

5/24/24 Friday

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Australian Waste Companies Producing Recycled Soil Broke Rules on Contamination - Report

The report claims that in one case, 16 tons of asbestos-contaminated soil produced by KLF Holdings was supplied to an apartment complex.

According to a report published on [Monday](#), some of the “best-known waste companies” in New South Wales (NSW), Australia have broken safety rules causing potentially contaminated soil to be supplied to public yards, schools and childcare centers.

According to Guardian Australia, waste management companies including Bingo Industries, Aussie Skips Recycling, Benedict Recycling and KLF Holdings broke state regulations for testing soil made from recycled construction and demolition waste.

“Each year facilities in NSW produce about 700,000 tons of fill made from recovered fines. They are required under resource recovery regulations to test their products for hazardous contaminants such as lead,” the report writes, adding that if the facility passes legislated thresholds they must dispose of the product and report the results to the EPA.

However, an EPA investigation in 2013 and another in 2019 found “widespread breaches of routing sampling and testing requirements”. Some of the investigations also found that companies would retest their samples until they received a result that was compliant.

The recycled soil comes from residues found in trash skips at construction and demolition sites. Recycling facilities then process the waste and rebrand it as recycled turf underlay, budget fill, crusher dust or recycled road base, according to the London-based newspaper. The fill is also sold directly to consumers who use it for home landscaping.

The news site first published their findings on [Sunday](#) and claimed to have found asbestos in a sample of recycled soil more than a decade after the contamination was first suspected by the state’s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The newspaper’s Australian office bought four products available for purchase at landscaping supply stores and had those samples tested by private labs. At least two did not comply with state regulations regarding pH levels and one was found to contain asbestos fibers, the report said. One of the products even contained a piece of glass and a metal screw.

“Based on those four products, one of them potentially poses a health risk because it contained asbestos fibers,” said Jason Scarborough, a former senior waste compliance officer at the NSW Environment Protection Authority. “Another would be unsuitable for any sort of horticultural use.”

“Fifty per cent are not compliant with an aspect of the [recovered fines] order and another had serious visible physical contamination that wasn’t reflected in the laboratory results,” he added. “...three out of the four products I wouldn’t use.”

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UK MP Committee Finds 'Very Little' Rail Reform Achievements Over Past Six Years

The committee found that the proposed changes to the railway system have been hindered by legislative delays and disagreements between government departments.

The [UK government](#) has achieved "very little" in their railway reforms six years after first identifying the need for such a reform, a recent report found. Members of Parliament on the cross-party public accounts committee - the parliament's spending watchdog - have said the Department of Transport has neglected the needs of its passengers and taxpayers.

The committee also claimed that they haven't seen evidence that plans for Great British Railways (GBR) - a proposed public body which would oversee services and infrastructure - would include any new reform ideas that would differ to those of the past two decades.

GBR was scheduled to launch in March of this year, but the launch has been delayed as the government has yet to designate specific responsibilities of the body and how those differ from the government as well as from commercial operations. Delaying the launch of GBR has also delayed potential savings of up to £1.5bn a year, said one [source](#).

The MPs wrote in a report that was published on Monday, that "many of the proposed reforms and associated benefits are largely on hold until the next parliament when legislation can be passed". UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has called for a general election for July 4, so in the meantime the UK government is rushing to finish their work and push through any final legislation.

"It has been six years since the department identified the need for a root and branch review of the railway, but it has achieved very little in this time," the committee said.

"While the department is fully aware of what is important to passengers, it has not delivered on the basic things that matter most," the report said. "Although the department [for transport] claims that improving passenger experiences is at the heart of its reform plans, poor performance persists across the rail network," the report said, adding that during the 2022-23 operating year [13.7% of trains](#) were delayed and 3.8% were canceled.

Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced his railway reform plans in 2021 which included the proposed GBR tasked with overseeing the project. But the committee says a lot of work remains to be done for those plans to be realized.

In 2018, Northern Trains introduced new timetables which led to widespread disruption. A [review](#) led by the former rail minister found "cancellations, delays, overcrowding and late-running caused significant disruption to the lives of passengers, and trust in the railways' ability to provide reliable services was severely affected." The report added that passengers had "lost their trust in the system".

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US Inflation is Causing Americans to View Fast Food as a 'Luxury' - Study

According to the survey, 3 out of 4 Americans typically eat fast food once a week, but 62% say they are eating fast food less frequently due to its "luxurious" cost.

About 78% of American consumers now consider fast food to be a "luxury" purchase due to the cost, a recent non-probability [survey](#) found. Half of those polled said it was too expensive for them because they are struggling financially, including 71% of those who say they make less than \$30,000; 58% who are parents of small children; and 58% who belong to Generation Z - those between the ages of 11 and 26.

Those making higher incomes (52% of those earning \$100,000 or more a year) are also eating fast food less.

From the perspective of Americans who were surveyed, 75% believe fast food should be less expensive than eating at home. And almost half (46%) of Americans surveyed say eating at a fast food restaurant costs about the same as their local sit-down restaurant, with 22% suggesting that fast food is actually more expensive.

According to an [article](#) published in March of this year, fast food prices have skyrocketed in the past 10 years and grew at nearly double the national rate of inflation. The inflation percentages for some of Americans' favorite fast food restaurants include: McDonalds at 100%; Popeyes at 86%; Taco Bell at 81%; Chipotle at 75%, and Starbucks increasing by 39%.

In 2014 the McDonald's Quarter Pounder with cheese meal was \$5.39; in 2024 that price increased to \$11.99 which is a 122% increase. McDonald's medium fries cost \$1.59 in 2014, and that prices surged to \$3.79 in 2024; a 138% increase. And perhaps the biggest percentage increase for a McDonald's item was the McChicken sandwich which cost just \$1.00 in 2014, and surged to \$2.99 in 2024.

Surge pricing has also affected those who opt to eat at the drive-through: [Wendy's](#) started a media buzz when they announced their plans to use technology as a way to surge price items during busier times of the day. The fast food company has since walked back that claim.

In an attempt to lure customers back to their drive-throughs, some fast food chains will offer promotions for a limited time, including McDonald's which plans to offer a \$5 combo meal in June.

In March, Sputnik reported that McDonald's estimated financial loss after leaving Russia was about "\$50 million monthly, stemming from operational costs, including continuing to pay staff, leases, supply chain costs and other expenses. The chain was later bought by Russian businessman Alexander Govor for a 'symbolic amount' and rebranded under the name '[Vkusno i Tochka](#).'"

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Pentagon's \$320mn Gaza Pier Falls Short of Goals

While continuing military support of Israel, the corridor is the Biden administration's most exaggerated attempt to aid Gazans who are facing a humanitarian crisis. Food and medical

supplies from around the world are sent by air or sea to the island nation of Cyprus, and then the aid is transported about 200 miles across the Mediterranean Sea.

The Pentagon has spent \$320 million and engaged 1,000 soldiers to open a maritime corridor to enable the flow of aid into Gaza to ease the ongoing humanitarian crisis there. But despite their efforts, in the first week of operations only 820 tons of aid was delivered through the pier and just two-thirds of that reached distribution points in Gaza, the Pentagon revealed on Thursday. That amount is roughly the same as 71 truckloads which falls below the initial target of 90 truckloads a day and is about 15% of the estimated minimum daily need for more than 2 million people facing a famine, according to a report published on [Saturday](#).

Citing UN officials, the report adds that more than [a dozen trucks from the pier never made it to their destinations in Gaza](#), and that the trucks were unable to use alternative routes due to Israeli restrictions even after desperate civilians commandeered the aid.

"It is not flowing at the rate that any of us would be happy with, because we always want more," said US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on Wednesday. Sullivan has rejected that the administration's poor planning is to blame for the poor numbers, and has referred to the crisis in Gaza as the result of "a dynamic environment."

The supplies goes through a cumbersome process; supplies is transported about 200 miles across the Mediterranean Sea to a floating platform built by the US. The pallets are then transported another 6 miles to a floating US-built causeway secured to the beach by Israeli army engineers, and are then driven another few hundred feet down the causeway and onto the beach into a zone controlled by Israeli soldiers. Another issue that the US faces is that Hamas has said it would treat the US forces at the pier as an occupying forces.

US officials have also said that the floating pier would expand capacity to enable 150 trucks a day to enter Gaza, in the hopes of aiding at least 500,000 people a month.

A report from Sputnik on Thursday revealed that the pier was first used to bring in military equipment before bringing in food; however, the first delivery of food was for the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers.

The report adds that even if the pier begins running at full capacity, the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has repeatedly emphasized that it will not be enough and Israel must open land routes to allow aid in.

On Friday, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) [ordered an immediate halt to Israel's military offensive in Rafah](#). The court has said that the attack on Gaza's southernmost city has already displaced more than 800,000 people less than 20 days after it first began its assault.

The court's decision has added to the increasing pressure that Israel now faces, [following arrest warrants that were issued by the International Criminal Court \(ICC\)](#) for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, as well as Hamas leader Yehiya Sinwar and two others for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Palestinian authorities have reported that over 35,000 Palestinians have been killed since the conflict first broke out in October. A majority of those who have been killed are believed to be women and children.

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ICJ Orders Israel to Halt Military Offensive in Rafah

The court order, which includes an increase in humanitarian aid to the region as well as access to the area for war crimes investigators, will no doubt be difficult to enforce. The judges have also said that Israel must open the Rafah crossing for the “unhindered” provision of aid to Palestinians.

On [Friday](#), the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered an immediate halt to Israel’s military offensive in Rafah. The court has said that the attack on Gaza’s southernmost city has already displaced more than 800,000 people less than 20 days after it first began its assault. Israeli officials have indicated that they will ignore the ruling, even as their actions continue to garner critical attention across the globe.

In a [statement](#), ICJ President Nawaf Salam said that the court was not convinced by measures that Israel said it had taken to ensure the safety of Palestinian citizens. The panel voted 13 - 2 in favor of the order for Israel to halt its military offensive and for “any other action in the Rafah Governorate, which may inflict on the Palestinian group in Gaza conditions of life that could bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.”

The court’s decision has added to the increasing pressure that Israel now faces, following arrest warrants that were issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, as well as Hamas leader Yehiya Sinwar and two others for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Additionally, this month the countries of [Norway, Ireland and Spain](#) said that they would recognize the Palestinian state, while Egypt announced that it would seek permission [to join South Africa’s case against Israel at the ICJ](#) in which Israel has been accused of violating its obligations under the Genocide Convention. Earlier this year, Colombia and Turkiye also asked to join the case which was brought in January.

However, the Biden administration and other US government officials have elected to [continue their support of Israel](#), even as they have expressed opposition to a military campaign in Rafah. The White House announced earlier this month that it would be pausing a shipment of some 3,500 bombs if Israel decided to invade Rafah.

“What we have seen so far in terms of Israel’s military operations in that area has been more targeted and limited, has not involved major military operations into the heart of dense urban areas,” added US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters at a White House briefing this week.

After returning from a visit to Israel, Sullivan said he had been briefed on changes that Israel had made to their plans in order to better root out Hamas fighters.

“When it comes to Rafah, we’ve made known for a long time our concerns about a full-on military assault of Rafah and the damage that that could do to civilian population absent a clear and credible plan to protect it,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken told the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Wednesday.

The day prior, Blinken said the Biden administration would be willing to work with congress on a way to impose sanctions against officials who belong to the ICC.

Rafah has been the last safe zone for many Palestinians fleeing Israeli fire in the Gaza Strip. More than 1 million people first sought refuge there in recent months but more than 800,000 have fled the city since the assault began earlier this month.

Palestinian authorities have reported that over 35,000 Palestinians have been killed since the conflict first broke out in October. A majority of those who have been killed are believed to be women and children. Cindy McCain, the head of the United Nations World Food Program has also warned that Gaza has now entered a "full-blown famine".

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Severe, Record-Breaking Weather Smacks Into US This Weekend

The US is exceeding its year-to-date tornado count, with at least 705 tornadoes having hit the country this year so far.

The US is experiencing fierce weather this week. On Thursday, the One World Trade Center was struck by lightning after an intense thunderstorm rolled into New York City. And now [forecasters](#) are warning of more severe weather that will hit the US on Memorial Day weekend. Violent tornadoes, extreme wind and hail are forecasted to hit the Plains on Saturday before the severe weather travels east into Mississippi, Ohio and Tennessee valleys on Sunday. Hail as large as softballs are expected to come down on western Oklahoma in the late afternoon of Saturday, and will be accompanied by wind gusts over 50 miles per hour.

According to the Storm Prediction Center (SPC), much of the US states of Oklahoma and southern Kansas have been placed under a Level 4 of 5 on the severe weather risk scale. Oklahoma could be hit hard on Saturday, and has already experienced three separate tornado outbreaks in the last few weeks.

A Tornado Watch has also been issued for parts of Texas, Oklahoma and southern Kansas. Meanwhile, these violent storms will shift into southern Kansas on Saturday, bringing strong to violent tornado threats for the state. Wind gusts over 75 miles per hour are also expected for eastern Kansas and western Missouri as the storm grows into Saturday night.

Severe thunderstorms are also expected to affect the Mississippi, Tennessee and Ohio valleys on Sunday.

Then on [Monday](#), a large spread of showers and thunderstorms are expected for much of the eastern US, while the SPC has placed over 27 million people in the mid-Atlantic in a level 2 severe weather threat, including Washington, DC; Baltimore and Charlotte and Raleigh.

Damaging wind gusts are predicted for the region, but tornadoes could also be possible.

According to one [source](#), the US has been experiencing severe weather in its forecasts since April 6, and the country is also running far above average for its year-to-date tornado count.

There have been at least 705 tornadoes so far, which is the sixth-most on record since 1950.

And so far, more than half of the days in the months of April and May have experienced at least a Level 3 out of 5 risk of severe weather, the source said citing the SPD. On Tuesday, a storm created a harrowing tornado outbreak in southwest Iowa, one of which lifted debris to 40,000 feet and killed four people.

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US v. ICC

Previously, Netanyahu and Biden denounced the charges as “outrageous”, with the Israeli prime minister calling it antisemitic.

On [Tuesday](#), US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that US President Joe Biden's administration would be willing to work with Congress on a way to impose sanctions against officials belonging to the International Criminal Court (ICC). The move comes after Karim Khan, the chief prosecutor of the ICC announced his intention to seek arrest warrants against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Hamas leader Yehiya Sinwar for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Some US politicians, including US Joe Biden and his political rivals, have criticized the ICC for their decision and have claimed that the court does not have jurisdiction over the Gaza conflict nor the US. On Tuesday, US Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) reportedly told Blinken that he wants to go beyond words and “take action”.

“Will you support [a] bipartisan effort to sanction the ICC, not only for the outrage against [Israel](#) but to protect, in the future, our own interest?” Graham asked Blinken during a Senate Appropriations Committee hearing on Tuesday.

Blinken responded to Graham's request saying, “I welcome working with you on that.” In a [video](#) of the hearing, protesters could be seen in the audience raising their hands which they had painted red.

Earlier this month - prior to the ICC announcing their request for a warrant - a group of US Republican lawmakers had released an open and signed letter threatening officials of the court. In their letter to ICC chief prosecutor Karim Khan, US lawmakers said “target Israel and we will target you”, adding that they would “sanction your employees and associates, and bar you and your families from the US.”

The US lawmakers indirectly threatened to invoke the American Service-Members' Protection Act (ASPA) in response to any arrest warrants. The act was signed into law in 2002 as a way for the US to protect itself against any accountability the ICC may seek and allows the US president to prevent Americans and other allies from being detained by the court. The legislation has been [condemned](#) by human rights organizations.

While the ICC did not mention the US by name, they shot back at the US lawmakers saying that, “such threats, even when not acted upon, may also constitute an offense against the administration of justice under Art. 70 of the Rome Statute.”

Ironically, the US politicians are not members of the ICC but have supported prosecutions by the court in the past, and at one point even urged the court to hold Russian President Vladimir Putin and “his enablers” accountable for aspects of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

And in 2020, the administration under former President Donald Trump accused the ICC of infringing on US national sovereignty when it authorized an investigation into war crimes committed in Afghanistan. The US targeted court staff with asset freezes and travel bans. Shortly after taking office Biden lifted those sanctions which, at the time, Blinken said were “inappropriate and ineffective”.

Based on these reports, it appears that the US oscillates between bullying and undermining the ICC depending on whatever benefits their government and its agenda.

The Biden administration has also said that they do not believe Israel is committing “genocide” in the Gaza Strip. Palestinian authorities have reported that over 35,000 Palestinians have been killed since the conflict first broke out in October. A majority of those who have been killed are believed to be women and children. Cindy McCain, the head of the United Nations World Food Program has also warned that Gaza has now entered a “full-blown famine”.

In mid-May, Egypt announced that it would seek permission to join South Africa’s case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in which Israel has been accused of violating its obligations under the Genocide Convention. Earlier this year, Colombia and Turkiye also asked to join the case which was brought in January.

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US Defense Secretary Austin Undergoes Hospital Treatment - Pentagon

In January, it was revealed that the American defense secretary had been hospitalized twice and undergone surgery without informing President Joe Biden. Some senior Republicans called for Austin’s dismissal, but the president expressed continued confidence in his defense chief. US Defense Secretary Lloyd, a retired four-star Army general, has undergone hospital treatment for a bladder-related issue for the second time in just over three months, the Pentagon said on [Friday](#). During the hospitalization, he temporarily turned over duties to US Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks, the Pentagon added.

