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Israel Rejects Calls for Independent Investigation Into Mass Graves

According to reports, some of the bodies found in the mass graves were handcuffed, shot in the head, or were buried without clothes.

Leaders from the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN) have called for an independent investigation into the mass graves that were discovered in Palestine. Volker Türk, the UN Human Rights Chief, said on Tuesday that an independent investigation into the mass graves - not an Israeli one - is needed "given the prevailing climate of impunity."

"We feel the need to raise the alarm because clearly there have been multiple bodies discovered," said Ravina Shamdasani, a spokeswoman for Türk.

When asked by reporters about the mass graves, Israel Defense Forces spokesperson Nadav Shoshani disregarded the reports as "fake news." He also asked, "investigate what?" When asked if Israel will investigate the mass grave reports, he claimed that Israel had already looked into the report and found no evidence of wrongdoing.

"We gave answers. We don't bury people in mass graves. Not something we do," said Shoshani, without providing details of the investigation.

However, a US official who requested anonymity said the US is not "in a position" to validate Israel's claims.

"The Israelis have told us privately what they've said publicly, that they totally reject the allegations," said the US official. "We aren't in a position to validate that, and would like a thorough and transparent investigation into the reports."

Palestinian Civil Defense said over the weekend that it had found a mass grave containing 283 bodies on the grounds of the Nasser Hospital in the southern city of Khan Younis. That discovery follows an incident two weeks ago when another mass grave was found at Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City.

Some of the bodies that were found in the mass grave over the weekend had been handcuffed, shot in the head or were found wearing detainee uniforms, according to Mahmoud Basal, a spokesperson for Palestinian Civil Defense. Further reports added that some of the bodies found had been stripped of their clothes, or they had been buried in hospital gowns with tubes or needles still in them.

Meanwhile, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) refused to comment on the findings, but acknowledged exhuming bodies that they claim had already been buried prior to their search for Israeli hostages. According to one report, at least two of the three burial sites were created prior to the arrival of IDF troops, but the Palestinian Civil Defense said only 100 bodies were in the graves prior to the arrival of IDF troops, and a total of 392 bodies were recovered.

John Kirby, spokesperson for the National Security Council said on Thursday that the reports about the mass graves is "deeply disturbing," and added "we'd like to see this investigated."

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US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan echoed those sentiments, telling reporters, “We want answers,” adding, “we want to see this thoroughly and transparently investigated.”
Since the founding of Israel, it has been the largest cumulative recipient of US foreign aid and has received about $300 billion in total for economic and military support. The Biden administration’s new aid request for $14.3 billion has been the highest aid support approved by Congress thus far, since 1979 when $13.2 billion (adjusted for inflation) was given to Israel by the US.

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NASA Celebrates as Voyager 1 Talks to Earth Again

Both Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 were launched in 1977 on missions to study the outer solar system, making the probes 46-years-old and the longest operating spacecraft in history. Decades ago, they successfully flew past Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune.
NASA recently announced that it was able to once again communicate with the Voyager 1 probe after months of troubleshooting a glitch that had Voyager 1 sending messages back to earth that were indecipherable.
The mission team received the first coherent data about the health and status of Voyager 1’s engineering systems on April 20, months after trying to solve the glitch. The team is still reviewing the information, but have surmised that the probe is back on board.
Voyager 1’s glitch was first detected in November; while there was still a clear connection between Earth and Voyager 1, the messages that the probe was sending back were unreadable. Troubleshooting the probe was challenging, as the spacecraft is traveling in interstellar space more than 15 billion miles away.
“With Voyager 1, it takes 22 1/2 hours to get the signal up and 22 1/2 hours to get the signal back, so we’d get the commands ready, send them up, and then like two days later, you’d get the answer if it had worked or not,” Linda Spilker, the project scientist for the Voyager 1 mission at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California.
Spilker explained that the glitch came from a hardware failure, most likely as a result of age or perhaps it was hit by radiation, and likely ruined a small section (3%) of code in the computer’s memory. As a result, Voyager 1 was unable to send readable messages about its health and science observations.
The NASA team found that they could not repair the chip, but did find that if they divided the code into smaller parts and stored them in different areas of the computer’s memory, and then reprogrammed the section that needed fixing so the entire system could work cohesively.
“To make this plan work, they also needed to adjust those code sections to ensure, for example, that they all still function as a whole,” NASA’s update said. “Any references to the location of that code in other parts of the (flight data system) memory needed to be updated as well.”
Repairs were difficult because the technology on Voyager 1 dates back to the mid-century. Spilker described the amount of memory as being equivalent to an electric car key.

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An Overstimulated, Younger Generation Are Now Turning to 'Dumbphones'

The phones of our past may become the phones of our future.

"Dumbphones" are 1990s-inspired phones that have been gaining popularity as an alternative to smartphones. And recently, the beer brand Heineken and the fashion retailer Bodega have collaborated on a dumbphone of their own: the "Boring Phone" is a translucent flip phone that was introduced at Milan Design Week 2024, which ran from April 15 to 21.

The Boring Phone has been designed with translucent outer hardware, a flip screen, and green accents. Andrey Tyukavkin, the executive director of the branding agency behind the campaign, said the phone was designed to "deliver the basics for a great night out," like texting and calling - sans the typical distractions of a smartphone.

The phone even has an email app but has no memory to receive actual emails which makes "space" for the user's social life, says Tyukavkin. The phone includes other apps that encourage the user to actually stop using their phone, including an app that encourages the user to talk to a bartender.

Although, the phone may be difficult for one to actually get their hands on, as Heineken and Bodega have only produced 5,000 units and plan to distribute the phones through competitions rather than selling them.

"Other features include a torch, calendar, FM radio, and alarm. Just a few years back this was all we needed for a night out, right?" Tyukavkin says.

The dumbphone boom is being driven by one generation, specifically. The technology analyst Portulans Institute found that Gen Z is concerned about their privacy when online, and often feel as though their personal data is at risk.

"Gen Z doesn't see tech the way other generations do," says Tyukavkin. "The world in general is made to think that everything is constantly improving, and everyone needs to upgrade/catch up, but Gen Z have a better overview of technology—both old and new—to see what tech is actually doing for their life."

Generation Z's suspicion of data - the attention-harvesting technologies that they have grown up with - has encouraged a wave of products centered on nostalgia, even if Gen Z can't remember the pre-internet, (seeing as they were born between 1997 and 2012).

"I've always hated being available to everyone," said a 29-year-old former finance worker, who is now a music producer and rapper. "The idea that if you send a WhatsApp to someone and they don't respond immediately then something's wrong. I've had periods of having a smartphone but I always revert back to having a burner phone."

The desire to disconnect from technology and detox is more apparent among the younger generation as well. Gen Z is the only generation whose time on social media has fallen since 2021, according to one research company. However, as nine out of 10 phones are smartphones, most dumbphones still remain a niche item.

"There is evidence of this generation modifying their smartphone behavior, with concerns around the negative impacts of being constantly digitally connected driving this," said Joe Birch,

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a technology analyst at the research firm Mintel. “Three in five gen-Zers say they’d like to be less connected to the digital world, for instance.”
According to a 2023 report, researchers found that the average teen receives about 237 notifications per day and spends about 4.5 hours on their smartphone. Those using their phones even reported feeling a struggle to manage their smartphone use despite its negative impacts on their health and attention span.
But Hannah Welan, a coordinator of the Data Poverty Lab at the Good Things Foundation charity, points out the difficulty in rolling back our advancements in technology by suggesting, “most essential services are now online – education, healthcare, universal credit.”

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Critical Fallout After Violent Arrests of Emory University Protestors

After descending on the protestors, dozens of Atlanta police officers and Georgia state troopers arrested 28 people, including three faculty members in the latest of crackdowns on pro-Palestine protests.
On Thursday, dozens of Atlanta police officers and Georgia state troopers descended on an encampment of Emory University protestors and arrested 28 people including three faculty members. Though the arrests were not as high as others schools, it may have been the quickest and most violent. Pepper balls, stun guns and rubber bullets were reportedly used against protesters.
During the crackdown, an Emory economics professor experienced a violent arrest in which a cop grabbed her and appeared to violently curse at her to “get on the f****** ground” and then flipped her onto the ground, smashing her head into the sidewalk in the process. The professor was reportedly attempting to intervene during the arrest of a student, and is now being charged with battery against a police officer, despite not touching the police officer nor the student.
"To sustain this level of blind support for Israel, the U.S. must erode its own democracy. And that is what we see happening on U.S. campuses now," said Trita Parsi, executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.
Emil’ Keme, a professor of English and Indigenous studies at Emory said that the scene on her campus resembled that of a “war zone”.
"I started feeling the tear gas, and I held arms with some people," he said. "We were being pushed back out of the encampment. And the student I was holding arms with, she was then arrested and the next thing I knew I was on the floor and I was being arrested."
Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, who is a Republican, issued a statement saying, “College campuses … in Georgia … will never be a safe haven for those who promote terrorism and extremism that threatens the safety of students.”
The Emory arrests came a week after Columbia University suspended more than 100 students for setting up an encampment in solidarity with Gaza, where more than 34,000 Palestinians have been brutally killed by the US-backed Israel Defense Forces (IDF) since October.
Columbia asked the New York Police Department to clear protestors from the camp which led to

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over 100 arrests and fueled pro-Palestinian protests across the country with at least 20 college campuses taking part in the encampment protests.

Police arrested 108 protestors at Emerson College in Boston on Thursday morning as well. And prior to that, state troopers in riot gear arrested nearly 60 protesters on Wednesday at the University of Texas in Austin at the behest of Governor Greg Abbott. Also on Wednesday, officers took 93 people into custody at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Arrests have also been made at Ohio State University and Princeton University.

The American Association of University Professors called the arrests "antithetical to the mission of higher education."

"Our institutions exist to foster robust exchanges of ideas and open dialogue in service of knowledge and understanding," said the group. "Sometimes that includes open dissent. Peaceful campus protests should never be met with violence."

The Biden administration has not directly addressed the protests nor their demands since Monday, though US President Joe Biden did suggest that the student protests were “antisemitic”.

Since the clash on Emory’s campus, one professor wrote a “motion of no confidence” in the university president, Gregory Fenves. Another professor said he would like to see a public apology from Fenves. A statement from 19 state legislators also opposed the “ [university’s] use of extreme anti-riot tactics … [and] a dangerous escalation to protests which were by all accounts peaceful and nonviolent”.

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Macron 'In Favor' of Debating European Nuclear Deterrent

In January, Macron pointed out in a speech at the Swedish Defense Academy that the future security architecture of the continent could no longer be settled simply by the US and Russia, and that Europe has a right to determine its own future.

Over the weekend, French President Emmanuel Macron said that he would be willing to discuss using French nuclear warheads as a “credible European defense” against possible Russian threats. France has about 300 nuclear warheads and is the only nuclear power in the European Union (EU), according to a recent report.

"I am in favor of opening this debate, which has to include missile defense, long-range weapons firing, nuclear weapons for those who have it or who have American nuclear weapons on their soil," Macron said in an interview that was published on Saturday.

It is not the first time Macron has openly discussed using France’s nuclear weapons for EU defense. The French president first hinted at the possible move in 2020 and again in 2022.

"France will keep its specificity, but is ready to contribute more to the defense of European soil," he added. But Macron was heavily criticized by French opposition parties for his comments. François-Xavier Bellamy, lead candidate from the rightwing Les Républicains party said that as head of state, one must “first learn to keep quiet about what is the head of our security model”.

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While the leftist France Unbowed's group wrote that the comments were a "grave mistake" that dealt "a new blow to the credibility of France's nuclear deterrent."
The French president alarmed the EU last month when he announced his openness to ground operations in Ukraine, saying they might be required "at some point". Macron has rapidly changed his stance on Russia over the past two years, and first warned that the West should not "humiliate" Moscow before fully supporting Ukraine.
Macron, who has been criticized for having a "fondness for disruptive grandstanding", has been desperately seeking ways to be viewed as a dominant power both domestically and internationally.
Germany was reportedly spearheading a European anti-missile shield project using US and Israeli technology but France refused to joining the project because Macron was rumored to see such an act as overstepping his own role as a "strategic leader" for Europe, and would prefer for Germany to remain in their position as an "economic leader".
Despite the disputes between Germany and France, Manafred Weber leader of the center-right European People's Party (EPP) and a member of the Bavarian CSU said that Europe should "take up Macron's offer" in light of building "the European dimension of nuclear defense as a long-term goal."

