worldwide.

In May 2022, the European Union developed the REPowerEU plan, aiming to make the European countries independent of Russian fossil fuels.

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UPDATE-US Congressman Says Facing $500 Fine for Sharing Video of Lawmakers Waving Ukrainian Flag

(Update: adds Johnson's comment in para 4)

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Thomas Massie said on Tuesday that he faces a $500 fine for posting a video to social media of US House lawmakers waving Ukrainian flags during a passage vote on a bill with nearly $61 billion in Ukraine-related funding.

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On Saturday, the US House of Representatives passed a series of foreign aid bills, including funds for Ukraine, Israel, and Indo-Pacific partners, totaling approximately $95 billion in funding. Some House lawmakers cheered and waved Ukrainian flags on the House floor during a passage vote, drawing criticism from numerous Republican colleagues.

"Instead of fining democrats for waving flags, the House Sergeant at Arms just called and said I will be fined $500 if I don't delete this video post. [US House Speaker] Mike Johnson really wants to memory hole this betrayal of America," Massie said in a statement via social media platform X.

Users replied to Massie's post, offering to crowdfund $500 to pay the fine. However, Johnson said in reply that Massie would not be fined, following a conversation with the House Sergeant at Arms.

The House of Representatives' rules prohibit members from recording or broadcasting material on the chamber floor. Johnson also chastised members who waved Ukrainian flags for violating House decorum rules.

US Congresswoman Kat Cammack said that she is working on legislation to prohibit the display of foreign flags on the House floor in the future.

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US Senator Says Ukraine Conflict Will Lead to Mass Displacement of Christians

WASHINGTON, April 24 (Sputnik) - US Senator J.D. Vance said that he believes the conflict in Ukraine will result in the mass displacement of Ukrainian Christians, amid the Ukrainian government's targeting of certain churches.

"I believe, standing here, that this war will eventually lead to the displacement of a massive Christian community in Ukraine, and that will be our shame," Vance said on Tuesday during a speech on the Senate floor.

In March, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said that the Ukrainian authorities continued to intimidate priests and worshipers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) from December 2023 to February 2024.

On Monday, the US State Department said in its annual human rights report that there are "significant human rights issues" involving Ukrainian government officials. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy sanctioned senior UOC clergy and backed legislation to prohibit religious organizations tied to Russia from operating in Ukraine.

US journalist Tucker Carlson also said on Monday that he questioned US House Speaker Mike Johnson about supporting billions of dollars in aid for Ukraine while the Ukrainian government persecutes Christians.

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Douglas DC-4 Plane Crashes in Alaska, Casualties Unknown - Police

WASHINGTON, April 24 (Sputnik) - A Douglas DC-4 aircraft has crashed near Fairbanks, Alaska, but the number of casualties is unknown, Alaska state police said in a press release.

"The Alaska State Troopers and our local, state, and federal partners are responding to a plane crash on the Tanana River near Kallenberg Road in Fairbanks," the release said on Tuesday. "The plane is a Douglas DC-4. Please avoid the area and expect an increased first responder presence in the area."

Police said this is an active and ongoing incident and more information will be released as it becomes available.

A National Transportation Safety Board spokesperson told Sputnik that they are aware of the incident and investigators are already on their way to the site.

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Airbus Granted Waiver From Canadian Sanctions on Russian Titanium - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - Commercial aircraft company Airbus has been granted a waiver by Canada permitting it to utilize Russian titanium in its manufacturing after the country banned the metal in its latest sanctions related to the Ukrainian conflict, Reuters reported on Tuesday.

"Airbus is aware of the Canadian government imposing sanctions on VSMPO and has obtained the necessary authorisation to secure Airbus operations in compliance with the applicable sanctions," Airbus Canada is quoted as saying in the report.

The waiver will allow the company to continue operations in Canada without manufacturing delays and assuage worry that the recent sanctions could effectively ban the import of Airbus's European-built jets, which rely heavily on titanium, into Canada, according to the report.

It is unclear at this time how long the waivers will stay in effect.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 24 (Sputnik) –

DETENTION OF RUSSIAN DEPUTY DEFENSE MINISTER

* Russian Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov has been detained on suspected bribery charges, the Russian Investigative Committee said on Tuesday.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin has been informed about the detention of Ivanov, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

FOREIGN MILITARY AID TO UKRAINE

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* The Biden administration hopes the Senate will send the Ukraine aid bill to the White House this week, and President Joe Biden will sign the bill once it reaches his desk, National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Tuesday.
* The UK's new military aid to Kiev is a "desperate" attempt to change the dynamics of the conflict in Ukraine, the Russian Embassy in London said.
* The Biden administration is readying a $1 billion military aid package for Ukraine in expectation of the US Congress passing a $60.84 billion Ukraine aid bill, Reuters reported.
* Most of the $61 billion assistance package that the United States allocated to Ukraine will finance the US military industry, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

NATO NUCLEAR AGENDA

* NATO has no additional plans to deploy nuclear weapons in other countries of the alliance, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Tuesday.
* NATO countries will violate the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) by deploying nuclear weapons in Poland, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) told Sputnik.

MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS

* If Israel decides to attack Iran then "hardly anything will be left" of Israel, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said on Tuesday.
* US forces in Iraq and Syria have come under attack from Iran-backed malign militia groups for the first time since February 4, Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder confirmed.
* The suspension of funding by the United States for the UN Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) will continue until the agency makes "real progress," White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Ukrainian armed forces have suffered nearly 500 military casualties near three settlements of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) in the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Tuesday.
* The Russian forces have attacked Ukrainian air defense systems in Odesa and, presumably, a warehouse containing air defense munitions, a coordinator of the underground network in Mykolaiv, also known as Nikolayev, Sergey Lebedev, told Sputnik.
* The Russian military will more intensively target Ukrainian logistic centers and storage facilities storing Western weapons, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN PEACE TREATY

* Azerbaijan and Armenia have a common understanding of how a peace treaty should look like, but details are yet to be agreed upon, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said on Tuesday.
* Baku has agreed to hold a meeting between the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan in Kazakhstan, Aliyev said.
* There is a possibility of reaching a peace agreement between Baku and Yerevan by November, as the sides can at least agree on the deal's basic principles, Aliyev said.