Maj. Gen. Patrick S. Ryder, the Pentagon press secretary, said that Austin underwent a “successful, elective, and minimally invasive follow-up” procedure at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland at around 6 PM. He then resumed his duties at 8:25 PM and returned home, Ryder added.

“The secretary’s bladder issue is not related to his cancer diagnosis and has had no effect on his excellent cancer prognosis. White House and congressional notifications have occurred,” the Pentagon said.

In late December, Lloyd underwent a prostatectomy to treat prostate cancer. According to reports, he had made plans to temporarily give Hicks the responsibility of some of his duties. He was released after the surgery but then returned a little over a week later with an infection, according to one [source](#). He was then put in intensive care.

However, The US’ top defense official had undergone at least two hospitalizations and surgery following a prostate cancer diagnosis, but both the White House and the Pentagon remained in the dark—even during a January 4 US airstrike on Baghdad that had been recommended by Austin the previous week. Even Hicks was unaware that her boss had been put in intensive care until January 4.

His failure to disclose that information resulted in confusion and criticism amongst officials throughout Capitol Hill, with some senior Republicans calling for his [dismissal](#). Austin said he took full responsibility and “could have done a better job ensuring the public was appropriately informed.”

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EU Marks a Sharp Decline in Population as Hopeful Predictions Fall Short - Report

Earlier this month, the Financial Times reported that Europe is aging rapidly. As a result, European employers have begun looking for workers from outside Europe to help fill the gap. This week, the [Financial Times](#) published an article highlighting the European Union's (EU) shrinking population which has put a strain on the bloc's finances. The article notes that a dip in the bloc's population rose in the year that ended in January 2023, thanks to the influx of displaced Ukrainians.

The London-based paper wrote earlier this [month](#) that the "trade-off between ethnic homogeneity and prosperity is set to become more acute over the next decade". The newspaper has also noted that the participation of immigrants and women working in the labor force is no longer enough to keep afloat the EU's falling percentages of those who are considered "working-age", or people who are aged 20 to 64.

According to United Nations (UN) data, those in the working-age bracket shrunk from 270 million in 2011 to roughly 261 million this year; dropping to 58% from a peak of nearly 62% in 2008.

And one European country in particular stands out regarding this drop: Germany has lost about 2 million people in the working age bracket since that group's number peaked in 1998, according to the article's analysis of UN data, and is set to lose another 10% in the next decade. The Institut der Deutschen Wirtschaft has estimated that a lack of workers could cost Germany [€49 billion](#) of lost output for this year alone.

The EU's population numbers for the year 2023 were below expectations as birth levels fell to a number that the European Commission's Eurostat had not predicted would occur for at least another two decades. This suggests that the forecast for the EU's peak population - 453 million - may occur sometime before 2026.

The article notes that in addition to the failure of EU governments' pro-natal policies, anti-immigration parties are predicted to make strides in the European parliament elections this June.

Dubravka Šuica, the European Commission's vice-president for democracy and demography, explains that if these dropping population numbers are not addressed, the bloc will suffer threats to its competitiveness, budgets, public services, pensions and unemployment.

According to the article, experts are now urging European governments to invest in skills and education to increase the value of what is produced per hour worked.

Šuica adds that affordable and efficient family policies, which worked in the past to help support fertility rates, no longer work as well as they once did. In 2022, the number of babies born in the EU fell below 4 million for the first time since data was first kept in 1960.

Europe also has the highest life expectancy of any continent as well as the highest median age, yet they fall far past Japan (25%), the US, OECD countries, and the UK in the percentages of those 65 years of age and older who still participate in the labor force, with just 6% of older Europeans still working. The number of those living over the age of 85 is also growing, which adds a pressure on the wallets of younger generations and strains public finances.

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Will Western Leaders Start World War III to Distract From Their Political Failure?

As Kiev's allies appear set to escalate tensions with Russia once again, controversy is deepening over governments' obsession with the Ukraine proxy war to the exclusion of domestic concerns.

The West faces an ongoing crisis of political legitimacy, with approval [ratings](#) among the G7 countries ranging from 44% for Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to a mere 20% for German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

The situation is particularly dire in the United States as the country enters another presidential election season featuring two major party candidates with [underwater](#) approval ratings.

Three-fourths of Americans [believe](#) the country is headed in the wrong direction, and societal institutions from Congress to the courts are broadly [viewed](#) with distrust.

Given such grim political and cultural indicators, will leaders seek global conflict to distract from their own failings? That's the fear of author Jeremy Kuzmarov, who appeared on [Sputnik's Fault Lines program Friday](#) to discuss the increasing desperation of the Western ruling class as the US-backed Ukraine puppet state nears collapse.

"These leaders seem to want a world war," said Kuzmarov, the managing editor of Covert Action magazine. "Maybe that is what they want. I mean, they're losing, they've lost legitimacy as far as governing at home. My feeling is that this is a strategy, that they're provoking conflicts abroad to divert the attention of the public from their misrule at home and corruption."

The tenor of political debate throughout the West has become increasingly contentious over issues such as immigration and the economy, with insurgent candidates rising to the fore to challenge establishment parties.

Increasingly, support for the Ukraine proxy war is seen as connected to such domestic concerns. In Germany, sanctions on Russian energy have [cratered](#) economic growth while the lifting of tariffs on Ukrainian food imports has led to farmers' protests throughout the continent. Moscow's success on the battlefield has caused "desperation" on the part of the United States and NATO, noted host Jamarl Thomas. US President Joe Biden has repeatedly breached his own self-imposed "red lines," ultimately providing Ukraine with Western weaponry such as ATACMS missiles after previously refusing to do so. Now Secretary of State Antony Blinken is publicly urging Biden to allow Kiev to use US armaments to strike targets within Russian territory.

But deepened commitment to the proxy war – and the prospect of NATO troops eventually being deployed to the battlefield – risks further controversy.

"The Russians are winning and Ukraine is running out of ammunition and personnel," noted Kuzmarov. "You might start to see protests like in the Vietnam era if [there were] American boots on the ground. I think the public would really start to question more what's going on."

"So, I don't know if they could do that politically unless they resort to more and more authoritarian standards at home, which seems to be what's going on. But, again, you're going to sustain a domestic political backlash. So, I think they're in trouble, and that's why we see these

reckless threats and very reckless behavior. And I hope it doesn't provoke a third world war, which is where it could be leading."

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Liberal Fascism: Analyst Says European Legacy Is 'One of a Criminal Gangster Cartel'

The West has committed many atrocities in the name of spreading liberal European values, notes one commentator.

Germany's Alternative fur Deutschland (AfD) party has been rocked by scandal in recent days after its top candidate in upcoming EU elections defended the Nazi Party's notorious Schutzstaffel paramilitary organization.

"I will never say that everyone who wore an SS uniform was automatically a criminal," [said](#) Maximilian Krah in comments made to an Italian newspaper. The Nazi Party was responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of people during World War II, including some 27 million Soviet citizens. The SS violently upheld Nazi rule within the Third Reich and killed millions more in concentration and extermination camps throughout Europe.

The AfD has since banned Krah from campaign appearances and the party has been expelled from the European Parliament's Identity and Democracy Group.

"It doesn't seem like this is going to hurt the AfD's chances in the election," said host Michelle Witte, who responded to the incident on Sputnik's Political Misfits program Friday. "They're expected to double their representation in the EU parliament, this is according to Politico. The group that they had belonged to, Identity and Democracy, is still expected to grow."

"Other EU right-wing parliamentary groups are expected to grow, and then Politico points out that if you combine the seats of right-wing groups and then also the parties that aren't with any group... they are just 10 seats short of the ruling European People's Party of [European Commission President] Ursula von der Leyen," she noted. "If those right groups were managing to work together, which they are not right now, that is potentially a pretty intimidating force." But political commentator Phil Kelly said it's the mainstream center in Europe that has paved the way for the resurgence of previously fringe political forces.

"It's actually the liberal center of the European Union that is fueling the kind of resurgence of that far right," said the Belfast-based activist. "Because when you think of Ursula von der Leyen and the statements she's made, when you think of the center-right and the prime minister of Estonia, when you think of even the Green Party in Germany, these are political forces calling in some sections for the dismantling of Russia, for increasing arms to be sent to the Zelensky regime."

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas [sparked controversy recently](#) with comments suggesting NATO should seek to Balkanize Russia after its current conflict with Ukraine. "There could really be a change in society," said the Baltic leader, claiming the Eurasian country should be split into several "small nations."

Pro-war figures like Kallas have dominated European politics as mainstream forces have sought to sideline the populist left, to the benefit of right-wing insurgents. Establishment parties formed

a grand coalition to thwart Sinn Féin from taking power after the Irish republican party prevailed in recent elections.

In the United Kingdom, [state intelligence actors](#) and [Zionist donors](#) joined forces to sabotage socialist Labor Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, with claims of “anti-Semitism” taking center stage in the smear campaign against the pro-Palestine candidate. US intelligence apparently assisted in the effort, with former Vice President and ex-CIA director Mike Pompeo promising to help prevent the populist figure from being elected prime minister in [private comments](#) leaked by the Washington Post.

“The architects of this, the people who are goose stepping Europe towards the abyss are those liberal centrists whose policies have failed, who are arming actual Nazis in Ukraine,” said Kelly. “I’m thinking of the Canadian liberal prime minister and President Zelensky standing in the Canadian Parliament and honoring the World War Two service of an SS veteran. It’s not just the kind of AfD lunatics who seem to have a nostalgia for the Waffen SS.”

“Europe is in a very, very dangerous place. The focus of that obviously is the war in Ukraine, but it’s at a very, very dangerous moment. And the problem is there is no counterweight to the far-right, and that failing liberal center.”

Witte blamed liberal and centrist forces in the EU for mainstreaming the far right’s policies around immigration. As Western military and political interference has destabilized countries like Libya and Syria, Europe has faced a significant migrant crisis. The European Union has responded by funding aggressive programs wherein “tens of thousands of migrants every year” are dumped in the North African desert – policy which critics have [called](#) a “death sentence.” Meanwhile, middle class Europeans have suffered as government resources are strained by the cost of accommodating immigrants, who are exploited by big business to suppress wages.

“More and more the ‘lesser evil’ is appearing to be just as bad as what it warns against,” said Kelly. “When people talk about European values and ‘is there a difference between liberals and fascism’ – I don’t understand what ‘European values’ means because Europe is the continent that built Auschwitz. Europe is the continent that colonized Africa, Asia, huge swathes of Latin America. Some of the worst crimes in human history were committed by the Belgian empire in Congo.”

“This is, again, the continent that gave rise to the Nazis,” he added, “where ex-Prime Minister of Britain Boris Johnson only this week was posing with members of the Azov* Brigade and saying that Ukraine should be sent weapons with which they should attack Russia and fire missiles into Russia. So this idea of European values is absurd to me.”

“These are the European values that supposedly Ukraine is the shield of? European democracy and freedom? Europe is living up to its historical legacy, which is one of a criminal gangster cartel creating misery across the world. And its inhuman response towards refugees and migrants is just a further example of that.

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Shock: EU Official Appears to Issue Mafia-Like Threat to Georgian Prime Minister

Georgian leader Irakli Kobakhidze has refused to provide military aid to Ukraine and opposes the influence of Western-backed NGOs in the Eastern European country.

Just over a week after an attempt on the life of Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, a top European Union official has warned another Ukraine-skeptic leader that he could suffer a similar fate.

That's the claim made by Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, who made the startling revelation Thursday in a post on social media.

"You see what happened to Fico, and you should be very careful," European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Oliver Varhelyi [allegedly told Kobakhidze](#) during a telephone call in which the Georgian leader was threatened with "a number of measures" in response to the passage of a proposed foreign NGO transparency act.

Varhelyi [acknowledged the comment](#) in a statement released soon after, but claimed it was not intended as a threat.

"I would like to express my very sincere regret that a certain part of my phone conversation was taken out of context," said the EU bureaucrat, who claimed the remark was "presented to the public in a way which could give rise to a complete misinterpretation." Varhelyi took the opportunity to once again urge Kobakhidze not to adopt the legislation, which is similar to the United States' Foreign Agents Registration Act and laws in various other countries.

"It sounds so Mafia-esque," said Garland Nixon on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Friday. Analyst Steve Poikonen agreed, noting a string of independent world leaders who have been harmed or killed in recent years.

"You had the [helicopter crash of Iranian President Raisi](#), you had [multiple coups and overthrow attempts in Haiti](#)," said the political organizer. "Let's add all of the four or five different African leaders who died of mysterious and suspicious circumstances over the last 4 or 5 years."

"It seems odd, and I may be painted as a conspiracy theorist for this but all you really have to do is act in a way that is unfavorable to NATO and you wind up either being targeted or assassinated," he claimed. "Now, only history will prove me right on this... but it really does sort of form a pattern."

The late Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez [observed](#) a similar pattern in 2011 after a number of anti-imperialist Latin American leaders, including Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo, and former Brazilian Presidents Dilma Rousseff and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva were diagnosed with cancer.

"I am not accusing anyone," said Chávez, who himself had recently been diagnosed with pelvic cancer. "I am simply taking advantage of my freedom to reflect and air my opinions faced with some very strange and hard to explain goings-on." The charismatic Venezuelan leader would succumb to his illness 14 months later.

"The bill that [Kobakhidze is] trying to push through the Georgian Parliament is for the color revolution industry to have to declare itself that it's coming into his country to start doing color revolution stuff," said Poikonen, referring to legislation that has sparked large protests in the country's capital of Tbilisi.

"For everybody that's been happy to basically have watered down versions of the exact same laws that the United States itself has should on its face show you that they're trying to get whatever are the whims of NATO, or the US and UK and Israel, and that's what the agenda is.

And he should increase his security detail and he should definitely make sure that there's a couple of brand new dogs around the property.”

Western-backed non-governmental organizations are an important way for the United States and other foreign powers to exercise influence in adversary countries, allowing outside actors to foment unrest and even regime change. The tactic forms an important part of US efforts to install compliant regimes through non-military means in events that are known as “color revolutions.”

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Germany Pushes ‘Solidarity Distribution’ of Ukraine Migrants as Social Services Strained

Anti-immigrant politics is on the rise in Europe, with a flood of refugees from Ukraine causing repercussions throughout the continent.

The German government has [announced](#) its support for a more even distribution of refugees throughout the European Union as the country copes with more than 1.3 million Ukrainian migrants.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz “strongly supports a solidarity distribution for refugees and believes that... secondary migration within the EU should be addressed and resolved in particular,” a spokesperson for the country’s Interior Ministry was quoted as saying in the German newspaper Die Welt Friday.

Germany has been the primary destination for [Ukrainian refugees](#) amid the country’s Western-backed proxy war against Russia. Poland and Czechia have welcomed the second and third-largest cohorts of migrants, hosting 960,000 and 360,000 Ukrainians, respectively.

The country offers generous benefits, with a monthly stipend of 563 euros or \$610. Meanwhile, the employment rate for Ukrainian refugees in Germany stands at just 20% – far lower than in other EU countries, according to German state broadcaster Deutsche Welle.

Berlin’s proposed policy would see [Ukraine migrants](#) who have illegally moved to other EU states be returned to the countries where they originally sought asylum. Some fighting-age refugees could be returned to Ukraine, according to an expert quoted by Die Welt.

Kiev has made efforts to seek the return of military-age citizens as draft dodging remains a major concern. In April, the country [announced](#) a plan to deny consular assistance to draft-age Ukrainians abroad, forcing them to visit conscription centers in Ukraine to access services.

Ukraine has taken to forcefully press ganging Ukrainians as opposition to its war with Russia grows within the country, detaining fighting-age men in public venues and submitting them to a brief period of training before they are sent to the front lines. A scandal ensued last month after a 14-year-old boy was [assaulted and detained by conscription officers](#), before subsequently being released after the teenager produced identification proving his age.

The strain of accommodating Ukrainian refugees has stoked tensions throughout Europe, where anti-immigrant politics are on the rise. The Republic of Ireland recently [announced](#) cuts to welfare payments for the migrants amid a major housing shortage in the country.

Other domestic policy imposed in light of the conflict between Kiev and Moscow has proven highly controversial; projected German GDP growth for 2024 has [shrunk](#) to just .3% as [sanctions on Russian gas](#) continue to batter the country's industry. The elimination of tariffs on Ukrainian agricultural goods has led to farmers' protests throughout the continent. Political tensions have mounted within the European Union as well, with Hungary, Serbia and Slovakia among the member states voicing opposition to the arming of Ukraine. Last week, [Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico was shot](#) by an assailant unhappy with the government's policy regarding the Western proxy war. Footage has [emerged](#) of the would-be assailant at a protest calling Fico's government "traitors" for refusing to provide military aid to the Kiev regime. Fico has insisted Slovakia will continue to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine, but the populist leader claims it is not in the small Central European country's interest to send armaments to the country.

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Viral Video Shows IDF Soldier Calling for Military Coup, Israeli Rule Over Gaza

The viral clip is evidence that many Israeli reservists reject international calls for Palestinian control over Gaza and the West Bank.

A viral video appearing to show an Israeli soldier threatening a military uprising is shedding new light on intense political polarization that [observers say](#) threatens to provoke civil war.

The video message has been shared in Israeli groups on the Telegram messaging platform and came to prominence after being [posted](#) by Yair Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister's 32-year-old son who currently [resides](#) in Miami.

It appears to [show](#) a masked Israel Defense Forces soldier calling for a rebellion against Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and military Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi. The servicemember dedicates the message to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and declares "we reservists do not intend to hand over the keys to any Palestinian Authority."