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US May Be Facing Its Hottest Summer Ever

Serious environmental consequences could follow a dangerously hot summer, as a higher risk of drought, hurricanes and wildfires are on the horizon.
A new study released by the National Weather Service (NWS) has found that for the summer months, temperatures could be 60% above normal for the United State's New England region as well as the Southwest. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently rolled out tools that will focus on forecasting when extreme heat waves will hit this summer, so they may be better equipped to warn people about these events.
This means that for the months of July through September, states including; Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Idaho, western Wyoming and Montana, as well as eastern Oregon and Washington, could experience sweltering, record-breaking temperatures.
The summer of 2023 was already Earth's hottest season since global records first began in 1880, said scientists at NASA's Goddard Institute of Space Studies (GISS) in New York. The months of June, July, and August combined were 0.42 degrees Fahrenheit (0.23 degrees Celsius) warmer than the average summer between 1951 and 1980.
Last summer's heat wave contributed to disastrous wildfires in Canada and Hawaii, dangerous temperatures and wildfires across Europe, and a heatwave that spanned from Thailand to Northern China that created the worst April heatwave in South China on record. And sadly, this summer may be no different.

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Higher summer temperatures will lead to a loss of water for flora, fauna, people and animals. The Southwest, part of the Pacific Northwest, and Hawaii are some of the regions that will be most susceptible to drought this coming summer, said the NWS. A higher frequency of lightning thanks to the warmer temperatures will be possible too, and could increase the risk of wildfires which are already at risk.

"From mid-April through the end of July 2024, a line could be drawn from the Rockies and the southern High Plains to delineate the forecast," the NWS wrote. "West of this line, drought is expected to persist or intensify where it exists, and a Long-Lead Outlook favoring below-normal May-July precipitation led to a forecast for drought development in a few areas with some degree of pre-existing dryness."

This Atlantic season could also feature nearly twice as many named hurricanes than usual, with anywhere between 27 and 39 tropical storms being possible due to warmer ocean temperatures helping to create a more intense hurricane season, said a group of climate scientists from the University of Pennsylvania.

The record-breaking heat will not only have an adverse effect on our environment, but may seriously impact people's health. Those who have health issues tied to cardiovascular disease could become seriously sick or die.

These hotter temperatures are being driven by climate change. William Boos, a UC Berkeley earth and planetary sciences associate professor told a US news source that the "obvious player is greenhouse gasses that are producing long-term climate change."

The La Niña weather pattern is also expected to make a return this year, and could develop as early as summer and continue into fall, according to data from the NWS. And it is possible that it could contribute to drier conditions in some parts of the US, but it's still too early to predict those conditions.

While La Niña can lead to a "cooling down of global temperatures... it causes changes in wind patterns that can cause some areas to be warmer than normal in summer," says University of Pennsylvania climate scientist Michael Mann.

La Niña is the "cold phase" of the El Niño-Southern Oscillation cycle. However, the climate phenomenon should have little influence on weather in the Northern Hemisphere over the summer months but will most likely follow through with a greater impact in the winter. And despite the predictability of the cycle, sometimes its influence on seasonal patterns is limited.

Israel Rejects Calls for Independent Investigation Into Mass Graves

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Leaders from the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN) have called for an independent investigation into the mass graves that were discovered in Palestine. Volker Türk, the UN Human Rights Chief, said on Tuesday that an independent investigation into the mass graves - not an Israeli one - is needed "given the prevailing climate of impunity."

Palestinian Civil Defense said over the weekend that it had found a mass grave containing 283 bodies on the grounds of the Nasser Hospital in the southern city of Khan Younis. That

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discovery follows an incident two weeks ago when another mass grave was found at Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City.

Some of the bodies that were found in the mass grave over the weekend had been handcuffed, shot in the head or were found wearing detainee uniforms, according to Mahmoud Basal, a spokesperson for Palestinian Civil Defense.

When asked by reporters about the mass graves, Israel Defense Forces spokesperson Nadav Shoshani disregarded the reports as “fake news.” He also asked, “investigate what?” When asked if Israel will investigate the mass grave reports, he claimed that Israel had already looked into the report and found no evidence of wrongdoing.

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Facade of Diplomacy Masks US Efforts to ‘Smear, Isolate, Suppress’ China

Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s second visit to China in less than a year this week signifies the importance the Biden administration places on Sino-US relations in addressing various global challenges, according to Chinese commentator Anna Ge.
“The United States aims to sustain dialogue with China and collaborate on addressing some of the world's most pressing issues and also domestic issues,” said the CGTN Radio host, who frequently discusses China-related issues in mainstream media in South Africa, India, and Central Asia. But the US maintains its own motives in such discussions, according to Ge, frequently using China as a scapegoat for its own geopolitical and economic difficulties.
The political commentator joined Sputnik’s Fault Lines program Friday to discuss the issue.
“It is interesting to see how China-US relations develop today,” said Ge as host Jamarl Thomas noted the often chaotic nature of diplomacy between the two countries in recent years. US President Joe Biden referred to Chinese President Xi Jinping as a “dictator” the last time the two met in the United States, a gaffe judged to have damaged relations between the two countries.
“We are left with a contradiction [between] messages and reality,” she said. “On the one hand, we hear relations are more stable with the personal diplomacy of [Janet] Yellen and Blinken in attending cultural events, etcetera. in line with the increase of flights and other types of people-to-people exchanges. These were impossible last year when the weather balloon lies and provocation in Taiwan and the South China Sea were edging towards a military confrontation.”
“On the other hand we have become accustomed to anticipating negative developments shortly after high level US officials depart, often leading to any positive outreach being subsequently retracted or modified by the American side… Washington has been testing China's limits unilaterally,” the commentator highlighted.
Ge noted that Biden signed a bill likely banning the Chinese-owned social media app TikTok shortly after Blinken arrived in Shanghai this week, an unprecedented measure. TikTok CEO Shou Chew, a Singaporean businessman, has vowed to oppose pressure to sell the social

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media platform to an American owner, which would result in the application being banned unless the company succeeds in launching a judicial challenge.

US politicians have cast TikTok as a threat to US security and Americans' privacy, but a raft of concessions won by former US President Donald Trump resulted in all data associated with the platform being hosted in the United States, with periodic auditing from US-based companies. Critics have claimed the strongarm tactic is merely a strategy to undermine competition from a successful Chinese competitor, as when the United States pressured European allies to ban 5G technology from the Shenzhen-based Huawei.

"Imagine them [China] looking at Elon Musk and saying that you need to sell Tesla or else," suggested Thomas. "It's just astonishing stuff."

"These meetings serve more like guard rails, which aren't meant to stabilize or improve relations but to keep them from spiraling out of control while the US continues to implement containment policies, continues to stack military assets in the region, continues to pressure the Chinese government wherever possible," said Ge. "And also continues to attack Chinese companies."

Discussion then turned towards the United States' criticism of China's economic relationship with Russia. Beijing has continued to conduct trade with Moscow in defiance of US calls to isolate the country after the launch of its special military operation in the Donbass in 2022. Some have even blamed China for Russia's success in the conflict, claiming Beijing provides the country with crucial components for military technology.

China has resisted what it views as coercion against the country's sovereign right to determine its trade relations.

"In essence the US is now raising the Chinese military assistance to Russia issue to forcibly link China and Russia," claimed Ge. "Again, aiming to smear, isolate and to suppress China… China, like many other countries, like Turkiye, and Egypt, etcetera, adopts a more neutral stance toward the Russia-Ukraine conflict. They take the needs of the two sides into consideration, not just Ukraine's, but also Russia's."

"Many scholars believe the US has every reason to prolong this war," she added. "China is not a party or participant in the Ukraine crisis, and China and Russia have the right to carry out normal economic and trade cooperation, which should not be interfered with by any country or restricted.

"The Chinese government keeps saying that this is a problem between Russia and Ukraine, it's not a problem between China and the US, and the US should not try to turn it into one," Ge emphasized.

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IOC Allows Palestinians to Compete in Olympics After Criticism of Double Standards

The Europe-based International Olympic Committee has long been criticized for its lack of neutrality, submitting to Western leaders' foreign policy prerogatives while unfairly punishing Russia.

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The International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced it would allow Palestinian athletes to compete in this summer's Olympic games after months of criticism over the organization's alleged double standards regarding wars in Gaza and the Donbass.

IOC head Thomas Bach claimed representatives of Palestine would be invited to the event regardless of the outcome of ongoing qualification competitions. So far Palestinian taekwondo fighter Omar Ismail has earned a slot at the games. Six to eight Palestinians in total are expected to compete, according to Bach.

"We have made the clear commitment that even if no athlete [from Palestine] would qualify on the field of play… then the National Olympic Committee of Palestine would benefit from invitations, like other national Olympic Committees," said Bach.

Palestinian athletes have only been allowed to compete at Olympic games since 1996 despite most global countries recognizing Palestinian statehood.

Israel's devastation of Gaza since Hamas' October 7 surprise attack last year has led to the destruction of sporting facilities in the enclave as well as the death of high-profile Palestinian athletes. Volleyball star Ibrahim Qusaya and Olympic football coach Hani Al-Masdar have been killed by IDF airstrikes as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is accused of indifference to civilian life.

The killings form part of a pattern of what critics allege is Israel's deliberate targeting of prominent Palestinian intellectual, professional, and cultural figures. Well-known poet Refaat Areer was killed in a strike on his home in Gaza last year after voicing criticism of Israel's military conduct in the territory. Areer reported receiving numerous harassing messages from Israeli soldiers online after being attacked by neoconservative pundit Bari Weiss on the X social media platform.

"Refaat Areer's tragic death is not an isolated incident in this round of fighting: it occurred alongside several other intellectuals, including scientists like the Islamic University of Gaza's president, Professor Sofian Tayeh; doctors like Omar Ferwana and his daughter Aya; and artists like Ali Nasman, whose loss has left a significant void in Gazan society," said Mohammed Ali, a reporter in Gaza who wrote under a pseudonym to protect his identity as Israel is accused of deliberately targeting dozens of journalists reporting from the enclave.

"Throughout history, Israel has time and again targeted Palestinian intellectuals, artists and cultural figures, often aimed at silencing the voices that articulate and embody the Palestinian struggle for identity and freedom," he added. "By targeting these influential figures, there is not only immediate grief and loss suffered by their communities but also a long-term impact on Palestinian cultural expression and the transmission of its historical narrative."

Bach's announcement signals a concession towards protest over the IOC's alleged double standards in its treatment of various countries' Olympic teams. The organization has been heavily criticized for its treatment of Russian athletes after Moscow launched a special military operation in the Donbass region in 2022.

Russian athletes were banned from competing under Russia's flag in this year's Olympic games after the escalation of the long running conflict in Ukraine. The athletes are also required to have never made public statements supporting Russia's military effort and must not be employed by the Russian armed forces or security services.

Critics pointed out the Swiss-based organization hasn't taken such measures against American athletes in the wake of US interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere, which have

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killed an estimated4.5 million people. In recent months European activists have called forIsrael to be penalized as the country's military continues its operation in Gaza, which killed more civilians in one month than have fallen during two years of fighting in the Donbass.
Bach's announcement is the latest in a series of mostly symbolic concessions towards public outcry by prominent European figures, who have faced mass protest over European countries' backing of Israel.
Russia, meanwhile, has repeatedly urged a more even-handed approach to solving the long running Palestine-Israel conflict, with Moscow holding a meeting of Palestinian political factions earlier this year. Beijing also announced Friday it would hold Palestinian unity talks.
"The main focus of efforts should be the creation of a Palestinian state in full compliance with the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council," said Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in January. "Without the establishment of a Palestinian state, the Palestinian people will continue to feel disadvantaged and disenfranchised. Generation after generation of young Palestinians will feel this injustice and pass it on to their children."
"The situation is very bad," he added recently. "We want an end to the violence, a solution to the humanitarian problems, and above all, we want the Arab [states] to take the initiative, with the support of all reasonable forces, to take the issue of the establishment of a Palestinian state into their own hands."

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World Central Kitchen to Resume Work in Gaza as Hunger, Malnutrition Still Stalk Enclave

The humanitarian organization announced a local Palestinian team would resume operations in the enclave, with foreign aid workers still sidelined.
The not-for-profit organization World Central Kitchen (WCK) has announced it plans to resume humanitarian activities in the Gaza Strip after a deadly Israeli drone strike earlier this month killed seven of its workers.
The group's CEO Erin Gore announced the plan Sunday as human rights organizations warn Gazans continue to face mass hunger amid an Israeli blockade of the besieged enclave.
"The humanitarian situation in Gaza remains dire," said Gore in a statement. "We are restarting our operation with the same energy, dignity, and focus on feeding as many people as possible."
A news release on the World Central Kitchen's website claimed a Palestinian-run team would distribute aid starting Monday, distributing food throughout the Gaza strip from the organization's three kitchens in the territory.
"We will continue to get as much food into Gaza, including northern Gaza, as possible – by land, air, or sea," read the statement. Hunger has been a particular problem in the northern Gaza Strip as the destruction of roads and infrastructure has isolated areas around Gaza City.
"Limited access to northern Gaza has hindered the ability of aid agencies to fully assess the situation there," noted a report in Western media last month, but numerous instances of the starvation of children have been reported on social media. Newborn infants are particularly

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vulnerable, with the Israeli destruction of hospitals in the enclave exacerbating health concerns for babies born prematurely or with special health needs.

