

5/21/24 Tuesday

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Iranian President's Death Latest in String of Strange Coincidences

On Monday, Iranian officials confirmed that Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian and every other passenger was killed when the helicopter they were traveling in crashed in the mountainous northwestern region of Iran.

One of the most important pipelines in Europe in one of the most surveilled areas of the Baltic Sea was destroyed in an act of sabotage and investigations by the Swedes and Denmark end without a culprit named.

[The Prime Minister of Slovakia was shot five times](#) after he halted his country's aid to Ukraine, by a senior citizen acting alone and who was a vehement supporter of Ukraine.

The Iranian president and foreign minister are both killed in a freak helicopter accident, during which the other two escort helicopters managed to return safely.

"You had three helicopters flying in a row, one all of a sudden drops out. No mayday. No nothing. And if it was due to foggy conditions, how did the other two get through okay? But not the president's?" Michael Maloof, a retired senior security policy analyst asked the hosts of Sputnik's [The Critical Hour on Monday](#).

The Iranian delegation was flying in the Iranian province of East Azerbaijan, which borders the country of Azerbaijan, a close ally of Israel.

On Monday, an Israeli official reportedly told US media that it was not involved in the Iranian President's death.

But, as Maloof notes, Israel has a history of alleged clandestine operations inside of Iran, including the bombing of pipelines, the murder of nuclear scientists and the recent response from Israel to an Iranian attack which Iran says was carried out from within its territory.

"[The attack by Israel on Iran] was also a very meager response, but I think that this was all planned for something much larger, something like this," Maloof speculated.

"You have other episodes occurring throughout the West, including the attempted assassination of the prime minister of [Slovakia]... So these are not happening in isolation. Something bigger is going on out there. I think people are trying to put their finger on it," he added.

The same day as the Iranian president's helicopter crashed, officials for the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) army said they thwarted a coup attempt and arrested 50 people, including three Americans. The coup's alleged leader, Christian Malanga, was killed in the attempt. Malanga lived in the US for most of his life and according to videos posted online, visited the Israeli military in 2015.

Maloof concluded that if it is revealed that Israel was involved in Raisi's death, the response will be significant. "You saw what the reaction was when the Israelis hit the Iranian consulate in Syria... for the first time, Iran displayed that it could strike Israel directly. If this helicopter crash indeed was purposeful and it could link back to Israel, I rethink you're going to see a very major response."

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EU Media Given Pass on Misinformation About Fico

Last week, Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico was shot several times, allegedly by a 71-year-old former mall security guard identified as Juraj C. by authorities. Fico, who opposed many EU policies, including funding Ukraine, is said to be in non-life threatening but critical condition.

The EU censorship apparatus has lowered its mask and shown that it has no issue spreading misinformation, as long as that information supports its narratives. This is evidenced by its coverage of Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico, both before and after his assassination attempt.

“Originally, the idea was ‘oh, we can’t have this information about Covid,’” explained senior research fellow at the Global Policy Institute George Szamuely while on [Sputnik’s The Critical Hour](#). “But it’s now extended to where we can’t have disinformation about Russia and Ukraine. We can’t have disinformation on EU foreign policy, and they intend to crack down on what they call disinformation and malinformation and misinformation [as well].”

The alleged shooter, according to Slovakian authorities, was motivated to assassinate Fico because he disagreed with the policy of Fico’s government on Ukraine, as well as his reforms to the judicial system and public broadcasting in Slovakia. All three issues were criticized by other EU nations and Slovakian opposition parties.

The idea that speech could inspire violence has long been a bludgeon that pro-censorship Western neo-liberals have used to justify the powers over speech that they seek. When the FBI announced in 2020 that it foiled a plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, both Whitmer and then-candidate for President Joe Biden blamed then-President Donald Trump for “fomenting” the anger that led to the plot.

Nevermind that it was [later revealed](#) that the FBI was largely responsible for the planning and logistics of the plot and several of the defendants were exonerated by a jury of their peers, it was Donald Trump’s words that inspired the conspirators to plot the Governor’s kidnapping and eventual execution.

“When our leaders speak, their words matter. They carry weight. When our leaders meet, encourage or fraternize with domestic terrorists, they legitimize their actions and they are complicit. When they stoke and contribute to hate speech, they are complicit,” Whitmer said. While the censorship regime in the US is constrained by the First Amendment, forcing them to use [alternative methods](#), in the EU it has become extremely powerful. Sputnik, RT and other Russian media outlets are banned in EU countries and the recently passed Digital Services Act forces social media companies to comply with governmental censorship demands or face massive fines.

But when it comes to Fico and the mainstream press in the EU, misinformation is allowed to flow freely, even after an assassination attempt on the world leader.

As pointed out in [Naked Capitalism](#), there has been a bevy of articles depicting Fico as a pro-Russian politician who is serving the Kremlin over his people.

But Fico was never shy about his - and his SMER party's- stance on Ukraine: That aid to Ukraine was not helping Slovakia and that the war has hurt the country militarily and economically. "Not one more bullet" was a common slogan during his campaign. And Fico was democratically elected on that platform, promising after being elected to do everything in his power to kickstart peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.

"More killing is not going to help anyone," Fico said at the time.

But this was enough to get him labeled as "Pro-Putin" despite large support from ordinary Slovakian voters.

It was even said that Fico was a threat to NATO and the EU themselves.

"Such clichés became commonplace in mainstream European press against any non-systemic political leader who stands for his or her country's sovereignty or veers from the EU's 'common foreign policy,' not necessarily in unison with Russia," argues Sputnik columnist Dmitry Babich. But even after Fico was nearly killed by a Slovakian shooter who was at least partially motivated by his disagreements with Fico, the EU censorship regime continues to allow media in the bloc to blame Fico for his assassination.

"[The alleged shooter is] basically on the same side as all of the EU media, the EU apparat, all the EU political figures who have been denouncing Fico and Slovakia for their supposed pro-Putin, for his supposed pro-Putin agenda, for his being in the service of the Kremlin," Szamuely explained. "[The media has] come up with another story, which is that, somehow, Fico brought this on himself... because he's such a polarizing figure. He's so divisive and the political atmosphere in Slovakia is very, very toxic. A lot of hatred, a lot of hate speech. And, who's behind it all? Robert Fico."

"So it's a real classic case of blaming the victim rather than addressing the political hate speech that has been emanating from the EU, from the European media that has been targeting Fico for his supposed pro-Russian stance."

Shortly after Fico was shot and before there were any indications that he would survive, Sky News all but justified the shooting.

"[Slovakia and Hungary] dipped their toes in against aid to Ukraine and against any sort of sympathy to Kiev. They keep saying 'look, we want the war to finish,' and by that they mean they want the Russians to succeed and then the war will be over and Ukraine will just surrender and give up territory... now that's very divisive in Slovakia, it's divisive in the EU, so it's not surprising that this sort of event might take place," the anchor said.

It seems that the fear of hate speech creating violence is only a concern in the EU when that hate speech concerns the EU.

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Biden Continues to Spread Dubious Claims About October 7, Even as He Calls For Ceasefire

On Sunday, US President Joe Biden gave the commencement speech at the HBCU Morehouse in Atlanta, Georgia as part of his campaign to court black voters before November.

During his commencement speech at Morehouse, Biden used the opportunity to say that he is calling for an “immediate ceasefire” in Gaza, even as the US continues to support Israel on the international stage.

“That’s why I’ve called for an immediate ceasefire — an immediate ceasefire to stop the fighting — bring the hostages home. And I’ve been working on a deal as we speak, working around the clock to lead an international effort to get more aid into Gaza, rebuild Gaza,” Biden said, according to the official [White House transcript](#) of the speech.

The comments made some minor headlines, though it wasn’t the first time Biden publicly called for a ceasefire. What flew under the radar is that just a few sentences earlier, Biden made a claim about the October 7 surprise Hamas attack that is not only unconfirmed but was spread by the same doctor that helped spread the now-debunked claim that Hamas decapitated babies during the attack.

“What’s happening in Gaza and Israel is heartbreaking. Hamas’s vicious attack on Israel, killing innocent lives and holding people hostage. I was there [in Israel] nine days after, [the attack] — pictures of tying a mother and a daughter with a rope, pouring kerosene on them, burning them and watching as they died,” the President claimed.

On October 25, the director of Israel’s National Center of Forensic Medicine, Dr. Chen Kugel, who handled many of the Israeli bodies from October 7, presented images at [a press conference](#) showing what he claimed to be the charred remains of a woman and child tied together with a wire before being burned.

At that same press conference, he and other members of the morgue claimed that they had seen the bodies of “babies” though he would not give an exact number, including burnt, headless bodies.

However, it has since been confirmed, including in Israeli media, that only one baby was killed on October 7: 10-month-old Mila Cohen, who tragically died after being shot and notably was not beheaded or burnt.

Even if we take Kugel’s claim of a mother and daughter being tied and burned at face value, something that is not a given considering the multitude of disproven claims from Israeli officials in the wake of October 7, it still does not match the claim made by Biden that he saw images of the victims having kerosene poured on them and being burned alive as Hamas watched.