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US Congressman Says Facing $500 Fine for Sharing Video of Lawmakers Waving Ukrainian Flag

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Thomas Massie said on Tuesday that he faces a $500 fine for posting a video to social media of US House lawmakers waving Ukrainian flags during the passage vote on a bill with nearly $61 billion in Ukraine-related funding.

On Saturday, the US House of Representatives passed a series of foreign aid bills, including funds for Ukraine, Israel and Indo-Pacific partners, totaling approximately $95 billion in funding. Some House lawmakers cheered and waved Ukrainian flags on the House floor during the passage vote, drawing criticism from numerous Republican colleagues.

"Instead of fining Democrats for waving flags, the House Sergeant at Arms just called and said I will be fined $500 if I don't delete this video post. [US House Speaker] Mike Johnson really wants to memory hole this betrayal of America," Massie said in a statement via social media platform X.

Users replied to Massie's post, offering to crowdfund $500 to pay the fine.

The House of Representatives' rules prohibit members from recording or broadcasting material on the chamber floor. Johnson also chastised members who waved Ukrainian flags for violating House decorum rules.

US Congresswoman Kat Cammack said that she is working on legislation to prohibit the display of foreign flags on the House floor in the future.

Subject:

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Pentagon Confirms Discussions Ongoing for 'Orderly Withdrawal' of US Troops From Niger

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The United States and Niger have begun discussions for the orderly withdrawal of US servicemen based in that Western African country, Defense Department spokesperson Patrick Ryder confirmed on Tuesday.

"What I would say is that we can confirm that discussions have begun between the United States and Niger for the orderly withdrawal of US forces from the country," Ryder said during a press briefing.

The Defense Department and the US Africa Command will participate in the withdrawal discussions with the Nigerien Government, Ryder added.

The official further said that when it came to Western Africa and the Sahel, the Pentagon would continue to monitor potential threats to ensure the protection of US personnel, assets, and interests throughout the region.

"We're going to continue to work with countries throughout the region when it comes to addressing terrorism threats throughout the region," Ryder continued.

Last month, a Nigerien military spokesperson said the country's transitional government, which took power in a coup last July, had terminated the military agreement with the United States with immediate effect, citing the interests of the Nigerien people.

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On Friday, the New York Times reported that the United States notified Niger it would withdraw some 1,000 military personnel from the country in the coming months.

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US Senate Expected to Pass $95Bln Ukraine, Israel Bill Late Tuesday – Congressional Source

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) – The US Senate is expected to pass the $95 billion supplemental bill with aid for Ukraine, Israel, and the Indo-Pacific later in the day, a congressional source told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"Yes, passage is expected late tonight," the source said when asked if the Senate plans to vote on the bill later in the day.

The legislation includes approximately $61 billion in Ukraine-related funding, $26 billion in Israel-related funding, and $8 billion for security initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region. It also includes measures to transfer frozen Russian sovereign assets to Ukraine and ban access to TikTok in the US unless it splits from its Chinese parent company.

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Oil Price Up Nearly 2% on Weak Dollar After Mideast-Related Sluggishness

NEW YORK, April 23 (Sputnik) - Crude prices on Tuesday jumped almost 2%, the most in a week, moving in the opposite direction of the dollar as the weaker US currency made oil less costly to buy.

The more than 1% surge in pricing for both London-based Brent and US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude came as oil markets began a gradual recovery from a selloff last week triggered by the notion that the heightened tensions in the Middle East had been overplayed in pushing oil markets higher.

Brent, the global benchmark for crude, settled New York trading at $88.42 per barrel, up $1.42, or 1.6%, on the day.

Brent reached a five-month high of $92.18 on April 12, on the eve of Iran's retaliatory attack on Israel that many feared would trigger a new Middle East catastrophe and seriously disrupt crude shipments from the oil-rich Middle East.

WTI, the benchmark for US crude, settled up $1.46, or 1.8%, at $83.36 per barrel. WTI hit a five-month high of $87.67 on April 12.

Tuesday's rebound came as the focus on oil moved from geopolitical issues in the Middle East to the state of Europe's economy versus the United States.

The dollar fell to its weakest since April 12 after S&P Global data showed US business activity slid in April to a four-month low on weaker demand. Any drop in the US currency typically lifts

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demand for dollar-denominated oil from investors holding other currencies.
Further support for oil came from eurozone data showing business activity on the bloc expanding at the fastest pace in nearly a year this month.

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US Southern Command Says Flew Personnel to US Embassy in Haiti

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The US military's Southern Command said on Tuesday that it transported support and security personnel to the US Embassy in Port-au-Prince, Haiti as part of a planned rotation.
"In support of the Department of State, US Southern Command transported support and security augmentation personnel for the US Embassy in Port-au-Prince. A US Air Force C-130 flew into Toussaint Louverture International Airport today for the planned rotation of personnel," Southern Command said in a statement.
The security and support personnel will help ensure that the embassy remains open and operational, the statement said.
The embassy remains focused on advancing US government efforts to support the Haitian people, including through supporting the Haitian National Police and Armed Forces, the statement said.
Earlier on Tuesday, an informed source told Sputnik that the Biden administration is attempting to establish clandestine contacts with the leaders of criminal gangs in Haiti, which have taken over much of the country. The goal is to find out their demands and how negotiable they are, the source said.

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US Sanctions 7 Al Qaeda-Linked Militants Over Hostage-Taking in West Africa

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is designating seven leaders of a militant jihadist organization linked to the al-Qaeda terror group (banned in Russia) for their roles in the hostage-taking of US nationals in West Africa, the State Department said on Tuesday.
"The Department of State is today designating a total of seven Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and al-Murabitoun leaders for their involvement in the hostage-taking of US nationals in West Africa," the statement said.
Four of them are also being designated as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGT), the State Department said in a separate fact sheet.
In addition, two JNIM leaders are being designated by the Department of the Treasury for allegedly providing material support to an act of hostage-taking involving a US national, the statement said.