"Think carefully to whom you intend to give the keys," he says. "Our brothers were not murdered or raped for nothing. We want victory, a decision. Whoever harmed the people of Israel and our brothers – we want to destroy him, and you, Mr. Gallant, cannot do that."

Independent investigations have [challenged](#) initial reports of mass rapes on October 7, while IDF soldiers have admitted to effectively [implementing](#) the military's controversial Hannibal Directive, which calls for Israeli citizens to be killed rather than allowed to be taken hostage. Israeli shelling and airstrikes are now [thought to account](#) for many of the civilian deaths that took place amid the surprise attack by Hamas.

Deep political divides in Israeli society have opened up in recent months, with opposition leader Benny Gantz [threatening to leave](#) the country's emergency war cabinet if the Israeli prime minister does not implement his proposed six-point plan for the country's military operation in Gaza. Among Gantz's demands are efforts to ensure the return of Hamas-held Israeli captives, a demilitarization of the Gaza Strip and a move towards international administration of the Palestinian territory.

Gallant appeared to [side](#) with Gantz's position last week, saying Prime Minister Netanyahu should not seek to establish Israeli rule over the Gaza Strip, which is considered Palestinian territory under international law. Netanyahu, meanwhile, has insisted the country should maintain military rule over Gaza and the West Bank, a stance demanded by hardline members of his coalition such as Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezele Smotrich.

The viral video suggests portions of Israel's military strongly oppose returning Gaza to Palestinian control after Israel's military operation, a stated demand of US President Joe Biden and other international figures.

"Change the record and understand that we want to win, or we will go only with the prime minister," continued the anonymous soldier. "Only with whoever decides that we should win, we will follow him. Here I tell you, did you want a military coup?"

Israel was rocked by massive anti-Netanyahu protests in the months before Hamas' unprecedented October 7 attack as the controversial prime minister attempted to weaken the country's judiciary. Protestors have returned to the streets in recent months calling for Netanyahu's resignation and the return of Israeli hostages held in Gaza.

Recent polling [suggests](#) younger Israelis are more likely to hold extremist positions, supporting radical political parties that call for the [ethnic cleansing](#) of Palestinians.

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'Remain Mobilized': Pro-Independence Protesters in New Caledonia Stand Their Ground – Report

France is keeping a tight grip on a remnant of its former colonial empire as indigenous demonstrators fear being politically sidelined.

A leader of pro-independence forces in the French overseas territory of New Caledonia is calling on protesters to "remain mobilized" and "maintain resistance" as French President Emmanuel Macron enforces a state of emergency in response to massive demonstrations. Christian Tein, the head of the Pacific archipelago's Field Action Coordination Unit party, made the call in a video posted to social media.

"We remain mobilized [and] maintain all [forms] of resistance," said the independence leader, urging protesters to remain non-violent. "There has been too much suffering, there's too much at stake and we must see [this] through [and] achieve our goals in a coordinated, structured and organized way... Our main objective is for our country to obtain full sovereignty."

Riots and demonstrations broke out in New Caledonia's capital of Nouméa earlier this month after Macron proposed a reform to the country's electoral system that is perceived as tightening France's colonial grip on the territory.

Since 1998, New Caledonia's electorate has been [limited](#) to its indigenous inhabitants plus pre-1998 residents and their descendants who have lived there continuously for at least 10 years. The European Court of Human Rights [ruled](#) the arrangement was acceptable as a provisional move towards decolonization of the territory.

But Macron's proposal aims to grant the vote to more migrants living there, a move indigenous inhabitants say is a step away from self-rule and towards renewed European control.

The French president met Wednesday with pro-independence leaders, but the summit failed to end the unrest. Macron called on protesters to remove barricades that have brought the territory's economy to a standstill.

Tein called on demonstrators to allow vehicles carrying food, fuel and medicine to move freely, but Macron has insisted the roadblocks must be dismantled entirely. The French president has imposed a state of emergency on the territory until the demand is met, deploying the French military to maintain a curfew, a ban on public gatherings and the prohibition of the sale of alcohol. Residents have also been blocked from accessing [TikTok](#).

Three independence referendums were held in New Caledonia in recent years, with the first two being narrowly defeated despite strong [support](#) in the territory's indigenous-majority provinces. A third referendum held amid COVID-19 restrictions was boycotted by independence advocates. The development comes after a series of governments of former French colonies in North Africa have forced French and US troops to abandon their military presence in the region. France has been [criticized](#) for its treatment of former territories in Africa, which it forces to pay a "colonial tax" for the alleged benefits of French subjugation.

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'Prewar Generation': UK Tories Propose Mandatory National Service

The Conservative Party has unveiled the plan in an effort to strengthen the country's military, while the Labour Party faulted its opposition for not investing more in the country's armed forces.

The head of the UK's Conservative Party [proposed](#) mandatory national service Saturday in the latest indication that European leaders see a major global conflict on the horizon.

"Generations of young people have not had the opportunities or experience they deserve and there are forces trying to divide our society in this increasingly uncertain world," said Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

Under the plan, 18-year-old UK citizens would be required to complete 12 months of service in the country's armed forces. Alternatively, the young adults could complete one year of community service, volunteering for one weekend each month.

The proposal is Sunak's first of this year's political campaign after calling for national elections to be held on July 4.

A statement by the opposition Labour Party criticized the idea, claiming, "this is not a plan – it's a review which could cost billions." The party said the proposal "is only needed because the Tories hollowed out the armed forces to their smallest size since Napoleon," suggesting Labour leader Keir Starmer would seek increased military funding.

Young adults opting for the year of military service could fulfill the obligation by working in the UK military's so-called cyber defense operations, it was reported, assisting in cyber security and civil response operations. Western countries have [increasingly focused](#) on cyber warfare amid a social panic over alleged foreign "disinformation" online.

The US military has been [operating](#) bot accounts to influence opinion on social media for more than a decade, and Wikipedia co-founder Larry Sanger has [claimed](#) the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) maintains a presence on Wikipedia to wage “information warfare.”

Sunak’s proposal is the latest step towards what observers fear could be a third world war as European countries maintain support for Ukraine’s proxy conflict against Russia. British military chief Gen. Patrick Sanders recently [claimed](#) the UK’s “prewar generation” should prepare for a possible war, saying it would be a “whole of nation undertaking.”

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America Prepares for War with China Amid Latest Provocation from US Congress

The US is conducting war games near the South China Sea as US lawmakers visit Taiwan, undermining the United States’ long-held official commitment to a one-China policy.

The United States is conducting military drills with its allies near the South China Sea as a congressional delegation visits Taiwan in America’s latest attempt to undermine its official one-China policy.

“Marines from the US and the Philippines have been carrying out ominous war games on small islands a short distance from Taiwan,” [according](#) to British media, citing reporting by the Wall Street Journal from correspondents embedded with a US military regiment.

“The exercises include deploying teams of marines from Chinook helicopters, readying unarmed assault rifles, and scoping out terrain that would hypothetically be used if conflict erupted,” the article continues. “The developments are a disturbing glimpse into the perspective of US military leaders... Any direct conflict between the US and China could easily spiral into World War Three, with both nations in possession of nuclear weapons that could destroy the planet.”

The United States’ historical position on intervention in Taiwan has been one of so-called “strategic ambiguity,” with the country refusing to clarify whether it would send armed forces to the territory. However, President Joe Biden has broken with tradition by affirming he would be willing to send US troops.

The US military would most likely pursue an “island-hopping” strategy, the Daily Mail reports, attempting to strain Chinese resources by fanning out across island chains off China’s coast. But China’s increasingly formidable naval power would complicate any US attempt, and the British tabloid admits that “Beijing would hold a significant advantage fighting in its own backyard.”

US media correspondents reported from an attachment to the 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment, which has undertaken numerous exercises on Philippine islands after being created two years ago. [American armed forces are restructuring](#) to prepare for a major war in the Pacific after decades of combat against irregular forces in the Middle East, it has been reported.

“We’re moving away from counterterrorism and counterinsurgency,” said Army Secretary Christine Wormuth, referring to roles which have been in high demand in US wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. “We want to be postured for large-scale combat operations.”

Figures within the country’s armed forces have predicted the United States must confront China militarily within the next few years in order to stem its economic rise.

"Rand Corporation warned about 10 years ago that they needed to go to war with China by 2025 in order to prevail," [noted](#) analyst KJ Noh.

"And so we have a General [Mike] Minihan saying that we will go to war in 2025. Admiral [Philip] Davidson said we'll go to war in 2027. Whatever it is, the question in Washington right now is not if we will go to war, but when, and they want it sooner rather than later."

Meanwhile, a delegation of lawmakers has [arrived](#) in Taiwan to meet with local authorities in the United States' latest provocation over the thorny issue of the territory's status. The bipartisan group was led by Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX) who chairs the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

The visit comes amidst cross-strait tensions, with [China conducting military drills](#) after Taiwanese politician William Lai Ching-te made statements perceived as promoting separatism. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin urged the United States to "seriously abide by the one-China principle" and "not arrange for any visit by members of the Congress to Taiwan."

The United States officially adopted a "one-China policy" regarding Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué, issued amid former President Richard Nixon's efforts to normalize relations with the PRC.

The policy was reaffirmed in the 1979 Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations, with the US recognizing the government of the PRC as the sole legal government of China and Taiwan as part of one China. The position was affirmed once more in a joint agreement between the US and PRC in 1982.

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Washed Up: US Naval Vessels Unmoor from Gaza Aid Pier, Resurface on Beaches

The plan to construct a humanitarian aid pier was originally announced by US President Joe Biden during his State of the Union address in March.

US vessels attached to the country's aid pier off the coast of Gaza disconnected in stormy seas Saturday, eventually washing up on the shore, it was reported.

US Central Command [acknowledged](#) that four vessels escaped their moorings, with two of them washing up on a beach nearby. Another was stuck off the coast of the city of Ashdod; a ship sent to rescue it also became stuck.

CENTCOM has claimed the pier is still functional, adding that there were no injuries due to the incident.

US President Joe Biden's vaunted aid pier ploy has been [criticized](#) by some [observers](#), who fear it will become a channel for US troops to enter Gaza or Palestinians to be forcefully expelled.

Aid deliveries via the \$320 million port have so far [fallen below expectations](#), providing just 15% of the estimated minimum daily need for the more than 2 million people in Gaza.

Israeli restrictions on the passage of vehicles reportedly contributed to less than 70% of the aid reaching distribution points. Reporting on Thursday revealed the pier was first used to bring in military equipment, with the first delivery of food going to Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) troops.

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Dozens Killed in Israeli Strike on Rafah Refugee Camp – Report

The attack comes shortly after the death of 81 people within 24 hours, according to Gaza's health ministry.

At least 35 people, most of them women and children, were [killed](#) in a series of Israeli airstrikes on a Palestinian tent encampment for refugees in western Rafah, according to Gaza's Ministry of Health. Dozens more were reportedly injured.

"The Ministry of Health confirms that never before in history has such a large number of mass killing tools been amassed and employed together in front of the world as is happening now in Gaza," read a statement from the health ministry, adding the enclave continues to suffer serious shortages of food, water, medicine, fuel and electricity.

Witnesses alleged that at least eight airstrikes hit the camp of displaced people located 600 feet from a United Nations warehouse. A Palestinian Red Crescent spokesperson said the death toll is likely to rise, also claiming the camp had been identified by the Israeli military as a "humanitarian area."

A statement from the Israel Defense Forces confirmed the strike, alleging that it was carried out against "legitimate targets."

"A short while ago, an IDF aircraft struck a Hamas compound in Rafah in which significant Hamas terrorists were operating," read the statement. "The IDF is aware of reports indicating that as a result of the strike and fire that was ignited several civilians in the area were harmed. The incident is under review."

The IDF later said that the strike killed Yassin Rabia, the Hamas Chief of Staff in the West Bank, The Jerusalem Post reported.

The attack comes shortly after a barrage of Hamas rockets reached central Israel Sunday, the group's first long-range strikes in months. No deaths or injuries have been reported as a consequence of the blitz.

Hamas' military branch justified the attack in a statement on Telegram as a response to "Zionist massacres against civilians." Earlier in the day Gaza's health ministry [reported](#) 81 people had been killed by Israeli attacks over the last 24 hours.

The Hamas strike is a new sign of resilience more than seven months after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to destroy the Palestinian group. Hamas fighters have reemerged in Northern Gaza in recent weeks, provoking domestic criticism of the Israeli leader's military strategy. Protesters have maintained a near-constant [presence](#) in the capital of Tel Aviv and outside Netanyahu's home.

Hundreds of thousands of Israelis remain internally displaced in Southern Israel as well as the northern portion of the country, where Hezbollah has launched frequent rocket and artillery strikes. It was [reported](#) late last year that nearly half a million Israelis have fled the country as armed conflict drags on.

Almost 36,000 Palestinians have been killed during Israel's military operation in Gaza, according to the local health ministry, although the death toll is [thought](#) to be higher given thousands of bodies still buried underneath the rubble of IDF airstrikes.

"Around 80% of the population's 2.3 million people have fled their homes, severe hunger is widespread and UN officials say parts of the territory are experiencing famine," [according to](#) US media.

UNICEF [reports](#) that almost all of the 600,000 children taking refuge in the southern Gaza city of Rafah are "injured, sick or malnourished."

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Report: Israeli Settlers, IDF Team Up to Destroy Gaza Aid Amid 'Full-Blown Famine'

Extremist settler groups are setting upon food trucks passing through the West Bank, assaulting the drivers and burning their cargo.

Video has emerged in recent weeks of Israeli West Bank settlers attacking and destroying aid trucks headed for the besieged Gaza Strip, reportedly with the acquiescence and even active participation of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and police.

A series of such instances was documented in a [report](#) by the Washington Post Sunday that described how extremist Israelis work together to plan the assaults with the help of security forces.

"The settler groups use a web of publicly accessible WhatsApp groups to track the trucks and coordinate attacks," the newspaper reported. "Groups of settler youth are tailing relief convoys, setting up checkpoints and interrogating drivers. In some cases, far-right attackers have ransacked and burned trucks and beaten Palestinian drivers, leaving at least two hospitalized."

"Working off what they say are [tips from Israeli soldiers and police](#), in addition to the public, members pore over photos to work out which vehicles might be carrying aid to Gaza and mobilize local supporters to block them."

An attack on Thursday took shape after participants in a chat group with over 800 users spotted a truck carrying sugar. Israeli settlers descended upon the vehicle, tossing out its cargo, which its driver claimed was intended for a town in the West Bank. IDF soldiers cleared the scattered bags of sugar with a bulldozer before destroying them.

"The attack happened in front of the army," claimed the owner of the truck, while its driver claimed IDF soldiers stood by as the ransacking took place.

"The environment around us is fed by hate and revenge," lamented the chair of a Palestinian business group.

Other trucks have been burned by the settlers. One Palestinian driver suffered a broken nose, ribs and vertebrae after being attacked by a group of Israeli protesters who asked him whether he was "a Jew or Arab." The driver's vehicle was destroyed and his \$200,000 worth of goods was lost.

"It's not our job to stop them, it's our job to protect them," said one female IDF soldier, defending the military's failure to stop the attacks.

An anonymous White House official claimed the Biden administration is considering sanctions on settlers involved in the incidents, although no action has yet been taken. Previous US sanctions on a handful of Israeli settlers were [reversed](#) after complaints from controversial Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, according to reports in Israeli media.

The World Food Program reports northern Gaza is in a state of “full-blown famine,” with food scarcity spreading south.

“I’m happy for every truck that doesn’t enter Gaza,” said 23-year-old Yosef de Bresser, a leader of an extremist settler group. “I’m also happy to see it catch fire.”

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Borrell Slams Netanyahu in Latest Sign of Tensions Between Europe, Israeli PM

The comment comes after Spain, Ireland and Norway granted diplomatic recognition of the State of Palestine this week, but Israel still enjoys significant support within the EU.

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell criticized Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Monday in the latest sign of strained relations between Europe and the controversial Israeli leader.

The remark came in response to [comments](#) by Netanyahu last week accusing International Criminal Court prosecutor Karim Khan of prejudice against Jewish people.

“Their position about antisemitism against the prosecutor of the ICC is completely not acceptable,” [said](#) Borrell. The Spanish politician said the accusation was an attempt to intimidate the human rights lawyer, adding that claims of antisemitism are made every time anyone “does something that Netanyahu doesn’t like.”

The Israeli Prime Minister denounced the ICC’s announcement last Monday that it would seek arrest warrants against him and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, as well as three leaders of Hamas, for alleged crimes against humanity.

Netanyahu rejected any implied comparison between the Palestinian group and Israel, which he describes as a “democratic” state. The Israeli organization B’Tselem and other international human rights groups have [characterized](#) Israel as an “apartheid” regime where 5.5 million Palestinians in occupied territories “have no representation in the political institutions that dictate their lives.”

“As the prime minister of Israel, I reject with disgust the Hague prosecutor’s comparison between democratic Israel and the mass murderers of Hamas,” said Netanyahu in a video message released last week. “This is a complete distortion of reality. This is exactly what the new antisemitism looks like. It has moved from the campuses in the West to the court in The Hague.”

The Israeli prime minister slammed [pro-Palestine protests at US colleges](#) last month, saying they were “reminiscent of what happened in German universities in the 1930s” and calling for them to be disbanded.

Borrell’s comment is a sign of growing tensions between Netanyahu and some EU leaders as Israel’s seven-month-long military campaign in the Gaza Strip rages on. Two Europe-based international courts have dealt setbacks to the Israeli government recently, with the International

Court of Justice ordering the country to end its operation in Rafah shortly after the ICC arrest warrant was issued last week.