The image Kugel shared only showed the charred remains of what he said were the victims, and a CT scan, allegedly of the same object, that showed two spinal cords and rib cages in the pile. But that doesn’t provide any evidence of who burned the victims or if the assailants were “watching as they died,” as Biden asserts.

Israeli media has [also reported](#) that there was a significant, though unknown, amount of victims on October 7 were killed by the IDF. It is entirely possible that the victims were tied up by Hamas, but then were [burned by tank or helicopter attacks](#) as the [IDF moved in](#).

Biden’s comments were reminiscent of comments he made shortly after the October 7 attack, in which he claimed to have seen pictures of beheaded babies.

“I never really thought that I would see and have confirmed pictures of terrorists beheading children,” [Biden said](#) on October 11, after Israel’s i24 News reported that 40 babies had been decapitated in the attack, citing Israeli soldiers, a claim we now know to be false.

The White House later admitted that Biden had not seen pictures of beheaded children or babies and that the US could not confirm such reports. Biden instead based his comments on

claims made hours earlier by a spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, they said.

Nevertheless, the President of the United States claiming that he personally saw photos of beheaded children gave the claim legitimacy and it continues to spread online today. Biden has never personally retracted his comments. In fact, he continued to spread it, even after the White House acknowledged that his claim to have seen the pictures personally was false.

At a campaign event on [December 12](#), Biden again made the claim that he saw photographs of beheaded infants. It also appears to be the first instance of Biden claiming to see a mother and daughter burned alive.

"I saw some of the photographs when I was there [in Israel]— tying a mother and her daughter together on a rope and then pouring kerosene on them and then burning them, beheading infants, doing things that are just inhuman — totally, completely inhuman," Biden said.

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Biden After Countries Recognize Palestine: State Should Be Realized Through Negotiations

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden supports the creation of a Palestinian state only through direct negotiations, the White House said on Wednesday after Norway, Spain and Ireland said they would recognize Palestine.

"The president is a strong supporter of a two-state solution and has been throughout his career," a White House National Security Council spokesperson said, as quoted by CNN. "He believes a Palestinian state should be realized through direct negotiations between the parties, not through unilateral recognition."

Earlier in the day, the Norwegian government announced the country's decision to recognize Palestine as a state. It was followed by announcement by Ireland and Spain that they will officially recognize the Palestinian statehood on May 28, the day Norway's decision goes into effect.

Shortly after the announcements, Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz instructed the immediate recall of Israel's ambassadors to Ireland, Norway and Spain.

Palestinian authorities welcome the three countries' move, Wasel Abu Yousef, a member of the executive committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, told Sputnik.

Palestine until now has been recognized by nine EU member states. Eight countries — Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania and Slovakia — recognized it in 1988, before joining the EU, and Sweden in 2014. A total of 142 countries recognize Palestine as a state, globally.

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White House After Spain, Norway, Ireland Recognize Palestine: Biden Believes Palestinian State Should Be Realized Through Direct Negotiations

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US, Gulf Partners to Discuss Joint Efforts to Counter Iranian Missiles, Drones - Official

WASHINGTON, May 20 (Sputnik) - The United States and its partner states in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) will discuss during meetings this week improving joint efforts to counter Iran's missile and drone capabilities, a senior US defense official said on Monday.

"We'll discuss multilateral efforts to counter those [Iranian] threats, the expansion of air and missile defense early warning systems, sharing of information to ensure a common air posture and other ways of eroding the effectiveness of Iran's missile and UAV capabilities," the official said.

US defense officials will visit Riyadh on Wednesday to attend defense working group meetings with member states of the GCC.

The working group meeting on increasing integrated air and missile defense in the region takes on a new importance in light of Iran's retaliatory attack against Israel on April 13, the official said.

The officials will conduct assessments of the air threats that undermine regional security and violate GCC sovereign airspace, the official said.

The main focus in discussions on integrated and missile defense will be on upgrading early warning systems, the official said.

The discussions will also focus on the Houthi attacks against international shipping in the southern Red Sea, the official added.

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Biden Announces Canceling Student Debt for Additional 160,000 Borrowers

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden announced on Wednesday that his administration will cancel the student debt for an additional 160,000 borrowers.

"Today, my administration is canceling student debt for 160,000 more people, bringing the total number of Americans who have benefited from our debt relief actions to 4.75 million," Biden said in a statement.

Each borrower has received an average of \$35,000 in canceled debt, Biden said.

Biden emphasized that his administration has made significant progress for students and borrowers over the past three years.

"That includes providing the largest increases to the maximum Pell Grant in over a decade; fixing Public Service Loan Forgiveness so teachers, nurses, police officers, and other public service workers get the relief they are entitled to under the law; and holding colleges accountable for taking advantage of students and families," Biden added.

The total amount of canceled student debt has reached \$7.7 billion, according to the White House.

Opponents of the Biden administration policy have said that the burden of the debt has now

been spread to the rest of the population, which was not party to the original contracts, rather than being absorbed by the lending institutions.

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Elon Musk Agrees to Host US Presidential Debate With Main Candidates, Including RFK Jr.

UNITED NATIONS, May 22 (Sputnik) - Elon Musk has agreed to host a debate for the current US presidential candidates, ex-President Donald Trump and incumbent President Joe Biden, in which Independent presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. would also participate as a debater.

"Sure," Musk replied to Kennedy on X on Tuesday when asked whether the entrepreneur would be willing to host the debate.

On Monday, The Hill shared the latest Harvard CAPS/Harris polls that showed that 79% of voters want Biden and Trump to debate, while 71% believe that the debates should include candidates from outside the major parties if they clear a viable threshold, including Kennedy.

Earlier in May, Kennedy challenged Trump to a debate at the Libertarian Party's national convention that the two are planning to attend in Washington from May 24 to 26. Last week, Kennedy's press team told Sputnik that Trump has yet to respond to a debate challenge between the two candidates.

Trump and Biden recently agreed to debates on June 27 and September 10, but Biden rejected additional debates proposed by NBC News and Fox News in the coming months. The Trump campaign has been calling on Biden to agree to have a debate each month leading to the November 5 vote in the US presidential election.

On Wednesday, Kennedy said that Trump and Biden are colluding to keep him off of the debate stage but later admitted that he does not qualify and hopes he will meet the required criteria before the June 20 deadline to participate in the debate on June 27.

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FBI Refutes Report That Justice Dept. Authorized Use of Deadly Force at Mar-a-Lago Raid

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The FBI in a statement to Sputnik refuted reporting alleging that the US Department of Justice had authorized the use of deadly force during a raid of former President Donald Trump's residence at Mar-a-Lago in 2022.

Earlier in the day, Trump said he had been shown reports indicating that the US Justice Department authorized the FBI to use deadly force in their raid of the former president's Mar-A-Lago residence in Florida.

"The FBI followed standard protocol in this search as we do for all search warrants, which includes a standard policy statement limiting the use of deadly force," the FBI said on Tuesday. "No one ordered additional steps to be taken and there was no departure from the norm in this matter."

Trump was responding to a report from Newsweek that stated a new court filing revealed FBI agents were authorized to use deadly force during the raid on Trump's Mar-a-Lago residence in August 2022. The report added that the agents at the scene were instructed to wear unmarked polo or collared shirts and bring standard-issue weapons, ammunition, handcuffs, and bolt cutters.

US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said the information was grounds for impeaching US Attorney General Merrick Garland and FBI Director Christopher Wray.

Trump faces a total of 91 charges in four criminal cases in what he has characterized as an attempt by Democrats and the establishment in the United States to prevent him from being reelected.

A federal judge overseeing the classified documents case delayed the case indefinitely, while the federal election interference case remains on hold as the US Supreme Court considers Trump's claims of presidential immunity. The Georgia election interference case has a slim chance of going to trial this year as well.

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UPDATE- Ex-DOJ Official Says Trump Hush Money Case An 'Abomination,' Chance of Jail Time Slim

(Updates with background in para 9, change day in para 3)

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Former US Justice Department prosecutor Ronald Sievert told Sputnik that Donald Trump's so-called hush money case is an abomination and that he faces slim chances of jail time if convicted.

Trump has been stuck in New York since April, fighting allegations that he falsified business records related to an alleged hush money payment made to silence adult film star Stormy Daniels from telling publicly of the sexual encounter the two allegedly had in 2006. Trump is accused of buying her silence in the run-up to the 2016 election. Trump has denied both the charges and the relations.

"The case in New York is an abomination," Sievert said on Tuesday. "The chances that President Trump would be sentenced to jail in this case, even in New York, are very, very small. It is an allegation of a false document that was not even false and was not made by him anyway."

Trump's defense team and the prosecutors rested their cases this week. The jury may reach a verdict in this case by the end of next week, media reported.

Sievert said the hush money case is an attempt to stretch the law for political purposes.

"The fact that it is brought by a Democrat District Attorney before a Democrat judge in a district that votes Democrat and has Democrat jurors just before an election demonstrates the political nature," Sievert said. "It does not reflect well on our great country and on our generally excellent judicial system."