Analysis from the group Integrated Food Security Phase Classification projected that half of people in the Gaza Strip would face "catastrophic" levels of malnutrition by mid-July if trends continued. All 2.2 million people in the enclave would be unable to fully meet nutritional needs necessary to maintain good health.

Gore added that aid workers are still under threat in Gaza, likely contributing to the group's decision to fully delegate its work to local Palestinians for now.

"We have been forced to make a decision: Stop feeding altogether during one of the worst hunger crises ever, ending our operation that accounted for 62% of all International NGO aid, or keep feeding knowing that aid workers and civilians are being intimidated and killed," Gora added.

The group is still calling for "an impartial and international investigation into the IDF attack" in which Israeli drones targeted three separate vehicles in the organization's aid convoy, continuously targeting survivors of the first two strikes as they scrambled to flee the attack.

The incident generated outrage in the West and among liberal US lawmakers in particular as WCK's founder, celebrity chef José Andrés, is a personal friend of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other high-profile Democratic Party leaders. The incident prompted former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, among 40 other top Democrats, to sign onto a letter urging Biden to halt weapons transfers to Israel without human rights guarantees.

Some observers claimed a double standard in media coverage of the attack, which killed six white foreign aid workers and their Palestinian driver. On the day of the Israeli drone strike against the organization the death toll among Gazans stood at an estimated 32,845.

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UK's Defense of Israel Reveals Hypocrisy, Cynical Abuse of 'Human Rights' Claims

The United Kingdom has been accused of "destabilizing the entire concept of universal human rights" through its defense of Israel and repression of internal dissent.

New light is being shed on the United Kingdom's military and diplomatic ties with Israel as a report by Amnesty International accuses European countries of "grotesque double standards" in their alleged concern over human rights abuses.

The investigative journalism website Declassified UK examined a so-called Roadmap agreement between Israel and the UK that demonstrates Britain's exceptional commitment to defending Israel.

"The bilateral relationship has never been stronger," begins the document. "Our strategic partnership is underpinned by extensive security and defence cooperation that continue to safeguard the UK and Israel's national security… The UK and Israel have a strong and evolving defence relationship through strategic dialogue and professional working groups between the defence ministries and an agreement for military cooperation."

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The investigative outlet has documented the strong military partnership between the two countries amidst Israel's operation in the Gaza Strip, which has killed over 34,000. Britain has reportedly flown 50 spying missions over the enclave while ferrying US weapons and equipment to the country from its nearby airbase in Cyprus.

The country has repeatedly refused to share details of its extensive support for Israel with the public, issuing so-called "D Notices" that ban British media from reporting on certain defense-related stories.

"We will continue to work together to keep our people safe from cyber, criminal and terrorist threats," the agreement continues.

Israel has historically attempted to delegitimize resistance by referring to Palestinian groups like Hamas and Hezbollah as "terrorist" organizations. But only a small handful of Western allies, along with the European Union, classify the groups as such.

United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2625 guarantees occupied people the right to violently resist "subjection of peoples to alien subjugation, domination and exploitation," recognizing Palestinians' right to rebel against Israel under international law. The international body has acknowledged Israeli settlement building and control of Gaza and the West Bank since 1967 as an illegal act of "settler colonialism."

Meanwhile observers classify the 1946 bombing of Jerusalem's King David Hotel as the first terrorist attack in the long-running Palestine-Israel conflict. The atrocity, which killed 91, was committed by the Zionist paramilitary group Irgun. Criminal groups such as Irgun and Lehi were instrumental in the ethnic cleansing of Palestine known as the Nakba, with Lehi openly referring to itself as a "terrorist" group.

The modern state of Israel has continued to adopt such violent tactics against its critics in the region, carrying out massive bombing campaigns in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria. But a separate section of the UK's Roadmap entitled "Antisemitism, delegitimisation, and anti-Israel bias" details the countries' strategy of deflecting criticism by accusing detractors of "disproportionate focus on Israel."

The UK and other European countries have repeatedly moved to crack down on pro-Palestine protests by accusing demonstrators of bias and antisemitism. Meanwhile the state media outlet BBC has punishedemployees for sharing pro-Palestine messages on social media.

The revelation of the agreement comes as the London-based human rights group Amnesty International slams the UK for its selective concern over alleged human rights abuses. The organization's searing indictment of Britain and other Western countries claimed the entire post-World War II human rights framework is "at risk of decimation" as global powers exploit their influence in international organizations to shield Israel from criticism.

"The UK is deliberately destabilizing the entire concept of universal human rights through its appalling domestic policies and politicking," said Amnesty International's UK chief executive Sacha Deshmukh.

The group also criticized European countries' repression of pro-Palestine activism as threatening key liberal freedoms of assembly and expression. Germany made headlines earlier this month after police in the country shut down a pro-Palestine conference taking place in Berlin, cutting off power to the venue where it was being held to force participants to disperse. Observers were shocked by video emerging online in recent days of German police beating and brutalizing pro-Palestine demonstrators. Similar scenes have emerged from US college

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campuses as politicians insist that freedom of speech does not apply to “antisemitic” anti-genocide protesters.
Journalists have documented the historic use of human rights narratives by Western governments to attempt to delegitimize perceived enemies. At least 12 million people have been killed in wars backed by the United States and its allies since World War II while the country maintains the highest incarceration rate on the planet.
Facade of diplomacy masks US efforts to ‘smear, isolate, suppress’ China

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Political commentator Anna Ge claimed the United States pursues discussions with China only to maintain its own interests in ongoing diplomacy, while otherwise seeking to undermine Beijing. The radio host offered the analysis on Sputnik’s Fault Lines program.

“These meetings serve more like guard rails, which aren't meant to stabilize or improve relations but to keep them from spiraling out of control while the US continues to implement containment policies, continues to stack military assets in the region, continues to pressure the Chinese government wherever possible,” said Ge. “And also continues to attack Chinese companies.”

“In essence the US is now raising the Chinese military assistance to Russia issue to forcibly link China and Russia,” she said, addressing US criticism of Beijing for carrying on trade relations with Moscow. “China, like many other countries, like Turkiye, and Egypt, etcetera, adopts a more neutral stance toward the Russia-Ukraine conflict. They take the needs of the two sides into consideration, not just Ukraine's, but also Russia's.”

“China and Russia have the right to carry out normal economic and trade cooperation, which should not be interfered with by any country or restricted… The Chinese government keeps saying that this is a problem between Russia and Ukraine, it's not a problem between China and the US, and the US should not try to turn it into one,” the commentator stressed.

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North African countries expel Western military presence

A wave of anti-imperialist sentiment is spreading across Africa as countries across the continent reject Western influence. The latest indication of the trend came Thursday when US officials revealed the country would comply with government requests to withdraw troops stationed in Chad. This week also brought news that the United States would be pulling troops out of the neighboring country of Niger, weeks after the government there had made similar requests.

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The country's government insisted on the United States' exit while also expelling troops from France, which historically held Niger as a colony.

"It's, I think, a very positive move that countries are finally beginning to tell the United States they have to leave, they don't belong there anymore, they're not wanted, they're not needed there, and, to go," said journalist Robert Fantina on Sputnik's Political Misfits program.

"We have to look at who the terrorists in Africa have been. It's been the United States, the French and others who exploit the people horrifically and have for decades and decades," he added.

Namibia's president underscored the point recently, issuing a scathing statement against Germany for its lockstep support of Israel's military operation in the Gaza Strip. The country suggested Germany, and by extension the rest of the Western world, have yet to reflect on their destructive colonial legacy as they continue to exert influence around the globe. Germany formerly held Namibia as a colonial possession, presiding over what scholars consider the 20th century's first genocide there.

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IOC allows Palestinians to compete in Olympics after criticism of double standards

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced it would allow Palestinian athletes to compete in this summer's Olympic games after months of criticism over the organization's alleged double standards regarding wars in Gaza and the Donbass.

"We have made the clear commitment that… the National Olympic Committee of Palestine would benefit from invitations, like other national Olympic Committees," said Bach.

Israel's devastation of Gaza has led to the destruction of sporting facilities in the enclave as well as the death of high-profile Palestinian athletes. Volleyball star Ibrahim Qusaya and Olympic football coach Hani Al-Masdar have been killed by IDF airstrikes as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is accused of indifference to civilian life. The killings form part of a pattern of what critics allege is Israel's deliberate targeting of prominent Palestinian intellectual, professional, and cultural figures.

Bach's announcement signals a concession towards protest over the IOC's alleged double standards in its treatment of various countries' Olympic teams. The organization has been heavily criticized for its treatment of Russian athletes after Moscow launched a special military operation in the Donbass region in 2022.

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Critics pointed out the Swiss-based organization hasn't taken such measures against American athletes in the wake of US interventions in the Middle East, which have killed an estimated 4.5 million people.

In recent months European activists have called for Israel to be penalized as the country's military continues its operation in Gaza, which killed more civilians in one month than have fallen during two years of fighting in the Donbass.

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Western media admits chaos on Ukrainian frontlines as Russia easily liberates another village

Russia has liberated large portions of the settlement of Ocheretino located northwest of Avdeyevka in the Donetsk People's Republic, with a report by New York City-based news website Business Insider suggesting Russian troops were able to enter the village unopposed amid a Ukrainian organizational breakdown.

Russian soldiers liberated most of the rural settlement of Ocheretino amid conflicting reports demonstrating the confusion and dysfunctionality that has increasingly taken hold within the Ukrainian armed forces. According to the report, Mykola Melnyk, the commander of Kiev's 47th Mechanized Brigade, claimed Russia's advance occurred because of an error made while rotating Ukrainian troops in the settlement, leaving it unguarded.

If true, the report is indicative of Russia's strategy in recent months as Moscow is able to slowly grind down Ukrainian forces, taking advantage of errors and the brittleness of enemy lines as Kiev's under-equipped army approaches collapse. Melnyk claimed his brigade was one month shy of serving for a full year without a rotation, underscoring the strain faced by Ukraine's understaffed forces.

The breakdown of Kiev's military was demonstrated in dramatic fashion in February when Ukrainian troops in Avdeyevka suddenly fled their positions en masse under Russian pressure. A complete disintegration of military command occurred as troops spontaneously abandoned their positions, allowing Russia to liberate the key city.

Recent accounts have suggested particularly fractious relations between extremist contingents within Ukraine's army, many of whom reportedly reject the command of new commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrsky. Recently Ukraine's 67th Mechanized Brigade was broken up by the country's defense ministry amid disputes between neo-Nazi commanding officers while trying to hold the city of Chasov Yar.

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World Central Kitchen to resume work in Gaza as hunger, malnutrition still stalks enclave

The not-for-profit organization World Central Kitchen has announced its plans to resume humanitarian activities in the Gaza Strip after a deadly Israeli drone strike earlier this month killed seven of its workers. The group's CEO Erin Gore announced the plan as human rights organizations warn Gazans continue to face mass hunger amid an Israeli blockade of the besieged enclave.

"The humanitarian situation in Gaza remains dire," the CEO emphasized. "We are restarting our operation with the same energy, dignity, and focus on feeding as many people as possible." A news release on the World Central Kitchen's website claimed a Palestinian-run team would distribute aid starting Monday.

"We have 276 trucks, with the equivalent of almost 8 million meals, ready to enter through the Rafah Crossing. We'll also send trucks from Jordan," Gore said.

"Limited access to northern Gaza has hindered the ability of aid agencies to fully assess the situation there," noted a report in Western media last month, but numerous instances of the starvation of children have been reported on social media. Newborn infants are particularly vulnerable, with the Israeli destruction of hospitals in the enclave exacerbating health concerns for babies born prematurely or with special health needs.

Gore added that aid workers are still under threat in Gaza, likely contributing to the group's decision to fully delegate its work to local Palestinians for now.

The Israeli airstrike on the aid convoy prompted condemnation from the United States and other traditional allies of Israel. However, US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby claimed that is "no evidence" that Israel deliberately struck World Central Kitchen aid workers.

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UK's defense of Israel reveals hypocrisy, cynical abuse of "human rights" claims

New light is being shed on the United Kingdom's military and diplomatic ties with Israel as a report by Amnesty International accuses European countries of "grotesque double standards" in their alleged concern over human rights abuses.

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"The bilateral relationship has never been stronger," begins a so-called "Roadmap" agreement between the two countries that has received little attention. "Our strategic partnership is underpinned by extensive security and defence cooperation."

The UK has repeatedly refused to share details of its extensive support for Israel with the public, issuing so-called "D Notices" that ban British media from reporting on certain defense-related stories.

