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6/17/24 Monday

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Putin Upstages Swiss Summit With Russian Peace Plan as US, German Leaders Bail

Moscow has reiterated its requirements for peace with Ukraine, undermining Western claims of Russian intransigence.

As Western leaders prepared to gather at President Volodymyr Zelensky's summit on the Ukraine conflict in Switzerland, Russian President Vladimir Putin preempted negotiations by promoting Moscow's own peace plan during an address at the Russian Foreign Ministry Friday evening.

Putin's speech at the venue, where he has traditionally offered important statements on foreign policy, restated many of the demands Russia has made dating back to the early days of the country's special military operation, including the neutrality and demilitarization of the Kiev regime. Putin also reiterated that Moscow views Ukraine's accession to NATO as an existential threat, insisting Ukraine must abandon attempts to join the anti-Russia bloc.

"Ukraine must return to neutrality," said security analyst Mark Sleboda on Sputnik's The Final Countdown program, summarizing Putin's address. "It cannot join NATO. It must not try to gain nuclear weapons, and it must respect the rights of Russian speakers and Russian ethnics and other minorities, like Hungarian speakers and so forth, in the country."

The international relations expert joined hosts Ted Rall and Angie Wong Monday to discuss the implications of Ukraine's much-derided "peace summit" this weekend at a luxury Swiss resort.

The communiqué that emerged from the meeting represented "a watered down version of Zelensky's 'peace formula,' a demand from the losing side of the conflict, a childish demand for Russia's unconditional surrender," said Sleboda.

Wong noted that many countries present at the summit opted not to sign the statement, citing the futility of negotiations that did not include representatives from Russia.

"Two of them then withdrew their signatures – Iraq and Jordan," noted Sleboda. "The countries who signed it were mostly the West and a few client states. That's essentially it."

"Evidently [US Vice President] Kamala Harris and [German Chancellor] Olaf Scholz – the conference was such an exercise in damage control that they left early," he continued. "They didn't even stay for the signing, for the crafting or the signing of the statement of this not peace party. They left right after the opening ceremonies and the photo op. So that tells you how important the US and Germany thought the work being done there was."

The analyst said any potential impact of the event was diminished after Putin's address Friday, undermining Western claims of Russian intransigence. Moscow's peace formula called for Kiev to withdraw from the Kherson and Zaporozhye regions, which have opted to join Russia via popular referenda, and also continued to demand the denazification of Ukraine.

Western countries have continued to downplay the influence of anti-Russia neo-Nazi elements in the country, a problem that was widely acknowledged in mainstream media before Moscow launched its special military operation in Ukraine in 2022.

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“Everytime I listen to Putin's and Russia's demands, what strikes me is that they've been basically the same,” said host Ted Rall. “It's very interesting that even though their military position has improved… with the exception of the two areas that you're mentioning, Kherson and Zaporozhye, pretty much not that much has really changed much.”
“If this were America in the same situation, the demands would keep escalating, right? ... Americans are dealing with a country that has a different temperament and its politicians have a different temperament than our own, and that's part of the problem why it's difficult to resolve things,” he argued, suggesting the consistent nature of Russia’s requirements for peace undermines Western claims the country is fighting a war of aggression.
But Sleboda reiterated that Moscow would not allow Ukraine to persist as an existential threat to the Russian state, noting the country would be forced to continue westward if Kiev is continuously weaponized as an anti-Russia beachhead.
“This is the last peace proposal by Russia,” he warned. “The next will not even be presented as a negotiation. They will be a set of unconditional surrender terms delivered to the Kiev regime and the West at the end of this conflict.”

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USAID Earmarks $1.5 Billion to Fund Ukraine Civil Society, Launder Image of US Abroad

Ukraine has become increasingly dependent on US aid simply to fund the operation of basic government services.
USAID has announced it is setting aside $1.5 billion in taxpayer funds to prop up Ukraine civil society and boost the public image of US aid efforts.
The agency’s plan was revealed when observers spotted a post on the US government’s online procurements portal soliciting assistance for “communication support activities.” The message noted USAID’s office sought support in “public awareness-raising campaigns, translation and interpretation, public relations and media work, preparation of materials and engagement of influencers and photographers,” according to reporting from the TASS news outlet.
The post disclosed that the award of the contract would be announced on July 1 for work lasting the duration of one year with the possibility of extension.
Although the public relations effort is aimed at Ukrainians, the posting of such material online implies US citizens would also be exposed to the content. Federal law has traditionally barred government agencies from creating propaganda aimed at Americans, but lawmakers lifted the ban in 2013 as the US government funded online bots to manipulate public opinion throughout the Middle East.
USAID has become highly controversial for using the provision of foreign aid as an under-the-radar tool of US influence. Established by former President John F. Kennedy during the height of the Cold War, the agency has backed media, activist, and political forces abroad to promote favored policy and even support operations in countries targeted for regime change. Such efforts are known as “color revolutions” and have taken place in such countries as Bolivia in 2019 and Ukraine in 2004 and 2014.