If Trump is convicted, Sievert projects that it is extremely likely that this case will be reversed on appeal for legal violations by Judge Juan Mercha. However, an appeal decision would probably come after the US presidential election slated for November 5, he added.

Sievert noted that it is too early to know how Trump's other cases will turn out as many are pending in appellate courts in pre-trial matters.

A federal judge overseeing the classified documents case delayed the case indefinitely, while the federal election interference case remains on hold as the US Supreme Court considers Trump's claims of presidential immunity. The Georgia election interference case has a slim chance of going to trial this year as well.

Sievert emphasized that these cases against Trump are not a reflection of American justice or the US justice system as a whole.

"The whole process that has occurred in them will be eventually rejected by the American people, scholars, and historians as a unique and shameful exercise that is not a reflection of America or the American legal system," Sievert said.

Trump has characterized the case as a form of election interference amid the 2024 US presidential race.

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ANALYSIS - Raisi's Death Unlikely to Bring Instability Despite Hopes in US, Israel

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The sudden death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash is unlikely to bring about a political upheaval in the Islamic Republic, even though Israel and the United States would like it, regional experts, diplomats and intelligence analysts told Sputnik.

Raisi, 63, was killed on Sunday, when a helicopter carrying him back from inaugurating a dam on Iran's border with Azerbaijan crashed. Iranian state media ascribed the crash to "technical failures." Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian, 60, who was aboard was also killed.

Raisi had been considered a candidate to succeed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

'FIGUREHEAD LEADER'

The deaths of both senior officials are unlikely to change the policies they had both consistently championed and pursued throughout their careers, Middle East analyst and author David Barsamian, who wrote "Targeting Iran," said.

The effect of their deaths would be "not much as the president is largely a figurehead," Barsamian said. "The power is with the Leader Khamenei and the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps]."

The United States on Monday extended its official condolences for the death of Iran's president and foreign minister. The US reaffirms its "support for the Iranian people and their struggle for human rights and fundamental freedoms" as Iran selects a new president, the statement said.

Department of State spokesman Matthew Miller said during a briefing that the US regrets "any loss of life" but called Raisi "a brutal participant in the repression of the Iranian people for nearly four decades."

Barsamian said Miller's comments reflected the implacable hostility of generations of US administrations and congresses toward Iran.

"Iran is a convenient punching bag for the ignorant jingoist so-called representatives we have in Washington," he said.

Domestically, Raisi faced some criticism because of the ongoing economic situation and his role in the killings of protestors and dissidents in the late 80s, Barsamian said.

"The US media liked to call him a hardliner, which he was. [However,] notice this term is never applied to US politicians," he noted.

Former United Nations Independent Expert on International Order, Geneva School of Diplomacy professor of International Law Alfred de Zayas agreed that Raisi "had many enemies inside and outside of Iran."

At the moment, there are no indications on who Raisi's successor as national leader would be, de Zayas pointed out.

"Let us see who follows him," he said.

De Zayas suggested that it was time for "a new generation of Iranians who are for Iran's independence and growing influence in the Middle East but not tempted to serve the United States and Brussels. "

"In any case it should never trust the United States or the EU," the expert said.

LOYAL TO KHAMENEI

"Israel and the United States would like to see some kind of political reaction to Raisi's death. But I just don't see what would drive that development even if the New York Times predictably is suggesting that there might be a prolonged period of instability," former CIA analyst and Damascus bureau chief Philip Giraldi said.

Giraldi agreed that the overall policies and direction of the government of Iran as set by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei would continue unchanged.

"Assuming that Raisi and his colleagues were not assassinated by parties unknown rather than dying by accident, I would see little change coming out of his death as he was essentially loyal to the pattern of government dictated by Ayatollah Khamenei," he said.

Khamenei, at age 85, remains a forceful presence and the clear leader of the Iranian state, Giraldi pointed out

"Khamenei, though in his eighties appears to have some years left in his tank and will be able to guide the process of election of the next president," he said.

Iran has structural problems and its economy is undergoing change through its participation in the BRICS grouping and evolving relationships with Russia and China, Giraldi observed.

However, "there exists a broad popular consensus in support of the Islamic government," he stressed.

NO REGIONAL CONSEQUENCES

Shocking as Raisi's death was, Iran's government and political system are both securely anchored in powerful institutions that will weather the storm and survive his loss, "Jadaliyya" co-editor and Middle East affairs commentator Mouin Rabbani said.

"I don't anticipate that Raisi's death will have significant regional consequences," he said.

Raisi was not an absolute ruler who personally formulated Iranian regional policy, and the president is not the supreme authority in Iran, Rabbani pointed out.

"Iran has a network of institutions responsible for the ship of state, and these continue to function in his absence," he said.

Iran has had presidents from various political backgrounds in the past two decades, and these have pursued largely similar policies toward both the region and the United States, Rabbani recalled.

Raisi and Amirabdollahian died when flying in a US-built heavy helicopter supplied to Iran 45 years ago, before the Islamic Revolution. Spare and repair parts for the helicopter are now either in short supply or unattainable because of the impact of long-lasting US and Western economic sanctions, Iranian media reports have pointed out.

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Ex-DOJ Official Says Trump Hush Money Case An 'Abomination,' Chance of Jail Time Slim

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Swedish Army to Replace CV90 Combat Vehicles Donated to Ukraine - BAE Systems

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - BAE Systems has signed a contract with the Swedish Defense Materiel Administration, FMV, for new CV9035 MkIIIC vehicles, as well as associated integrated logistic support, the company announced in a press release.

"BAE Systems has signed a contract with the Swedish Defense Materiel Administration, FMV, for new CV9035 MkIIIC vehicles, as well as associated integrated logistic support," the release stated on Tuesday.

Under the contract, BAE Systems will manufacture new CV90s to help replace the Swedish Army's fleet of vehicles, the release explained.

"These new CV9035 MkIIICs will replace CV9040 vehicles donated to Ukraine by the Swedish government. In addition, the Swedish government is procuring more new-build CV90 vehicles to expand Ukraine's capabilities," BAE Systems said.

The Combat Vehicle 90 is a family of Swedish tracked armored combat vehicles designed by the Swedish Defence Materiel Administration, Hägglund & Söner, and Bofors during the mid-1980s to early 1990s, according to published sources.

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Seven Companies to Compete for US Army Clean Up Projects Worth \$464Mln - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Seven companies will compete for each order of a new \$464 million US Army contract for environmental clean-up services, the Defense Department announced.

"[The seven companies] will compete for each order of the \$464 million ... contract for environmental remediation services," the Defense Department said in a release on Tuesday.

The Defense Department named the companies as Cape Environmental Management of Norcross, Georgia; EA Engineering Science and Technology of Hunt Valley, Maryland; Environmental Chemical Corporation of Burlingame, California; ERRG-VERSAR of Martinez, California; FPM-AECOM of Oneida, New York; Plexus-Pika of Alexandria, Virginia; and TW-USAE of Elkridge, Maryland.

Work on the project will be carried out over the next five years with an estimated completion date of May 21, 2029, the release said.

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Trump Says Biden Justice Dept. Authorized FBI to Use Deadly Force in Mar-a-Lago Raid

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said he had been shown reports indicating that the US Justice Department authorized the FBI to use deadly force in their raid of the former president's Mar-A-Lago residence in Florida.

"I just came out of the Biden witch hunt trial in Manhattan, the 'Icebox,' and was shown reports

that crooked Joe Biden's DOJ, in their illegal and unconstitutional raid of Mar-A-Lago, authorized the FBI to use deadly (lethal) force. Now we know, for sure, that Joe Biden is a serious threat to democracy. He is mentally unfit to hold office - 25th amendment," Trump said via Truth Social on Tuesday.

US Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said the information was grounds for impeaching US Attorney General Merrick Garland and FBI Director Christopher Wray.

Earlier on Tuesday, Newsweek reported that a new court filing revealed FBI agents were authorized to use deadly force during the raid on Trump's Mar-a-Lago residence in August 2022.

The report added that the agents at the scene were instructed to wear unmarked polo or collared shirts and bring standard-issue weapons, ammunition, handcuffs and bolt cutters.

Trump faces a total of 91 charges in four criminal cases in what he has characterized as an attempt by Democrats and the establishment in the United States to prevent him from being reelected.

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Port of Baku Says Finalizing Grain Terminal Partner Selection, Ready to Start Construction

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - The port of Baku, Azerbaijan, has come up with the necessary plan to build a terminal for grain arriving from Kazakhstan within a year and is in the final stages of finding the "right partners," Baku International Sea Trade Port COO Eugene Seah told Sputnik.

"We are still looking at it. We are getting into the final stages of finding the right partners. But we have come up with all the plans, ready to implement," Seah said on the sidelines of the 8th Annual Trans-Caspian Forum Tuesday. "Once we do the agreement, a contract signed, the terminal will be built between I think 6 to 12 months. I'm not sure when yet because we're still looking for the right partners."