The EU foreign policy chief also announced that a meeting of the EU-Israel Council would be held soon to discuss the human rights situation in Gaza and “the impact of the ICJ ruling on the association agreement,” according to Reuters. The comment suggests that trade between Israel and the bloc of 27 European countries may be placed in jeopardy by recent legal developments. The Irish foreign minister [claimed](#) Monday that “significant discussion on sanctions” against Israel is taking place among EU member states. Such measures would represent a significant economic blow against the country after Türkiye [halted](#) trade with Israel earlier this month over Tel Aviv’s conduct in Gaza, where nearly 36,000 Palestinians have been killed according to the territory’s health ministry.

Still, European support has remained crucial in Israel’s ongoing operation in the Palestinian enclave, with Germany serving as the country’s most important military ally after the United States. Last month the ICJ [refused](#) to issue an emergency injunction against Germany’s provision of arms to Israel in a case brought against the European country by Nicaragua.

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‘America Breaks Global Rules’ It Imposes on Others, Admits Financial Times

A columnist for the British newspaper suggests the US should abandon all talk of the rules-based order entirely, instead adopting a reductionist Cold War rhetoric focused on defense of freedom and democracy.

“Our administration is committed to leading with diplomacy to advance the interests of the United States and to strengthen the rules-based international order,” said US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during a 2021 summit with Chinese leaders noted for the White House’s “[acrimonious](#)” and “[condescending](#)” tone towards the Asian power.

The US diplomat went on to [criticize](#) China’s “aggressive behavior,” accusing it of “economic coercion” and alleged disregard for democracy. “Each of these actions threaten the rules-based order that maintains global stability,” Blinken chided.

The term “rules-based international order” has drawn scrutiny as a favored talking point of the Biden administration. Which “rules” are being referred to, it is often asked, and who created them? If the expression is simply another name for “international law,” why not use that term? The problem, as some [observers](#) have pointed out, is that “international law” and the “international rules-based order” are not, in fact, synonymous. The former is something concrete – a series of codes and conventions upheld by nominally-independent global bodies. The latter is, frequently, whatever the White House wants it to be: “the substitution of international law with the prerogatives of American hegemony.”

Financial Times foreign affairs columnist Gideon Rachman [acknowledges](#) as much in an editorial on the subject, writing, “America’s own actions are undermining vital parts of the rules-based order.” What’s more, Rachman observes that the rules-based international order is “a deeply uninspiring concept,” “a phrase that means nothing to a normal person.”

“Nobody is going to fight and die for the RBIO,” Rachman admits.

As a substitute slogan he proposes something even more subjective, cliché and nebulous. America should abandon any pretense of rules or outside authority entirely, he writes, and return to the Cold War rallying cry of “defending the free world.”

The issue with citing rules is that the United States frequently breaks them. “The 100 percent tariffs that the Biden administration has imposed on Chinese electric vehicles are virtually impossible to reconcile with [World Trade Organization] rules on trade,” Rachman notes.

The International Criminal Court’s recent announcement it would pursue an arrest warrant against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also placed the White House in a bind. The prospect of a junior partner of US imperialism being held accountable led Blinken to mull sanctions on the ICC, an important arbiter of the rules he claims to defend.

The saga was perfectly illustrative for those who argue both major parties share a common foreign policy, with Blinken suddenly difficult to tell apart from a conservative hawk like John Bolton who has [muses](#) openly about abolishing the UN. Democrats typically at least pay lip service to the notion the US cares about global opinion, until push comes to shove.

Rachman’s Cold War framing dispenses with such need to keep up appearances. All that is necessary is to claim the United States is defending freedom and democracy, and we are good at claiming such things. No international court can rule against us if a vague notion of “freedom” is our only constraint.

But that notion is appearing more vague than ever.

A recent survey [asked](#) people worldwide whether they view their country as being democratic. In what must come as a shock to many Westerners, China was among the top performers in the study, with 79% of its citizens believing their country is highly democratic. Only about half of Americans surveyed said the same of the United States.

“People’s perception of whether they live in a democracy or not is not at all aligned with procedural democracy: whether people vote for their country’s leaders or not, and whether a country has the procedural attributes of liberal democracy,” [explained](#) French analyst Arnaud Bertrand.

“The perception of democracy is extremely correlated with the percentage of people who believe the government serves the majority as opposed to a minority,” he continued. “For instance, China scores highest in the world on this, with almost everyone agreeing with the sentence ‘my government usually acts in the interests of most people in my country.’”

“This is after all quite important for democracy: the whole point is that it’s supposed to be ‘for the people,’ isn’t it?”

Indicators of economic equality and class mobility in the United States were at their highest during the Cold War period, when the US fought a global ideological battle with the Soviet Union over which system offered its citizens a better quality of life. Those figures are now in decline as lawmakers pursue a bipartisan neoliberal vision: “the share of people who go on to earn more than their parents has been steadily declining,” [reveals](#) one study on the matter.

Rachman rejects the notion that the US and its global adversaries are “on the same moral level.”

“As in the Cold War and the earlier struggles of the 20th century, the world’s democracies do not need to apologize for being ruthless in defense of free societies,” he writes.

The claim presumes the United States has ever apologized for anything, and that the Americans doing the defending share his belief in their own freedom and democracy. But that notion now seems more uncertain than ever.

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US Veterans Sickened by Radiation at Area 52 Denied Health Benefits

Cases of cancer, bronchitis and other breathing issues have been documented in veterans who served at a classified military compound that inspected secretly-obtained Soviet fighter jets. Hundreds of veterans of the US Armed Forces have been sickened after being stationed at a top secret base in the Nevada desert, but the confidential nature of their work there has prevented them from receiving benefits for their health conditions.

US media [documented](#) the story of one such former servicemember, who worked at an installation sometimes called Area 52.

"It scarred my lungs," said Mark Ely, a 63-year-old retired Air Force technician. "I got cysts on my liver... I started having lipomas, tumors inside my body I had to remove. My lining in my bladder was shed."

For years the United States conducted extensive nuclear testing near the secret base.

A 1975 federal [report](#) acknowledged that toxic radioactive dust scattered throughout the area posed a risk to people stationed nearby, but government analysts concluded nuclear testing should continue.

"Discontinuing the work done at the Range would be against the national interest," concluded the assessment. "The Range could in principle be decommissioned, but the cost would be great... Shutting the Range down or moving its operations elsewhere would also have an adverse impact on the economy of the Tonopah area."

"The environmental costs inherent in the work are small and reasonable for the benefits received."

Some \$25.7 billion in health benefits have been allocated to employees of the US Department of Energy and other federal agencies who were stationed in the area. But the work of Ely and other military veterans is excluded from service records, meaning they cannot prove they were present at Area 52.

"It makes me incredibly mad and it hurts me too because they're supposed to have my back," said Ely. "I had theirs and I want them to have mine."

Will Western leaders start World War III to distract from their political failure?

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The West faces an ongoing crisis of political legitimacy, with approval ratings among the G7 countries ranging from 44% for Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to a mere 20% for German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The situation is particularly dire in the United States where three-fourths of Americans believe the country is headed in the wrong direction.

Given such grim political and cultural indicators, will leaders seek global conflict to distract from their own failings? That's the fear of author Jeremy Kuzmarov, who appeared on Sputnik's Fault Lines program Friday to discuss the increasing desperation of the Western ruling class as the US-backed Ukraine puppet state nears collapse.

"These leaders seem to want a world war," said Kuzmarov, the managing editor of Covert Action magazine. "Maybe that is what they want. I mean, they're losing, they've lost legitimacy as far as governing at home. My feeling is that this is a strategy, that they're provoking conflicts abroad to divert the attention of the public from their misrule at home and corruption."

"So, I don't know if they could do that politically unless they resort to more and more authoritarian standards at home, which seems to be what's going on. But, again, you're going to sustain a domestic political backlash. So I think they're in trouble, and that's why we see these reckless threats and very reckless behavior. And I hope it doesn't provoke a third world war, which is where it could be leading."

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Liberal fascism: analyst says European legacy is 'one of a criminal gangster cartel' (Part 1)

Germany's Alternative fur Deutschland (AfD) party has been rocked by scandal after its top candidate in upcoming EU elections defended the Nazi Party's notorious Schutzstaffel paramilitary organization.

"I will never say that everyone who wore an SS uniform was automatically a criminal," said Maximilian Krah in comments made to an Italian newspaper. The Nazi Party was responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of people during World War II, including 27 million in the Soviet Union alone.

"It's actually the liberal center of the European Union that is fueling the kind of resurgence of that far right," said Belfast-based political commentator Phil Kelly on Sputnik's Political Misfits program, criticizing establishment politicians' support for the Ukraine proxy war.

Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas sparked controversy recently with comments suggesting NATO should seek to Balkanize Russia after its current conflict with Ukraine. "There could really be a change in society," said the Baltic leader, claiming the Eurasian country should be split into several "small nations."

Pro-war figures like Kallas have dominated EU politics as mainstream forces have sidelined the populist left. Establishment parties formed a grand coalition to thwart Sinn Féin from taking power after the Irish republican party prevailed in recent elections.

In the United Kingdom, state intelligence actors and Zionist donors joined forces to sabotage socialist Labor Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, with claims of “anti-Semitism” taking center stage in the smear campaign against the pro-Palestine candidate. US intelligence apparently assisted in the effort, with former Vice President and ex-CIA director Mike Pompeo promising to help prevent the populist figure from being elected Prime Minister in private comments leaked by the Washington Post.

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Shock: EU official appears to issue mafia-like threat to Georgian prime minister

Just over a week after an attempt on the life of Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, a top European Union official has warned another Ukraine-skeptic leader that he could suffer a similar fate. That's the claim made by Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, who made the startling revelation Thursday.

“You see what happened to Fico, and you should be very careful,” European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Oliver Varhelyi allegedly told Kobakhidze during a telephone call in which the Georgian leader was threatened with “a number of measures” in response to the passage of a proposed foreign NGO transparency act. Varhelyi acknowledged the comment in a statement released soon after, but claimed it was not intended as a threat.

“It sounds so Mafia-esque,” said Garland Nixon on Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program. Analyst Steve Poikonen agreed, noting a string of independent world leaders who have been harmed or killed in recent years in Iran, Haiti, and throughout Africa.

“The bill that [Kobakhidze is] trying to push through the Georgian Parliament is for the color revolution industry to have to declare itself that it's coming into his country to start doing color revolution stuff,” said Poikonen. “For everybody that's been happy to basically have watered down versions of the exact same laws that the United States itself has should on its face show you that they're trying to get whatever are the whims of NATO, or the US and UK and Israel, and that's what the agenda is.”

Western-backed non-governmental organizations are an important way for the United States and other foreign powers to exercise influence in adversary countries, allowing outside actors to foment unrest and even regime change. The tactic forms an important part of US efforts to install compliant regimes through non-military means in events that are known as “color revolutions.”

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Germany pushes ‘solidarity distribution’ of Ukraine migrants as social services strained

The German government has announced its support for a more even distribution of refugees throughout the European Union as the country copes with more than 1.3 million Ukrainian migrants.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz “strongly supports a solidarity distribution for refugees and believes that... secondary migration within the EU should be addressed and resolved in particular,” a spokesperson for the country’s Interior Ministry was quoted as saying in the German newspaper Die Welt.

The country offers generous benefits, with a monthly stipend of 563 euros or \$610. Meanwhile, the employment rate for Ukrainian refugees in Germany stands at just 20% – far lower than in other EU countries, according to German state broadcaster Deutsche Welle.

Berlin’s proposed policy would see Ukraine migrants who have illegally moved to other EU states be returned to the countries where they originally sought asylum. Some fighting-age refugees could be returned to Ukraine, according to an expert quoted by Die Welt.

Kiev has made efforts to seek the return of military-age citizens as draft dodging remains a major concern. In April, the country announced a plan to deny consular assistance to draft-age Ukrainians abroad, forcing them to visit conscription centers in Ukraine to access services.

Ukraine has taken to forcefully press ganging Ukrainians as opposition to its war with Russia grows within the country, detaining fighting-age men in public venues and submitting them to a brief period of training before they are sent to the front lines. A scandal ensued last month after a 14-year-old boy was assaulted and detained by conscription officers, before subsequently being released.

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Viral video shows IDF soldier calling for military coup, Israeli rule over Gaza

A viral video appearing to show an Israeli reservist threatening a military uprising is shedding new light on intense political polarization that observers say threatens to provoke civil war in Israel.

The video message has been shared in Israeli groups on Telegram and came to prominence after being posted by Yair Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister’s 32-year-old son who currently resides in Miami.

It appears to show a masked IDF soldier calling for a rebellion against Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and military Chief of Staff Herzl Halevi. The servicemember dedicates the message to

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and declares “we reservists do not intend to hand over the keys to any Palestinian Authority.”

“Change the record and understand that we want to win, or we will go only with the prime minister,” he says. “Only with whoever decides that we should win, we will follow him. Here I tell you, did you want a military coup?”

Israel was rocked by massive anti-Netanyahu protests in the months before Hamas’ unprecedented October 7 attack as the controversial prime minister attempted to weaken the country’s judiciary. Protestors have returned to the streets in recent months calling for Netanyahu’s resignation and the return of Israeli hostages held in Gaza.

Recent polling suggests younger Israelis are more likely to hold extremist positions, supporting radical political parties that call for the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.

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‘Remain mobilized’: pro-independence protesters in New Caledonia stand their ground

France is keeping a tight grip on a remnant of its former colonial empire as indigenous demonstrators fear being politically sidelined.

A leader of pro-independence forces in the French overseas territory of New Caledonia is calling on protesters to “maintain resistance” as French President Emmanuel Macron enforces a state of emergency in response to massive demonstrations.

“There has been too much suffering, there’s too much at stake and we must see [this] through [and] achieve our goals in a coordinated, structured and organized way... Our main objective is for our country to obtain full sovereignty,” said Christian Tein, the head of the Pacific archipelago’s Field Action Coordination Unit party, in a video posted to social media.

Riots and demonstrations broke out in New Caledonia’s capital of Nouméa earlier this month after Macron proposed a reform to the country’s electoral system that is perceived as tightening France’s colonial grip on the territory. Macron’s proposal aims to grant the vote to more migrants living there, a move indigenous inhabitants say is a step away from self-rule and towards renewed European control.

The French president met Wednesday with pro-independence leaders, but the summit failed to end the unrest. Macron has imposed a state of emergency on the territory until roadblocks are removed, deploying the French military to maintain a curfew, a ban on public gatherings and the prohibition of the sale of alcohol. Residents have also been blocked from accessing TikTok.

The development comes after a series of governments of former French colonies in North Africa have forced French and US troops to abandon their military presence in the region. France has been criticized for its treatment of former territories in Africa, which it forces to pay a “colonial tax” for the alleged benefits of French subjugation.

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'Prewar generation': UK Tories propose mandatory national service

The head of the UK's Conservative Party proposed mandatory national service in the latest indication that European leaders see a major global conflict on the horizon.

“Generations of young people have not had the opportunities or experience they deserve and there are forces trying to divide our society in this increasingly uncertain world,” said Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

Under the plan, 18-year-old UK citizens would be required to complete 12 months of service in the country's armed forces. Alternatively, the young adults could complete one year of community service, volunteering for one weekend each month.

A statement by the opposition Labour Party criticized the idea, claiming, “this is not a plan – it's a review which could cost billions.” The party said the proposal “is only needed because the Tories hollowed out the armed forces to their smallest size since Napoleon,” suggesting Labour leader Keir Starmer would seek increased military funding.

Young adults opting for the year of military service could also fulfill the obligation by working in the UK military's so-called cyber defense operations, it was reported.

Sunak's proposal is the latest step towards what observers fear could be a third world war as European countries maintain support for Ukraine's proxy conflict against Russia. British military chief Gen. Patrick Sanders recently claimed the UK's “prewar generation” should prepare for a possible war, saying it would be a “whole of nation undertaking.”

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America prepares for war with China amid latest provocation from US Congress (Part 1)

The United States is conducting military drills with its allies near the South China Sea as a congressional delegation visits Taiwan in America's latest attempt to undermine its official one-China policy.

“Marines from the US and the Philippines have been carrying out ominous war games on small islands a short distance from Taiwan,” according to British media, citing reporting by the Wall Street Journal from correspondents embedded with a US military regiment.

“The developments are a disturbing glimpse into the perspective of US military leaders... Any direct conflict between the US and China could easily spiral into World War Three, with both nations in possession of nuclear weapons that could destroy the planet.”

The United States’ historical position on intervention in Taiwan has been one of so-called “strategic ambiguity,” with the country refusing to clarify whether it would send armed forces to the territory. However, President Joe Biden has broken with tradition by affirming he would be willing to send US troops.

US media correspondents reported from an attachment to the 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment, which has undertaken numerous exercises on Philippine islands after being created two years ago. American armed forces are restructuring to prepare for a major war in the Pacific after decades of combat against irregular forces in the Middle East, it has been reported.

“We’re moving away from counterterrorism and counterinsurgency,” said Army Secretary Christine Wormuth, referring to roles which have been in high demand in US wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. “We want to be postured for large-scale combat operations.”

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America prepares for war with China amid latest provocation from US Congress (Part 2)

Figures within the US armed forces have predicted the United States must confront China militarily within the next few years in order to stem its economic rise.