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JNIM is al-Qaeda's largest and most lethal affiliate in West Africa and the Sahel, the State Department said. The group has claimed responsibility for numerous kidnappings and assaults since its establishment in 2017, with funding sourced from ransom payments, extortion, and collaboration with smugglers and traffickers, the statement said.

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Pentagon Confirms 'Malign' Militia Groups Conducted 2 Attacks on US Forces in Iraq, Syria

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - US forces in Iraq and Syria have come under attack from Iran-backed malign militia groups for the first time since February 4, Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder confirmed on Tuesday.

"On April 22, Iran malign militia groups conducted two unsuccessful attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria. These are the first attacks on coalition facilities since February 4. These attacks put coalition and Iraqi personnel at risk," Ryder said during a press briefing.

The United States calls on the Iraqi government to take all necessary steps to ensure the safety of US forces and will not hesitate to defend itself should the attacks continue.

On Sunday, a source in the know told Sputnik that a US military base located outside the northeastern Syrian city of Al Hasakah came under a drone and rocket attack on Sunday night.

Media reported that at least five rockets were fired toward the base from the Iraqi town of Zummar, just across the border from the Al Hasakah governorate.

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US Sanctions 2 Companies, 4 People Over Alleged Cyberattacks on Behalf of Iran - Treasury

(Adds details in para 3,4,5,7; adds quote in para 6 from Justice Department press release)

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on companies and people that it says have conducted cyberattacks against US companies and government agencies on behalf of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Treasury Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned two companies and four individuals involved in malicious cyber activity on behalf of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Cyber Electronic Command (IRGC-CEC). These actors targeted more than a dozen US companies and government entities through cyber operations, including spear phishing and malware attacks," the statement said.

Iranian nationals Hossein Harooni, Reza Kazemifar, Komeil Baradaran Salmani, and Alireza Shafie Nasab were part of a hacking organization from at least 2016 to April 2021, targeting numerous US entities, including government departments, the US Justice Department said in a separate press release.

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Three of them were employed by Mahak Rayan Afraz, an Iran-based company that "purported to provide cybersecurity services, but which was, in fact, a front for the conspirators' operations," the release alleged.

The hacking group primarily targeted cleared defense contractors, a New York-based accounting firm, and a New York-based hospitality company, using spearphishing to infect victim computers with malware, compromising over 200,000 and 2,000 employee accounts in separate campaigns, and gaining access to an administrator email account to create unauthorized accounts for further spearphishing attacks, the statement said.

"In addition to spearphishing, the conspirators utilized social engineering, which involved impersonating others, generally women, to obtain the confidence of victims. These social engineering contacts were another means the conspiracy used to deploy malware onto victim computers and compromise those devices and accounts," the statement read.

The defendants face multiple charges, including computer and wire fraud, carrying maximum sentences of up to 20 years in prison, with additional penalties for aggravated identity theft, according to the Justice Department.

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US Senate Advances $95Bln Ukraine, Israel, Indo-Pacific Aid Legislation

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Tuesday advanced a foreign aid package with some $95 billion in aid for Ukraine, Israel and the Indo-Pacific region.

The US House of Representatives passed the series of foreign aid bills on Saturday, sending them to the Senate for consideration as an amendment to a previous Senate aid bill.

Senators passed a motion to invoke cloture on a motion to concur with the House amendment in a vote of 80 in favor and 19 opposed, with 60 votes required to advance the legislation.

The legislation includes approximately $61 billion in Ukraine-related funding, $26 billion in Israel-related funding and $8 billion for security initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Biden administration is reportedly readying a $1 billion military aid package for Ukraine in expectation of the legislation passing the US Congress. The administration has warned that Ukraine could face significant battlefield setbacks without further aid from US lawmakers.

A majority of Americans, 51%, disapprove of the House of Representatives' passage of the Ukraine aid bill, according to a poll conducted by the Washington-based Democracy Institute.

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US Not Taking Part in Direct Talks With Iran on JCPOA – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) – The United States is not taking part in direct talks with Tehran on the return to Iran's nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of

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Action (JCPOA), US State Department deputy principal spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Tuesday.

"We are not in direct talks with Iran on the JCPOA, either in New York or anywhere else," Patel said during a press briefing.

The reporter who asked the question wanted to confirm a media report by a Kuwaiti newspaper that Iran received a letter from the Biden administration with an offer to resume nuclear deal negotiations after reaching security understandings, including promises to cancel a large portion of the economic and non-economic sanctions if Iran cooperates and ceases its atomic activity and seeks regional pacification.

In 2015, Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with the involvement of the European Union. The deal committed Iran to scaling back its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. The US withdrew from the deal in 2018 under then-President Donald Trump but resumed talks with Iran in a bid to revive the deal under incumbent President Joe Biden. Their talks in Vienna are now considered frozen.

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India's Gukesh Likely Favorite in 2024 Chess Championship – US Grandmaster

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) – Indian chess grandmaster Dommaraju Gukesh, who won the recent 2024 FIDE Candidates Tournament, will likely be considered the favorite in the upcoming match for the World Chess Crown with the reigning champion Ding Liren from China, Soviet and US Grandmaster Lev Alburt told Sputnik.

"Gukesh is a very clever person, and I think he would be the favorite in the championship match," Alburt said.

Gukesh, 17, became the youngest player in chess history to win the Candidates tournament in Toronto on Sunday. He scored 9 points in 14 games and was ahead of seven competitors.

"Because Gukesh is so young and already so strong, I see he can be truly a great champion. He plays very interesting chess. As a chess player, I am glad that he won," Alburt said.

He added that Liren is also a very strong player, so we can expect a very interesting match for the chess crown.