Last year, Seah informed Sputnik of plans to construct such a facility within approximately five years.

Seah noted that they are planning to transport grain primarily from Kazakhstan to the world markets, as needed.

Sanctions imposed on Russia by the collective West have had minimal impact on the work of the port of Baku since the company receives a minimum number of ships from Russia, Seah added.

"We receive directly from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan. Not from Russia," he explained. "So there's no problem with our shipments."

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Republicans Demand Biden Stop Fast-Tracking Arms to Haiti Amid Oversight Concerns - Letter

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Top Republican lawmakers sent a letter to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken demanding that the Biden administration stop fast-tracking security aid to Haiti amid concerns there's no proper oversight on the arms transfers as they bypass congressional approval.

Last month, the Biden administration approved \$60 million in security assistance for the Kenya-led multilateral security mission that will work to quell gang violence in Haiti. The aid package was authorized through the presidential drawdown authority (PDA), which allows the United States to immediately send out equipment from its own military stockpiles.

"The President's unprecedented use of PDA in this context is extremely questionable," the letter said. "Plainly stated, the administration is rushing to fund an undefined and indefinite engagement in Haiti without congressional approval."

US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul and US Senate Foreign Relations Committee ranking member Jim Risch in the letter to Blinken urged the Biden administration to halt all transfers from the \$60 million aid package pending further discussions over legal matters, the specific equipment to be transferred, and oversight measures to prevent violent gangs from acquiring US-supplied weapons.

A Republican congressional aide told Politico that the US military is conducting internal inventory audits to see what they can spare for Haiti, which puts it in direct competition with security aid available for Ukraine for materials.

Foreign forces are expected to arrive in Haiti over the coming few weeks to prepare for the multilateral security mission, which will include forces from Jamaica and the Bahamas among others.

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Netanyahu Says More People Die of Malnutrition in US Than in Gaza

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that there are allegedly more people dying of malnutrition in the United States than in the Gaza Strip amid the dire humanitarian situation in the Palestinian enclave.

"The talk is about 23, I think, or 30 cases of [deaths of] malnutrition in a population of 2 million. The United States in 2022 had 20,000 deaths of malnutrition. That's three times more than in Gaza," Netanyahu said in an interview with CNN on Tuesday.

According to Netanyahu, Israel has taken more than 20,000 trucks with 500,000 tons of food and medicine into Gaza since October 7.

On that day, the Palestinian movement Hamas attacked Israel from Gaza, killing more than 1,100 Israelis, both military and civilians, and abducting some 240 others.

Israel implemented a complete blockade of Gaza, undertook a massing bombing campaign and then invaded the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas and rescuing the hostages. More than 35,000 Palestinians have been killed, 78,000 injured and at least 1.8 million displaced, according to the local authorities.

International aid organizations have reported that the population of Gaza is experiencing

severe malnutrition and famine amid Israel's blockade and military operations.

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Biden Says Not Surprised Trump Campaign Shared Video Referencing 'Unified Reich'

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he is not surprised former president Donald Trump's campaign shared a video referencing the emergence of a "unified Reich" if Trump wins reelection in 2024.

On Monday, Trump shared a video on social media that included a reference to a unified Reich in the event he wins the 2024 presidential race. The word "Reich" is often associated with Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler, which was known as the Third Reich.

"This is the same guy that uses Hitler's language, not America's. It's no surprise that when he, about four months ago, he talked about... that Hitler did, quote, 'some good things,'" Biden said on Tuesday at a fundraiser in Boston.

Trump campaign spokesperson Karoline Leavitt said that the video was not created by the campaign and was reposted by a staffer who was unaware of the presence of the Reich reference in the video, which has since been deleted.

In December, Trump said that he knows nothing about Hitler and called comparisons unwarranted, after the Biden campaign released a graphic comparing Trump and Hitler quotes.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 22 (Sputnik) –
IRANIAN PRESIDENT DEATH

* The Guardian Council, Iran's 12-member council with vast legislative and executive jurisdictions, has set the presidential election for June 28, a council representative said on Tuesday.

* Russia is ready to provide expert assistance to Iran in identifying the causes of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's helicopter crash if necessary, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.

* Putin asked on Tuesday State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin to convey to the Iranian leadership that he expects the development of Russian-Iranian relations to continue in the same way.

* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the Iranian people are "probably better off" now that Raisi is dead.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The European Union considers itself entitled to steal assets entrusted to it and turns theft into an instrument of its foreign policy, the Russian Permanent Mission to the EU said on Tuesday.

* The EU permanent representatives will agree on a new anti-Russian sanctions regime concerning the "situation in Russia" on May 22, according to an agenda of the meeting.

* London does not rule out the introduction of further restrictive measures against Russian frozen assets in the interests of Ukraine, UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron said.

* After the decision of the European Union, the Netherlands intends to explore additional possibilities of using frozen Russian assets to help Ukraine, Dutch Foreign Minister Hanke Bruins Slot said.

* The Canadian government has imposed sanctions on two Russian individuals and six entities for allegedly facilitating the transfer of weapons from North Korea to Russia, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said.

* The EU Council said that it had officially approved the decision that will allow using income from frozen Russian sovereign assets to provide military assistance to Ukraine.

MIDDLE EAST

* US President Joe Biden is in discussions with lawmakers on the next steps regarding House Republicans' proposed sanctions on the International Criminal Court (ICC) in connection with its arrest warrants for Israeli leaders, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday.

* The Biden administration is looking into reports that the Israeli officials seized media equipment belonging to the Associated Press (AP) and halted live broadcast in the Gaza Strip, Jean-Pierre said.

* Food distributions in Rafah have paused due to a lack of supplies and increased insecurity, the UN Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) said.

* The possible issuance of arrest warrants by the ICC for the Israeli leadership will not affect foreign policy activities of Israel, Dmitry Gendelman, an adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, told Sputnik.

* The reaction of the United States to the decision by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to seek arrest warrants against Israeli and Hamas leaders is interesting in terms of Washington's readiness to use sanctions methods, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Germany and other countries are not seriously discussing the possibility of downing Russian missiles and drones over Ukraine, as this would be a direct participation in the conflict, German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius said on Tuesday.

* The European Union has no doubts about the mandate of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, EU foreign policy spokesman Peter Stano said.

* Ukraine has lost up to 425 soldiers in battles with Russia's Zapad (West) Group of Forces over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* The position of Kiev's armed forces on the fronts is unfavorable, the Ukrainian military is in a difficult situation, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

RUSSIA-UZBEKISTAN TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed with his Uzbek counterpart Shavkat Mirziyoyev the preparations for his upcoming state visit to Uzbekistan, the Kremlin said on Tuesday.

* Mirziyoyev and Putin discussed expanding cooperation and a schedule of upcoming bilateral events in a phone conversation, the Uzbek presidency said.

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

UN on Biden's ICC Rebuke: Every Member State Must Respect International Institutions

UNITED NATIONS, May 21 (Sputnik) - All states have the responsibility to respect international institutions such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said when commenting on Biden's statement calling the ICC prosecutor's application for arrest warrants against Israeli leaders "outrageous."

"We are not to comment on every statement that comes out of every member state, but what is clear is that ... every member state has a responsibility to respect the international institutions," Dujarric said in a UN press briefing.

On Monday, ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan said he had filed requests for arrest warrants for Israeli and Hamas leaders over alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed since October 2023 based on evidence collected and examined by his office.

US officials slammed the ICC arrest warrants, with President Joe Biden saying that despite the ICC prosecutor's application for arrest warrants against Israeli leaders, Israel is not carrying out genocide in Gaza.

In addition, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said that lawmakers are exploring options, including sanctions, to punish the ICC if it proceeds with arrest warrants for Israeli officials.

The White House said earlier on Tuesday that Biden was in discussion with lawmakers on the next steps regarding House Republicans' proposed sanctions on the ICC.

Neither the United States nor Israel are a party to the ICC.

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US Approves \$96.4Mln Sale of JDAM Tail Kits to Canada - Defense Security Agency

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has approved a potential \$96.4 million sale to Canada for the supply of Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) tail kits and associated equipment, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Tuesday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Canada of Joint Direct Attack Munition Tail Kits and related elements of logistics and program support for an estimated cost of \$96.4 million," the DSCA said in a release.

The agency delivered earlier on Tuesday the required certification notifying Congress of the possible sale, the release said.

Canada would acquire several JDAM's variants for a combined total of 1075 units, the statement said. Ottawa had already requested to purchase 285 tail kits in a previously implemented case, the release said.

The potential sale is in line with the United States' foreign policy interests and national security goals as it would assist a NATO member state it deems among others "an important force" for ensuring political stability around the world, the release said.

In addition, Canada's ability to address future threats would be enhanced, the release added.

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Majority of US Voters Believe Jury Will Find Trump Guilty in 'Hush Money' Trial - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - A majority of likely voters in the United States believe that former President Donald Trump will be found guilty in his New York City "hush money" trial, a new Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Tuesday.