A separate section of the UK's Roadmap entitled "Antisemitism, delegitimisation, and anti-Israel bias" details the countries' strategy of deflecting criticism by accusing detractors of "disproportionate focus on Israel." The UK and other European countries have repeatedly moved to crack down on pro-Palestine protests by accusing demonstrators of bias and "antisemitism." Meanwhile, mainstream media outlet BBC punished employees for sharing pro-Palestine messages on social media.

The revelation of the agreement comes as London-based human rights group Amnesty International slams the UK for its selective concern over alleged human rights abuses. The organization's searing indictment claimed the entire post-World War II human rights framework is "at risk of decimation" as global powers exploit their influence in international organizations to shield Israel from criticism.

The group also criticized European countries' repression of pro-Palestine activism as threatening key freedoms of assembly and expression. Germany made headlines earlier this month after police in the country shut down a pro-Palestine conference taking place in Berlin, cutting off power to the venue where it was being held.

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US aid can't buy troops: Ukrainian soldier says 'no one' willing to join army

A Ukrainian soldier from the notorious Azov battalion offered a frank analysis of the country's war effort to a local news outlet this weekend.

"No one is willing to join the Armed Forces of Ukraine nowadays," said the soldier, identified as "Niko," to a local news outlet. The soldier continues to fight on despite having lost one of his legs in combat, insisting that there is no one to replace him.

A shortage of personnel has wreaked havoc in the country's armed forces in recent months, with fatigue contributing to a breakdown in discipline and effectiveness as troops are unable to be rotated. The dynamic was on display recently as Russia was able to liberate a village in the Donetsk People's Republic reportedly almost unopposed.

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The soldier added that “literally no one” is willing to go to Ukraine’s front lines. It has emerged in recent weeks that multiple Ukrainian troops have refused to take orders from the country’s new commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrsky, who is viewed less favorably than former military head Valerii Zaluzhny.

Fighting-age Ukrainians “do whatever they come up with” to try to escape the draft, the soldier added, including “swimming across the Tisza River and drowning themselves in there.” Some 22 Ukrainians have reportedly died attempting to cross the river separating Ukraine from Romania.

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Europe Will Remain Vulnerable While It Depends on Imported Energy – Georgieva

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – Europe will remain vulnerable to price shocks until it reduces its dependence on imported energy sources, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Monday.

“As the recent gas-supply shock showed, as long as Europe is dependent on imported fossil fuels, it will remain vulnerable,” Georgieva said in prepared remarks for the Annual EU Budget Conference.

She pointed out that the EU’s fossil-fuel imports doubled and exceeded 5% of GDP in 2022.

Georgieva stressed that developing a green energy industry is the best solution for Europe to improve its energy security. “No one can shut off the wind or the sun!” she said.

The IMF chief also announced that by the end of the month, the fund will provide its recommendations of how the EU can improve regional energy security by implementing a climate action plan.

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ECB's Monetary Policy Working to Curb Inflation, But Fight Not Over Yet – Georgieva

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – The European Central Bank's (ECB) tight monetary policies are working to beat inflation, but it is too soon to declare victory, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Monday.

“After a global burst of inflation to levels many people have never seen in their lifetimes, it looks like the ECB’s tight monetary policy is doing its work,” Georgieva said in prepared remarks for the Annual EU Budget Conference.

But while the IMF acknowledged that the current situation looks promising, she warned against any premature celebrations.

“It’s not over yet. But, yes, it looks promising: inflation down from its disturbingly high peaks and

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no deep recessions in Europe," Georgieva said.

She added that "the last mile can be the hardest," and noted that major central banks in Europe will no longer be marching in lockstep, as they have been during the recent rate hikes.

The upcoming divergence in interest rates could be accompanied by some exchange rate movements, she said.

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Blinken to Visit Saudi Arabia From April 29-30 for Talks With Regional Partners - Gov't

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Saudi Arabia from April 29-30 to discuss the situation in Gaza with regional partners, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Saturday.

"Secretary Antony Blinken will travel to Saudi Arabia April 29-30 to meet with regional partners. The Secretary will discuss ongoing efforts to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza that secures the release of hostages and how it is Hamas that is standing between the Palestinian people and a ceasefire," Miller said in a press statement.

The top US diplomat will call for humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian enclave to be increased sustainably and for efforts to prevent wider hostilities and achieve lasting peace in the region, including "through a pathway to an independent Palestinian state with security guarantees for Israel."

Blinken will also take part in a ministerial meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council and in the World Economic Forum's special meeting on global collaboration and growth, where he will coordinate with partners on measures aimed at mitigating climate change and achieving global energy transition.

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Congress Panics Over Ukraine as Russian Drones Kill Abrams Battle Tanks - UK Diplomat

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The rush to fast-track $6 billion in military aid to Ukraine on Friday reflects the panic felt by the Biden administration and in Congress that the Zelenskyy regime's forces are collapsing amid reports that Russia's unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are now proving successful at targeting and destroying US-supplied Abrams Main Battle Tanks, veteran UK diplomat, former ambassador and political commentator Peter Ford told Sputnik.

"The haste to release billions of dollars of funds for Ukraine betrays US alarm at the dire situation facing its client state on the battlefront," he said on Friday.

On Tuesday, the US Senate passed a $95 billion bill containing approximately $61 billion in Ukraine-related funding, including via a loan. US President Joe Biden signed the bill into law on Wednesday.

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The US Department of Defense later unveiled a $1 billion military aid package for Kiev, including cluster munitions and air defense supplies.

In addition, the Pentagon announced on Friday its largest-ever $6 billion military aid package that will include interceptors for Ukraine's Patriot and NASAMS systems, more counter-drone systems, significant amounts of artillery ammunition, and air-to-ground munitions.

However, the move came amid reports that the Ukrainian armed forces moved Abrams tanks from the frontlines due to threats from Russian drones.

Ford observed that the rush to send so many more advanced weapons systems to Ukraine came hard on the heels of these reports.

"The announcement coincides with reports that the Ukrainians are withdrawing US Abrams tanks from the front because they have shown themselves to be vulnerable to drone attack," he said.

However, the main US defense contractors were oblivious to the multiple failures of their weapons systems on the battlefields of Ukraine and were only interested in further expanding their already enormous profit margins, Ford said.

"Never mind, the main aims are being achieved. Not to help Ukraine - how naive! - but to stuff billions of taxpayer dollars down the gullet of the arms manufacturers," he said.

The other purpose of the otherwise futile and too late new arms package was to give Biden domestic credibility before his reelection campaign against former President Donald Trump this fall, Ford explained.

The $6 billion arms package was therefore meant "to make Biden look resolute and consistent as he positions himself for the presidential election campaign," he said.

The people of Ukraine once again had become the victims of cynical and ruthless US political manipulations and intrigues, Ford advised.

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Campbell Visiting UK, France Next Week For Talks on Ukraine, Indo-Pacific - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Kirby Campbell will travel to the United Kingdom and France next week for a range of security talks involving Ukraine, the Indo-Pacific, and the AUKUS deal, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a press release.

"Deputy Secretary Kurt M. Campbell will travel to Abuja, Nigeria; London, United Kingdom; and Paris, France April 29-May 3," Miller said in the release on Friday.

In London, Campbell will participate in bilateral meetings on the Indo-Pacific and the AUKUS trilateral security pact, Miller said.

Miller said Campbell will also meet with UK counterparts to discuss continued support for Ukraine, and efforts to facilitate a ceasefire in Gaza.

In Paris, Campbell will attend the OECD Ministerial Council Meeting. On the margins of the meeting, Campbell will meet with French counterparts to discuss allied support for Ukraine, US concerns over China's alleged support for Russia’s war machine, and matters related to the

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Indo-Pacific, Miller noted.

In Nigeria, Campbell will co-chair the sixth US-Nigeria Binational Commission with Foreign Minister Yusuf Tuggar to discuss partnerships; security cooperation; shared prosperity; democracy, and governance and accountability, Miller said.

Campbell will also meet with senior Nigerian government officials, business leaders, and civil society representatives, Miller added.

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US Declines To Comment on Extradition of Russian Citizen Arthur Petrov From Cyprus

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - USA authorities declined to comment on the possibility of extradition of Russian-German national Arthur Petrov to the United States from Cyprus, a Department of Justice spokesperson told Sputnik.

“We decline to comment,” the spokesperson said on Friday.

Earlier, a source told RIA that the Cyprus Court of Appeal has agreed to extradite Petrov, who was arrested last August at the request of the US for allegedly smuggling sensitive US technology to Russia.

Petrov faces 11 federal criminal charges in connection to his alleged role in the illicit procurement scheme and faces up to 100 years in prison if convicted on all charges, according to the US Department of Justice.

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US Air Force Orders $387Mln Contract to Maintain RQ-4 Drones Around World - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman Systems was awarded a more than $387 million US Air Force contract action for Global Hawk (RQ-4) aircraft sustainment, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Northrop Grumman Systems Corporation [of] San Diego, California, was awarded a $387,545,690 ...contract action for Global Hawk (RQ-4) aircraft sustainment," the release stated on Friday.

This contract provides for contractor logistics support services at Sacheon Air Base in South Korea; Osan Air Base in South Korea; Misawa Air Base in Japan; Naval Air Station Sigonella in Italy and San Diego, the Defense Department said.

The contract will last for one year and is expected to be completed by April 30, 2025, the Defense Department said.

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US Air Force Boost Global Humanitarian Crisis Aid Contract by $8.6Bln - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - Eight companies have received an $8.4 billion increase on their original $6.4 billion US Air Force contract for worldwide contingency and humanitarian support, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"[The eight companies] were originally awarded a combined ...contract ...of $6.4 billion for worldwide contingency and humanitarian support on April 3, 2020," the release said on Friday. "This modification ...contract increases the program ceiling value to $15 billion for worldwide contingency and humanitarian support."

The contract provides contingency planning, deploying, and training and equipping of forces; emergency and contingency construction; logistics and commodities; and services, the Defense Department said.

The release identified the companies as URS Federal Services International, DynCorp International, ECC International, Fluor Intercontinental, Kellogg Brown & Root Services, PAE-Perini, Readiness Management Support, and Vectrus Systems Corporation.

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Philadelphia-Based Republic First Bank Has Been Seized By Regulators - Statement

(Updates with details, background in paras 3,4)

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The Philadelphia-based Republic First Bank has been seized by regulators, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) announced in a press release.

"Philadelphia-based Republic First Bank was closed today by the Pennsylvania Department of Banking and Securities, which appointed the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) as receiver. To protect depositors, the FDIC entered into an agreement with Fulton Bank, National Association of Lancaster, Pennsylvania to assume substantially all of the deposits and purchase substantially all of the assets of Republic Bank," the release said on Friday.

The FDIC said it's the first US bank failure this year, but it's smaller than the regional bank failures from last year that involved Silicon Valley Bank, which had about $209 billion in assets at the end of 2022 and collapsed in March 2023.

Republic First Bank only had about $6 billion in total assets and $4 billion in total deposits at the end of January, according to the FDIC.

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Pentagon Says US Has Not Provided Training to Israeli West Bank Unit Under Scrutiny

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - A Pentagon spokesperson said in a statement that the US military has not provided training to a controversial Israeli unit in the West Bank that is on the edge of being subject to US sanctions for alleged human rights abuses.

On Saturday, the Axios news website reported that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken would announce sanctions against Israel's Netzah Yehuda battalion within days. The sanctions would be related to incidents in the West Bank prior to Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel. Netzah Yehuda is reportedly made up of young, radical Jewish settlers who have not been accepted into other IDF units.

"The DoD [Defense Department] has not provided training to this IDF [Israel Defense Forces] unit," the statement said on Friday.

However, ABC News recently reported that the Biden administration has decided against cutting off military aid for three military battalions with the Israel Defense Forces, despite determining that they committed "gross human rights violations" against Palestinian civilians in the West Bank.

The assessment was outlined in a letter sent by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to House Speaker Mike Johnson, the report said.

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Omaha Police Say Established Command Center to Respond to Tornado

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The Omaha Police Department in the US state of Nebraska said in a statement via social media platform X that it established a command center to respond to a tornado in the area.

“Omaha Police along with other responding agencies have established a command center at

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228th and Dodge Street," the statement said on Friday.
People should avoid the Elkhorn neighborhood of Omaha, where emergency personnel are assisting those who were in the path of the tornado, the department said in a follow-up statement.
The National Weather Service Omaha released a series of statements warning Nebraska residents of the tornado's path as it moved across parts of the state.
Video footage of the tornado's aftermath circulating on social media appears to show extensive property damage in the Elkhorn area.