Alburt expressed regret that Russia's Ian Nepomniachtchi, who finished third with 8.5 points, missed the chance to become the first player in history to win the Candidates Tournament three times in a row.

"As a Russian and a person who knows Nepomniachtchi and even played blitz with him in New York in 2016, I would have liked Ian to win, but certainly Gukesh was strong," Alburt said.

The grandmaster explained that Nepomniachtchi was probably not in his best condition. "He was close to winning. I cannot say he was unlucky. He was lucky in some games, but he was probably not in his best shape," he added.

Alburt was born in the Soviet Union but emigrated to the United States in 1979. He won three

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US Championships and was introduced into the US Chess Hall of Fame in 2003.

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US Settles 139 Claims Over Ex-USA Gymnastics Physician Nassar Case - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - Hundred-and-thirty-nine administrative claims of sexual abuse alleged to have been committed by former USA Gymnastics physician Lawrence Nassar have been settled, the Justice Department said on Tuesday.

"The Justice Department announced today that it has settled 139 administrative claims arising from allegations of sexual abuse committed by former physician and USA Gymnastics official Lawrence Gerard Nassar," the statement said.

Nassar was alleged to have sexually abused hundreds of victims over the course of nearly two decades until his arrest in 2016, the statement said.

"These settlements will resolve administrative claims against the United States alleging that the FBI failed to conduct an adequate investigation of Nassar's conduct," the statement said.

The settlements, which have been approved by the Justice Department, amount to a total sum of $138.7 million and will be distributed to the claimants, the added.

In December 2017, Nassar was sentenced to 60 years in prison after being convicted on child pornography charges. The following year, Nassar received two more sentences of 40 to 175 years and 40 to 125 years in a US state penitentiary upon being convicted of the sexual assault charges.

Nassar was one of the team doctors of the US women's national gymnastics team for 18 years and had access to hundreds of girls and young women. More than 260 women and girls have claimed they were sexually assaulted by him.

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White House Says Moratorium on UNRWA Funding to Continue Unless 'Real Progress' Occurs

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The suspension of funding by the United States for the UN Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) will continue until the agency makes "real progress," White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"In terms of our funding of UNRWA, that is still suspended. We're going to have to see real progress here before that is changed," said Kirby during a press briefing.

On Saturday, the US House of Representatives passed a bill that provides an additional $26.38 billion in aid for Israel - including $3.5 billion for the procurement of weapons - and also prohibits funding for UNRWA.

The UN agency is the primary humanitarian organization in the Gaza Strip, where 2.3 million Palestinians depend on it for their survival.

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

The United States, Finland, Italy, Australia, Canada, Japan and the United Kingdom, among other countries, responded by suspending funding for UNRWA.

In early February, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres appointed an independent review panel led by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna to examine UNRWA activities. The United Nations said Israel has not given any evidence to back its claims against UNRWA.

Last month, Canada, Sweden and Australia lifted their suspensions of UNRWA funding after a pause of more than two months.

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White House Says Will Discuss With Israelis Reports of Mass Grave Found in Gaza

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is deeply concerned about reports of a mass grave found at the Nasser Medical Complex in southern Gaza and will discuss the matter with Israeli counterparts for further information, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"We're seeing these reports...deeply, deeply concerning, not in a position to confirm them, but we'll certainly talk to our Israeli counterparts about it, see what they know," Kirby told reporters.

The bodies of 180 people have been found by Palestinian emergency services in a mass grave at the Nasser Medical Complex in the southern Gazan city of Khan Yunis, according to Al Jazeera.

The bodies, including those of elderly women and children, were discovered in the hospital courtyard over the weekend, media reported.

Israeli troops pulled out from Khan Yunis on April 7 as Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant declared that the Israel Defense Forces eliminated the Palestinian movement Hamas as a military structure in the city.

Israel launched a ground incursion into the Gaza Strip after Hamas attacked the Jewish state on October 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people and abducting some 240 others. Over 34,000 people have been killed so far by Israeli strikes in the Gaza Strip, according to local authorities.

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US Sanctions 2 Companies, 4 People Over Cyberattacks on Behalf of Iran - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on companies and people that it says are conducting cyberattacks against US companies and government agencies on behalf of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Treasury

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Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned two companies and four individuals involved in malicious cyber activity on behalf of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Cyber Electronic Command (IRGC-CEC). These actors targeted more than a dozen U.S. companies and government entities through cyber operations, including spear phishing and malware attacks," the statement said.

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Americans Have Right to Protest But Anti-Semitic Protests Have No Place in US -White House

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - Americans have a right to protest but anti-Semitic demonstrations calling for violence against Jews have no place in the United States, White House deputy press secretary Andrew Bates said on Tuesday.

"While every American has the right to peaceful protest, calls for violence and physical intimidation, targeting Jewish students and the Jewish community are blatantly anti-semitic, unconscionable and dangerous and they have no place on any college campus or anywhere in the United States of America," Bates told reporters.

Some Jewish students have expressed fear for their safety amid these pro-Palestine demonstrations on college campuses.

Earlier in the day, the New York Police Department (NYPD) said that it had arrested 133 people involved with protests at New York University (NYU) against Israel's war on Gaza.

Students at various universities around the United States have organized pro-Palestinian protests in solidarity with their Columbia University counterparts, who first erected tents on campus last Wednesday to form a "Gaza Solidarity Encampment" as Columbia President Minouche Shafik testified at a congressional hearing on anti-Semitism.

The following day, Shafik authorized the NYPD in a controversial move to clear out the encampment, which also involved the suspension and arrest of more than 100 people.

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Blinken Will Travel to Saudi Arabia in Coming Days After Visiting China - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Saudi Arabia in the coming days after concluding his visit to China, Axios reported on Tuesday, citing officials.

Blinken will participate in a special meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) on April 28-29, where he will have an opportunity to meet with the Saudi Crown Prince and other regional leaders, the report said.

Blinken is also mulling conducting a visit to Israel to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

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Netanyahu and other officials.