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Researcher Adrienne Pine describes USAID as an important tool of US “soft power.” The agency was created around the same time as other government organizations such as the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress, “a US imperialist program aimed at preventing revolutions in Latin America,” Pine says.

“You've got these three institutions that are founded by Kennedy in the wake of the Cuban Revolution and in the context of revolutionary anti-imperialist movements around the world so that the US can establish its hegemony post-World War Two,” said the academic. “So USAID has never been a benign institution. It's never really been an aid institution.”

USAID has been banned by a number of foreign governments who oppose its use as a tool of covert subversion, including Venezuela, Ecuador, Cuba and Bolivia. Russia expelled the organization in 2012 after a cache of emails was leaked showing hidden cooperation between US-backed non-governmental organizations and opposition groups.

The agency’s latest public relations effort is part of a massive grant announced by US Vice President Kamala Harris at Ukraine’s diplomatic summit in Switzerland over the weekend. The $1.5 billion in funds will go towards such uses as maintaining Ukraine’s electrical infrastructure and paying the salaries of civil servants.

Funding for Ukraine has been sharply criticized as the United States backs government programs such as universal healthcare that are not enjoyed by American citizens. Polling has revealed that about half of Americans believe the country is spending too much money supporting Kiev’s proxy war against Russia.

Just a few months ago USAID announced it had exhausted previous funds allocated for Ukrainian civil society. The United States has approved over $175 billion in support for the country since early 2022.

Putin upstages Swiss summit with Russian peace plan as German, US leaders bail

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“Ukraine must return to neutrality,” said security analyst Mark Sleboda on Sputnik’s The Final Countdown, summarizing Putin’s address. “It cannot join NATO. It must not try to gain nuclear weapons, and it must respect the rights of Russian speakers and Russian ethnics and other minorities, like Hungarian speakers and so forth, in the country.” The international relations expert joined hosts Ted Rall and Angie Wong to discuss the implications of Ukraine’s much-derided “peace summit” this weekend at a luxury Swiss resort.

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Muslim Pilgrims Die, Suffer From Heat During Hajj

Thousands of cases of heat stress were also reported late last June during the sacred pilgrimage where at least 240 people died.
Muslim pilgrims suffered extraordinary heat during the Hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia, Jordan's Foreign Ministry said over the weekend. Temperatures reached 120 degrees Fahrenheit (49 degrees Celsius) on Sunday.
The catastrophic heat has resulted in the death of at least six Jordanian pilgrims, The Washington Post reported. A separate report by France 24found that at least 19 Jordanian and Iranian pilgrims died while more than a dozen Jordanian pilgrims went missing as a result of the heat.
In addition, more than 2,700 cases of heat stress and sunstroke among pilgrims were reported, Mohammed al-Abdulaali, a spokesperson for the Saudi Health Ministry said on Monday, according to the Saudi Press Agency.
Muslims who are physically and financially able to travel are obligated to make at least one pilgrimage in a lifetime. Hajj is considered to be a sacred pilgrimage and is one of the five pillars of Islam. Every year, millions of Muslims travel to and perform their Hajj in Makkah, the modern day Saudi Arabia, according to Islamic Relief.
At least 1.8 million people are attending this year's Hajj which began on Friday, and is set to peak with attendees on Wednesday. Unfortunately, most of these rituals are outdoors and include walking around the Kaaba, a sacred Islamic site. As a way to get ahead of the heat, Saudi Arabia handed out water, set up large umbrellas and dedicated certain hospitals to treat heat-related illnesses.
Climate change has continued to warm our globe, and scores of others have already reportedly died from heat-related illnesses including India and Greece. Last week, Greece came under a sweltering heat wave with temperatures soaring to 109.4 degrees Fahrenheit (43 degrees Celsius).
The heat in Greece grew to such a dangerous level that schools were shut down, and the culture ministry was forced to close Greece's most popular tourist attraction: the ancient Acropolis site, as well as other archaeological sites. At least four tourists in Greece have died with most of those deaths assumed to be linked to the heat, and three other tourists still remain missing.