Most respondents, 53%, said they believe a jury will find Trump guilty of falsifying business records to conceal alleged payments to adult film actress Stormy Daniels, a report on the poll said.

Less than one-third of respondents, 31%, believe that Trump will not be found guilty, the poll report said. Fifteen percent (15%) of respondents are unsure what the jury will decide, the poll report said.

Trump denies the criminal charges against him, as well as an alleged affair with Daniels. Trump has characterized the trial as a form of election interference.

The poll surveyed 1,092 likely US voters from May 15-16. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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Pentagon Claims Russia Launched Satellite With Counterspace Weapon on May 16

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - Defense Department spokesperson Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said on Tuesday that Russia launched last week a satellite carrying a counterspace weapon that is presumably capable of attacking other satellites in low Earth orbit.

"On May 16, Russia launched a satellite into low Earth orbit that we assess is likely a counterspace weapon presumably capable of attacking other satellites in low Earth orbit," Ryder said during a press briefing. "Russia deployed this new counterspace weapon into the same orbit as a US government satellite."

Ryder claimed that Russia deployed the satellite without communicating this fact to the United States.

On Thursday, the Wall Street Journal reported that US officials said Russia launched a research spacecraft into space in February 2022 intended to test components for a potential nuclear anti-satellite weapon.

In February, the US government claimed that Russia was developing a space-based anti-satellite weapon that poses a serious threat to US national security.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said Russia has always been categorically opposed to deploying nuclear weapons in space. Russia's activities in space are no different from those of other countries, including the US, Putin added.

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White House Halts Guantanamo Detainee Transfer to Oman After October 7 Attack - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The White House stopped a planned secret mission to transfer Guantanamo Bay detainees to Oman in October after Congress raised concerns about Middle East security following the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, The New York Times reported on Tuesday.

According to the report, the United States reached an agreement with Omani officials last year to transfer Guantanamo Bay prisoners there.

However, the plan encountered resistance during an October closed briefing in Congress, where Democrats expressed concerns about potential Middle East instability following the Hamas attack on Israel, leading the Biden administration to agree to postpone and review the transfer arrangements, the report said.

The report added that while Congress lacks the authority to halt the transfer to Oman, it is notified confidentially of each pending transfer at least 30 days in advance in accordance with the law and has the right to raise objections. Legislation bars detainee transfers from Guantanamo to the United States.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel and breached the border, attacking both civilian neighborhoods and military bases. Nearly 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others were abducted during the attack. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 35,200 people have been killed so far by Israeli strikes in the Gaza Strip, local authorities said. More than 100 hostages are still believed to be held by Hamas in Gaza.

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Biden's Approval Rating Falls to 36% in April - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's approval rating fell 2% in the period between March and April, marking the lowest level in two years, a new Reuters poll revealed on Tuesday.

The poll showed that 36% of Americans approve of Biden's performance in office, down 2% from April, a release on the poll said.

The poll saw Biden lagging behind his presumptive political challenger in the November election, Donald Trump, particularly in US states believed to be crucial in determining the election winner, the release said.

The issue most contributing to the decline of Biden's approval rating is the struggling US economy (for 23% of respondents), the release said. Forty percent of respondents said Trump had better policies for the economy.

Another important issue influencing Biden's approval rating decline is the record level of illegal immigration (for 13% of respondents), the release said.

On the whole, Trump was viewed by respondents as having a better approach to foreign conflicts and terrorism, with 36% to Biden's 29%, the release added.

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US Lawmakers Ask Biden Admin. to Allow Ukraine to Use US Weapons Inside Russia

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan group of US lawmakers sent a letter to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin demanding that he allow Ukraine to use US-supplied long-range weapons to carry out strikes inside Russian territory.

"We write in our capacity as members of the US House of Representatives to convey our strong support of several urgent requests on behalf of our Ukrainian colleagues: Authorizing the Use of US-Provided Weapons to Strike Strategic Targets within Russian Territory Under Certain Circumstances," US House Intelligence Committee Chairman Michael Turner and other lawmakers said in the letter.

The Biden administration has repeatedly said since the start of Russia's special military operation that it discourages Ukraine from carrying out strikes on Russian territory and restricts Kiev from using US-supplied weapons for such strikes.

However, the US lawmakers claim in the letter that this policy from the Biden administration is holding back Ukraine's ability to use US-supplied weapons to push back Russian forces making advances near the city of Kharkiv.

The lawmakers also urged the Defense Department to train more Ukrainian pilots to operate F-16 fighter jets.

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Trump Media Stock Down 10%, Extending Plunge After Bad Quarter For Ex-President's Firm

NEW YORK, May 21 (Sputnik) - The media stock associated with former US president Donald J. Trump is showing a renewed pattern of weakness after the company reported a loss of more than \$300 million in the first three months of the year, resulting in a 10% price slump on Tuesday alone.

Trump Media & Technology Group Corp has seen wild swings in its value since its debut on the New York Stock Exchange in late March.

The latest plunge of the stock linked to Trump's Truth Social app came after it reported a net loss of \$327.6 million on a revenue of \$770,500 for the first quarter of 2024.

It was the first earnings report for the stock trading under the DJT symbol synonymous with the former president's initials. The bad quarter initially wiped more than 10% off the stock, sending it to an intra-day low of \$42.28, before the price stabilized at under \$44. DJT debuted at a high of \$79.38 on March 26.

Trump Media also cautioned investors on Tuesday that things could get worse for the company before they get better, saying it "expects to continue to incur operating losses and negative cash flows from operating activities for the foreseeable future" while it tries to expand its user base and advertising revenue.

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Higher Prices Have Made Americans' Finances Worse - Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - Heavier-than-expected inflation has worsened the finances of a majority of Americans, the Federal Reserve said in a report on US households on Tuesday. The US Consumer Price Index (CPI), a key inflation indicator, had one of the slowest growths in January, expanding at an annualized rate of just 3.1% from December's 3.4%. However, the CPI edged higher again over the next two months, touching 3.2% in February and 3.5% in March, before returning to 3.4% in April. The Fed's target for inflation is 2% per year.

"Inflation readings in the first quarter of this year were disappointing," the Fed's Vice Chair for Supervision Michael Barr said. "These results did not provide me with the increased confidence that I was hoping to find to support easing monetary policy."

In its report on the livelihood of Americans, the Fed said 65% of the adults it polled cited price hikes since the prior year having "made their financial situation worse." This included 19% who said price changes made their finances "much worse."

While 72% of households reported being "OK financially" as of October, it was the smallest percentage to say so since 2016, a breakdown of the report showed.

Earlier on Tuesday, Fed Governor Christopher Waller said the US central bank was keen to cut interest rates hovering at two-decade highs but wary of doing so with inflation stronger than its 2% per year target.

"I need to see several more months of good inflation data before I would be comfortable supporting an easing in the stance of monetary policy," Waller said.

The Fed hiked interest rates 11 times since March 2022. The current range for interest rates, at between 5.25% and 5.5%, is at the highest level since 2002 and has been in place since July 2023.

The Fed has an opportunity to revise this at the conclusion of its next policy meeting on June 12. Should the Fed pass on its June decision on interest rates, it has four more opportunities to make a change this year: July 31, September 18, November 7 and December 18.

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Joly Turns Down 'Hypothetical' Question of Enforcing ICC Warrants on Netanyahu in Canada

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) – Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Melanie Joly turned down a question she deemed "hypothetical" about whether Ottawa would enforce a potential arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on Israeli Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu.

"It's a hypothetical question and therefore I won't answer it," Joly told reporters when questioned on the matter of enforcing the warrants on Hamas officials or Netanyahu in Canada.

The minister further dismissed the possibility of enforcing the warrants on Hamas, noting that the group is listed as a terrorist organization in Canada, and they are barred from entry into the country.

Joly acknowledged that charges laid on Israel and Hamas officials are different in nature but noted that for Canada there is no equivalency between the two of them. Canada will nonetheless respect the independence of the ICC and its process, she continued.

On Monday, ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan said he had filed requests for arrest warrants for Israeli and Hamas leaders over alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed since October 2023 based on evidence collected and examined by his office.

US President Joe Biden later said that despite the ICC prosecutor's application for arrest warrants against Israeli leaders, Israel was not carrying out genocide in Gaza. US House Speaker Mike Johnson said that lawmakers were exploring options, including sanctions, to punish the ICC if it proceeded with arrest warrants for Israeli officials.

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US Aviation Safety Officials to Help Probe Fatal Singapore Airlines Flight - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is sending advisors to help Singaporean aviation officials investigate a fatal incident involving a Boeing-made Singapore Airlines aircraft that hit violent turbulence midair, a NTSB spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, Singapore Airlines said that there were multiple injuries and one fatality on board the Boeing 777 aircraft after it hit turbulence near Myanmar.

"The NTSB is sending an accredited representative and four technical advisors to support the Singapore Transport Safety Investigation Bureau's (TSIB) investigation of the May 21 turbulence accident on Singapore Airlines Flight 321," the NTSB said.