“Rand Corporation warned about 10 years ago that they needed to go to war with China by 2025 in order to prevail,” noted analyst KJ Noh. “General [Mike] Minihan [said] that we will go to war in 2025. Admiral [Philip] Davidson said we’ll go to war in 2027. Whatever it is, the question in Washington right now is not if we will go to war, but when, and they want it sooner rather than later.”

Meanwhile, a delegation of lawmakers has arrived in Taiwan to meet with local authorities in the United States’ latest provocation over the thorny issue of the territory’s status. The bipartisan group was led by Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX) who chairs the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

The visit comes amidst cross-strait tensions, with China conducting military drills after Taiwanese politician William Lai Ching-te made statements perceived as promoting separatism. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin urged the United States to “seriously abide

by the one-China principle” and “not arrange for any visit by members of the Congress to Taiwan.”

The United States officially adopted a “one-China policy” regarding Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué, issued amid former President Richard Nixon’s efforts to normalize relations with the PRC.

The policy was reaffirmed in the 1979 Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations, with the US recognizing the government of the PRC as the sole legal government of China and Taiwan as a part of it. The position was affirmed once again in a joint agreement reached in 1982.

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Washed up: US naval vessels unmoor from Gaza aid pier, resurface on beaches

US vessels attached to the country's aid pier off the coast of Gaza disconnected in stormy seas, eventually washing up on the shore, The Times of Israel reported.

US Central Command acknowledged that four vessels escaped their moorings, with two of them washing up on a beach nearby. Another was stuck off the coast of the city of Ashdod; a ship sent to rescue it also became stuck.

CENTCOM has claimed the pier is still functional, adding that there were no injuries due to the incident.

US President Joe Biden's vaunted aid pier ploy has been criticized by some observers, who fear it will become a channel for US troops to enter Gaza or Palestinians to be forcefully expelled. Aid deliveries via the \$320 million port have so far fallen below expectations, providing just 15% of the estimated minimum daily need for the more than 2 million people in Gaza.

Israeli restrictions on the passage of vehicles reportedly contributed to less than 70% of the aid reaching distribution points. Reporting on Thursday revealed the pier was first used to bring in military equipment, with the first delivery of food going to Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) troops.

Video from social media.

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Dozens killed in Israeli strike on Rafah refugee camp – report

At least 35 people, most of them women and children, were killed in a series of Israeli airstrikes on a Palestinian tent encampment for refugees in western Rafah, according to Gaza's Ministry of Health.

Witnesses alleged that at least eight airstrikes hit the camp of displaced people 600 feet from a United Nations warehouse. A Palestinian Red Crescent spokesperson said the death toll is likely to rise, also claiming the camp had been identified by the Israeli military as a "humanitarian area."

A statement from the Israel Defense Forces confirmed the strike. "A short while ago, an IDF aircraft struck a Hamas compound in Rafah in which significant Hamas terrorists were operating," read the statement. The IDF later said that the strike killed Yassin Rabia, the Hamas Chief of Staff in the West Bank, The Jerusalem Post reported.

The attack comes shortly after a barrage of Hamas rockets reached central Israel Sunday, the group's first long-range strikes in months. No deaths or injuries have been reported as a consequence of the blitz. Hamas' military branch justified the attack in a statement on Telegram as a response to "Zionist massacres against civilians." Earlier in the day Gaza's health ministry reported 81 people had been killed by Israeli attacks over the last 24 hours.

Almost 36,000 Palestinians have been killed during Israel's military operation in Gaza, according to the local health ministry, although the death toll is thought to be higher given thousands of bodies still buried underneath the rubble of IDF airstrikes.

"Around 80% of the population's 2.3 million people have fled their homes, severe hunger is widespread and UN officials say parts of the territory are experiencing famine," according to US media. UNICEF reports that almost all of the 600,000 children taking refuge in the southern Gaza city of Rafah are "injured, sick or malnourished."

Video from social media.

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Report: Israeli settlers, IDF team up to destroy Gaza aid amid 'full-blown famine'

Video has emerged in recent weeks of Israeli West Bank settlers attacking and destroying aid trucks headed for the besieged Gaza Strip, reportedly with the acquiescence and even active participation of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and police.

"The settler groups use a web of publicly accessible WhatsApp groups to track the trucks and coordinate attacks," the Washington Post reported. "Groups of settler youth are tailing relief convoys, setting up checkpoints and interrogating drivers. In some cases, far-right attackers have ransacked and burned trucks and beaten Palestinian drivers, leaving at least two hospitalized."

"Working off what they say are tips from Israeli soldiers and police, in addition to the public, members pore over photos to work out which vehicles might be carrying aid to Gaza and mobilize local supporters to block them."

One Palestinian driver suffered a broken nose, ribs and vertebrae after being attacked by a group of Israeli settlers who asked him whether he was "a Jew or Arab." The driver's vehicle was burned and his \$200,000 worth of goods was destroyed.

"It's not our job to stop [Israeli settlers], it's our job to protect them," said one female IDF soldier, defending the military's failure to stop the attacks.

The World Food Program reports northern Gaza is in a state of "full-blown famine," with food scarcity spreading south.

"I'm happy for every truck that doesn't enter Gaza," said 23-year-old Yosef de Bresser, a leader of an extremist settler group. "I'm also happy to see it catch fire."

Video from social media.

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Borrell slams Netanyahu in latest sign of tensions between Europe, Israeli prime minister

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell criticized Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the latest sign of strained relations between Europe and the controversial Israeli leader. The remark came in response to comments by Netanyahu last week accusing International Criminal Court prosecutor Karim Khan of prejudice against Jewish people.

The Spanish politician said the accusation was an attempt to intimidate the human rights lawyer, adding that claims of antisemitism are made every time anyone "does something that Netanyahu doesn't like."

The Israeli Prime Minister denounced the ICC's announcement last Monday that it would seek arrest warrants against him and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, as well as three leaders of Hamas, for alleged crimes against humanity.

"This is exactly what the new antisemitism looks like," said Netanyahu. "It has moved from the campuses in the West to the court in The Hague." The Israeli prime minister slammed pro-Palestine protests at US colleges last month, saying they were "reminiscent of what happened in German universities in the 1930s" and calling for them to be disbanded.

The EU foreign policy chief also announced a meeting of the EU-Israel Council would be held soon to discuss the human rights situation in Gaza and "the impact of the ICJ ruling on the association agreement," according to Reuters. The comment suggests that trade between Israel and the bloc of 27 European countries may be placed in jeopardy by recent legal developments.

Nonetheless, European support has remained crucial in Israel's ongoing operation in Gaza, with Germany serving as the country's most important military ally after the US. Last month, the ICJ refused to issue an emergency injunction against Germany's provision of arms to Israel in a case brought against the European country by Nicaragua.

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'America breaks global rules' it imposes on others, admits Financial Times

The term "rules-based international order" has drawn scrutiny as a favored talking point of the Biden administration. Which "rules" are being referred to, it is often asked, and who created them? If the expression is simply another name for "international law," why not use that term?

The problem, as some observers have pointed out, is that "international law" and the "international rules-based order" are not, in fact, synonymous. The former is something concrete – a series of codes and conventions upheld by nominally-independent global bodies. The latter is, frequently, whatever the White House wants it to be: "the substitution of international law with the prerogatives of American hegemony."

Financial Times columnist Gideon Rachman acknowledges as much in an editorial on the subject, writing, "America's own actions are undermining vital parts of the rules-based order." What's more, Rachman observes that the rules-based international order is "a deeply uninspiring concept," "a phrase that means nothing to a normal person."

The issue with citing rules is that the United States frequently breaks them. "The 100 percent tariffs that the Biden administration has imposed on Chinese electric vehicles are virtually impossible to reconcile with [World Trade Organization] rules on trade," Rachman notes.

The International Criminal Court's recent announcement it would pursue an arrest warrant against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also placed the White House in a bind. The prospect of a junior partner of US imperialism being held accountable led Blinken to mull sanctions on the ICC, an important arbiter of the rules he claims to defend.

"The world's democracies do not need to apologize for being ruthless in defense of free societies," Rachman validates American foreign interventions and color revolutions all over the globe and presumes the United States has ever apologized for anything.

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US veterans sickened by radiation at Area 52 denied health benefits

Hundreds of veterans of the US Armed Forces have been sickened after being stationed at a top secret base in the Nevada desert, but the confidential nature of their work there has prevented them from receiving benefits for their health conditions. US media documented the story of one such former servicemember, who worked at an installation sometimes called Area 52.

"It scarred my lungs," said Mark Ely, a 63-year-old retired Air Force technician. "I got cysts on my liver... I started having lipomas, tumors inside my body I had to remove. My lining in my bladder was shed."

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"Discontinuing the work done at the Range would be against the national interest," concluded the assessment. "The Range could in principle be decommissioned, but the cost would be great... The environmental costs inherent in the work are small and reasonable for the benefits received."

Some \$25.7 billion in health benefits have been allocated to employees of the US Department of Energy and other federal agencies who were stationed in the area. But the work of Ely and other military veterans is excluded from service records, meaning they cannot prove they were present at Area 52.

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US Amends Cuban Sanctions to Boost Access to Internet, Financial Services - Treasury

WASHINGTON, May 28 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury amended its sanctions regulations on Cuba on Tuesday in order to expand access to internet and financial services for Cubans, according to a release.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's (Treasury) Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) amended the Cuban Assets Control Regulations, 31 CFR part 515, (CACR) to further implement the policy announced by the Biden-Harris Administration on May 16, 2022 to increase support for the Cuban people. These regulatory amendments update and clarify authorizations in support of internet-based services to promote internet freedom in Cuba, support independent Cuban private sector entrepreneurs, and expand access to certain financial services for the Cuban people," the release stated.

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Biden to Host Belgian Prime Minister on May 31 - White House

WASHINGTON, May 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will meet with Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo on May 31, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday.

"On May 31, President Joe Biden will welcome Prime Minister Alexander De Croo of Belgium for a meeting at the White House," Jean-Pierre said in a statement.

They will discuss "their shared commitment to continue supporting Ukraine," including the "efforts to make the greatest use of the immobilized Russian sovereign assets," the statement said.

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 said that seizure would pose reputational risks to the euro in the long term.

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Israel Gives Qatar, Egypt, US Updated Proposal on Gaza Hostage Deal - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 28 (Sputnik) - Israel has provided Qatar, Egypt, and the United States with an updated official proposal to secure the release of hostages held by Hamas in Gaza, Axios reported on Tuesday, citing sources familiar with the matter.

The proposal expressed Israel's readiness to be flexible on the number of hostages who will be released during the first part of the deal, the report said. Israel is now also willing to discuss Hamas' demand for "sustainable calm" in Gaza, it added.

Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani is expected to deliver Israel's proposal to Hamas representatives on Tuesday, according to the report.

On Monday, the Palestinian movement Hamas said it would not participate in any negotiations after Sunday's deadly Israeli strike on a camp housing displaced Palestinians.

The Palestinian civil defense service said that at least 40 people died and dozens were injured as a result. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the airstrike on the Rafah camp a "tragic mishap," adding that an investigation is underway. The Israel Defense Forces said that it used "precise munitions."

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Democrats Deeply Concerned About Biden Reelection Prospects - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 28 (Sputnik) – Democrats are deeply concerned about US President Joe Biden's reelection prospects, Politico reported on Tuesday, citing more than a dozen party leaders and operatives.

They said the gap between what they were willing to publicly and privately say was only growing amid a freak-out over Biden's consistently poor polling and the real prospect of another Trump presidency.

One advisor said they kept a running list of nearly two dozen reasons why Biden could lose the

November election as easy reference to show major Democratic donors, while the number of reasons Biden could win were too few to merit a list.

Former President Donald Trump is polling ahead of Biden in most battleground states and raised \$25 million more than Biden last month.

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Former US Lawmaker Calls US 'Champion of Coups' in Last 30-40 Years

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - Former US Congressman and leading libertarian thinker Ron Paul has called the United States "a champion" for organizing coups around the world, including in Ukraine, over the past 30-40.

"There's been coups around, and the United States are the champions. We've committed more coups in the last 30 or 40 years than probably anybody in history ... even as recent as Ukraine," Paul, who ran for President in 1988, 2008 and 2012, said at the 2024 Libertarian National Convention in Washington DC on Sunday.

Paul went on to say that he thinks that the events in the United States in 1963 - the assassination of President John F. Kennedy - were also a coup.

"I think that it's very clear that there was a coup in 1963, and we're suffering from it ever since," he said. "As the history has evolved and I've come to the conclusion as many of you probably have that over all these years, you know, the whole lie told about Oswald, the single shot business, that turns out, in my opinion, it was a filthy lie."

Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, while riding in a motorcade in Dallas, Texas. The president was shot by US Marine Corps veteran Lee Harvey Oswald, according to the official Warren Commission report released in 1964. The Warren Commission's report was initially sealed until 2039 before Congress passed the so-called JFK Records Act in 1992, which directed the National Archives and Records Administration to develop a collection on the assassination. The official narrative has been the subject of intense criticism whereby a number of alternative theories to explain Kennedy's assassination have since been offered.

In November 2013, a series of protests, dubbed Euromaidan or simply Maidan, broke out in Ukraine due to the authorities' decision to halt policy aimed at integration with the European Union. The unrest quickly took on a sharply anti-presidential and anti-government character. During clashes between Ukraine's security forces and demonstrators, more than 100 people died. The protests eventually turned into a coup and resulted in the ousting of then-President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014. It also resulted in the estrangement of Ukraine's eastern Donbas region and the subsequent offensive against it by new authorities in Kiev.

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Disorganization, Harsh Conditions in Ukraine Deter New Foreign Contractors - Security Firm

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - Disorganization and harsh conditions on the battlefield in Ukraine have contributed to discouraging foreign security contractors to join the fight, Tony Schiena, chairman of the US-based intelligence and security advisory firm MOSAIC, told Sputnik.

"Reports from the field often highlight disorganization and challenging conditions, contributing to a less welcoming environment for foreign contractors compared to the early stages of the conflict," Schiena said.

Schiena pointed out that insights gathered from various online chat rooms suggest that potential foreign contractors considering going to Ukraine are discouraged by descriptions of harsh conditions and operational frustrations, making it unlikely there will be a significant increase in the number of private contractors going to the country.

The role of private military companies (PMCs) in Ukraine could expand temporarily to fill gaps in manpower ahead of an anticipated summer offensive, as Kiev works to bolster its military ranks, Schiena said.

However, it remains unclear whether the Ukrainian government has the financial resources to sustain such contracts extensively, Schiena said.

The Russian offensive anticipated this summer could be chaotic for the Ukrainian military, even though it is better prepared than it was in the early stages of the conflict, he said.

"While the immediate future for private military contractors in Ukraine does not necessarily indicate a surge in demand, legislative changes and ongoing military developments could reshape the operational landscape significantly," Schiena said.

The demand for private military contractors could change with the recent proposed legislative changes advocating for the creation of international defense companies in Ukraine, Schiena added.

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Ukraine Conflict Not Profitable for PMCs Compared to Other Conflict Zones - Security Firm

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The conflict in Ukraine is not as profitable for private military companies (PMCs) compared to work opportunities in other combat zones, Tony Schiena, chairman of the US-based intelligence and security advisory firm MOSAIC, told Sputnik.

"The war in Ukraine has not translated into the kind of profitable opportunity for private military companies (PMCs) that one might expect in other conflict zones," Schiena said. "Typically, in regions where PMCs are incorporated into national defense strategies, they benefit from clear budgetary allocations and government contracts. However, in Ukraine, the situation deviates from this model."

Schiena said that private contractors in Ukraine are mostly operating independently from the Ukrainian government as there is currently no dedicated budget for foreign military companies within the Ukrainian military budget.

Since opportunities for PMCs in Ukraine rely on private investments, they are susceptible to the fluctuations and uncertainties of private financial backing, influenced by varying political and economic interests, the former South African intelligence operative said.

However, the demand for private military contractors could change with the recent proposed legislative changes advocating for the creation of international defense companies in Ukraine, Schiena said.

"Looking forward, the role of PMCs could expand temporarily to fill gaps in manpower ahead of the anticipated summer offensive, as Ukraine works to bolster its military ranks," Schiena said.

"However, it remains unclear whether the Ukrainian government has the financial resources to sustain such contracts extensively."

The proposed legislation in Ukraine could potentially formalize the role of PMCs and align their activities more closely with national security objectives and potentially stabilize their financial prospects within the country, he said.

Schiena noted that most private military contractors operating in Ukraine are not primarily engaged in direct combat on the frontline, but they have played key roles in non-combat operations in the country, such as evacuating families from danger zones.

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Trump Says Will Break 'Deep State Grip' on Democracy for Good

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said on Sunday that he will break the "deep state grip" on the country's democracy once and for all.

"When I return to the White House, we will break the deep state grip on our democracy once and for all. I did far more than any other president in that regard," Trump said at the 2024 Libertarian National Convention in Washington DC.

During his speech, Trump called on the Libertarians to either nominate him or support him in the upcoming elections.

The Libertarian Party says it is opposed to any government interference in personal, family and business decisions. The party received approximately 1% of the votes in the 2020 US presidential election and 3% in the 2016 race.

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Trump Returns to Washington to Speak at Libertarian National Convention

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump is returning to Washington, DC on Saturday where he is expected to address the 2024 Libertarian National Convention at the Washington Hilton, while hundreds of people started arriving at the venue hours before the event amid the enhanced security measures.

While many Libertarians support neither of the two front runners in the upcoming November presidential election — incumbent US President Joe Biden or Trump — many of the arriving guests are seen wearing Make America Great Again hats and t-shirts.