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USAID Seeking Advisor on Non-Energy Critical Infrastructure in Ukraine – Notice

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is seeking an individual for the position of an Infrastructure and Engineering Advisor to lead a team of specialists and guide the US mission in Ukraine in terms of decision-making related to critical infrastructure in the country, according to a solicitation notice.
"USAID/Ukraine faces many significant challenges in re-establishing the infrastructure that has been destroyed by the war with Russia. As such, USAID/Ukraine is seeking an Infrastructure and Engineering Advisor to help guide the mission to make critical decisions regarding infrastructure. The individual will be the team lead of the non-energy related infrastructure and will serve as the mission's lead technical advisor," the notice said on Friday.
The notice said the advisor will provide her/his informed opinion on a range of infrastructure projects in Ukraine, including rail and roadway projects, and water, sanitation, and hygiene projects.
According to the notice, the individual will perform his duties in Kiev for one year with an option for one more year upon satisfactory performance.
The contract provides annual compensation for the advisor ranging from $104,604 to $135,987 per year, the notice said.

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Israel Has Carried Out Deadly Strikes in Gaza That It Marked as Safe Zones - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - Israel has carried out deadly strikes in areas of Gaza that it marked as safe zones for Palestinian civilians, NBC News reported, citing an investigation it conducted on this matter.
The report said it looked into seven Israeli strikes that had killed Palestinians in areas of southern Gaza designated as safe zones by Israel.
These strikes occurred from January to April, the report noted.

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The report said that on December 18, Israeli armed forces dropped leaflets in Gaza that identified the Tal Al Sultan, Al Zuhur, and Al Shaboura neighborhoods as safe and told Gaza residents to seek shelter there.

However, NBC News said its investigation found that all three locations have been hit by Israeli airstrikes since then.

NBC News said they were told by the Israel Defense Forces on Sunday that they continue to consider these designated areas as safe zones.

Israel's operation in Gaza has resulted in the death of more than 34,000 Palestinians and the wounding of over 77,000 Palestinians since October.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) -

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Ukrainian armed forces lost up to 430 soldiers near several settlements of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) in the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday.

* One person was killed and several more injured in Kakhovka in the Kherson region after a shell hit a home, regional Governor Vladimir Saldo said.

* The United States is ready to take new measures and introduce sanctions against China amid the situation in Ukraine, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS

* The United States continues to privately express concerns to Israel, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday in reference to Israel's military operation in the Gaza Strip.

* United Nations investigators have closed one out of 12 cases related to Israeli allegations that UNRWA staff were involved in the 7 October attacks by Hamas, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called on China to use its influence on Iran to contain the crisis in the Middle East.

MOLDOVA DEVELOPMENTS

* The head of Moldova's autonomous region of Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, on Friday greeted her supporters at the Chisinau airport's arrival zone, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

* Gutsul said that Moldovan authorities are doing everything to detain or humiliate her.

WESTERN MILITARY AID TO UKRAINE

* US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Friday announced that the United States will provide a new $6 billion military aid package for Ukraine.

* The Biden administration is hopeful to work with a number of its allies and partners to provide

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additional Patriot air defense systems to Ukraine amid the ongoing conflict with Russia, Austin said.
* The new package includes additional munitions for NASAMS, Patriot and HIMARS systems, the Defense Department said.
* Canada will make a C$3 million ($2.1 million) donation for Ukraine's domestic drone production, the Department of National Defense said.
* Belgium may transfer its F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine before the end of 2024, Defense Minister Ludivine Dedonder said.
* NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that Germany will send a third Patriot air defense system to Ukraine and urged other NATO allies to follow the suit.

UK-RUSSIA DISPUTE
* The United Kingdom's Foreign Office said on Friday that it summoned Russian Ambassador Andrey Kelin over allegations of Russian orchestrated malign activity in the country.
* Kelin told the UK Foreign Office that London's allegations of Russia's involvement in alleged malign activity are absurd, the Russian embassy said.

UNSC MEETING ON NORD STREAM PIPELINES SABOTAGE
* Any damage to critical civilian infrastructure should be condemned and investigated, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Europe, Central Asia and the Americas said commenting on the terrorist attack on the Nord Stream 2 pipelines.
* An international probe into the attacks on the Nord Stream pipelines is necessary to find out the truth, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said.

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New US $6Bln Aid for Ukraine Includes Munitions for NASAMS, Patriot, HIMARS - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States' newly announced $6 billion security package for Ukraine includes additional munitions for NASAMS, Patriot, and HIMARS systems, the Pentagon said Friday in a release.
"The capabilities in this announcement include ... additional munitions for Patriot air defense systems; additional munitions for National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS); additional ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS)," the Pentagon said in a release.
It also includes equipment to integrate Western air defense launchers, missiles, and radars with Ukraine's air defense systems; counter-UAS equipment and systems; munitions for laser-guided rocket systems; multi-mission and counter-artillery radars; 155mm and 152mm artillery rounds; and precision aerial munitions.
In addition, the US will provide Switchblade and Puma Unmanned Aerial Systems; components to support Ukrainian production of UAS and other capabilities; small arms and additional small arms ammunition; and ancillary items and support for training, maintenance, and sustainment

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activities.

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US, Japan, S. Korea Affirm Commitment to Bolstering Trilateral Defense Ties - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States, South Korea and Japan affirmed their commitment to bolstering trilateral defense ties during virtual talks earlier this week, the countries said in a joint statement on Friday.

US Assistant Defense Secretary for Indo-Pacific Security Ely Ratner, Japanese Director General for Defense Policy Kano Koji and South Korean Deputy Minister for National Defense Policy Cho Chang-rae convened the 14th Defense Trilateral Talks virtually on April 24, the statement said.

"The three sides affirmed their enduring commitment to strengthening trilateral cooperation to deter the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) nuclear and missile threats and to promote peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the Indo-Pacific region," the statement said.

The officials also affirmed that their countries have significantly strengthened security cooperation over the past year, particularly through collaboration on a real-time DPRK missile warning data sharing mechanism and a multi-year trilateral exercise plan, the statement said.

The United States also reaffirmed its "ironclad" commitment to defending Japan and South Korea, highlighting that it is backed by the full range of US capabilities, including nuclear ones, the statement added.

The officials agreed to hold the 15th Defense Trilateral talks later this year in South Korea, according to the statement.

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Pro-Palestine Student Protest in Washington Continues Despite Demands to Remove Camp

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Dozens of students are still camped out at the George Washington University (GWU) in the US capital to protest against Israeli military actions in Gaza, despite demands by officials to disperse, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Friday.

The protests at GWU have emerged alongside other pro-Palestine demonstrations at US college campuses across the country in recent days, some of which have seen intense clashes between protesters and law enforcement.

Students began protesting at GWU on Thursday to condemn Israel's assault on Gaza and demand a halt to US arms supplies to the Jewish state. The epicenter of the demonstrations remains the square at the university's Law School, which is located within walking distance from the White House.

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Student demonstrations are also taking place at Columbia University, Yale, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton, Harvard, Stanford, Berkeley, Emory, the University of Texas and Ohio State, among others. In some universities, police are using force to remove protesters, and their interventions have resulted in hundreds of arrests.

Protesters at George Washington University are holding signs with slogans including “Stand with Palestine,” and “Stop the Genocide,” among others.

Officials and police stationed at George Washington University have not yet moved to break up the ongoing protest. On Thursday, officials demanded that the protesters vacate the territory by the end of the day, but on Friday the protest continued without intervention by law enforcement officers.

The territory of the protest encampment has been fenced off, with only protesters and several police officers inside. The officers have not interfered with the demonstrations.

Police squads are stationed outside the campus grounds and restrict the movement of vehicles along the adjacent street. Police say they do not have any information about when the protesters will leave their encampment.

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Some Western Officials Begin to Talk About Religious Rights Violations in Ukraine - Priest

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Some Western politicians have already begun talking about the prosecution of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) by the government of Ukraine, Russian Church Abroad (ROCOR) Synod of Bishops Chancellor Archpriest Serafim Gan said.

"Some statesmen in the Western countries have already begun talking about that," Gan told Sputnik on Friday.

The UOC said on Thursday that the Ukrainian authorities arrested Metropolitan Arsenii (Yakovenko) - the abbot of the Svyatogorsk lavra - and are detaining him for 60 days without providing a chance to post bail.

The authorities opened a criminal case against Arsenii for allegedly disseminating information about the movement and location of the country’s armed forces. If convicted, Arsenii faces a prison sentence of up to eight years.

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Foreign Ministry have called on international human rights organizations to document Arsenii’s detention and help resolve the case.

Gan said that many in the ROCOR worry about the fate of Arsenii and the monks he leads as well as about the refugees and pilgrims cared for in the Svyatogorsk lavra.

Gan emphasized the very strong links between ROCOR and the Svyatogorsk lavra because St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco, one of the most venerated saints in the Russian diaspora and the whole Orthodox Christian world, was born near that monastery.

"Metropolitan Arsenii's very edifying and meaningful sermons are very popular among our clergy and flock. People listen to him with great interest," Gant said.

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Gant said ROCOR consists of emigres not only from Russia but also from Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, the Baltic states, Kazakhstan, Georgia and other countries.

"Those people are citizens of the host states of the Russian Church Abroad. That is why we must inform the governments and journalists about the deplorable situation of the persecuted Ukrainian Orthodox Church and about the significant violations of the rights and religious freedoms of Ukrainians. The more Orthodox believers call and write to them, the better," Gant added.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said in late March that the Ukrainian authorities continued intimidating UOC priests and worshipers during the period from December 2023 to February 2024.

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Oil Snaps 2-Week Loss; Steady Economy Offsets Demand Doubts, Delayed US Rate Cuts

NEW YORK, April 26 (Sputnik) - Oil prices rose for the first time in three weeks, supported by a slowing but stable US economy and growth in Europe that offsets concern about fuel demand in the United States and the likelihood of delayed rate cuts by the Federal Reserve.

West Texas Intermediate (WTI), the benchmark for US crude, settled Friday's trade up 28 cents, or 0.3%, at $83.85 per barrel for the contract slated for delivery in June. It rose 0.9% on the week, after back-to-back weekly declines of 2.9% and 1.4%.

WTI aside, London-traded Brent, the global benchmark for crude, closed the session up 49 cents, or 0.6%, at $89.50 for June delivery. Brent was up 2.4% for the week, after conceding 3.5% and 0.8% in two prior weeks.

"Crude oil had been trending higher for much of the week, making back a good chunk of the losses suffered in the previous week," Fawad Razaqzada, an analyst at London-based Stone X, said in an email to clients shared with Sputnik.

The four-month rally stalled earlier this month as investors worried about demand for fuel in the United States, where hot inflation continues to push back the implied probability of interest rate cuts, Razaqzada noted. Yet, US consumer price and gross domestic product indicated there wasn't too much for investors in oil to worry, he reasoned.

As of Friday, WTI was up 17% on the year while Brent was 16% higher.

"Signs of an economic recovery in Europe [and] ongoing supply cuts by the OPEC+ group [have] continued in the background, limiting any bearish moves," Razaqzada noted.

OPEC+ groups the 13-member Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries with 10 other oil-producing nations steered by Russia. The alliance intends to maintain supply cuts of 2.2 million barrels per day until the end of June.

The Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) Index has been middling in 2% territory for some time, displaying a stability analysts said the central bank would wish to see for interest rate cuts planned later in the year. Yet, to some observers on Wall Street, the index's inability to close in more rapidly on the Fed's flat 2% target for inflation was a sign that the central bank would hold on to rates for the moment.

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Marking the slowest quarterly growth in nearly two years, the GDP data reported by the Commerce Department seemed to validate fears that inflation was getting the better of growth again.

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US Delays Menthol Cigarette Ban, Says Will 'Take Significantly More Time'

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - A decision on whether to ban menthol cigarettes at the federal level will require significantly more time, Secretary of Health and Human Services Xavier Becerra said on Friday, amid reports that the delay is linked to alleged political concerns it could anger Black voters.

"This rule has garnered historic attention, and the public comment period has yielded an immense amount of feedback, including from various elements of the civil rights and criminal justice movement. It's clear that there are still more conversations to have, and that will take significantly more time," Becerra said in a statement.

The Wall Street Journal reported earlier in the day that the Biden administration is abandoning its proposal to ban menthol cigarettes due to fear of backlash from African-American voters during an election year after weighing the health benefits against the political consequences.

Menthol cigarettes make up over a third of all cigarette sales in the US annually, with a preference among Black and Hispanic smokers, with 81% of Black smokers, 51% of Hispanic smokers, and 30% of White smokers using menthols in 2020, the report said.

In 2021, the US government planned to ban menthol flavoring in cigarettes, saying the prohibition would save lives, especially among the nation's African-American population.

Menthol is a minty-tasting and smelling flavor additive aroma that reduces the irritation and coarseness associated with smoking.

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Majority of US Voters Believe Trump Likely to Win 2024 Presidential Election - Poll

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - A majority of prospective voters in the United States believe that former US President Donald Trump is likely to win the 2024 US presidential election, according to the results of a Rasmussen Reports poll released Friday.

A majority of respondents, 56%, believe that Trump is likely to retake the White House, the poll report said. Nearly one-third of respondents, 32%, believe that Trump is very likely to win the election, the poll report said.