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Russia Willing to Commit to Peaceful Negotiations, as Ukraine Continues to Rely on Western Aid

At the end of March of this year, a nationwide poll asked Ukrainians how they thought their draft-age acquaintances might respond to a call to serve. Just 10% who responded to the poll said they would accept.

Ukraine's current military recruitment campaign has fallen short of expectations, a recent article from The Conversation suggested. The recruitment plan was first announced on April 16, 2024, with the goal of enlisting "hundreds of thousands of young Ukrainian men", the report claimed. However, the effort has been met with "public skepticism, draft dodging and opposition to unpopular, heavy-handed attempts to root out those not heeding the call to sign up," the report writes, adding that it has "left Ukraine struggling to fill the positions officials say are needed to beat back the invading army."

Nicolai Petro, a professor of political science at the University of Rhode Island, sat down with Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Monday. According to Petro, Russian President Vladimir Putin's specific proposals on Ukraine, and world development in the future comes down to "two points".

"Putin simplified the path to negotiation, because from Russia's perspective it's now boiled down to just two points," said Petro. "Withdraw Ukrainian troops from the four regions that have been admitted to Russia and, secondly, issue an official statement. Ukraine should issue an official statement that it does not intend to join NATO. And as soon as that happens, Russia is willing to commit to an immediate ceasefire and peace negotiations."

"So why is this easier than what Ukraine proposed? Well, because Ukraine has ten sets of demands rather than just one from Russia's perspective, which is an official statement that Ukraine will not join NATO," he added. "The second thing that's interesting about Russia's proposal is that it is offering something that Ukraine has not offered, which is an end to the bloodshed. In other words, you want to stop the fighting and the killing? Just withdraw troops."

Issues with Ukraine's draft also highlight the fundamental issue: without funding from Western allies, Ukraine is likely to "exhaust its resources long before Russia does", The Conversation report writes.

In December of 2023, former commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi told leader Volodymyr Zelensky that he needed nearly 500,000 more troops. But a nationwide poll conducted at the end of March showed that Ukrainians believe only 10% of their draft-age acquaintances might respond to a call to serve.

"And thirdly," the professor continued. "Putin's proposal essentially [shows the lie of] Western statements that Russia intends to conquer all of Ukraine and then all of Europe, because he now specifically says Russia's territorial ambitions are limited to the four occupied regions of Crimea, which is why I think it is aimed primarily not at Ukraine."

"The Ukrainian, Western position is we cannot negotiate and we don't want to negotiate because negotiation itself would be an acknowledgment of an immoral act of aggression, and therefore there's nothing to negotiate, which is why we have this summit in Switzerland not even including Russia."

"So we're not actually negotiating or willing to negotiate anything," Petro said. "We're simply making a statement of defiance against a Russian invasion versus the other side, in Russia's case, which is saying [Russia] feels threatened by NATO's expansion, which is why [they are]

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taking these actions. There's also humanitarian reasons, but we are, we have always been and continue to be willing to negotiate on what our mutual security interests are."
Sputnik's Wilmer Leon noted that the US has a habit of "capitulation" when it comes to negotiating. He suggests that the US is only willing to talk, if who they are negotiating with meets their demands first. Russia has repeatedly indicated that they are willing to discuss peace plan negotiations, and said this spring that an aborted 2022 peace deal between Russia and Ukraine could still be used as the basis for new negotiations.
"I think the Russian position, and this is what I think Putin has articulated not only in this last speech, there is a win-win scenario here. And the win-win scenario is: let's have an agreement that allows for mutual security for all sides. And Putin, a number of times in his recent speech, reiterated that Russia has tried to take into account what are legitimate Ukrainian security interests," said Petro.