The hall where the former American leader is set to give a speech, has been fenced and there is enhanced police and security presence both inside and outside the venue. However, the atmosphere is very friendly and people look happy and excited. Dozens of media representatives are also at the hotel to cover the speech.

Outside the hotel in the heat there is a single protester. Bob Kunst, 81, is a prominent US activist who came all the way from Miami Beach and has been standing outside the venue for at least six hours ahead of the expected Trump's speech. Kunst told Sputnik that he is a registered democrat, however, he has come to Washington, DC to express his support for ex-US President Donald Trump.

"I believe that the country is in a very serious trouble ... We are in deep trouble economically, we are divided as a country ... I am very disappointed that the Democratic Party keeps doing this damage," Kunst said, adding that with Biden in office for another four years the United States is "not going to survive."

Kunst is holding the sign reading "Trump or WWII."

"The more he [Biden] says we don't want a war, the more we get into a wider war. Everything that Biden is doing is leading us further to this territory of mass division, hysteria, crisis and all our enemies are looking at how they can take advantage. Our enemies are all looking at us saying, have you lost your mind?" he said.

The country is also in a very dangerous situation with open borders, the protester added.

"We are going to something, God forbid, before the election, and I am here to support the President. I look at the Democratic Party and say, 'look at all the damage that you have done to prevent Trump from being a candidate'," he said.

Trump's speech on Saturday followed the speech by independent presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. on Friday.

Earlier this month, Kennedy challenged Trump to a debate at the Libertarian Party's national convention.

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.

The Libertarian Party says it is opposed to any government interference in personal, family and business decisions. The party received approximately 1% of the votes in the 2020 US presidential election and 3% in the 2016 race.

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Swiss-Hosted Ukraine Peace Summit Pointless Without Moscow - Russian Mission to UN

UNITED NATIONS, May 25 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The upcoming Switzerland-hosted peace conference on Ukraine will bring no viable results since Russia is not participating in it, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy told Sputnik on Friday.

"It's sort of a questionable event, to put it mildly, and its added value is almost non-existent," Polyanskiy said. "A lot of countries actually share this position of ours, saying that the true peace conference should have both Russia and Ukraine."

The diplomat said that for the conference to become credible, it would also have to discuss other topics and not only what Zelenskyy wants to cover.

According to Polyanskiy, emphasis should be given to the root causes of the conflict and the security of the whole of Europe.

Switzerland will host a high-level conference on Ukrainian peace at the Buergerstock resort outside of Lucerne from June 15-16. More than 160 delegations from around the world have been invited to attend the event. Russia is not on the guest list. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said the peace conference is clearly not result-oriented, as it is impossible to have effective talks on Ukraine without Russia's participation.

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Zelenskyy 'Peace Formula' Unrealistic Ultimatum - Russian Mission to UN

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"Also, the only platform that the Kiev regime would like the others to discuss would be the so-called Zelenskyy formula, which is absolutely unrealistic and which is based on his wishful thinking that Ukraine is capable of inflicting defeat on Russia. So it's kind of an ultimatum and there is not a single reason in the world for anybody to discuss this ultimatum, especially for us," Polyanskiy said.

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Russia, Ukraine 'Very Far' From Peace Talks - Mission to UN

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"So far, we're very far from any practical move towards negotiations. The reasons are quite clear. First of all, the Kiev regime and the leader of the Kiev regime forbids himself to enter into any negotiations with Russia," Polyanskiy said.

The Russian diplomat noted that Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whose term in office expired on May 20, had adopted a decree at the end of 2022 to not enter peace negotiations with Russia.

In addition, there is the issue of legitimacy regarding Zelenskyy, who continues to be in power without having held elections as required, in case of signing any official documents, Polyanskiy said.

Ukraine was due to hold a presidential election on March 31 but it was called off allegedly because of the martial law and general mobilization that are in effect. Zelenskyy said now was not the right time to hold elections.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Ukraine's political and legal systems themselves should answer the question of Zelenskyy's legitimacy after his term expires.

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Israel Undermines Efforts to Secure Release of Hostages Held by Hamas - Russian UN Mission

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"And it's absolutely clear that it hasn't fulfilled any of the goals of its operation, which were declared by Prime Minister Netanyahu, and what is especially worrying is that the lives of the hostages taken by Hamas are in clear danger and Israel is not doing anything actually to resolve this issue," Polyanskiy said. "It aggravates the issue and complicates the efforts of mediators."

Moreover, the Security Council has been paralyzed due to the United States' vetoes on Gaza

resolutions in an effort to "save" its ally, the Russian diplomat added.

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US Unwilling to Pressure Israel to Stop Operations in Gaza - Russia's UN Mission

UNITED NATIONS, May 25 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The United States is not willing to pressure Israel to stop its military operations but is rather covering up their actions in Gaza, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy told Sputnik.

"The main problem is that the United States, which is the only country that is able to press Israel for anything, is not willing to do so," Polyanskiy said. "It's quite clear that they are covering [up] Israel. We are seeing that due to this, Washington's position has become more vulnerable and uncomfortable.

Polyanskiy cited pro-Palestinian student protests sweeping through the West.

"But they [the US] are trying to win the time [for Israel to proceed with their operations]," the diplomat said.

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UNSC Vote on Russian Resolution Banning Space Weapons Shows West 'Isolated'- Mission

UNITED NATIONS, May 25 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The results of the vote on a Russian-drafted UN Security Council resolution to ban weapons in outer space highlight the West's isolation, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy told Sputnik.

On Monday, the UN Security Council failed to adopt the draft resolution on preventing an arms race in space. It received seven votes in favor (Algeria, China, Ecuador, Guyana, Mozambique, Russia, and Sierra Leone), seven votes against (France, Japan, Malta, South Korea, Slovenia, the UK, and the US), and one abstention (Switzerland).

"The results of the voting indicated that the Western countries are in fact isolated. Yes, they are in big numbers in the Security Council, there were seven votes against and this reflects the poor composition of the Security Council and the lack of developing countries with independent policies and positions," Polyanskiy said.

The council was split "along the lines that are very much uncomfortable to our Western colleagues," Polyanskiy observed.

"We believe that we achieved our results, we showed that there is a big support for prevention of an arms race in outer space. So we kind of reinvigorated this issue. We still believe that the best platform for this would be the First Committee and the Conference on Disarmament and other disarmament forums," the diplomat added.

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Russia 'Astonished' After US, Japan Reject Ban on Any Weapons in Space - Mission to UN

UNITED NATIONS, May 25 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Russia is surprised that the United States and Japan blocked Moscow's attempt to expand the ban on the placement of the weapons of mass destruction in outer space to all types of weapons, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy told Sputnik.

In April, Russia blocked a US-Japanese draft UNSC resolution urging against the weapons of mass destruction in outer space after a Russian-Chinese amendment to extend the ban to any weapons was rejected in a 7-7 vote with one abstention.

"We're very much astonished by the position of the United States and Japan to reject any kind of reference to non-placement of any weapons into outer space to prevent arms race in outer space, which would be in our eyes a legitimate issue to be discussed," Polyanskiy said.

Russia from the outset had been critical of bringing the issue to the Security Council, as such matters should be addressed by forums that include all members of the United Nations, Polyanskiy recalled.

With their draft resolution, the US and Japan wanted "to kind of gain political profits from what they believe was exposing Russia's alleged ambitions and plans" in outer space, the diplomat said.

On Monday, the US and six other UN Security Council Council members voted against a Russia-drafted resolution on the non-deployment of weapons in space, saying their concerns were not addressed in the document.

Russian state space corporation Roscosmos expressed concern over the aspiration of some Western nations to turn space into a potential battlefield after the Moscow-drafted resolution had failed in the UN Security Council.

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Hard to Revive US-Russia Intra-Parliamentary Talks as Congress Very Political - Massie

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Reviving an intra-parliamentary dialogue between Russia and the United States would be hard to do given that Congress is very political, US Congressman Thomas Massie told Sputnik on Friday.

"It's hard to do that because Congress is very political and anybody who goes out on a limb to do that will be demonized by the media in the United States," Massie said on the sidelines of the 2024 Libertarian National Convention. "Also, foreign policy is usually, with the exception of funding, the domain of the executive branch."

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Russian President Vladimir Putin said Ukraine's political and legal systems themselves should answer the question of Zelenskyy's legitimacy after his term expires.

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US Awards Boeing \$7.4Bln to Upgrade JDAMs As Ukraine Struggles With Russian Jamming Tech

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department awarded Boeing a \$7.4 billion contract to upgrade its Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAMs) kits, the Pentagon said in a press release.

US media reported that Ukrainian officials have been urging US arms manufacturers to upgrade their guidance systems on weapons supplied to Ukraine, as over the past several months they have become increasingly ineffective on the battlefield against advanced Russian jamming technology.

"The Boeing Co., doing business as Boeing Defense Space and Security, St. Louis, Missouri, was awarded a \$7,479,640,772 fixed-price-incentive-fee, firm-fixed-price, indefinite-delivery/indefinite-quantity contract action for Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM)," the release said on Friday. "This contract provides for JDAM tail kits, spares, repairs, technical and Laser Joint Direct Attack Munition sensor kits."

The release noted that this work is expected to be completed by February 29, 2030.

According to media reports, Russia has been able to jam guidance systems on Western weapons such as the Excalibur GPS-guided artillery shells and the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS).

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US Military Pays University of Maryland \$500Mln For Security, AI Research - Pentagon

WASHINGTON May 25 (Sputnik) - The US military is paying the University of Maryland half a billion dollars to continue operating its research laboratory for intelligence and security, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"The University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, is awarded a ...contract ...valued at \$500 million," the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

The purpose of the contract from the Washington Headquarters Agency (WHA) is to operate the University of Maryland Applied Research Laboratory for Intelligence and Security University Affiliated Research Center, the release explained.

"The University of Maryland will execute activities consistent with the University Affiliated Research Center mission and provide essential research and development capabilities in human and social systems [and] applied artificial intelligence," the Defense Department said.

The research will also be extended into the fields of automation, advanced computing, and emerging technologies for a wide variety of security and intelligence applications, the Defense Department added.

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Musk Says Russia 'Succeeded' in Jamming Each Comms System Used By Ukraine, 'Huge Problem'

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - SpaceX founder Elon Musk said Russia has succeeded in jamming every communications system used by Ukraine except his Starlink internet service, but it's costing him significant resources to protect it.

"SpaceX is spending significant resources combating Russian jamming efforts," Musk said via X on Friday. "This is a tough problem. They have succeeded in shutting down every communications system, except Starlink."

However, the New York Times reported, citing Ukrainian officials, that Russia has deployed advanced technology that has disrupted Ukraine's use of the Starlink service on the battlefield.

Moreover, the Washington Post reported that Russia has also been able to jam guidance systems of modern Western weapons such as the Excalibur GPS-guided artillery shells and the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, or HIMARS.

The report said Ukrainian officials are pressing the US Defense Department to address this issue by having US arms manufacturers upgrade these weapons systems to overcome Russian jamming.

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Blinken Discusses Ukraine, China With German Counterpart Baerbock - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and reaffirmed their countries' support for Ukraine while

also discussing the challenge posed by China, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

"Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Baerbock reaffirmed support for Ukraine's fight against Russia's aggression and discussed challenges posed by the People's Republic of China, including the PRC's support for Russia's defense industrial base," Miller said in a statement on Friday.

The two officials also discussed ongoing efforts to achieve a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip that would also secure the release of hostages and facilitate increased deliveries of much needed humanitarian aid into the Palestinian enclave, the statement said.

Blinken and Baerbock agreed on the importance of preventing an escalation of the conflict in the Middle East and the threat posed by Iran, the statement added.

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Assange Lawyer Says No Updates on Biden Consideration to End Prosecution, Case Proceeding

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Barry Pollack, the lawyer who represents Julian Assange in the United States, told Sputnik that there has been no progress on US President Joe Biden's consideration to end the prosecution against his client and the US Justice Department has continued to proceed with its extradition request.

In April, Biden told reporters that he was considering Australia's request to drop the prosecution against Assange.

"No news here in the [United] States. The Justice Department is proceeding with its extradition request," Pollack said on Friday.

Earlier this week, the UK High Court of Justice in London ruled that Assange will be allowed to appeal his extradition to the United States.

Polack said the prosecutor and the defense teams submitted filings to the UK court on Friday regarding Assange's appeal not to be extradited to the United States. Polack deferred any other questions for details in the case to Assange's UK legal defense team.

In March, the London High Court asked the US government to provide assurances that Assange would be able to claim the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which guarantees freedoms of speech, press, religion, assembly and the right to petition the government for redress of grievances.

The UK court also asked for assurances that Assange would not be prejudiced at his trial due to his nationality and that he would not face the death penalty.

In mid-April, the US government provided minimal assurances demanded by the UK court to proceed with the case.

Assange, an Australian citizen, was transferred to London's high-security Belmarsh prison in April 2019 on bail breach charges.

In the United States, he faces prosecution under the Espionage Act for obtaining and disclosing classified information that shed light on numerous war crimes and human rights violations committed by US troops during the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

If convicted, Assange could face up to 175 years in prison. One of the last means of preventing his transfer to the US may be an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights. Assange lost his previous appeal at the UK High Court last June.

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US Congressman Massie Says Opposes Sending More Money to Ukraine Unless It Brings Peace

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Thomas Massie told Sputnik on Friday that he opposes the US government sending more money to Ukraine unless such assistance achieves peace.

"I told our own speaker - if you want to send \$60 billion and the goal is to achieve some kind of peace, I might be compelled to vote for it. But I'm not voting for \$60 billion that will then only necessitate another \$60 billion," Massie said on the sidelines of the 2024 Libertarian National Convention.

Massie also said that both sides to the conflict in Ukraine will eventually run out of people if fighting continues.

"I think it's immoral to grind up people in this war on both sides," Massie added.

Earlier on Friday, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken announced that the United States was providing a new weapons package for Ukraine worth \$275 million.

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

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

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

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Kennedy Says Would Pardon Snowden, Drop Charges Against Assange on 1st Day as US President

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Independent US presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said during a speech at the 2024 Libertarian National Convention that he would pardon whistleblower Edward Snowden and drop criminal charges against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange on his first day in office.

"On my first day in office, I'm going to pardon Edward Snowden and I'm going to drop charges — all charges — against Julian Assange," Kennedy said on Friday.

Assange should be celebrated as a hero, Kennedy said. There ought to be monuments in Washington to both Assange and Snowden, Kennedy said.

Earlier this week, the United Kingdom's High Court of Justice granted Assange's application for

the right to challenge attempts to extradite him to the United States, where he faces prosecution under the Espionage Act for obtaining and disclosing classified information that revealed war crimes and human rights violations by US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Snowden lives in exile in Russia, after having leaked classified information about US surveillance programs, for which he was likewise charged with violating the Espionage Act.

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US Freezing Foreign Assets 'Very Short-Sighted' - Congressman Massie

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - The US government freezing of foreign assets, including those of Russia, is a very short-sighted policy and sends a message to the international community that the United States may stop honoring transactions, US Congressman Thomas Massie told Sputnik on Friday.

"I think it's very short sighted of our government to freeze for instance, Treasury assets, that are held by other countries, such as Russia, because it sends a message to the world that if you buy our debt, then we may not honor the transaction at some point," Massie said on the sidelines of the 2024 Libertarian National Convention.

Massie also said US moves to freeze foreign assets are "extremely dangerous" because they will increase the price that Washington has to pay to finance its debt.

"I'm sure that our closest allies will still trust that we'll be good on our word, but other sovereign funds will have a diminished appetite for financing our debt," Massie said. "So, I think it's very short-sighted of us to do that."

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Biden-Putin Talks Could Help Solve Ukraine Conflict - US Congressman Massie

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden could help solve the conflict in Ukraine, and even lower-level discussions between top diplomats could help achieve progress, US Congressman Thomas Massie told Sputnik on Friday.

"I think it could help," Massie said when asked whether talks between Biden and Putin could help solve the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. "Although, even lower-level negotiations would help as well, I think."

When asked at what level such discussion should be held, Massie said, "Maybe at the secretary of state level, for instance."

Massie expressed his view that it is "wrong" that communications between the US and Russia are limited.

"I think there should be talks," he said.

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us congressman massie tells sputnik talks between biden and Putin, or even lower level negotiations could help resolve ukraine crisis

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) -

ISAREL MILITARY OPERATION IN GAZA

- * The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has ordered Israel to stop its military operation in Rafah, ICJ President Nawaf Salam said on Friday.
- * Israel has not carried out actions in Rafah that could create conditions for the concrete or partial destruction of the Palestinian civilian population, the Israeli Foreign Ministry said.
- * US President Joe Biden will send a senior team to Cairo, Egypt, next week to discuss the potential reopening of the Rafah border crossing and aid into the Gaza Strip, the White House said.

RUSSIAN FROZEN ASSETS

- * Canadian Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland said on Friday that she was optimistic about the Group of Seven (G7) member states reaching an agreement on seizing Russian frozen assets and noted Ottawa is ready to step up to directly provide funding to Ukraine using the seized funds.
- * The finance ministers of the G7 countries will outline the plan on the use of the profits from Russian frozen assets to support Ukraine in the communique of the upcoming meeting in Italy, Bloomberg reported, citing the draft document.
- * The European Union plans to use profits from frozen Russian assets to pay for the purchase of weapons for Ukraine in Europe and beyond its borders as well as for arms production in Ukraine, an EU official told reporters.
- * US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen discussed frozen Russian assets during her meetings in Italy with European Commissioner for the Economy Paolo Gentiloni and Italian Minister of Economy and Finance Giancarlo Giorgetti, the Department of the Treasury said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

- * Russia believes Volodymyr Zelenskyy's legitimacy as Ukrainian president is over, President Vladimir Putin said on Friday.
- * Russia stands ready to continue negotiations with Ukraine, but only based on the agreements that have already been reached in Turkey and Belarus, Putin said.
- * The United States is providing a new weapons package for Ukraine worth \$275 million to include additional high-mobility artillery rocket system (HIMARS) ammunition and 155mm

artillery rounds, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

* The United States does not anticipate that Ukraine will be formally invited to join NATO during the alliance's upcoming summit in July, US Assistant Secretary of State James O'Brien said.