Thirty-five percent (35%) of respondents believe that Trump is not likely to win the election, including 16% who believe it is not likely at all, the poll report said.

The poll surveyed 1,093 likely US voters on April 11 and 14-15. The poll maintains a margin of

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error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

Trump, the presumptive Republican Party presidential nominee, is expected to rematch current officeholder Joe Biden for control of the White House.

On Friday, Biden said that he would be happy to debate Trump but does not know when such an event would be organized.

In response, Trump said that he is willing to debate Biden “anytime, anyplace,” including as soon as Friday night.

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Biden-Erdogan Meeting in May Postponed Due to Scheduling Differences - White House

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - A meeting expected between President Joe Biden and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at the White House next month has been postponed due to scheduling difficulties, Reuters reported, citing a White House official.

"We look forward to hosting President Erdogan at the White House at a mutually convenient time, but we have not been able to align our schedules and do not have any visit to announce at this time," the White House official said as quoted by Reuters.

The United States reportedly extended the invitation to Turkey, which it accepted, and the meeting was initially scheduled to take place on May 9.

A Turkish official told Reuters that a new date will soon be set.

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US Reviewing Counterterror Options After Niger, Chad Request to Withdraw Troops - General

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Charles Brown said on Friday that he is discussing with US military leaders options as to how the United States can continue its counterterrorism (CT) operations in Africa given that US forces are required to reduce their presence in Niger and Chad.

"One of the areas that we were focused on is to continue our CT operations ... so as we are working through and adjusting," Brown said during a press conference. "This is a conversation I've had with [US Africa Command] General Langley on how we can still continue to do our counterterrorism ... and work with the various nations within the region."

Brown and US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin declined to directly respond to a question about whether the United States is losing its influence to Russia and China in the African continent.

The United States must find willing partners and expects it will be able to do so in Africa amid the changes in the US force posture, Brown said.

The general noted that some US adversaries will try to financially appease host nations but they do not have the long-term relationship with shared values and objectives that the United

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States can offer.

The United States reportedly plans to pull out dozens of its troops from Chad and some 1,000 of its troops from Niger at the request of the governments of the two countries.

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Joly Reaffirms Canada's Intention to Sanction Israeli Extremist Settlers in West Bank

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – The Canadian government remains committed to imposing sanctions on individuals responsible for extremist settler violence in the Palestinian West Bank, Foreign Minister Melanie Joly said on Friday.

"We will be imposing sanctions on extremist settlers. We've said it and we'll do it," Joly told reporters when questioned on whether Ottawa had changed its mind on the matter.

When questioned on the timeline determined by the government to announce the sanctions, Joly said that "it would be coming."

In early February, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that Ottawa was considering the imposition of sanctions as a means to hold accountable individuals responsible for extremist settler violence in the West Bank.

Trudeau had stated that settler violence in the West Bank was unacceptable and further endangered the prospects for peace and stability as well as the path toward an "absolutely essential" two-state solution to the conflict.

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US Stocks Rise On Week Despite Increasing Signs of Holdoff on Rate Cuts

NEW YORK, April 26 (Sputnik) - Wall Street was gearing on Friday for a weekly higher close, with buyers lifting key stock indexes that had fallen for as many as four weeks in a row.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the S&P 500 and Nasdaq Composite rose between 1% and 5% on the week despite data increasingly showing inflation not cooling fast enough to compel the Federal Reserve to cut rates in the near future. One reason for the flip:
Stronger-than-expected earnings from tech giants Microsoft and Alphabet that revived bullish bets.

With two hours to the close, the S&P 500, which tracks stocks of the top 500 US companies, was headed for a 3% rise on the week. It had fallen three prior weeks, reversing a loss of the same amount from last week.

The tech-laden Nasdaq, which comprises stocks such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, was up 3% on the week. It had plunged four weeks before this, losing as much as 5.5% last week.

The Dow, the broadest indicator for US stocks, showed a near 1% gain on the week after last

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week's flat finish.

Stocks rebounded this week despite an inflation gauge closely watched by the Federal Reserve showing US prices growing 2.7% during the year to March, above Wall Street's forecast 2.6% and the previous 2.5% growth seen in February.

The Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) Index has been middling in 2% territory for some time, displaying a stability analysts said the central bank would wish to see for interest rate cuts planned later in the year. Yet, to some observers on Wall Street, the index's inability to close in more rapidly on the Fed's flat 2% target for inflation was a sign that the central bank would hold on to rates for the moment.

Reinforcing that notion was the reading on core PCE — a measure of the index stripped of volatile energy and food prices — which grew 2.8% year-on-year, versus the forecast 2.7%.

"The progress on inflation is stalled," economist Greg Michalowski said in a reaction to the PCE data, posted on the ForexLive forum.

The March PCE data came a day after a quarterly reading for Gross Domestic Product slowed to 1.6% year-on-year in the January-March period — versus Wall Street's forecast of a 2.5% growth and the 3.4% noted in the final quarter of 2023.

Marking the slowest quarterly growth in nearly two years, the GDP data reported by the Commerce Department seemed to validate fears that inflation was getting the better of growth again.

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Trump Invites Biden to Debate 'Anywhere, Anytime' Including at New York Courthouse

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump on Friday responded to current President Biden's willingness to debate and offered him to do so at a place and time of his choosing, including at the New York City courthouse tonight and broadcast the debate on national television.

"Crooked Joe Biden just announced that he's willing to debate! Everyone knows he doesn't really mean it, but in case he does, I say, anywhere, anytime, anyplace - an old expression used by fighters," Trump said. "In fact, let's do the debate at the Courthouse tonight - on national television, I'll wait around."

Earlier on Friday, Biden said he would be happy to debate his likely political opponent in the upcoming presidential election, Trump, but does not know when such a debate will be possible to organize.

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US Military Leaders Decline to Comment on Reports Kiev Moved Abrams Tanks From Frontlines

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Charles Brown on Friday declined to comment on reports that the Ukrainian armed forces moved Abrams tanks from the frontlines due to threats from Russian drones.

"I'll defer to the Ukrainians on how they use their Abrams," Brown said when asked about reports Ukrainian forces have removed their Abrams tanks from the frontlines.

The New York Times reported last week, citing a senior US official, that the Russian armed forces have taken out five of the 31 US-supplied M1 Abrams tanks in the special military operation zone in the last two months.

Another three tanks the United States sent to Ukraine have been moderately damaged since the beginning of this year, the report added.

In February, Ukrainian media platform strana.ua reported that the Ukrainian armed forces had been using Abrams for over a month in the direction of Avdiivka, also known as Avdeyevka, from where they later withdrew. On March 6, a commander of one of the Russian military units told Sputnik that the Russian forces destroyed a US-made Abrams for the first time in the Avdiivka direction during a tank battle.

In late September 2023, the White House confirmed that Abrams tanks had begun arriving in Ukraine. In total, the US administration vowed to give Kiev 31 Abrams tanks. However, the head of Ukraine's military intelligence service, Kyrylo Budanov, said that these tanks "will not live very long on the battlefield" in an ordinary combined arms battle.

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New US $6Bln Aid for Ukraine Includes Munitions for NASAMS, Patriot, HIMARS - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States' newly announced $6 billion security package for Ukraine includes additional munitions for NASAMS, Patriot, and HIMARS systems, the Pentagon said Friday in a release.

"The capabilities in this announcement include ... additional munitions for Patriot air defense systems; additional munitions for National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS); additional ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS)," the Pentagon said in a release.

It also includes equipment to integrate Western air defense launchers, missiles, and radars with Ukraine's air defense systems; counter-UAS equipment and systems; munitions for laser-guided rocket systems; multi-mission and counter-artillery radars; 155mm and 152mm artillery rounds; and precision aerial munitions.

In addition, the US will provide Switchblade and Puma Unmanned Aerial Systems; components to support Ukrainian production of UAS and other capabilities; small arms and additional small arms ammunition; and ancillary items and support for training, maintenance, and sustainment

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activities.

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ATACMS 'Not So Important' for Ukraine But Useful Alongside Other Capabilities - Austin

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) are not particularly important for Ukraine on their own but are useful in conjunction with other capabilities, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Friday.

"That capability alone is not so important; it's the integration of that capability with the other kinds of things - like Storm Shadow and other things that other countries are providing - that really then gives them a capability to conduct a long-range fires campaign," Austin said during a press briefing.

On Wednesday, a Defense Department spokesperson told Sputnik that the United States covertly provided ATACMS to Ukraine at US President Joe Biden's direction.

White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan also said on Wednesday that the US is confident that Ukraine will only use ATACMS within its own territory.

However, UK Chief of Defense Staff Adm. Tony Radakin reportedly said this week that Ukraine may use ATACMS to strike inside Russian territory despite US requests not to do so.

The provision of ATACMS for Ukraine will only cause more problems for that country, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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Canada Donates $2.1Mln for Ukraine Drone Production - National Defense

(Adds details in paras 3, 5-7 and background in para 8)

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Canada will make a C$3 million ($2.1 million) donation for Ukraine's domestic drone production, the Department of National Defense said on Friday.

The announcement was made by Defense Minister Bill Blair following the 21st Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting hosted by US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in Washington. The fresh donations draw from a C$500 million military assistance package announced by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in June 2023 during his state visit to Kiev.

"At today's meeting, Minister Blair announced that Canada is donating $3 million to Ukraine for the production of drones by Ukraine's domestic defence industry. This marks the first time that Canada is contributing directly to the production of military drones in Ukraine, and this donation will be made in collaboration with the United Kingdom," the department said in a statement.

In addition, Canada will make a new C$13 million contribution to the Czech-led initiative seeking the procurement of 155-millimeter artillery rounds for Ukraine, the department added.

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Ottawa has already pledged C$40 million for the initiative.

Minister Blair further added that Canada was topping its donation of 800 SkyRanger drones announced in early February by another hundred units, the department continued.

The minister also provided updates on the delivery timelines for previously announced donations, the department said. The first 10 of 50 donated Armored Support Combat Vehicles will be delivered to Ukraine in the fall, whereas 10 multirole boats are set to be delivered in July, it added.

Since the onset of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, Canada has committed over C$4 billion in military assistance to Ukraine. The Kremlin has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it would lead to further escalation of the conflict.

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US, Allies Working on Identifying How to Boost Ukraine's Defense Capabilities - Austin

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies and partners are working to identify how they can enhance Ukraine's capabilities in air defense, drones, artillery, and air power, among others, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Friday.

"We are identifying where and how to boost Ukraine's capabilities in such areas as air defense, air power, artillery, maritime security, armor, information technology, de-mining and UAVs [drones]," Austin said after a virtual meeting with the Ukraine Defense Contact Group.

The contact group is working with Ukraine to help it develop an efficient and self-reliant defense industry, Austin added.

Moreover, Austin noted that during the meeting on Friday, the United States pushed especially hard on expediting more air defense systems and interceptors to Ukraine.

Austin also announced that the United States will commit $6 billion in new defense contracts for Ukraine, which will provide Ukraine with new defense capabilities in the coming years.

Earlier this week, President Joe Biden signed a supplemental package passed by Congress that provides $61 billion for Ukraine.

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US Hopeful Other Countries to Provide Their Patriot Systems to Ukraine - Austin

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration is hopeful to work with a number of its allies and partners to provide additional Patriot air defense systems to Ukraine amid the ongoing conflict with Russia, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Friday.

"I think going forward, we'll be able to hopefully work with a number of countries to put together additional Patriot capability," Austin said during a press briefing.

However, Austin urged against treating the Patriot air defense systems as a "silver bullet" for

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defending Ukraine.

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Biden Says Would Be 'Happy' to Debate Trump, But Does Not Know When

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Friday that he would be happy to debate his predecessor and likely opponent in the upcoming presidential election Donald Trump, but does not know when it will be possible.

"I am, somewhere, I don't know when I am happy to debate him," Biden said during an interview with host Howard Stern on Sirius XM radio when asked if he is ready to debate Trump.

Biden's response to the debate with Trump is different from what he said in March when he replied that the prospect of such a debate would depend on Trump's behavior.

On Thursday, a Quinnipiac University national poll revealed that Biden and Trump would get the same number of votes in the presidential election if it was being held now.

The US presidential election is slated for November 2024. The main contenders expected on the ballot are Biden and Trump, who have both won enough delegates' votes to be their respective Democratic and Republican parties' presumptive nominees.

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US Defense Secretary Austin Announces $6 Bln Millitary Aid Package For Ukraine

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - United States Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin on Friday announced that the US will provide a new $6 billion military aid package for Ukraine.

"I am also pleased to announce today an additional commitment of $6 billion through our Ukraine security assistance initiative that will allow us to procure new capabilities for Ukraine from US industry," Austin said in a press conference, noting that this was the largest security package for Kiev to date.

The package will include interceptors for Ukraine's Patriot and NASAMS systems, more counter-drone systems, significant amounts of artillery ammunition and air-to-ground munitions, Austin said.