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'Dreadful, Horrible, Unspeakable': Gaza War to Surge Even After Cabinet Dissolved

The war cabinet was first formed on October 11 as a way to make fast decisions about the conduct of the war, but recently, Netanyahu had come under pressure from the right-wing ministers in his coalition cabinet who wished to join the war crew.
Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has dissolved his war cabinet that was created after the Hamas attack on October 7. The three-person war cabinet was dissolved a week after Benny Gantz, a popular opposition lawmaker and former military chief quit. The cabinet, which included Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, was formed as a way to block right-wing lawmakers in Netanyahu's cabinet, AP reported.
On Monday, writer and journalist Dan Lazare, known for The Weekly Worker.co.uk, joined Sputnik's Political Misfits to discuss how the dissolvement of Netanyahu's war cabinet may impact Israel, the Gaza Strip, and the Middle East.
"It's very hard to judge. It's a very minor adjustment," Lazare said. "I presume that the general trend is that [Finance Minister Bazalel] Smotrich and [Minister of National Security Itamar] Ben-Gvir, the two ultra-right fascists, in fact, members of the Netanyahu government are creeping closer and closer to power."
"I think that Netanyahu will wind up reaching some kind of accommodation with them. The accommodation could take many forms," the writer and journalist added. "It could be a little more than a wink and a nod, in which he will take their views into account as he prosecutes the war. But I think that the bottom line is that the Israeli government is continuing its drift to the far-right."
The Israeli prime minister's opponents believe he "never had a strategy for Gaza beyond" destroying Hamas, Sputnik's John Kiriakou suggested. Kiriakou added that there have been more than 37,000 deaths in Gaza and more than 100,000 injuries with "no end in sight."
"I think there could be an end at some point. I think that essentially the Israeli steamroller is moving forward. The Israeli military officials are talking about carrying the war out through the end of the year, which is six months from now," Lazare responded.

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“I think that the Israelis have no [postwar] plan. The Israeli government has no plans other than the complete destruction of Hamas or the 80% or 90% destruction of Hamas. It doesn't really care what happens to the Palestinian people themselves in Gaza,” Lazare added. “And I think that the Palestinian Authority is so profoundly unpopular in Gaza, that there's just little chance of them establishing any kind of viable government after Gaza has been reduced to complete and total rubble.”

“Therefore, I think it's conceivable that in that period, the war might end after thousands more deaths, including thousands more civilians. I mean, this is a dreadful, horrible situation,” he said. “But it will continue for months and months until Hamas is pretty much crushed. And I think that is not a totally unrealistic military goal.”

Officials who spoke with AP on the condition of anonymity said that Netanyahu will now be holding smaller forums with some of his government members for “sensitive issues”. Meanwhile, critics of Netanyhau have lambasted him for allowing his decisions to be swayed by ultranationalists in his government who oppose a ceasefire deal with Hamas and who have voiced support for the “voluntary migration” of Palestinians out of Gaza as well as military occupation of the area.

“I think this is a war of destruction and I think that Netanyahu is determined to prosecute it, I think it can be prosecuted ultimately. But the choices will be harrowing for the Palestinian population,” Lazare said. “They will be facing unspeakable conditions inside Gaza, where they will be living in utter destitution, and ruled by Palestinian turncoats for whom they have no respect. And they will be facing the fiercest repression for as long as possible. I think that's one option the Israelis have in mind.”

“The other option is some kind of mass ethnic cleansing, which will in some ways even make things worse, because if you have refugee camps in Egypt or Jordan, they will be rapidly taken over by Hamas, and Hamas will simply shift operations to just over the border, which means the war and the fighting will continue indefinitely,” Lazare suggested. “It is truly a dreadful, horrible, unspeakable situation.”

Last month, a bipartisan group of lawmakers agreed to invite Netanyahu - whose arrest is being sought after by the International Criminal Court (ICC) - to speak before Congress which is slated for July 24. The speech is a redundant exercise to express the US’s continued and unwavering support for Israel as they continue their war in Gaza. Multipe countries, human rights groups and international agencies have accused Israel of committing genocide against the Palestinians.

WATCH: As Israeli PM Netanyahu prepares to address a joint session of Congress, @RepRoKhanna (D-Calif.) says he "will not attend."

"I'm not going to sit in a one-way lecture. … How he treated treated President Obama, he should not expect reciprocity.” pic.twitter.com/kvgiNwJPsm

— Meet the Press (@MeetThePress) June 16, 2024

“I will not attend. I said that if he wants to come to speak to members of Congress about how to end the war and release hostages, I would be fine doing that,” said California Representative Ro Khanna, who serves on the House Armed Services Committee, on Sunday. “But I’m not going to sit in a one-way lecture.”