The State Department did not immediately respond to Sputnik's request for comment on this matter.

Blinken's upcoming visit to Riyadh comes as the United States seeks to renew its push to broker a deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel to normalize relations.

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UNRWA Chief Says Will Travel to Russia to 'Visit BRICS Member'

UNITED NATIONS, April 23 (Sputnik) - UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini said on Wednesday that he will travel to Russia to "visit the BRICS member."

Lazzarini referred in his statement to the Brazi-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) group of countries. Russia will host the next BRICS summit scheduled to be held at the end of August.

"I plan to go to Russia to visit the BRIC member. There is a meeting of the BRICS and I'm invited to talk to the BRIC country," Lazzarini told reporters in the United Nations briefing room.

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US Accusations in Human Rights Report Attempt To Shake Up Situation In Russia-Embassy

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - Moscow categorically rejects the statements on Russia made in the State Department's report on Human rights and believes that by such attacks Washington is trying to shake up the situation in Russia, the Russian embassy in Washington DC said in a statement on Tuesday.

The embassy explained that the attacks against Russia largely boil down to challenging the legality of its special military operation in Ukraine and unsubstantiated allegations of violations of international humanitarian law by the Russian Armed Forces.

"In the same row is slander about internal repression and suppression of freedom of speech in our country," the embassy said. "We categorically reject these accusations. This is not the first time Washington has played the human rights card in vain attempts to shake up the internal political situation in Russia."

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Biden to Sign Ukraine Aid Bill as Soon as Possible, as Soon as This Week - White House

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WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration hopes the Senate will send the Ukraine aid bill to the White House this week, and President Joe Biden will sign the bill once it reaches his desk, National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"We are hoping that the Senate can move this [bill] up to the President's desk here this week. ... I can assure you that once it gets to his desk, he will sign it as quickly as possible," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby added that the first military package for Ukraine will go out as soon as Biden signs the bill.

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US Helsinki Commission Appoints Open Supporter of Ukrainian Nationalistic Battalion Azov

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The US Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, said in a press release that chairman Joe Wilson appointed Paul Massaro, an open supporter of Ukraine's nationalist Azov battalion (banned in Russia), to be the new staff director.

“I am very grateful to appoint Paul Massaro as Staff Director of the Helsinki Commission. He has worked closely with me and my staff for many years advancing legislation to hold dictators to account and further the cause of democracy and Ukrainian victory,” the release from Monday quoted Wilson as saying.

Before his promotion, Massaro was a senior policy advisor for counter-corruption and sanctions at the commission.

Massaro gained widespread fame on X (formerly known as Twitter) after posting photos of himself with the Azov flag containing a reference to the SS or the Schutzstaffel, a paramilitary organization under Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany, and a sleeve patch with a portrait of Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera. He deleted his posts amid a backlash on X.

The commission's X post about Massaro's appointment has already collected more than 200 comments, most of which are negative and condemning in nature.

“So, one of your senior leaders is the guy who is glorifying Nazis (Azov) that your own report in the past admitted were Nazis?” one of the comments reads.

“Fascists in leadership positions of Western institutions what else is new,” another X user wrote under the post.

The appointment of Massaro to one of the key positions in the Helsinki Commission goes hand in hand with the fact that official Washington continues to turn a blind eye to the glorification and support of neo-Nazis in Ukraine.

The renaming of dozens of streets in Ukrainian cities, including in Kiev itself, in honor of Nazi officer Roman Shukhevych went unnoticed in the United States. Between February 1941 to December 1942, Shukhevych served as commanding officer of the Nachtigall Battalion and as a Hauptmann of the German Schutzmannschaft 201 auxiliary police battalion in late 1941 and 1942.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian forces.

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Russia said that the aim of its special operation is the "demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine."

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UPDATE - US Seeks to Limit New Energy Markets for Russia - State Dept.
(Updates with background in paras 5, 6)
WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The US State Department said on Tuesday that it will seek to ensure Russia has "very limited opportunities" to secure new energy markets, as European importers turn to new suppliers.
"It's part of my job to ensure that as European importing companies turn away from Russia and turn to more reliable suppliers that there are very limited opportunities for Russia to secure new markets," Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Geoffrey Pyatt said at a conference hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).
Pyatt said that Russia had shown itself to be unreliable energy supplier that would weaponize its energy resources.
Europe's transition to new sources had progressed more quickly than expected, with Russia supplying about 40% of the EU's natural gas in 2021 compared to 13% in 2023, he added. That figure has since further declined.
The European Union has been facing inflation and a massive energy crisis as part of the post-pandemic global economic recession. The situation has further exacerbated against the backdrop of the Ukraine conflict and comprehensive Western sanctions against Russia, leading to supply chain disruptions and energy price spikes worldwide.
In May 2022, the European Union developed the REPowerEU plan, aiming to make the European countries independent of Russian fossil fuels.

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US Warns Against New Era of 'Energy Dependence' on China - State Department

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) – The US State Department said Tuesday that it was important to ensure the era of dependence on Russian fossil fuels was not replaced by one on Chinese critical minerals.
Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Geoffrey Pyatt highlighted the "critical importance of continuing to work on the diversification of energy supplies" at a conference hosted by CSIS, noting that "in particular, we need to make sure that we don't replace an era of dependence on Russian fossil fuels with dependence on critical minerals and critical mineral processing in the People's Republic of China."
He said China had already secured an "overwhelming monopoly" over solar energy supply chains, and the US could not allow this to happen in emerging energy sectors like clean

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hydrogen, wind power, and electric vehicles.

Pyatt called the EU "an essential partner in this effort," because European countries were also pursuing a clean energy transition, and there were billions of dollars of investment flowing both ways across the Atlantic.

Over years, the US has accused Russia of using its energy supply to Europe as a "weapon."

Since the onset of the Ukraine conflict, the West has imposed sanctions on the Russian energy sector, including a price cap on its oil. The EU has also committed to ending its dependency on Russian fossil fuel imports.