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Blinken Says US Not Seeking to Contain China, Benefits From Its Economic Growth

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WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is not seeking to contain China's economic growth and it is in the United States' best interest for China's economy to remain strong, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in an interview on Friday.

"We're not focused on cutting off trade, or for that matter, containing or holding back China," Blinken told NPR during his visit to China. "It's actually in our interest for China to have a growing and strong economy, but we also want to make sure that on the economic side of the ledger, there's a level playing field for our companies and our workers."

Blinken made the comment in answering a question regarding US regulations to deny China access to advanced US microchip technology.

Last year, the United States imposed export controls designed to prevent China to access advanced US semiconductor technology with dual-use purposes that could benefit the Chinese military.

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Canada Donates $2.1Mln for Ukraine Drone Production - National Defense

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – Canada will make a C$3 million ($2.1 million) donation for Ukraine's domestic drone production, the Department of National Defense said on Friday.

The announcement was made by Defense Minister Bill Blair following the 21st Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting hosted by US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in Washington.

"At today's meeting, Minister Blair announced that Canada is donating $3 million to Ukraine for the production of drones by Ukraine's domestic defence industry. This marks the first time that Canada is contributing directly to the production of military drones in Ukraine, and this donation will be made in collaboration with the United Kingdom," the department said in a statement.

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UN Closes One Case Out of 12 Regarding Israel's UNRWA Allegations - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 26 (Sputnik) - United Nations investigators have closed one out of an initial 12 cases related to Israeli allegations that staff members of the UN Palestinian refugee agency UNRWA were involved in the 7 October attacks, UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in a briefing on Friday.

"One case was closed [one case out of 12], as no evidence was provided by Israel to support the allegations against the staff member. We are exploring corrective administrative action to be taken in that person's case," Dujarric said in an update on the inquiry by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS).

Also, three cases were suspended because there were lack of information but can be

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unsuspended if more information is provided, he added.
In addition, seven new cases were added, bringing the total number of staff members probed by the OIOS to 19, he said.

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Biden Administration Changes President's Walking Routine to Hide Stiff Gait - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has stopped walking by himself to the Marine One presidential helicopter and is now surrounded by aides in what appears to be an attempt by the administration to distract the US public from his unsteady gait, Axios reported on Friday.
For the last ten days, Biden has been accompanied on his treks across the White House's south lawn to Marine One by a cadre of staffers 90% of the time, the report said, citing White House staff.
The shift in the routine appears to be part of the Biden administration's effort to shift focus away from the issue of the president's advanced age during an election year.
Instead of walking by himself to Marine One, Biden is now joined by staff, lawmakers or others, including nine times out of ten.
White House advisers referenced in the report said the idea is that the change in routine would lead to a more positive image of the president.
Biden has been speaking more openly about his age during the campaign.
Biden's doctor has disclosed that the president suffers from spinal arthritis and mild neuropathy of the feet and both conditions contribute to his stiff gate, according to the report.
At age 81, Biden is the oldest president in US history and has been routinely criticized for his cognitive decline and a tendency to fall. Some lawmakers and pundits have called on Biden to step down due to his declining psycho-physical condition.

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US Congressman Says Introducing Bill to Create Anti-Semitism Monitors for College Campuses

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Democratic US Congressman Ritchie Torres said on Friday that he is introducing legislation to create anti-Semitism monitors for federally funded colleges in the United States, amid pro-Palestine protests on campuses across the country.
The legislation, dubbed the College Oversight and Legal Updates Mandating Bias Investigations and Accountability (COLUMBIA) Act, would enable the US Education Department to send anti-Semitism monitors to institutions of higher education that receive federal funding, Torres said in a statement.
The bill's acronymic title references pro-Palestine protests at Columbia University, which have

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received significant media attention and sparked accusations of anti-Semitism.

"This past week's crisis at Columbia is not an isolated incident — it is the straw that has broken the camel's back — and I am prepared to do something about it. That's why I am introducing the COLUMBIA Act today, and I urge all of my colleagues in the House, from both parties, to join me in this crucial action," Torres said in the statement.

The legislation is co-sponsored by Republican US Congressman Mike Lawler, the statement said.

The campus anti-Semitism monitors would be paid for by the monitored institution, the statement said. Institutions that fail to comply with the monitors would lose federal funding, the statement said.

On Thursday, independent US Senator Bernie Sanders — who has Jewish heritage — said that criticizing Israeli government policies in the Gaza Strip does not constitute anti-Semitism.

Palestinian organization Hamas launched an attack on Israel on October 7, in which approximately 1,200 Israelis, both military and civilian, were killed and some 230 others abducted.

In response, Israel launched a military operation in the Gaza Strip, killing more than 34,000 people and injuring over 77,000 others so far, according to local health authorities.

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Ukraine 'In Deep Hole' Over Delay of US Aid, Will Take Time To 'Dig Out' Of It - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Ukraine ended up in a deep hole because of the delay with the Congressional approval of the supplemental package, and it will take some time for Kiev to get out of it, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday

"I've said this publicly myself that Ukraine ended up in a deep hole because of the delay in the aid over six months that Congress worked on this but didn't pass it, and it's going to take some time to dig out of that hole," Sullivan said in an interview with MSNBC. "In the days ahead, Ukraine will continue to be under pressure. But as time goes on, we believe Ukraine's strategic position is strong. We believe the support for Ukraine in the United States and Europe is strong, and we believe ultimately Ukraine can win this war."

Earlier, Congress passed a supplemental package that includes $61 billion in additional aid for Ukraine. A substantial amount of the funding will go toward replenishing US equipment sent to Ukraine from its current inventory.

Politico reported, citing sources, that some officials in the Biden administration are skeptical about Ukraine being able to succeed on the battlefield even with the new aid package. Moreover, Sullivan said that the United States admits the possibility that Russia could make additional territorial gains in Ukraine over the coming weeks.

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Biden Says He Was 'Jerk' in Law School, Did Not Take Studying Seriously

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Friday he was a "jerk" in law school because he didn't care much about studying.

"I was a jerk in law school," Biden said during a live interview with Howard Stern on Sirius XM radio. "I didn't take it seriously enough. For example, I didn't buy my textbooks until the middle of the first semester."

Biden also talked about one incident during his law school years when a strict professor called him and asked him to cite a certain case and, without reading it, he was able to recite it, which delighted both the professor and one of the best students in the class. However, Biden called this episode "embarrassing."

Throughout his career, Biden has been caught lying about his academic performance in law school. Back in 1987, the Washington Post reported that Biden's claims about being in the top half of his class in law school were later refuted by Biden himself as "inaccurate."

"The first year in law school I decided I didn't want to be in law school and ended up in the bottom two-thirds of my class, and then decided I wanted to stay and went back to law school and in fact ended up in the top half of my class," the report cited Biden as saying in April 1987 during a campaign event in New Hampshire.

According to the report, Biden ranked 80th in a class of 100 in his first year in law school, 79th of 87 at the end of his second year, and 76th of 85 in his final year in 1968.

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US Continues to Privately Express Concerns to Israel - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to privately express concerns to Israel, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday in reference to Israel's military operation in the Gaza Strip.

"We continue to express our concerns publicly and privately to the Israeli government. I have dealt with them directly on this issue, and we will continue to do that," Sullivan told MSNBC.

Sullivan emphasized that the United States has conveyed to Israel its "deep and fundamental" concerns over the latter's military operation in Rafah in the Gaza Strip.

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Biden Says Was Thinking of Suicide After His First Wife, Daughter Died in 1972

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WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Friday that he was thinking about committing suicide after his first wife and daughter died in a car crash in 1972.

"But, I actually thought about [committing suicide]. You don't have to be crazy to commit suicide," Biden said during an interview with host Howard Stern on Sirius XM radio. "For just a brief moment, I thought maybe I just go to the Delaware Memorial Bridge and jump, but I had two kids. Don't get me wrong. I wasn't like 'I got to commit suicide.'"

In December 1972, Biden's 30-year-old wife Neilia and their 13-month-old daughter Naomi died in a car accident in the US state of Delaware. Their two sons, Hunter and Beau, who were also in the car at the time of the accident, suffered serious injuries and were hospitalized.

Biden was in Washington at the time of the accident, hiring staff for his office after being elected to the US Senate by achieving a narrow victory against incumbent Republican Senator J. Caleb Boggs.

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Incident Involving Air Canada, Indigenous Chief Ceremonial Headdress 'Mistake' - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – The incident where an Air Canada flight crew decided to prohibit an Indigenous Chief from boarding the plane with her ceremonial headdress in the cabin was a "mistake", Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday.

"This was a mistake that I know Air Canada is looking into right now. But from my perspective that is … an unfortunate situation that I hope is going to lead to a bit of learning not just by Air Canada, but a lot of different institutions," Trudeau told reporters.

The Premier further added that the incident was unacceptable, notably following the calls to action made under the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that urges the Canadian Government to responsibly engage as a partner to Indigenous Peoples.

On Wednesday, the staff of an Air Canada flight departing for Montreal forced the Assembly of First Nations' national chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak to hand a case in which her ceremonial headdress was kept, to store it in the cargo compartment.

In a statement issued on Thursday, the country's flag carrier said it reached out to Chief Nepinak to better understand and apologize for the incident. Air Canada further added that it understands the importance of accommodating its customers with items of either cultural or religious significance, something that Chiefs have been able to do in past instances.

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US Has 'Other Measures' Outside Sanctions to Make China 'Stop Aiding Russia' - Blinken

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WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has other measures outside of sanctions and export controls that it is prepared to use to attempt to block China from allegedly aiding Russia, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during an interview on Friday.

"You've already seen us take action against more than a hundred Chinese entities with sanctions, applying export controls," Blinken told NPR. "There are other measures that we're fully prepared to take. As I said before, if China won't act, we will."

Blinken was responding to a question about US efforts to influence China to "stop aiding Russia" amid US concerns that Chinese companies are supplying dual-use items that may be used by the Russian defense industrial base to make weapons used in Ukraine.

However, Blinken noted in the interview that China has not provided any actual weapons to Russia for use in Ukraine.

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

China has been playing a constructive role in facilitating a political settlement of the conflict in Ukraine, the Embassy said. Moreover, the Embassy said normal trade between China and Russia should not be interfered with or restricted.

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Sullivan Says If We Can Unlock Further Patriot Batteries to Send to Ukraine We Will

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday that if the United States is able to unlock further Patriot systems that it can deliver to Ukraine, it will do so.

"The US Patriot systems right now are being deployed around the world, including in the Middle East to protect US troops," Sullivan said in an interview with MSNBC. "If we can unlock further American Patriot batteries, we would send them, but in the meantime, what we're going to do is work with European partners and partners in other parts of the world to get them to provide additional air defense capability to Ukraine, and we will do everything we can to protect its skies from the missiles that are raining down on the cities of Ukraine."

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US Ready to Take Measures Beyond Sanctions to Stop China's Aid to Russia - Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to take measures against China beyond those already taken if Beijing does not stop its aid to Russia, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

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"As I've said, you've already seen us take action against more than a hundred Chinese entities with sanctions, applying export controls," Blinken said in an interview with NPR after his meeting with China's President Xi Jinping. "There are other measures that we're fully prepared to take. And as I said before, if China won't act, we will."

Blinken also said that unlike Iran and North Korea, China is not providing arms to Russia but does supply it with critical components such as machine tools, microelectronics and optics.

"This is not only a problem for us, it's not only a problem for Ukraine; it's a problem for virtually everyone in Europe, because they see this as helping to perpetuate the Russian aggression in Ukraine," Blinken said. "They also see it as creating a growing threat to Europe's security."

Blinken pointed out one of the things he told Chinese officials is that China cannot try to develop better relations with Europe while at the same time helping fuel what the collective West views as the biggest threat to Europe's security since the end of the Cold War.

US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said last week that the United States is willing and able to take unilateral action to block private Chinese firms from supplying goods to Russia that can be used by its defense industry.

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

China has been playing a constructive role in facilitating a political settlement of the conflict in Ukraine, the embassy said. Moreover, the mission said normal trade between China and Russia should not be interfered with or restricted.

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Blinken Says China Could Play Role in Preventing Escalation of Middle East Conflict

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - China could play a constructive role in preventing the escalation of conflict in the Middle East, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"I've had, I think, six conversations with my Chinese counterparts since October 7th. I actually believe that China could play a constructive role in trying to make sure that conflict doesn't spread, that we don't see escalation because it has relationships, it has influence with critical countries in the region, including, for example, Iran," Blinken said in an interview.

The United States has seen evidence of China engaging to prevent the escalation of conflict in the region, Blinken said.

It is in China's interest to prevent the spread of conflict in the Middle East because it is "deeply reliant" on the region's energy resources, Blinken said.