“The US regards Israel as an absolutely invaluable ally in a crucial part of the world, which has been a focus of US foreign policy for 40 years at least,” said Lazare. “So the US is not going to abandon this strategic alliance. Therefore, I think that after all the huffing and puffing and

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moaning on the part of Biden is finished, the US will continue to supply Israel, continue to back Israel, and will enable the war to keep grinding onward with just dreadful consequences."
According to Gaza's Health Ministry, the war against Hamas has killed more than 37,100 people. The death toll does not distinguish between soldiers and civilians. The war has been a catalyst for widespread famine and a lack of access to medicine and other aid in the region. On Monday, tens of thousands of Israelis reportedly protested against Netanyahu in Jerusalem on Monday and called for immediate elections as well as an end to the war in Gaza.

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Whistle-Blower Says Boeing Lost Track of Bad Parts, May Have Installed Them - Senator

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - A current Boeing employee told congressional investigators that the company lost track of hundreds of faulty parts and may have ended up installing them in its 737 Max planes, US Senator Blumenthal told CNN on Tuesday.
The Boeing employee said company supervisors ordered him to hide the faulty parts from the Federal Aviation Administration and are now subjecting him to retaliation.
"His allegations are extraordinarily serious," Blumenthal told CNN. "His account of the retaliation against him is particularly chilling the pressure that was exerted on him to stay silent. They have a program called Speak up well, he was told to shut up."
The report quoted a Boeing statement that said the company is reviewing the whistle-blower's claims.
"We continuously encourage employees to report all concerns as our priority is to ensure the safety of our airplanes and the flying public," Boeing said in the statement.
The new allegations come as Boeing's CEO David Calhoun is set to testify on Tuesday afternoon before a subcommittee of the Senate Homeland Security Committee which Blumenthal chairs.

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Biden Admin. Offers Legal Status to Some Immigrant Spouses of US Citizens - White House

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is set to announce on Tuesday new actions that will offer a legal status to some immigrant spouses of US citizens who have been in the country for several years, the White House said.
"This new process will help certain noncitizen spouses and children apply for lawful permanent residence - status that they are already eligible for - without leaving the country," the White House said in a fact sheet.
The policy is intended to promote family unity and strengthen the US economy, the fact sheet said.
In order to be eligible, noncitizens must as of June 17, 2024 have resided in the United States for 10 or more years and be legally married to a US citizen. Non-citizens are also required to

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satisfy all applicable legal requirements.

On average, those who are eligible for the new relief have resided in the US for 23 years, according to the fact sheet.

Noncitizen spouses whose application will be approved after DHS's case-by-case assessment will be afforded a three-year period to apply for permanent residency.

They will be allowed to remain with their families in the United States and be eligible for work authorization for up to three years.

The White House estimates that half a million spouses of US citizens and about 50,000 noncitizen children under the age of 21 whose parent is married to a US citizen could be eligible for the program.

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US Army Gives Boeing $127.5Mln Contract Boost to Keep Heavy Copters Flying - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - Boeing has received a $127.5 million US Army contract extension to supply more parts to keep its fleet of CH47 Chinook heavy lift helicopters operational, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"The Boeing Company [of] Ridley Park, Pennsylvania was awarded a $127.5 million modification ...contract for the procurement of sustainment parts for CH47 aircraft," the release stated on Monday.

Work on the contract will be carried out over the next four and a quarter years with an estimated completion date of September 30, 2028, the Defense Department said.

The US Army Contracting Command at Redstone Arsenal in the state of Alabama will oversee work on the project as its contracting activity, the Defense Department said.

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Democrats in US Congress Lift Hold on Arms Sale to Israel That Includes F-15s - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - Key Democrats in the US Congress lifted their holds on a major US arms package to Israel that includes F-15 fighter jets, the Washington Post reported.

The report said on Monday that the arms package includes 50 F-15 fighter jets priced at a total of some $18 billion.

Congressman Gregory Meeks, the top Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, previously blocked approval of the arms sale until he received assurances from the Biden administration about how this military equipment would be used.

The F-15 fighter jets will be delivered to Israel after several years, the report noted.

The arms sale also includes air-air-missiles and Joint Direct Attack Munition kits, according to the report.

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Astronics Wins $215Mln US Army Contract to Supply New Radio Test Sets - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - Astronics Test Systems has won a $215.5 million US Army contract to manufacture the radio test set TS-4549/T, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Astronics Test Systems [of] Orlando, Florida was awarded a $215.5 million ...contract for the production and delivery of radio test set TS-4549/T," the release said on Monday.

The program is replacing the Army's aging GRM-122 test equipment for tactical radios, according to published sources.