The Singapore Airlines flight was on its way from London to Singapore when it encountered sudden extreme turbulence over the Irrawaddy Basin, forcing the pilot to make an emergency landing in Bangkok earlier on Tuesday, the company said.

There were a total of 221 passengers and 18 crew members on board the aircraft, the airlines noted, adding that most of the passengers were from Australia and the United Kingdom.

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Lawmakers Urge Biden to Implement REPO Act Before G7 Meeting

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan group of US lawmakers has sent President Joe Biden a letter urging the administration to implement the REPO Act ahead of the G7 finance

ministers' meeting this week, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said in a statement on Tuesday.

Signed into law on April 24, the REPO Act authorizes the US president to seize frozen Russian sovereign assets in the US for Ukraine's reconstruction.

"US Senators Jim Risch (R-Idaho), ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), along with US Representatives Michael McCaul (R-Texas) and Marcy Kaptur (D-Ohio), sent President Biden a letter urging the administration to implement the REPO Act ahead of the G7 finance ministers' meeting this week," the statement said.

The lawmakers said in the letter that they agree that acting together with G7 and European allies is critical to the success of the effort.

They also said that they are "encouraged" to hear the Biden administration is working toward an announcement for the June G7 meeting on this front.

"We request a briefing on the progress of these talks by June 1st," the letter said.

US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen said Tuesday she plans to urge the Group of Seven partners to collectively find a way to unlock the value of Russian sovereign assets for the benefit of Ukraine.

Members states of the G7 are reportedly "making progress" toward reaching a consensus on a plan to harness Russia's frozen sovereign assets in favor of Ukraine, Reuters reported last week, citing an official with knowledge of Yellen's trip.

Moscow has criticized the efforts to seize its sovereign assets as the biggest theft in history and a violation of international law. The European Central Bank has warned that seizure would pose reputational risks to the euro in the long term.

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US Public Debt Could Reach 166% of GDP If Spending Unchanged in Next 30 Years - CBO

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - US publicly held debt could reach 166% of its gross domestic product if the nation continues spending at the current pace, the bipartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) projected on Tuesday.

"If current laws governing revenues and spending generally remained unchanged, the federal budget deficit would increase significantly in relation to gross domestic product over the next 30 years, driving up federal debt," the CBO said in its latest long-term budget outlook. "Debt held by the public would soar from 99 percent of GDP in 2024 to 166 percent of GDP in 2054 — exceeding any previously recorded level and on track to increase further."

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Canadian Govt. to Table Bill on Capital Gains Tax Changes in 'Coming Weeks' – Freeland

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) – The Canadian government intends to table a bill in the House of Commons (HoC) to introduce changes to the country's capital gains inclusion rate, Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland said on Tuesday.

"In the coming weeks and certainly before the House rises, we will begin the legislative process to implement our increase in the inclusion rate," Freeland said during an update of the government's economic plan.

It is important to "get things right," Freeland continued when questioned over the lengthy delays to the bill's introduction which would come over a month after Budget 2024 was tabled in the HoC. Party leaders sitting at the Parliament will have to make choices and clearly position themselves on what they would consider to be a "fair and responsible" economic plan for Canada, she added.

"We're doing all this because we know it's what Canadians need, and we're doing it in a fiscally responsible way," Freeland argued.

On April 16, Chrystia Freeland introduced Budget 2024 to the Canadian Parliament with C\$39.2 billion in net new spending and a C\$39.8 billion deficit. Among several items in the government's economic plan are changes to the capital gains inclusion rate.

Accordingly, the changes would impose a 66.7% tax, up from 50%, on individuals making more than C\$250,000 in capital gains over a fiscal year. By doing so, Ottawa hopes to offset part of the massive increase in spending by raking up to C\$21.9 billion over the next five years.

However, the significant planned hike has created a national debate on its fairness and utility. Businesses, chambers of commerce, and even the Canadian Medical Association have openly opposed the changes. The latter warned that it would add financial strain to doctors who do not have pensions.

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AP Should Be Allowed to Work in Gaza Free of Israeli Harassment - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, May 21 (Sputnik) - Journalists from the media outlet Associated Press (AP) should be allowed to conduct their work in the Gaza Strip without being harassed by the Israeli authorities, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"I think journalists need to be able to do their work freely. The Associated Press of all news organizations should be allowed to do its work freely and free of any harassment," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

The spokesperson made the statement in response to a request for a comment on the recent seizure of AP's equipment by the Israeli authorities.

Earlier on Tuesday, AP said that the Israeli authorities seized a camera and other equipment as well as shut down a live broadcast from the southern town of Sderot for allegedly violating the country's foreign broadcast law, which includes a ban on the media outlet Al Jazeera. The latter is one of numerous clients who use AP's live video feeds.

The seizure came after a verbal warning on Thursday to cease the live broadcast, which AP refused to do.

On May 5, the Israeli government voted unanimously to close Al Jazeera's local offices and

suspend its operations in the country due to perceived national security risks. The move came after the Israeli parliament in April passed a bill allowing the government to shut down foreign broadcasters and confiscate their equipment if their activities are deemed harmful to state security.

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UPDATE- Biden Admin. Sells 1Mln Barrels of Gasoline to Lower Prices at Pumps - US Energy Dept.

(Updates with additional details in para 4, corrects mistake in head)

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has announced a sale of one million barrels of gasoline from the Northeast Gasoline Reserve to lower prices at pumps ahead of the vacation season in the United States, the Department of Energy said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Today, the US Department of Energy's Office of Petroleum Reserves announced a solicitation for the sale and liquidation of 1 million barrels (42 million gallons) of gasoline in the Northeast Gasoline Supply Reserve. This solicitation is strategically timed and structured to maximize its impact on gasoline prices, helping to lower prices at the pump as Americans hit the road this summer," the statement said.

The released gasoline should be transferred to the commercial market no later than June 30 while the Energy Department is accepting solicitation bids until May 28, the statement said.

The administration intends to sell 900,000 barrels from a storage site in Port Reading, New Jersey, and South Portland, Maine, the statement added.

On May 17, the Energy Department announced its plan to solicit bids from US energy firms for the purchase of three million barrels of crude oil that will be used to fill the national oil reserve.

The Energy Department began buying crude oil to refill the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) in May 2023, after drawing about 200 million barrels or more from the reserve since the end of 2021 to tamp down spiraling oil prices caused by supply outages.

Biden's use of the SPR has been a highly charged matter for proponents of high oil prices and political opponents of the president. Both accuse him of turning the SPR into a political tool to subdue crude prices and shore up his standing with US voters when the reserve is meant for emergency use.

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Tucker Carlson Network CEO Says Never Made Deal With State Media

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The Tucker Carlson Network has never made a deal with any country's state media, network CEO Neil Patel said on Tuesday.

Earlier on Tuesday, US media company Newsweek misleadingly reported that Carlson launched a show on Russian state television. However, episodes of Carlson's show have simply

been translated for Russian-speaking audiences.

"The Tucker Carlson Network has not done any deals with state media in any country. Whoever is currently pretending to be the old Newsweek brand would know that if they had checked with us before printing like news companies are supposed to do," Patel said in a statement via social media platform X.

Newsweek ultimately updated their story to more accurately reflect the situation.

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Schumer Says US Senate Will Vote on Border Security Bill on Thursday

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Tuesday that the Senate will vote on border security legislation on Thursday.

"The Senate will vote on the bipartisan Border Bill on Thursday," Schumer said in a statement via social media platform X.

US President Joe Biden called Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Speaker Mike Johnson to urge them to back the legislation, Schumer said.

Lawmakers who claim that the US Congress needs to act on the border will get a chance to show that they are serious, Schumer added.

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Blackwater Founder Says Unsure if Ukraine Survives as Independent Country

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - Former US Navy SEAL and Blackwater private military company founder Erik Prince said on Tuesday that he is unsure whether Ukraine can survive its conflict with Russia as an independent country.

"I'd say now they [Russians] want to absolutely humiliate the West. And make sure that they never have a problem with Ukraine again," Prince said in an interview with US journalist Tucker Carlson. "I don't know if it survives as an independent country."

Prince said he never really believed in the ability of Ukraine to push back Russian forces to previous borders.

Moreover, a Russian takeover of Odessa (also known as Odesa) would threaten the long-term economic viability of Ukraine, Prince said.

Borders change on maps based on military victories, which drive diplomatic breakthroughs, Prince said.

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Biden Admin. Sells 1Mln Barrels of Gasoline at Lower Prices at Pumps - US Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has announced a sale of one million barrels of gasoline from the Northeast Gasoline Reserve to lower prices at pumps ahead of the vacation season in the United States, the Department of Energy said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Today, the US Department of Energy's Office of Petroleum Reserves announced a solicitation for the sale and liquidation of 1 million barrels (42 million gallons) of gasoline in the Northeast Gasoline Supply Reserve. This solicitation is strategically timed and structured to maximize its impact on gasoline prices, helping to lower prices at the pump as Americans hit the road this summer," the statement said.

The released gasoline should be transferred to the commercial market no later than June 30 while the Energy Department is accepting solicitation bids until May 28, the statement said.