The sanctions and the terrorist attack on the Nord Stream pipelines led to a spike in energy prices, harming the European economy while benefiting the US's LNG sector, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.

In an interview with Tucker Carlson in February, Putin said that the US intelligence services were behind the Nord Stream blasts.

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US Has No Intent to Conduct Nuclear Testing, Seeks to Bring CTBT Into Force - State Dept

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has no intention to carry out nuclear testing and is working to bring the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) into force, Assistant Secretary of State Mallory Stewart said in an interview with the Arms Control Association.

"We are encouraging China to continue to push forward on the monitoring stations in its own country, as well as encouraging the international community to explain to Russia that its withdrawal was not the right approach and not a responsible action," Stewart said. "On our part, there is no US interest, desire, willingness, or support for testing. It's not necessary, it's not helpful, it's deeply destabilizing, and it's not something the US government will do."

Stewart said the Biden-Harris administration "supports the CTBT and is working to bring it into force.."

The stance represents a shift from previous administration headed by former President Donald Trump, which declared that it would not seek the Senate's ratification of the CTBT.

"What we are happy about is that the CTBT International Monitoring System (IMS) is nearing completion, thanks in large part to a lot of resources and expertise from the US government. We need to build appreciation for the IMS capacity to detect explosions and for a concept that the Biden-Harris administration deeply appreciates, which is that the CTBT in force is better for the entire global community," Stewart said.

In November 2023, President Vladimir Putin signed a bill to revoke Russia's ratification of the CTBT, which had been signed by Russia in New York on September 24, 1996. The CTBT is a multilateral treaty that bans nuclear weapon test explosions and all other nuclear explosions for civilian and military purposes. The treaty was adopted in 1996 but never entered into effect, as it would require ratification by all 44 countries that had nuclear power or research reactors at the time it was signed.

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Of the nine recognized nuclear powers, only France, the United Kingdom and Russia had signed and ratified the treaty before Moscow's withdrawal. The United States, China and Israel have signed but not ratified the treaty, while India, Pakistan and North Korea have neither signed nor ratified it.

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Police Arrest 133 Demonstrators at New York University Protest for Palestine

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The New York Police Department (NYPD) said on Tuesday that it had arrested 133 people involved with protests at New York University (NYU) against Israel's war on Gaza.

"On Monday, April 22 2024… police responded to an impromptu demonstration at 40 West Fourth Street within the confines of the sixth precinct. Demonstrators affiliated with the NYU Palestine Solidarity coalition had set up tents in the plaza at that location," the NYPD told Sputnik. "Demonstrators engaged in a counter protest, marched along the sidewalk in an orderly manner. Individuals were taken into custody over the course of the protest. 133 were taken into custody. All were released with some assists,"

Students at various universities around the United States have organized pro-Palestinian protests in solidarity with their Columbia University counterparts, who first erected tents on campus last Wednesday to form a "Gaza Solidarity Encampment" as Columbia President Minouche Shafik testified at a congressional hearing on anti-Semitism.

The following day, Shafik authorized the NYPD in a controversial move to clear out the encampment, which also involved the suspension and arrest of more than 100 people.

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US Sees Place For 'Eventually' Legally Binding Deal on Military Uses of AI - State Dept

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that eventually there will be a place for a legally binding agreement on the military uses of artificial intelligence (AI), Assistant Secretary of State Mallory Stewart said in an interview with Arms Control Association.

"Eventually, yes, if we can come to a consensus on the best path forward," Stewart said when asked whether she sees a place for a legally binding agreement

"The challenge, of course, is that these emerging technologies evolve so quickly that if you lock that into a legally binding agreement without incorporating all the possible changes and iterations of how AI can manifest, you may lock yourself into a situation that evolves next week," Stewart said.

Stewart expressed hope that more nations will join an international political declaration on the

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military uses of artificial intelligence, already endorsed by 54 countries.
The political declaration outlines ethical commitments to the military use of AI. Signatories include the US, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, Poland, and Turkey among others.

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US Ready to Engage on China's Proposal on No-First-Use of Nuclear Arms - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is willing to engage in talks with China on Beijing's proposal against first nuclear strike given that Washington has numerous questions about it, Assistant Secretary of State Mallory Stewart said in an interview with the Arms Control Association.
Stewart noted that the United States has heard of China's recent statements that it desires to engage in a conversation on no-first-use of nuclear weapons, however, it has many questions about them.
"Our questions to China are: help us understand how your nuclear buildup is consistent with your no-first-use policy; help us understand how what we're all watching, which is this launch-on-warning capacity, is consistent with China's statement from 2019 that they don't need such a capacity and that it would be inconsistent with their no-first-use policy," Stewart said. "If they want to engage in a conversation on the many questions raised by their no-first-use proposal, we would engage."
Stewart went on to say that in the same conversation, the two countries should discuss other risk reduction proposals that Washington has put on the table, including test launch notifications.
"This would be similar to the launch notification agreement that China already has with Russia. Those ideas are on the table, but so far have not been taken up by China," Stewart said.
Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said in March that Moscow is studying Beijing's initiative to conclude a deal on the no-first-use of nuclear weapons. Ryabkov said Russia welcomes China's initiative on the no-first-use but raises the question whether other nuclear states stand ready to agree.

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State Dept. Says Lack of Treaty After New START Expires Risks 'Unbridled Arms Race'

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The lack of any treaty between Russia and the United States after the expiration of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in 2026 poses the biggest risk of an unconstrained arms race, Assistant Secretary of State Mallory Stewart said in an interview with Arms Control Association.
"So, the concern, come 2026, is that we will have no guardrails in place, thus risking

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misunderstanding and miscalculation," Stewart said.

Stewart noted that the primary concern lies in an unrestrained nuclear arms race, a scenario that nobody desires or requires, adding that the international community should be "outraged" by the prospect of heading toward such an outcome.

In January, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said it is premature to say whether Russia will comply with the New START restrictions after the treaty expires in 2026.