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UPDATE - State Prosecutor Says Dismissed 57 Cases Related to Gaza Protest at University of Texas

(Updates with details in para 3, updated count in headline, lede)
AUSTIN, April 26 (Sputnik) - The Travis County Attorney's Office told Sputnik on Friday that it decided to dismiss the cases of some 57 people arrested in connection to the pro-Palestine protests that took place at the University of Texas campus in Austin this week.
"We individually reviewed each case that was presented and agreed there were deficiencies in the probable cause affidavits," the attorney's office said in a statement. "The Court affirmed and ordered the release of those individuals."
The attorney's office noted that there were a total of 57 people arrested on criminal trespass charges, but all of the cases lack sufficient probable cause.
The attorney's office noted that they will continue to individually review any new cases presented to their office related to the protest and will determine whether prosecution is legally appropriate.
Numerous pro-Palestine demonstrations have emerged on US college campuses in recent days against the United States military, financial and diplomatic support for Israel's operation in Gaza, which has resulted in the death of more than 34,000 Palestinians and the wounding of over 77,000 Palestinians.
Students are calling for their universities to condemn Israel’s US-backed military campaign in Gaza, to divest from companies linked to Israel and to discontinue study abroad programs at Israeli universities, among other demands.

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State Prosecutor Says Dismissed 46 Cases Related to Gaza Protest at University of Texas

AUSTIN, April 26 (Sputnik) - The Travis County Attorney's Office told Sputnik on Friday that it decided to dismiss the cases of some 46 people arrested in connection to the pro-Palestine protests that took place at the University of Texas campus in Austin this week.
"We individually reviewed each case that was presented and agreed there were deficiencies in the probable cause affidavits," the attorney's office said in a statement. "The Court affirmed and ordered the release of those individuals."
The attorney's office noted that they will continue to individually review any new cases presented to their office related to the protest and will determine whether prosecution is legally appropriate.
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Israeli universities, among other demands.

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US Commerce Department Says Will Restrict Gun Exports to Entities in 'High-Risk' Countries

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The US Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) said on Friday that it intends to restrict the export of firearms to non-governmental entities in high-risk countries.

"BIS will revoke all currently valid licenses to non-government end users in High-Risk Destinations for Firearms and Related Items," a Federal Register document on an interim final rule said.

BIS is amending the Export Administration Regulations to enhance the control structure for firearms and related items to better protect the United States' national security and foreign policy interests, the document said.

The rule identifies semi-automatic firearms under new Export Control Classification Numbers, adds new licensing requirements for Crime Control and Detection items, amends license review policies, expands requirements for support documentation for license applications and better accounts for the import documentation requirements of other countries, the document said.

BIS publicized the interim final rule to solicit comment on additional changes to export controls, the document added.

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Watchdog Says Canadian Police's Ability to Defend National Security 'Eroding' - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – The Royal Canadian Mounted Police's (RCMP) ability to defend national security is "eroding," CBC News reported on Friday, citing a report by the police service's independent advisory board.

The RCMP's ability to police key files related to foreign interference, terrorism, and financial crimes among others is "on the line" and the law enforcement institution needs to change in order to survive, the report said.

The report was produced over a period spanning more than a year by a task force set up by the RCMP's external Management Advisory Board.

"Federal policing has now arrived at a critical juncture of its sustainability, which present risks for the national security and safety of Canada, its people, and its interests," the report was quoted as stating.

The situation is further putting the RCMP at risk of global disrepute as the national police service represents Canada in global security institutions such as the Five Eyes alliance or

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Interpol, the report said.

The report lists such issues as funding reductions, difficulties in both recruitment and retention of members, and having to compete for experts in cybercrime with the private sector that hires faster and pays more, the report continued.

Established in 1920, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police operate nationwide and also provide policing service to all provinces under contract, including to indigenous communities.

Under federal policing, the Mounties investigate some of the most complex criminal files, those involving national security, organized crime, money laundering, cyber attacks and war crimes.

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White House Officials Made Failed Attempt to Remove Press Secretary - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – White House officials made a failed attempt to remove Press Secretary Karine Jean Pierre from her position, the New York Post said on Friday, citing its own sources.

The secret plan to replace the unwanted press secretary was undertaken last fall and involved attracting outside allies, the report said.

One of the sources shared that Anita Dunn, the wife of US President Joe Biden's personal attorney Bob Bauer and a de facto White House communications chief, told colleagues about her desire to call in prominent members of the Democratic Party to explain to Jean-Pierre the need for her to leave the position.

"There were a number of people she asked to engage Karine," one source with experience working in several administrations said. He also added that White House chief of staff Jeff Zients was aware of the situation.

The officials tried to involve people whom Jean-Pierre knows and trusts, according to the report, adding that Zients and Dunn were trying to find Jean-Pierre a graceful exit.

One source stressed that the press secretary sometimes does not understand the issues that she has to discuss with reporters during press briefings. "Karine doesn't have an understanding of the issues and she reads the book [binder] word-for-word," said the source.

However, White House deputy press secretary Andrew Bates rejected the allegations about his boss. He called the claims in the report "false," adding that the reality is absolutely different.

"Karine was never approached by anyone with such a message. She spends four hours preparing every day. And neither Jeff nor Anita did any such thing; both have been unflinchingly supportive of her," Bates said, according to the report.

The report also said that Jean-Pierre received and rejected in December an offer to become a President of EMILYs List, an organization that aims to help elect Democratic female candidates in favor of abortion rights to office.

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Biden Hails Passage of First Cargo Ships After Baltimore Bridge Collapse

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden on Friday hailed the resumption of cargo ships passage through a channel near Baltimore, where the Francis Scott Key bridge collapsed last month.

After being trapped for several weeks, the bulk carrier Balsa 94 was finally released on Thursday and became the first ship to move through the temporary 35-foot-deep channel. Two more commercial ships followed suit later in the day, according to reports.

"Yesterday marks a major milestone toward fully reopening the port of Baltimore by the end of May - the first large cargo ships traveling through the channel since the Francis Scott Key bridge collapsed," Biden said via the social media platform X.

In the early hours of March 26, a commercial Singapore-flagged cargo ship hit the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore soon after it departed. The bridge collapsed and six people died in the incident.

US media reported earlier that the insured loss from the Baltimore bridge collapse could reach $4 billion, making it the most expensive ship collision incident in modern history.

Earlier this week, the Baltimore city authorities filed a legal claim against the owner and operator of the Dali cargo ship that rammed into the Francis Scott Key Bridge, accusing them of negligence as the vessel was unseaworthy, according to court documents.

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International Investigation Into Nord Stream Terror Attack Needed - Nebenzia

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - An international probe into the attacks on the Nord Stream pipelines is necessary to find out the truth, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Friday.

"It should be clear now to everybody that determining what actually transpired is only possible through international cooperation," Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting. "Despite the efforts of a number of countries, including the US to cover this up, an international investigation is necessary. Unless we conduct one, we will be living in the world without any rules nor any legality."

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UPDATE - Fed's Favorite Inflation Gauge PCE Index Grows 2.7% Year-On-Year in March - Commerce Dept.

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(Adds details, comments and context, paragraphs 3-13)

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - An inflation gauge closely watched by the Federal Reserve showed US prices growing 2.7% during the year to March, above Wall Street's forecast of 2.6% and the previous 2.5% growth noted in February, the Commerce Department said on Friday.

The Personal Consumption Expenditures Index, often just referred to as the PCE, has been middling in 2% territory for some time, displaying a stability analysts said the central bank would wish to see for interest rate cuts planned later in the year. Yet, to some Wall Street analysts, the index's inability to approach more rapidly the flat 2% target eyed by the Fed was a sign the central bank would prefer to hold on to a policy pivot at the moment.

Reinforcing that notion was the reading on core PCE — a measure of the index stripped of volatile energy and food prices — which grew 2.8% year-on-year, versus the forecast 2.7%.

"The progress on inflation is stalled," economist Greg Michalowski said in a reaction to the PCE data, posted on the ForexLive forum.

The March PCE data came a day after a quarterly reading for Gross Domestic Product slowed to 1.6% year-on-year in the January-March period — versus Wall Street's forecast of a 2.5% growth and the 3.4% noted in the final quarter of 2023.

Marking the slowest quarterly growth in nearly two years, the GDP data reported by the Commerce Department seemed to validate fears that inflation was getting the better of growth again.

Inflation hit a four-decade high in the aftermath of the 2020 coronavirus breakout, with the Consumer Price Index (CPI) — another major indicator — growing as much as 9.1% during the year to June 2022.

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

While the Fed managed to subdue annual inflation by more than half with its action — the CPI rose just 3.5% in the year to March versus a four-decade high of 9.1% in June 2022 — it just can't seem to reach its sweet spot of 2%, with each update on price growth coming in a tick higher than expected.

The White House acknowledged this problem on Friday, saying healthcare and housing costs were still too high for the average American. "While inflation has fallen more than 60% from its peak, today's report reinforces the importance of our ongoing work to bring costs down," Lael Brainard, director of the National Economic Council, which advises President Joe Biden, said in a statement.

The Fed has said it's open to cutting rates by 0.75 basis points for both this year and next. If that were to happen, it would translate to three 0.25-basis point reductions in 2024 alone.

But the central bank has also made it clear that any policy pivot would depend on inflation returning to the 2% or below norm seen in the pre-Covid years. Almost every influential Fed official — from Chairman Jerome Powell to the heads of its different regional jurisdictions — wants either the PCE or CPI to make a meaningful descent towards the 2% target to force their hand.

The central bank's next decision on rates will be on May 1. But it's also likely true that none of the policy makers on its Federal Open Market Committee believe the inflation target will be met by then or even the third quarter. Wall Street is, in fact, betting on a late year pivot, meaning the

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November 7 and December 18 dates on the Fed meeting calendar will be the more closely-watched ones for a rate cut.

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UN Has No Additional Details About Nord Stream Attacks - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has no new details about the terrorist attacks on the Nord Stream pipelines, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Europe, Central Asia and the Americas Miroslav Jenca said on Friday.

"The United Nations does not have any additional details of the events and is not in a position to verify or confirm claims or reports made regarding the incident," Jenca said.

The Nord Stream pipelines, built to deliver gas from Russia to Germany under the Baltic Sea, were hit by explosions in September 2022. The pipelines operator Nord Stream AG said the damage was unprecedented and it was impossible to estimate the time repairs might take.

Denmark, Sweden, Germany and Norway have left Russia out of their investigations into the attacks. In February, Denmark and Sweden ended the investigations but conceded that sabotage was the cause of the pipelines' breakdown.

Russia said it considers the explosions that damaged the two pipelines to be act of international terrorism. While there are no official results of the investigation yet, veteran US investigative journalist Seymour Hersh published a report in 2023 alleging that the United States with the support of Norway were behind the explosions.

The United States has denied any involvement in the Nord Stream attacks.

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US, Taiwan to Hold '21st Century' Trade Talks on April 29 - US Trade Representative

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States and Taiwan will hold negotiations for the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade on April 29, the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) said on Friday.

"The United States and Taiwan, under the auspices of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO), will hold another in-person negotiating round for the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade in Taipei, Taiwan, beginning April 29, 2024," USTR said in a statement.

USTR will lead the US delegation with accompanying representatives from other US government agencies, the statement said.

The talks are expected to cover several trade areas laid out in the initiative's negotiating mandate, the statement said.

In June 2023, the US and Taiwan reached an initial agreement under the initiative, as a result

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of which US businesses will be able to deliver more products to Taiwan, the statement said.
The negotiations are being conducted consistent with the US' one China policy, which is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the three US-China Joint Communiques and the Six Assurances, the statement said.

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UN Official on Nord Stream: Any Damage to Critical Infrastructure Must Be Probed

UNITED NATIONS, April 26 (Sputnik) - Any damage to critical civilian infrastructure should be condemned and probed, the UN assistant secretary-general for Europe, Central Asia and the Americas said on Friday, commenting on the terrorist attack against the Nord Stream pipelines.
"We reiterate that any intentional damage to critical civilian infrastructure is of serious concern, should be condemned and investigated," Miroslav Jenca told the UN Security Council. "In the current sensitive security context, we urge everyone to exercise restraint while we wait for the remaining investigation to conclude and for the information to be shared accordingly."

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Blinken Says US Has Seen Evidence of China's Alleged Attempts to Influence US Elections

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday that the United States has seen evidence of China's efforts to "influence and arguably interfere" in American elections.
"We have seen, generally speaking, evidence of attempts to influence and arguably interfere, and we want to make sure that that's cut off as quickly as possible," Blinken told CNN during his visit to China.
He said that Washington had asked Beijing not to interfere in the election.
Blinken pointed out that US President Joe Biden was "very clear" about it when he raised the issue with his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping.
"Any interference by China in our election is something that we're looking at very carefully," Blinken said.
This is totally unacceptable to the US, and Washington is monitoring the situation very carefully, he added.
China maintains that it is committed to a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations.

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