On May 17, the Energy Department announced its plan to solicit bids from US energy firms for the purchase of three million barrels of crude oil that will be used to fill the national oil reserve.

The Energy Department began buying crude oil to refill the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) in May 2023, after drawing about 200 million barrels or more from the reserve since the end of 2021 to tamp down spiraling oil prices caused by supply outages.

Biden's use of the SPR has been a highly charged matter for proponents of high oil prices and political opponents of the president. Both accuse him of turning the SPR into a political tool to subdue crude prices and shore up his standing with US voters when the reserve is meant for emergency use.

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Blinken Says Iranian People 'Probably Better Off' After President Raisi's Death

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday that the Iranian people are "probably better off" now that President Ebrahim Raisi is dead.

"Yes, the Iranian people are probably better off," Blinken said during a hearing.

Raisi and his delegation, including Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian, died on Sunday in a helicopter crash in northwestern Iran on their way back from a visit to Azerbaijan.

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Pentagon Preparing More Ukraine Aid Packages in 'Near Future' - US Official

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department is preparing additional security assistance packages for Ukraine that will be announced in the near future, a US official told Sputnik on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, US media reported that a new aid security package for Ukraine could be announced this week.

"While we have no new security assistance announcements to make today, we are working to

have additional packages in the near future," the official said.

On Monday, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the United States has already delivered many of Ukraine's "top-priority requirements" and much more assistance is on the way.

Austin also said that he expects a steady flow of US assistance for Ukraine on a weekly basis.

Russia has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying they would only prolong the conflict but would not change the situation on the ground.

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High-Dollar US Military Equipment Not Performing Well in Ukraine - Blackwater Founder

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - Expensive US military equipment is not performing well in Ukraine, former US Navy SEAL and Blackwater private military company founder Erik Prince said on Tuesday.

"The US systems are not holding up ... the super high-dollar American stuff is not doing so well in that battle space," Prince said in an interview with US journalist Tucker Carlson.

Drone-dropped munitions manufactured for \$1,500 are capable of destroying multi-million-dollar tanks, Prince said.

US taxpayers should be concerned that they are not getting good value from the country's defense spending, Prince said.

Last month, Prince said in an essay that there is something "gravely wrong" with the United States' military capacity and its ability to project power in the world. The fiat nature of the US dollar and debt spending have enabled the government to overfund the military, creating a military policy that prioritizes a small number of contractors over winning wars, Prince said.

The US military is the most expensive organization in history, but serves as a means to sell overpriced equipment to countries that struggle to use or maintain it, Prince said.

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Fed Not Likely to Hike US Interest Rates But Unlikely to Cut Either for Months - Waller

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve is unlikely to raise interest rates after almost two years of hikes, but a cut may not come for several months either due to more stubborn-than-anticipated inflation, Christopher Waller, one of the US central bank's seven governors, said on Tuesday.

"I just don't see [a] rate hike happening; the US economy has been shockingly resilient," Waller said.

However, Waller also wavered on when an interest rate cut could occur, saying: "I need to see several more months of good inflation data before I would be comfortable supporting an easing in the stance of monetary policy."

The US Consumer Price Index (CPI), a key inflation indicator, had one of its slowest growths in January, expanding at an annualized rate of just 3.1% from December's 3.4%. But CPI edged

higher again over the next two months, touching 3.2% in February and 3.5% in March, before returning to 3.4% in April.

The Fed has said it intends to cut interest rates that are at two-decade highs but is wary of doing so with inflation still stronger than its 2% per year target.

Waller declined to give a number closer to that target that would earn his vote on an interest rate cut.

"I will keep that to myself for now but let's say that I look forward to the day when I don't have to go out two or three decimal places in the monthly inflation data to find the good news," Waller added.

The Fed has hiked interest rates 11 times since March 2022. The current range for rates at between 5.25% and 5.5% has been in place since July 2023 and are at their highest since 2002.

The Fed has an opportunity to revise this at the conclusion of its next policy meeting on June 12. Should the Fed pass on its June decision on rates, it has four more opportunities to make a change this year on July 31, September 18, November 7 and December 18.

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US, Kenya Presidents to Discuss Counter-Terror Cooperation - White House

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and his Kenyan counterpart William Ruto will meet later this week and discuss their counterterrorism cooperation, Biden's Special Assistant and Senior Director for African Affairs Frances Brown said on Tuesday.

"In terms of this visit, I think you can expect to see some important announcements and deliverables regarding counter-terror cooperation in the region," Brown said.

The United States welcomes Kenya's efforts to de-escalate several conflicts throughout the region, including in Somalia and Ethiopia, and expressed Washington's continued support of Kenya's mediation efforts.

"I think this will come up in conversations between presidents, as well," Brown said.

During the meeting, the two officials will also discuss security, climate change, health and clean energy as well as debt affecting poor states, Brown said.

"You can expect that President Biden and President Ruto to address their shared vision on how countries can step up their support to developing countries who are also servicing large debt obligations," Brown added.

The White House announced earlier that Biden will host Ruto on May 23 to mark the sixtieth anniversary of Kenya and the United States establishing diplomatic relations.

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France's Counterterrorism Operations in Africa Failed, Led to Conflict - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, May 21 (Sputnik) - Western countries' counterterrorism operations in Africa, such as those conducted by France, have failed and led to armed conflicts, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Tuesday.

"The poor attempts of the Western states, in particular France, at counterterrorism in Africa have actually in fact led to armed conflict," Nebenzia told a UN Security Council meeting on civilian casualties in armed conflict.

In March, Senegalese media reported, citing an unnamed source, that France will almost halve its military contingent in Senegal by the end of June. France's military presence in Senegal will be reduced to about 260 soldiers from some 500 troops, with mostly instructors remaining in the country to continue training, the report said.

In February 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron laid out a "new era" for the country's reduced presence in Africa as part of a "partnership-based approach."

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Uzbekistan Envoy to US Urged Washington to Repeal Jackson-Vanik Amendment

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The Jackson-Vanik amendment should be repealed for Central Asian states, Uzbekistan's Ambassador Furqat Sidiqov said on Tuesday.

"I would like to tell you that today we are witnessing growing interest of American business in doing business in Uzbekistan and Central Asia," Sidiqov said during the 8th Annual Trans-Caspian Forum in Washington DC.

"Presently more than 300 American companies are operating in Uzbekistan... in this regard, I think we have shown that the American government, the US government has to repeal the Jackson-Vanik amendment for Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan," he added.

Sidiqov called the amendment "heritage from the past."

"We have to open a new page and move forward," he stated.

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US Adults Cite Inflation as Top Financial Concern, 65% Say Surging Prices Made Their Financial Situation Worse - Fed Survey

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No Evidence SpaceX Willingly Providing Russia With Starlink Terminals - Pentagon Official

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - There is no evidence that SpaceX is willingly providing Starlink satellite internet terminals to Russia amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary for Space and Missile Defense John Hill said in a congressional testimony on Tuesday.

"You are correct," Hill told the US Senate Armed Services Committee when asked if there is evidence SpaceX is willingly supplying Russia with Starlink terminals.

In early March, the Washington Post reported that two US House Democrats claimed Russia had been using Starlink terminals, posing "a serious threat" to Ukraine's security.

SpaceX supplied Starlink terminals to Ukraine soon after Russia began its special military operation there in February 2022. The Pentagon also purchased several hundred terminals for Ukraine in June 2023.

SpaceX founder Elon Musk has said that no Starlinks have been sold directly or indirectly to Russia.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the Starlink satellite internet system was not certified for use in Russia nor officially supplied to that country and could not be used there.

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Sending NATO Trainers to Ukraine Mirrors Start of Vietnam War - Ex-US Congressman

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The Defense Department's indication that NATO trainers could be sent to Ukraine mirrors the decisions that led to the start of the United States' war in Vietnam, former US Congressman Ron Paul said on Tuesday.

Last week, US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Charles Brown said that NATO will eventually send trainers to Ukraine.

"This, of course, is exactly how we got the Vietnam War, but Russia in 2024 is hardly late-1950s Vietnam. Russia of today is a country that can fight back and can project military power all the way to the source, which means the United States," Paul said in an article for antiwar.com.

Paul also criticized former US State Department official Victoria Nuland's statement supporting US facilitation of missile attacks inside Russia. Nuland and her ilk demand escalation in response to Ukraine's failures, risking nuclear conflict, Paul said.

US involvement in the Ukraine proxy war has been based on lies and US media is closely tied to the military-industrial complex, dissuading them from pushing back on falsehoods, Paul said.

Proponents of US involvement in the Ukraine conflict will demand escalation, such as attacks on Russia and US troops in Ukraine, until Russia fights back, Paul also said.

At that point, it will "all be over," Paul added.

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Blinken Says Haiti on Brink of Becoming 'Failed State'

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday that Haiti is on the verge of becoming a failed state.

"Haiti's on the precipice of becoming an all-out failed state," Blinken said during a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.