"The concerns are what we face right now, only worse. Our intelligence community was able to confirm its belief that Russia did not, as of the end of last year, exceed the caps set by New START," Stewart added. "Russia has said it will abide by New START caps, and we feel that we'll be able to respond in a reciprocal way. But without New START, we're not able to perform the verification procedures and feel as confident in our compliance assessments."

Moscow sees no possibility for a strategic dialogue with Washington at the moment, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in January during his annual press conference. The West must stop its anti-Russian rhetoric to create the possibility for such talks.

Russia does not reject the possibility of negotiations, as well as "the possibility of a political and diplomatic settlement" on the issue of strategic stability, but Washington wants to resume control over the Russian nuclear arsenal under the guise of reciprocity, Lavrov stated.

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US Seeks to Limit New Energy Markets for Russia - State Dept

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The US State Department said on Tuesday that it will seek to ensure Russia has "very limited opportunities" to secure new energy markets, as European importers turn to new suppliers.

"It's part of my job to ensure that as European importing companies turn away from Russia and turn to more reliable suppliers that there are very limited opportunities for Russia to secure new markets," Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Geoffrey Pyatt said at a conference hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Pyatt said that Russia had shown itself to be unreliable energy supplier that would weaponize its energy resources.

Europe's transition to new sources had progressed more quickly than expected, with Russia supplying about 40% of the EU's natural gas in 2021 compared to 13% in 2023, he added. That figure has since further declined.

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US Senator Sanders Says Offering Measures to Cut Israel Military Aid, Allow UNRWA Funding

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WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - Independent US Senator Bernie Sanders said on Tuesday that he is proposing amendments to an Israel aid bill passed by the House of Representatives over the weekend, including to cut offensive military aid and restore funding for the UN Reliefs and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

On Saturday, House lawmakers passed a $26.38 billion Israel aid bill, which includes $3.5 billion to procure weapons through foreign military financing. The legislation also prohibits funding for UNRWA.

“Today, I am offering two amendments. 1. NO unfettered military aid for [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s] war on the Palestinian people. 2. Restore funding for UNRWA so that children in Gaza don’t starve,” Sanders said in a statement via social media platform X.

The US Senate is set to consider advancing the legislation later on Tuesday. The House-passed foreign aid package also includes billions of dollars in assistance for Ukraine and the Indo-Pacific region.

Senators should have an opportunity to debate and vote on key components of the aid package, Sanders said in a separate statement.

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UNSC Expected to Vote Wednesday on US Resolution Against Nukes in Space - Source

UNITED NATIONS, April 23 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council is expected to vote Wednesday on a draft resolution sponsored by the United States and Japan that would urge against developing nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction that are specifically designed to be placed in space, a diplomatic source told Sputnik.

"Vote likely will be tomorrow," the diplomatic source said.

Russia suggested that the draft resolution seek a ban on the development of any type of weapon intended for deployment in space, not just nuclear ones, but was met with opposition from the US and Japan, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said earlier this month.

Nebenzia also noted that the UN Security Council is not the right body to adopt resolutions on outer space activities that affect all UN members.

In his annual address to the Federal Assembly, President Vladimir Putin said claims that Russia is attempting to deploy nuclear weapons in space are baseless. The allegations represent a ploy to prompt negotiations on the issue with terms that benefit the US, Putin stated.

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Nearly 13% of US Households Face Lack of Food - Reports

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WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - A growing number of Americans are struggling to feed themselves and 12.8% of households face lack of food, Newsweek said on Tuesday, citing US Department of Agriculture (USDA) data.

Some 17 million US households faced problems to obtain enough food in 2022 due to lack of resources, the report said.

Those most affected by food insecurity were single parent and ethnic minorities households as well as families with children.

In 2019 and 2020, 10.8% of households were struggling to get food. The percentage share decreased to 10.2% in 2021, but began to rise again in 2022 and the upward trend continues.

Such a development may become a serious problem for President Joe Biden in light of the upcoming presidential election in November, according to the report.

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US to Obstruct Russia's Key Energy Projects, Including Ust-Luga, Vostok Oil – Pyatt

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) – The United States will continue imposing sanctions on Russian companies involved in Moscow's key energy projects, including Ust-Luga LNG, Vostok Oil, and Yakutia LNG, US Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources Geoffrey Pyatt said on Tuesday.

"We are going to keep tightening the screws, we're going to continue to designate a broad range of entities involved in the development of other key energy projects [in Russia], future energy projects as well, and associated infrastructure, including the Vostok Oil project, the Ust-Luga LNG terminal and the Yakutia Gas," Pyatt said during a discussion hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

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New $17Bln Aid to Israel 'Last Nail in Coffin of US Credibility' - ex-US Envoy to Riyadh

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives approval of $17 billion in additional military aid to Israel amid the ongoing war on Gaza demonstrates US disregard for international law and human decency, delivering the final blow to its reputation, former US Ambassador to Riyadh Chas Freeman told Sputnik.

On Saturday, the US House passed legislation to provide $26.38 billion in supplemental appropriation for Israel and Gaza. It includes $17 billion in military aid for Israel and $9 billion for worldwide humanitarian aid, including for civilians in Gaza.

"This puts the last nail in the coffin of US credibility around the world. It makes it clear to everyone beyond a reasonable doubt that the United States has joined Israel in contempt of

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both international law and human decency," Freeman, who also served as assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs in the Clinton administration, said.

The "obscenely massive aid" will enable Israel to continue to carry out "the very genocide in Gaza and the occupied West Bank that the United States hypocritically claims to oppose," Freeman said.

"Neither Israel nor the United States is likely soon to overcome the international opprobrium generated by their partnership in depravity," he predicted.

Saturday's aid package approved more than double the amount of funds also for the Volodymyr Zelenskyy regime in Ukraine. But it would not avert Kiev's looming defeat there at the hands of Russia, Freeman cautioned.