PUTIN-LUKASHENKO TALKS

* Belarus will become the tenth member state of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) at the summit in Astana in July, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Friday.

* Trade and investment between Russia and Belarus are protected from the influence of third countries, as over 90% of mutual trade is made in national currencies, Putin said.

* Putin said he had explored opportunities for creating a common defense zone with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.

* Lukashenko described the level of cooperation with Russia as "unprecedented," adding that no problem seemed entirely insurmountable.

IRANIAN PRESIDENT DEATH

* The United States carries responsibility for the helicopter crash that killed Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian and other officials, former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Mohsen Rezaee said on Friday.

* Those accompanying Raisi on his trip and used Russian helicopters traveled without problems, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.

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US Approves Possible \$950Mln Sale of Black Hawk Helicopters to Brazil - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - The US State Department approved a possible \$950 million sale of 12 Black Hawk helicopters and related equipment for Brazil, the US Department of Defense said on Friday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Brazil of UH-60M Black Hawk Helicopters and related elements of logistics and program support for an estimated cost up to \$950 million, which includes initial acquisition of \$450 million in Major Defense Equipment, and up to \$500 million in other equipment and services," the Defense Department said in a press release.

The release noted that Brazil requested to buy 12 UH-60M Black Hawk helicopters, among other equipment.

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Peace Talks in Switzerland Meaningless Without Russia at Table- Congressman Massie

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - There should be some effort made to bring both Ukraine and Russia to the upcoming peace conference in Switzerland as it is hard to imagine

negotiations without Russia, US Congressman Thomas Massie told Sputnik on Friday.

"This sounds kind of hard to negotiate a peace if they don't have Russia at the table. So I think there should be some effort to have Ukraine and Russia there," Massie said on the sidelines of the 2024 Libertarian National Convention.

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Support For Sending Weapons to Ukraine Weakening in US Congress - Congressman Massie

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - US lawmakers are showing dwindling support for sending military aid to Ukraine each time the matter comes to a vote, US Congressman Thomas Massie told Sputnik on Friday

"The support for sending weapons to Ukraine is weakening in the US Congress, as you can see with each subsequent vote," Massie said on the sidelines of the 2024 Libertarian National Convention.

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US Should Quit Sending Money to Ukraine, Try to Negotiate Peace - Congressman Massie

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - The United States should stop sending money to Ukraine and attempt to negotiate peace as soon as possible, US Congressman Thomas Massie told Sputnik on Friday.

"I think we should quit sending money there. I think we should try to negotiate peace as soon as possible," Massie said on the sidelines of the 2024 Libertarian National Convention.

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congressman massie tells sputnik he thinks US should quit sending money to ukraine and try to negotiate pace as soon as possible

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Oil Posts Significant Weekly Loss on Friday Despite Snapping 4-Day Loss

NEW YORK, May 24 (Sputnik) - Oil prices posted their biggest weekly decline since late April despite the US and UK crude markets snapping four straight days of losses.

Friday's rebound came on the back of expectations that oil producer alliance OPEC+ will provide price support to crude by reaffirming at its meeting next week that it will extend output

cuts. But the average gain of 1% in the two crude benchmarks followed by oil traders was not enough to override losses that had set in since the week began.

July, the front-month futures contract for US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) settled Friday's session at \$77.72 per barrel, up 85 cents, or 1.4%. For the week, WTI lost \$2.34 or 2.9% - the most since the final week of April, when it finished with a 6.9% drop.

UK-origin Brent crude's July contract settled at \$82.12 per barrel, up 76 cents, or 0.9%, on the day. Brent finished the week down \$1.86, or 2.2% - the biggest weekly decline since a 7.3% slump in the final week of April.

Oil traders are awaiting a June 2 OPEC+ meeting that is expected to reinforce the alliance's plan to cut 2.2 million barrels per day in output through September. OPEC+ groups the 13-member Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries with ten other oil producing nations steered by Russia.

Oil prices were weighed this week by an unexpected build in US crude stockpiles that raised questions about demand in the run-up to summer.

The US Energy Information Administration said domestic crude balances rose by 1.825 million barrels during the week that ended on May 17, after a prior weekly draw of 2.508 million. Energy analysts on Wall Street had anticipated a drop of 2.4 million barrels instead.

Demand for crude aside, another concern for oil traders has been inflation and the impact that could have on the spending of Americans, which could again slow fuel consumption.

With US interest rates already at two-decade highs, Federal Reserve policy makers have discussed the likelihood of an even tighter monetary policy should US inflation remain high, the central bank revealed in its latest policy meeting minutes published on Wednesday.

The Fed intends to bring US interest rates down from their highest levels since 2002 but is wary of making cuts when inflation is still stronger than its 2% per year target.

The US Consumer Price Index (CPI), a key inflation indicator, went from an annualized growth of 3.1% in January to 3.2% in February and 3.5% in March, before retreating to 3.4% in April.

The Fed hiked interest rates 11 times, bringing them to a range of between 5.25% and 5.5%, versus the pre-pandemic range of between zero and 0.25%. The current range of rates has been unchanged since July 2023 due to uncertainties in the inflation outlook.

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'No Change' to Austin's Travel Plans as Result of His Medical Procedure - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's medical procedure on Friday evening will have no impact on his plans to travel to Singapore, Cambodia and France next week, a US Defense Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

Earlier on Friday, the Defense Department said Austin would undergo a scheduled, minimally invasive and non-surgical procedure related to his previous bladder issue.

"No change," the spokesperson said when asked if Austin's medical procedure would impact his travel plans.

Austin is scheduled to meet his Chinese counterpart Admiral Dong Jun on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore held May 31 to June 2. He is also scheduled to travel to

France and Cambodia after his visit to Singapore.

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Austin Temporarily Transfers His Duties Ahead of Scheduled Medical Procedure - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin temporarily transferred his duties to Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks ahead of a scheduled medical procedure later on Friday, Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said.

"The Secretary has determined he will be temporarily unable to perform his functions and duties during the procedure, so Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks will assume the functions and duties of the Secretary of Defense and serve as the Acting Secretary of Defense," Ryder said.

The current medical issue has no effect on Austin's previous cancer treatment, RydeR added. Earlier on Friday, the Pentagon announced that Austin is expected to travel to Singapore next week.

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Biden Reiterates Call for Police Reform on Anniversary of George Floyd's Death

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Friday repeated his call for Congress to pass policing reform measures ahead of the fourth anniversary of George Floyd's murder by a police officer.

"George Floyd should be alive today. His murder shook the conscience of our nation and reminded us that our country has never fully lived up to its highest ideal of fair and impartial justice for all under the law," Biden said in a statement. "I will continue to urge Congress to send the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which ensures law enforcement accountability, to my desk."

Biden's statement was similar to one he issued on October 14, 2023 to mark what would have been Floyd's 50th birthday.

He noted that Floyd's death sparked "one of the largest modern civil rights movements" in US history and pledged to continue to work to build public trust and safety.

Floyd died in May 2020 after Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for nine minutes during an arrest. Chauvin was convicted of murder and manslaughter and sentenced to over 22 years in prison. The other three officers involved were also convicted of federal civil rights violations.

Floyd's death sparked mass protests against police violence and racial injustice across the United States.

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Defense Investments 'Extremely Well Received' by US Allies – Trudeau on Congressmen Letter

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) – The defense investments Canada has made in its latest budget have been “extremely well received” by the United States and allies around the world, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in response to a letter US lawmakers sent him urging Ottawa to meet its NATO financial commitments.

On Thursday, a bipartisan group of 23 US lawmakers urged Trudeau to uphold Ottawa's commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defense in order to ensure the strength of the NATO alliance.

The lawmakers said that at the upcoming NATO Summit in Washington, the US will expect all non-compliant member states to present a plan on how they intend to reach the 2% benchmark as soon as possible.

“We are now on track to reaching over 1.76% of GDP, which is a record high for Canada ... Our recent budget's massive investments in Arctic safety and security, recognizing NATO's western and northern flank is Canada's Arctic, are all extremely well received by the Americans and by allies around the world,” Trudeau said.

The Canadian government recognizes that more remains to be done in matters of defense but is committed to seriously addressing the issue of ensuring servicemen have the required equipment, Trudeau continued.

In mid-April, the Ministry of National Defense released its defense policy update "Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defense." Ottawa plans to invest C\$8.1 billion (\$6 billion) over the next five years, and C\$73 billion over the next 20 years.

The increased spending would bring the country's defense budget to 1.76% of its GDP by 2029-2030.

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Trudeau Says Expects Everyone to Abide by UN Court's Ruling on Rafah

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - Rulings made by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) are binding and Canada expects everyone to adhere to them as a matter of international law, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday, after the top UN court ordered Israel to immediately stop its incursion in Rafah.

"The ICJ's proposals are binding, and we expect everyone to follow them as a matter of international law," Trudeau said during a news conference.

There must be an immediate ceasefire, Hamas needs to lay down its arms and release its hostages, just as Israel needs to refrain from pursuing military operations in Rafah and avoid any sort of escalation, Trudeau added.

The prime minister highlighted the "real" dangers of starvation and famine in the Palestinian enclave. Trudeau further called for more and larger quantities of assistance to get in to address a "horrific" humanitarian catastrophe.

"We need to get more aid in. The ICJ's latest proposed measures go exactly in that direction," he said.

Earlier in the day, ICJ President Nawaf Salam said that Israel must stop its military operation in the city of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. It also must ensure unimpeded access to the enclave for the missions that are investigating the allegations of genocide, the judge added.

Dmitry Gendelman, an adviser to the Israeli prime minister, said that nothing in the world would make Israel abide by The Hague court's order because this would mean a "public suicide" for Israel.

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US Announces \$275Mln Weapons Package for Ukraine, Including HIMARS Ammunition - Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is providing a new weapons package for Ukraine worth \$275 million to include additional high-mobility artillery rocket system (HIMARS) ammunition and 155mm artillery rounds, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced on Friday.

"The United States is announcing today a significant new drawdown of weapons and equipment for Ukraine," Blinken said in a statement. "This \$275 million package, which is part of our efforts to help Ukraine repel Russia's assault near Kharkiv, contains urgently needed capabilities including: ammunition for HIMARS; 155mm and 105mm artillery rounds."

The new package also includes tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided missiles; Javelin and AT-4 anti-armor systems; precision aerial munitions; small arms and additional rounds of ammunition and grenades; demolitions munitions; anti-armor mines; tactical vehicles; body armor; chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear protective equipment; and other equipment.

Blinken confirmed that US assistance from previous packages has already been delivered to the front lines in Ukraine.

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assistance from previous aid packages already on front lines in Ukraine, US will move new aid as quickly as possible - Blinken

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Austin to Meet Chinese Counterpart During Shangri-La Dialogue Next Week - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will meet his Chinese counterpart Admiral Dong Jun on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore next week, the Defense Department said on Friday.

"As part of his tenth official visit to the Indo-Pacific region, Secretary Austin will deliver plenary remarks at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore...He is also planning to meet bilaterally with other counterparts from across the Indo-Pacific region and with Admiral Dong Jun, Minister of National Defense of the People's Republic of China (PRC), following their April 16 discussion via video teleconference," the Defense Department said in a press release.

Austin is also scheduled to travel to France and Cambodia after his visit to Singapore, the release added.

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NASA Sets June 1 for Crewed Starliner Flight Despite Ongoing Helium Leak - Officials

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - NASA has worked through the latest problems that have repeatedly postponed the first crewed flight of the Boeing CST-100 Starliner to the International Space Station (ISS) and has now set June 1 as the next date for its planned launch, the space agency said on Friday.

"The agency is working toward a launch at 12:25 pm, Saturday, June 1, for the first crewed flight of Boeing's Starliner spacecraft to the International Space Station as part of the agency's Commercial Crew Program," NASA said in a statement.

NASA and United Launch Alliance (ULA) engineers and technicians have contained and are monitoring a helium leak on a service module on the Starliner after replacing a valve and it poses no significant risk.

Boeing Vice President Mark Nappi said the company can manage the leak so it is not really a safety flight issue.

Other launch opportunities are available on Sunday, June 2; Wednesday, June 5; and Thursday, June 6, according to NASA.

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US State Dept. Says Aware of Reports Americans Killed in Haiti, Ready to Assist

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - The US State Department is aware of reports that two Americans were killed in an ambush by gangs in Haiti on Thursday and is prepared to provide consular assistance to address the incident, a spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik on Friday.

"We are aware of the reports of the deaths of US citizens in Haiti," the spokesperson said. "We offer our sincerest condolences to the family on their loss. We stand ready to provide all appropriate consular assistance."

Ben Baker, a representative in the legislature of the state of Missouri, said it was his daughter

and son-in-law, Natalie and Davy Lloyd, who were killed by the Haitian gangs.

The couple were part of the US-based group Missions in Haiti, Inc. The group's Haitian director, Jude Montis, was also killed in the ambush.

The missionary group said in a statement on Facebook (banned in Russia) on Thursday that the missionaries were confronted by the Haitian gang as they were leaving a local church.

The gangs returned to the couple's house, beat Davy Lloyd, and robbed them of their belongings, including their trucks, the group said. Another gang arrived to allegedly try to help the couple, but the two gangs got into a violent dispute that led to the death of the three missionaries, according to the group.

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

On February 29, gang violence erupted in the downtown area of Port-au-Prince while Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry was visiting Kenya to seek an agreement for 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. They took control over many parts of the city and stormed Haiti's largest prison, freeing an unconfirmed number of inmates. The Haitian government declared a state of emergency in the capital region. On March 11, Henry announced that he would resign when a transitional presidential council was created.

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Biden to Send Team to Cairo for Discussions on Gaza Aid, Rafah Crossing - White House

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will send a senior team to Cairo, Egypt, next week to discuss reopening the Rafah border crossing and aid to the Gaza Strip, the White House said on Friday.

"President Biden also expressed his full commitment to support efforts to reopen the Rafah crossing with arrangements acceptable to both Egypt and Israel and agreed to send a senior team to Cairo next week for further discussions," the White House said in a statement.

Earlier on Friday, Biden spoke with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to discuss ongoing efforts to secure the release of hostages and address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the statement added.

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UN Chief on ICJ Ruling on Rafah Offensive: Decisions Are Binding

UNITED NATIONS, May 24 (Sputnik) - Decisions of the International Court of Justice are binding, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday, after the ICJ ordered that Israel stop its invasion of Rafah.

"The Secretary-General recalls that, pursuant to the Charter and to the Statute of the Court, decisions of the Court are binding and trusts that the parties will duly comply with the Order from the Court," his office said in a statement.

In accordance with the Statute of the Court, the secretary-general will promptly transmit the notice of the provisional measures ordered by the court to the Security Council, the statement added.

Earlier in the day, ICJ President Nawaf Salam said that Israel must stop its military operation in the city of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. It also must ensure unimpeded access to the enclave for the missions that are investigating the allegations of genocide, the judge added.

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US Became Much More Dangerous Place Than Under Trump - Congressman

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has become a much more dangerous place under the Biden administration than it was under the Trump administration, US Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart said on Friday.

"When you have an administration this incompetent that actually rewards and appeases our enemies and even does things like we saw here at Miami International Airport, it should be no surprise that the world is in flames, and the United States is a much more dangerous place than it was under the administration of President [Donald] Trump," Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart told reporters.

Earlier on Friday, Diaz-Balart along with Senator Rick Scott and Congressman Carlos Gimenez organized a press conference at the Miami International Airport to denounce the Biden administration's decision to allow Cuban officials to tour Transportation Security Administration facilities at the airport earlier this week.

Diaz-Balart said there could be nothing more absurd, stupid, reckless and dangerous than such actions by the Biden administration.

According to media reports, five members of the Cuban government spent five hours at the Miami International Airport on Monday to tour two security areas, including checkpoint and baggage screening areas.

The tour took place after the Biden administration last week removed Cuba from its short list of countries it alleges do not fully cooperate with the United States on counterterrorism efforts while leaving the country on the US list of the countries designated as state sponsors of terrorism.

The move caused an outrage among Republican lawmakers who slammed the decision as delusional.

Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel called on the United States to go further and remove Cuba from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Cuba was first added to the list of state sponsors of terrorism by the State Department in 1982 during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. The US government removed Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism during the Obama administration in 2015 as part of efforts to normalize relations. However, the island nation was re-added to the list during the Trump

administration when the United States accused Cuba of harboring American fugitives and Colombian rebels.

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Canada Ready to Step Up, Give Direct Financing to Ukraine Using Russian Assets - Freeland

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-9)

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - Canadian Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland said on Friday that she was optimistic the Group of Seven (G7) would reach an agreement on using the frozen Russian assets in the West and emphasized that Ottawa was ready to step up and directly provide funding to Ukraine from the frozen assets.

"Canada is prepared to be one of the countries that will step up as part of this collective agreement and directly provide financing to Ukraine," Freeland said.