On February 29, gang violence erupted in the downtown area of Port-au-Prince while Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry was visiting Kenya to discuss the deployment of foreign forces in Haiti to fight organized crime. The gangs said their goal was to prevent the prime minister from returning to Haiti.

Gangs took control of many parts of the city and stormed Haiti's largest prison, freeing an unconfirmed number of inmates. The Haitian government responded by declaring a state of emergency in the capital region. On March 11, Henry announced that he would resign when a transitional presidential council was created.

The power of gangs in Haiti needs to be ended once and for all, Blinken said. Haitian police must be given the resources and support needed to regain control of the country, Blinken said.

Earlier this week, the Kenyan Foreign Ministry said that Kenyan police officers will arrive in Haiti soon to help improve the security situation in the country.

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Biden, Lawmakers in Discussions on Next Steps Regarding ICC Sanctions - White House

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is in discussions with lawmakers on the next steps regarding House Republicans' proposed sanctions on the International Criminal Court (ICC) in connection with its arrest warrants for Israeli leaders, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday.

"We're having discussions, to your question, with the Hill on next steps," Jean-Pierre said during a gaggle when asked if Biden supports the House Republicans' sanctions on the ICC.

On Monday, ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan said he had filed requests for arrest warrants for Israeli and Hamas leaders over alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed since October 2023 based on evidence collected and examined by his office.

Biden said during a press conference that despite the ICC prosecutor's application for arrest warrants against Israeli leaders, Israel is not carrying out genocide in Gaza.

US House Speaker Mike Johnson said that lawmakers are exploring options, including sanctions, to punish the ICC if it proceeds with arrest warrants for Israeli officials.

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US Looking Into Reports Israeli Authorities Seized AP Media Equipment - White House

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is looking into reports that the Israeli officials seized media equipment belonging to the Associated Press (AP) and halted live broadcast in the Gaza Strip, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday.

"We are looking into it, we have seen the reporting, but we stand firm in our belief that journalists have the ability and the right to do the job," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

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Preliminary Canonical Probe of Archbishop Lacroix Shows no Signs of Misconduct - Vatican

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The preliminary canonical investigation commissioned by the Vatican to look into allegations of sexual misconduct made against Quebec Archbishop Gerald Cyprien Lacroix has found that no actions amounted to abuse, the Holy See Press Office said in a communique on Tuesday.

In late-January, Lacroix's name was added to a class action lawsuit against the Archdiocese of Quebec for allegedly having sexually molested individuals between 1987 and 1988.

Pope Francis on February 8 mandated Andre Denis, a retired Superior Court of Quebec judge, with investigating the accusation. Denis' preliminary investigation concluded on May 6 and a report was submitted to the Pope.

"In the light of the facts examined by the judge, the report does not permit to identify any actions that amount to misconduct or abuse on the part of Cardinal Gerald C. Lacroix.

Consequently, no further canonical procedure is foreseen," the communique said.

The Superior Court of Quebec approved the class-action lawsuit in June 2022. The law firm representing the plaintiffs had then confirmed to Sputnik that Cardinal of Quebec Marc Ouellet, which had been considered by many to be a potential successor to Pope Francis, was among those on the list against which allegations of sexual abuse had been made.

Initially supported by 101 victims who alleged being abused between 1942 and 2018, the number of plaintiffs has since grown to nearly 150. The number of targeted clergymen increased from 88 to more than 100.

The Seminary and the Grand Seminary of Quebec, the St-Francois-de-Laval College and THE insurance company offering service to the church have also been added to the list of defendants.

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US Looking Into Reports That Israeli Authorities Seized AP Media Equipment, Halted Live Broadcast - White House

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White House on whether Biden supports sanctions on ICC: we are having discussions between Biden, lawmakers on next steps

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UNRWA Says Food Distributions in Rafah Suspended Due to Lack of Supplies, Insecurity

UNITED NATIONS, May 21 (Sputnik) - Food distributions in Rafah have paused due to a lack of supplies and increased insecurity, the UN agency for Palestine refugees (UNRWA) said on Tuesday.

"Food distributions in Rafah are currently suspended due to lack of supplies and insecurity," UNRWA wrote on X. "Only 7 out of 24 UNRWA health centers are operational. In the last ten days they have not received any medical supplies due to Rafah and Kerem Shalom crossing closures/disruptions."

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Military Aid to Ukraine Crippled by Poor Coordination With Partners - Pentagon Audit

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - US and Western military aid to Ukraine has been limited in its effectiveness because of the failure to coordinate, document and integrate donations of weapons and equipment between the contributing nations, a Department of Defense Inspector-General audit report said on Tuesday.

"Although the Department of Defense coordinated at multiple levels on Ukraine's requests for military equipment and assistance with partner nations, challenges made coordination with partner nations difficult and impacted effectiveness," the report, which was published on May 17 but released on May 21, said.

The US European Command (USEUCOM), the US Security Assistance Group - Ukraine (SAG-U) and the Service Component Commands (SCC) did not document the roles, responsibilities, processes or procedures for validating Ukraine requests, the audit report said.

"According to USEUCOM, SAG-U, and SCC officials, they did not document processes and procedures because of the fast-paced nature of the effort and sense of urgency to support the UAF [Ukrainian armed forces]," the audit report said.

Although the officials communicated and coordinated to support UAF requests for military equipment and assistance, they did not ensure seamless operations for the requests' validation process, the audit report added.

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US, Philippines, Japan Launch Group to Drive Investment in Luzon Corridor - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) - The United States, the Philippines and Japan have launched a steering committee to drive infrastructure investment and development in the Luzon economic corridor in the Philippines, the State Department said on Tuesday.

"On the sidelines of the Indo-Pacific Business Forum in Manila, U.S. Senior Advisor to the President for Energy and Investment Amos Hochstein, along with Acting Special Coordinator for the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGI) Helaina Matza, joined fellow co-chairs Philippine Senior Advisor to the President for Investment and Economic Affairs Frederick Go and Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General for International

Cooperation Bureau Ishizuki Hideo for the inaugural Luzon Corridor Steering Committee meeting, to drive infrastructure investment and development along the Corridor," the statement said.

The officials also discussed priority sectors for engagement and reviewed potential projects and areas of interest, committing to future meetings on a quarterly basis, according to the statement.

The project is the first economic corridor in the Indo-Pacific region developed under the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), a collaborative effort by Group of Seven which is often described as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The corridor will support connectivity among key economic centers in the Philippines and facilitate strategic investments within each hub in high-impact infrastructure projects, including rail, port modernization, agribusiness, and clean energy and semiconductor supply chains and deployments, the statement said.

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Associated Press Says Israeli Authorities Seized Equipment, Took Down Live Shot

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) – Israeli authorities seized a camera and other equipment belonging to the Associated Press and shut down a live broadcast from southern Israel for allegedly violating Israel's new ban on Al Jazeera, the news agency said on Tuesday.

"The Associated Press decries in the strongest terms the actions of the Israeli government to shut down our longstanding live feed showing a view into Gaza and seize AP equipment," AP's vice president of corporate communications Lauren Easton Easton said in a statement.

Al-Jazeera is one of thousands of media clients who receive and use AP's live video feeds, the agency said.

"The shutdown was not based on the content of the feed but rather an abusive use by the Israeli government of the country's new foreign broadcaster law. We urge the Israeli authorities to return our equipment and enable us to reinstate our live feed immediately so we can continue to provide this important visual journalism to thousands of media outlets around the world," Easton said.

The AP said that when officials from the Israeli Communications Ministry seized the equipment in the southern town of Sderot, they provided a letter signed by Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi alleging that the agency was violating the country's new foreign broadcaster law.

The seizure came after a verbal warning on Thursday to cease the live broadcast, the AP said, adding that it refused to do so.

On May 5, the Israeli government voted unanimously to close Al Jazeera's local offices and suspend its operations in the country due to perceived national security risks. The move came after the Israeli parliament in April passed a bill allowing the government to shut down foreign broadcasters in Israel and confiscate their equipment if their activities are deemed harmful to state security.

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Canada Sanctions 2 Russian Individuals, 6 Entities Over Alleged Arms Transfers From DPRK

WASHINGTON, May 21 (Sputnik) – The Canadian government has imposed sanctions on two Russian individuals and six entities for allegedly facilitating the transfer of weapons from North Korea to Russia, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said on Tuesday.

"The Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, today announced that Canada is imposing additional sanctions on two individuals and six entities under the Special Economic Measures (Russia) Regulations ... Today's sanctions target individuals and entities that facilitated the illegal transportation of weapons, including ballistic missiles, from North Korea to Russia," GAC said in a statement.

The sanctioned individuals are Vladimir Mikheyichik and Vladimir Shastin, GAC said in an updated Special Economic Measures (Russia) Regulations.

The entities include Sovfracht JSC, Azia Shipping Company LLC, the 224th Flight Unit State Airlines JSC, Marine Trans Shipping LLC, M Leasing LLC and MG-Flot LLC.

Russia denies that its cooperation with North Korea violated UN Security Council resolutions, dismissing the claims of "illegal" military-technical cooperation as "unfounded and unsubstantiated."