"Ukraine's morale will be boosted by the renewal of financial support from the United States but this will not remedy its problems on the battlefield. It will not create more Ukrainian men with military training. Nor will it supply more artillery shells," he said.

Along with Israel aid, the US national security supplemental package authorized $60.84 billion for Ukraine, including $23 billion to restore US arsenals of weapons and ammunition, and $8.12 billion for the Indo-Pacific, including Taiwan. The package is expected to quickly pass the Senate this week.

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US Readying $1Bln Military Aid Package for Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is readying a $1 billion military aid package for Ukraine in expectation of the US Congress passing a $60.84 billion Ukraine aid bill, Reuters reported on Tuesday.

The $1 billion package would be the first assistance sourced from the multi-billion-dollar aid bill, which passed the US House of Representatives over the weekend, the report said, citing two US officials.

The US Senate is set to consider advancing the legislation on Tuesday. The legislation also includes billions of dollars in aid for Israel and the Indo-Pacific region.

The Biden administration has warned that Ukraine could face significant battlefield setbacks without further assistance from the US Congress.

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US Ban on Russian Aluminum Unlikely to Have Big Impact on Consumers - Industry Firms

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) - The recent decision by the US government to ban imports of Russian-produced aluminum is unlikely to impact consumers in the United States considering that domestic companies have already been scaling down supply from Russia for several years,

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top industry companies told Sputnik.

Earlier this month, the US Treasury Department announced that the United States is prohibiting the imports of aluminum, copper and nickel of Russian origin. In addition, the Treasury Department said the London Metal Exchange (LME) and Chicago Mercantile Exchange are prohibited from accepting aluminum, copper and nickel produced by Russia.

The US-based aluminum company Kaiser Aluminum, one of the largest aluminum producers in the United States, said it has not been a buyer of Russian aluminum since the start of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022.

"We don't believe there will be any impact to US supply as little of the Russian material was used in the US," a Kaiser Aluminum spokesperson told Sputnik.

The Kaiser spokesperson noted that the tightening of supply has driven up the price for US aluminum as non-Russian metal units are in higher demand in Europe.

"Further, we believe it will be a short term run up if China becomes a buyer of the Russian metal and displaces their local production, which would result in the Chinese material being pushed out into the global market," the spokesperson said.

The Norway-based aluminum company Hydro, one of the top aluminum manufacturers in the world, said it introduced strong "self-sanctioning" measures in 2022 to cut off Russian supply, but this decision contributes to putting the London Metal Exchange at risk.

"Many companies are self-sanctioning Russian aluminum, including producers, consumers and banks," a Hydro spokesperson told Sputnik. "We saw a risk that the market, supported by LME, is becoming more and more uneven, putting the global aluminum index set by LME at risk."

The spokesperson explained that Russian-origin metal made up 80% to 90% of the LME stocks and as parts of the market did self-sanction Russian-origin metal, this could lead to a two-tier market and LME not representing a correct market price, losing its role as a price reference.

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US' AI Warfare Program Sees Mixed Results in Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) – The US government's Project Maven, an AI tool designed to process big data and drone footage to help a military map out its enemy on the battlefield, has had mixed results so far in Ukraine, The New York Times reported on Tuesday.

The conflict in Ukraine has provided the US with a real battlefield to test its algorithmic warfare technology. However, Ukraine's ability to fend off attacks is more dependent on a consistent supply of weapons, including the 155-mm artillery shells that are running low, the report said. Additionally, Russia has been quick to adapt to the technology and interfere with it or evade it, the report added.

US, UK and Ukrainian officers, along with some of top US military contractors are exploring new ways of finding and exploiting "Russian vulnerabilities," the report said.

Technology developed from Project Maven is being used at a US intelligence-gathering base in Europe, more than a thousand miles west of Ukraine, nicknamed "The Pit." However, the version given to the Ukraine does not incorporate the US's most sensitive or advanced

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intelligence systems, according to the report.

As US President Biden has mandated that the US should not directly target Russia in order to avoid inflaming the war into a global battle, the US will direct Ukraine in the right direction of Russian forces on the battlefield without giving them the exact targeting data, the report said. Ukraine has also built its own version of Project Maven, using data from commercial satellite firms, social media, and cheap drones.

Russian officials have said that they see the Ukraine conflict as a hybrid war led by the West. The United States is prepared to pour weapons and other types of assistance into Ukraine as long as necessary and spare no Ukrainian lives to make sure that its proxy continues fighting Russia, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Sunday.

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Trump Calls Pro-Palestinian Protests at US Universities 'Disgrace,' Says Biden to Blame

WASHINGTON, April 23 (Sputnik) – Donald Trump on Tuesday called pro-Palestinian protests on US college campuses a "disgrace" and accused President Joe Biden of being unable to resolve the crisis in Gaza.

"What's going on [on US campuses] is a disgrace to our country, and it's all Biden's fault. Everybody knows that. He's got no message. He's got no compassion. He doesn't know what he's doing. He can't put two sentences together. Frankly, he is the worst president in the history of our country," Trump told reporters as he arrived in a Manhattan court to take part in the "hush money" trial.

Trump accused Biden of being a friend of the Arab world and not of Israel after he had allegedly abandoned the US ally and added that Gaza will never see a peaceful resolution as long as Biden is president.

On Monday, Columbia University announced that classes would be held remotely for an unspecified period as its administration scrambled to contain student protests to push the university to divest from companies with ties to Israel. Earlier on Tuesday, Columbia announced that all courses at its Morningside campus would be held in a hybrid format for the remainder of the spring semester.

Last Wednesday, as Columbia University President Minouche Shafik testified at a congressional hearing on anti-Semitism, Columbia students erected tents on a central lawn on campus to form a "Gaza Solidarity Encampment." The following day, Shafik authorized the New York Police Department in a controversial move to clear out the encampment, which also involved the suspension and arrest of more than 100 people.

The Yale Daily News also reported on Monday that the university police arrested 47 pro-Palestine student protesters who gathered at Beinecke Plaza to demand the university divest from military weapons manufacturers.

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