Freeland pointed out that Canada has shared its willingness to use the frozen Russian funds with its US and European partners, and discussed the matter directly with the Ukrainian finance minister and prime minister earlier this week.

Asked how close the G7 was to reach an agreement, Freeland expressed optimism that a deal would be reached if the member states remain collectively committed to Ukraine's victory.

"The approach that is immediately under discussion is ... an approach that would allow us as a group of allies to bring forward the interest that is accruing on the frozen assets, to bring it forward and to immediately provide to Ukraine a very significant sum of money backed by the future interest payments on those Russian assets," Freeland said.

Canada has introduced amendments to its legislation after Russia started its special military operation in Ukraine in 2022, which gave it the tools to confiscate Russia's frozen assets.

The G7, led by the United States and the European Union, have been discussing ways to confiscate the estimated \$300 billion worth of Russian central bank assets frozen in Western accounts and allegedly use them to aid Ukraine.

The issue is expected to be discussed at the G7 summit in the Italian region of Apulia from June 13-15.

The Kremlin has maintained that any attempts to confiscate Russian assets amounts to theft and is an act in violation of international law.

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Deputy US Secretary of State Will Meet With NATO, EU Official in Belgium - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell will travel to Belgium on May 28-29 for meetings with NATO, EU and Belgian government officials, the US State Department said on Friday.

"[Campbell's] visit will underscore the strength and unity of the transatlantic partnership and its

critical role in global security and prosperity," the State Department said in a statement.

Campbell will address NATO allies at a North Atlantic Council meeting and discuss progress towards the Washington Summit with NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoana, the statement said.

Campbell will also meet with European External Action Service Secretary General Stefano Sannino to discuss further US-EU partnership in addressing shared challenges in Europe, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific, the statement said.

Moreover, Campbell will meet with senior Belgian government officials to discuss bilateral and regional cooperation, including support for Ukraine and holding Russia accountable, the statement said.

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US Dollar Still Rules World Trade, Likely to Maintain That Position - Waller

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - The US dollar still rules world trade and finance and the situation is likely to stay that way in the near future, Federal Reserve Governor Christopher Waller said on Friday.

Waller made the comment as the so-called BRICS group of countries continues to work to form a new common payment in a challenge to the US currency's hegemony.

"Notwithstanding the drumbeat of warnings from some that the US dollar is in danger of losing its primacy in global trade and finance, it remains by a very large margin the world's reserve currency," Waller said at the Reykjavik Economic Conference in Iceland.

BRICS, founded by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, wants to replace the dollar with a so-called R5 common payment mode that would represent the five currencies used by its founding members.

BRICS reportedly plans to tie the real, ruble, rupee, renminbi and rand to a new multilateral central bank digital currency that will undergird international finance.

However, the BRICS group faces challenges in the path toward de-dollarization. India's imports of Russian crude oil, for instance, fell in January to a one-year low, down 35% from last year's peak, as New Delhi diversified its sources for energy purchases. One reason for this was India's hesitance to use the yuan as payment for the oil.

Russia has more economic dealings with China than India, and would benefit from having more Chinese currency in its hold, but India has been averse to empowering the yuan against its own rupee.

There are also reports of the BRICS model working well in some instances. Exporters in Russia who started trading with India have spent nearly \$4 billion rupees to buy India-made defense equipment and armaments, among other imports. The amount came from rupee funds lying idle in Russian Vostro accounts, according to reports.

Waller made no reference in his speech to the BRICS alliance but maintained that the reserve status of the dollar was intact for the foreseeable future.

"I do not expect the dollar to lose its status or influence anytime soon, and recent developments, if anything, point more to increased influence for the dollar than to any significant

decline," Waller said.

On top of this, Waller said he does not expect other countries to emerge as substantive issuers of safe and liquid assets to rival Treasuries as an investment "nor any change in the approach of the countries with sovereign wealth funds that would lead them to pull back from their foreign investments."

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Canada Ready to Step Up, Give Direct Financing to Ukraine Using Russian Assets – Freeland

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) – Canadian Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland said on Friday that she was optimistic about the Group of Seven (G7) member states reaching an agreement on seizing Russian frozen assets and noted Ottawa is ready to step up to directly provide funding to Ukraine using the seized funds.

"Canada is prepared to be one of the countries that will step up as part of this collective agreement and directly provide financing to Ukraine," Freeland said during a teleconference.

The Minister added that she was optimistic that a deal would be reached among the G7 member states as they collectively remain committed to Ukraine's victory.

"The approach that is immediately under discussion is ... an approach that would allow us as a group of allies to bring forward the interest that is accruing on the frozen assets, to bring it forward and to immediately provide to Ukraine a very significant sum of money backed by the future interest payments on those Russian assets," Freeland said.

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US-China Row Demonstrates Need for New Global Trade Deal - Ex-Wall Street Trader

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - The US-China trade row highlights the need for a new global trade deal between surplus and deficit countries, but it is more likely that those types of economic tensions will continue to worsen around the world, former Wall Street trader and economist Michael Pettis told Sputnik.

A deficit country is a country that spends more money than it receives, while a surplus country exports more goods and services than it imports.

"The best way to resolve this would be ... through a new global trade agreement that forces both deficit and surplus countries to take the necessary steps to rebalance domestic demand," Pettis said. "Because an agreement between surplus and deficit countries is very unlikely, the more likely outcome will almost certainly be a continued deterioration of global trade relations."

Pettis early in his career worked as a sovereign debt trader for Manufacturers Hanover, which is now JPMorgan Chase.

Last week, the White House announced that US President Joe Biden is increasing US tariffs on \$18 billion worth of Chinese imports, including electric cars, solar panels and steel, to allegedly protect domestic businesses from Beijing's "unfair trade practices." Beijing vowed to take all the

necessary measures to protect its interests from the adverse effects of the tariff hikes.

Pettis explains that although the focus is currently on the US-China trade row, it's only a portion of a much broader problem.

"Europe is very worried about the health of its manufacturing industries and even Latin American countries are now putting tariffs on steel and other imports," Pettis added.

Pettis argues that a global trading environment characterized by large and persistent surpluses is unsustainable, similar to the global economic environment in the 1920s and 1930s.

"These surpluses are driven mainly by policies that suppress domestic demand," Pettis said.

"This will be bad for the world, but especially difficult for the surplus countries, who rely heavily on foreign exports to resolve their very weak domestic demand."

The International Monetary Fund recently said the United States would be better served by maintaining open trade policies that have been crucial to its economy. It also urged the United States and China to work together toward a solution that addresses the underlying concerns that have exacerbated trade tensions between the two countries.

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Ukrainian Citizen Pleads Guilty to Smuggling Dual-Use Items to Russia - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian national Stanislav Romanyuk pleaded guilty in US federal court to a money laundering charge related to attempting to smuggle dual-use export-controlled goods to Russia, the US Justice Department said on Friday.

"Stanislav Romanyuk, 39, a citizen of Ukraine last residing in Estonia, pleaded guilty yesterday in New Haven federal court to a money laundering charge stemming from his role in a scheme to violate United States export laws and regulations by attempting to smuggle a dual-use export-controlled item to Russia," the Justice Department said in a statement.

Court documents revealed that since 2019, Romanyuk, who operated Estonia-based BY Trade OU, conspired with Latvian citizens Vadims Ananics and Eriks Mamonovs, as well as with individuals in Russia and a Russian company, to send a 500 Series CPWZ Precision Jig Grinder manufactured in Connecticut to Russia, the statement said.

The transaction violated US export laws and regulations, the statement said.

A jig grinder is a high-precision grinding machine system that does not require a license to export to European Union countries but does require a license for export and re-export to Russia, the statement said.

Romanyuk was arrested in August 2022 and has since been detained. He faces up to 20 years in prison on the charge brought up against him, the statement said.

Ananics and Mamonovs pleaded guilty to related charges and await sentencing, according to the statement.

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US State Lawmaker Says His Daughter, Son-in-Law Killed by Gangs in Haiti

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - Ben Baker, a representative in the legislature of the state of Missouri, said on Thursday that his daughter and son-in-law were killed by gangs in Haiti.

"My heart is broken in a thousand pieces. I've never felt this kind of pain. Most of you know my daughter and son-in-law Davy and Natalie Lloyd are full time missionaries in Haiti. They were attacked by gangs this evening and were both killed," Baker said in a statement.

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

Former President Donald Trump in light of this incident said Haiti is totally out of control and that the suspects must be found immediately.

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.

On February 29, gang violence erupted in the downtown area of Port-au-Prince while then-Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry was visiting Kenya to seek an agreement for 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. They took control over many parts of the city and stormed Haiti's largest prison, freeing an unconfirmed number of inmates. The Haitian government declared a state of emergency in the capital region. In April, Henry resigned, paving the way for a transitional presidential council to lead the country amid a surge in violence.

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US Does Not Anticipate Formal Invitation for Ukraine to Join NATO at July Summit -Official

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) – The United States does not anticipate that Ukraine will be formally invited to join NATO during the upcoming summit in July, US Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Friday.

"We do not anticipate that there'll be an invitation for Ukraine to join NATO, but we think there will be a substantial show of support for Ukraine as it works to win its war. This will include ongoing NATO support in building Ukraine's future force and efforts to help Ukraine as it makes more reforms needed so it's able to join the EU and run across the bridge to NATO," O'Brien said during a press briefing.

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Russian Influence in Transnistria Concerning But No Military Threat at Present - O'Brien

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - Russian influence operations in Transnistria are concerning but there is no direct military threat at present time, Assistant Secretary of State James O'Brien

said on Friday.

"There's not a direct military threat that we see at this at this time. But there's ongoing Russian influence operations and that is of concern," O'Brien said during a briefing.

O'Brien made the remark in response to a question as to whether and to what extent is the United States' concerned about the situation in Transnistria.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is scheduled to travel next to Europe, making stops in Moldova and the Czech Republic. During his visit to Moldova, Blinken will meet with Moldovan President Maia Sandu.

Transnistria, where 60% of the population are Russians and Ukrainians, had sought to secede from Moldova since before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In 1992, Transnistria became a territory effectively outside of Moldova's control after the unsuccessful attempt by the Moldovan authorities to subdue the region by force.

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US Believes Putin Uninterested in Peace, Ukraine Must Stabilize Battlefield - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that Russian President Vladimir Putin is uninterested in peace with Ukraine at this time, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Friday.

"We do not see President Putin as being interested in peace now," O'Brien said during a press briefing, in response to a question from Sputnik.

It is important that Ukraine have the opportunity to "stabilize" on the battlefield prior to peace talks, O'Brien said. The US is focused on ensuring that Ukraine is able to succeed on the battlefield, O'Brien added.

Earlier on Friday, Putin said that Russia is prepared to continue negotiations with Ukraine based on agreements previously reached in Turkey and Belarus. The Istanbul agreements satisfied both the Russian and Ukrainian sides in 2022, Putin said.

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Blinken to Travel to Moldova, Czechia to Discuss Ukraine, NATO Summit - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will be traveling to Moldova and Czechia next week for meetings with senior officials and to participate in a foreign ministers' meeting ahead of the NATO summit in Washington, US Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Friday.

"The Secretary is traveling next week to Europe. On Wednesday, he'll arrive in Chisinau, Moldova. Then that evening into Thursday, he'll be in Prague in Czechia, and starting Thursday evening, he'll participate in the informal ministerial of foreign ministers in preparation for the NATO summit," O'Brien said during a press briefing.

In Moldova, Blinken is expected to meet with President Maia Sandu, the prime minister, and

other officials to discuss the country's progress toward European integration and Russia's alleged interference in its internal processes, O'Brien added.

In Prague, Blinken will meet with a number of senior officials, a list of which is still being confirmed, O'Brien said.

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Casualties to Significantly Decrease if US Stops Supplying Weapons to Israel - Evstigneeva

UNITED NATIONS, May 24 (Sputnik) - The number of casualties would significantly decrease or even reach zero if the United States stops supplying weapons to Israel, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations Anna Evstigneeva said on Friday.

"In reality, Washington has been delivering unprecedented quantities of weapons," Evstigneeva said in reference to Israel. "If the United States stops doing this, then there will be far fewer casualties and perhaps there will be no casualties at all."

Evstigneeva made the comment during a meeting at the UN Security Council on safety of humanitarian personnel in conflict zones.

The Russian diplomat emphasized that ensuring safety of humanitarian personnel is of paramount importance.

More than 260 UN humanitarian aid workers have died in conflict zones over the past year and 193 of them in the Gaza Strip alone, Evstigneeva said.

Earlier on Friday, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution on protecting humanitarian personnel and other assisting staff in conflict zones.

The resolution calls upon all states to respect and protect humanitarian personnel and United Nations and associated personnel in accordance with their obligations under international law.

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No Damage Reported After Houthis Launch Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles in Red Sea - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - The US Central Command (CENTCOM) said on Friday that no damages were reported on vessels navigating through the Red Sea after Yemen's Ansar Allah movement, whose members are also known as the Houthis, launched two anti-ship ballistic missiles.

"At approximately 7:26 a.m. (Sanaa time) on May 23, Iranian-backed Houthis launched two anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM) into the Red Sea. There were no injuries or damage reported by U.S., coalition, or commercial ships," CENTCOM said in a statement.

The Houthis' "malign and reckless behavior" remains a threat to regional stability and further endangers the lives of sailors across the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the statement said.

On Thursday, Ansar Allah leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi said that the number of vessels and ships his forces attacked since October 2023, including those linked with Israel, United States and the United Kingdom, had reached 119.

Ansar Allah forces conducted over the past week eight operations by using missiles and drones in the Red and Arabian Seas, the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, including one attack in the Mediterranean Sea, al-Houthi said.

Ansar Allah vowed in November 2023 to attack any ships associated with Israel until it halts military actions in the Gaza Strip. The attacks prompted the United States to form a coalition, which includes the United Kingdom among others, to protect shipping in the area of the Red Sea, as well as to strike Houthi targets on the ground.

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UNSC Adopts Resolution on Safety, Protection of Humanitarian Personnel in Conflict Zones

UNITED NATIONS, May 24 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council adopted a resolution on protecting humanitarian personnel in conflict zones, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Friday.

The resolution provides the legal framework under which states should be guided in their behavior toward the humanitarian personnel.

Specifically, the resolution calls on states to "respect and protect humanitarian personnel and United Nations and associated personnel, including national and locally recruited personnel, in accordance with their obligations under international law."

In addition, it urges states to "respect and to ensure respect for applicable international humanitarian law in all circumstances; and recalls the obligations under the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols."

The highest number of United Nations personnel has so far perished amid Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip.

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) reported that as of mid-May, 188 of its staff have been killed in Gaza since October 7, 2023.

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Canada Treasury Board Committed to Reach 'Fair, Reasonable' Deal With Workers - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - Canada's Treasury Board said on Friday that it was "fully committed" to reach a fair and reasonable deal with Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) personnel as the union representing them receives overwhelming support for a strike mandate.

Earlier on Friday, the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) announced that it had been received overwhelming support for a strike mandate by more than 9,000 unionized CBSA personnel. PSAC is the country's largest federal public union, representing nearly 230,000 workers in every province and territory in the country.

"The government is fully committed to reaching a fair and reasonable agreement for border services employees. We have already signed renewed agreements with more than 80% of the public service, and if the union is ready to negotiate in good faith, we can do the same for Border Services group employees," the Treasury Board said in a statement.

The government recognizes that CBSA employees have a right to strike but believes that strikes are unnecessary at this time, the statement said.

Moreover, by the end of May both parties will receive recommendations made by the Public Interest Commission after which mediation is set to follow on June 3, the statement added.

As CBSA employees have been working without a contract for more than two years, PSAC is currently seeking a deal that includes fair wages, flexible telework and remote work options, as well as equitable retirement benefits and stronger protections around discipline, technological changes and working hours.

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Canadian Border Workers Endorse Strike, Flow of Goods Likely to Be Disrupted - Union

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - More than 9,000 members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) employed by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) overwhelmingly voted in favor of a strike mandate, PSAC said on Friday.

PSAC is Canada's largest federal public union, representing nearly 230,000 workers in every province and territory in the country.

"Members voted 96% in favor of taking job action during strike votes held April 10 to May 23, 2024," PSAC said in a statement.

The strike mandate will likely lead to significant disruptions in the flow of goods, services and people at Canadian ports of entry as the summer season approaches, the statement said.

PSAC noted that CBSA personnel actions in 2021 had brought commercial cross-border traffic to a near standstill, causing important delays at airports and border entry points nationwide.

"Unless they want a repeat of 2021, Treasury Board and CBSA must be prepared to come to the table with a fair offer that addresses our key issues," PSAC National President Chris Aylward said in the statement.

PSAC pointed out that while CBSA employees have been working without a contract for over two years and the Treasury Board continues to demand concessions, the statement said.

Both parties are currently engaged in discussions on wages, flexible telework and remote work, as well as equitable retirement benefits, among others, the statement added.

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Pentagon Declines Comment on Use of ATACMS Against Crimea, Says Peninsula Part of Ukraine

WASHINGTON, May 24 (Sputnik) - A US Defense Department spokesperson on Friday declined to comment on Ukrainian forces using US-supplied long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) in attacks against Crimea, but said the United States considers the peninsula to be part of Crimea.

"The US considers Crimea to be part of Ukraine; however, considering Ukraine is responsible

for their own operations, we will defer to them to speak to any recent operations," the spokesperson told Sputnik.

Earlier in the day, the Russian Defense Ministry said that Russian forces destroyed three ATACMS missiles over Crimea launched by the Ukrainian armed forces.