Work on the contract is scheduled to take five years with an estimated completion date of June 16, 2029, the Defense Department said.

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US Air Force Orders $442Mln in More Testing Operations at Tennessee Base - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - National Aerospace Solutions has received a US Air Force $442,227,417 modification contract for test operations, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"National Aerospace Solutions [of] Arnold Air Force Base, Tennessee has been awarded a $442,227,417 modification ...contract for test operations and sustainment," the press release said on Monday.

The extended contract will cover test operations, technology development, equipment and facility sustainment, capital improvements, and some support services for the Arnold Engineering Development Complex, the Defense Department said.

The extra $442 million in funding will cover test operations for one year and the work is expected to be completed by June 30, 2025, the Defense Department said.

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US Justice Dept., FTC Sue Adobe for Alleged Consumer Law Violations - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - A lawsuit has been initiated against Adobe and two of the company's executives, accusing them of violating the Restore Online Shoppers' Confidence Act (ROSCA), the Justice Department announced in a statement.

"The Justice Department, together with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), today announced a civil enforcement action against Adobe Inc. and two Adobe executives, Maninder

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Sawhney and David Wadhwani, for alleged violations of the Restore Online Shoppers' Confidence Act (ROSCA)," the statement said on Monday.

Adobe had imposed a hidden "Early Termination Fee" and used fine print to deceive subscribers about cancellation costs, systematically violating consumer protection laws, the statement said.

"The complaint alleges that Adobe has further violated ROSCA by failing to provide consumers with a simple mechanism to cancel their recurring, online subscriptions. Instead, Adobe allegedly protects its subscription revenues by thwarting subscribers' attempts to cancel, subjecting them to a convoluted and inefficient cancellation process filled with unnecessary steps, delays, unsolicited offers, and warnings," the statement said.

The lawsuit seeks unspecified consumer redress, monetary civil penalties and a permanent injunction against future violations, the statement added.

Adobe Inc., founded in 1982 and headquartered in San Jose, California, is a software company known for creating Photoshop and offering subscriptions through its website, Adobe.com.

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Off-Duty US Secret Service Agent Robbed at Gunpoint During Biden California Trip - Police

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - An off-duty US Secret Service agent was robbed at gunpoint during a trip to California by President Joe Biden over the weekend, the Tustin Police Department said in a statement.

"On Saturday, June 15, 2024 at approximately 9:36 p.m., Tustin Police Officers responded to a call of a possible robbery that just occurred at the Tustin Fields I residential community. On arrival, officers discovered the victim was a member of the US Secret Service and his bag was stolen at gunpoint," the statement said on Monday.

On Saturday, Biden visited Los Angeles for a campaign fundraising event.

The incident resulted in an officer/agent-involved shooting, the statement said. It is unknown whether the suspect was injured during the incident, the statement added.

Officers recovered some of the victim's belongings in the area, the statement said.

The suspect's vehicle may be a 2004-2006 silver Infiniti FX35, which was seen leaving the scene of the incident, the statement said.

There is no known threat to the public, but police are requesting the public's help in identifying the suspect involved in the crime, the statement said.

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SEC Says Suing Texas Man For Alleged Fraudulent Offer to Invest $200Mln in Virgin Orbit

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - The US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has filed a lawsuit against a Texas man accused of making a fraudulent offer to invest $200 million into Virgin Orbit, the agency said in a press release.

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"The Securities and Exchange Commission today charged Dallas-Fort Worth resident Matthew Brown and his company, Matthew Brown Companies, LLC, for engaging in a fraudulent scheme to submit and publicly tout a bogus offer to invest $200 million in Virgin Orbit Holdings, Inc.," the release said on Monday.

The SEC's complaint states that on March 19, 2023, Brown submitted an unsolicited investment offer as Virgin Orbit was on the brink of bankruptcy. Brown allegedly sent Virgin Orbit a fake screenshot of his company's bank account purporting to show a balance of over $182 million dollars when the bank account actually had less than $1.

Brown also allegedly told Virgin Orbit that he had a law degree from Southern Methodist University, when he actually had never graduated from college, the release said.

According to the SEC, Brown's offer was leaked to the media and spurred Virgin Orbit's stock price to rise approximately 33.1%.

Brown also appeared on national television on March 23, 2023 to talk about his offer and falsely portray himself and his company as experienced venture capitalists with stakes in some 13 space companies. According to the SEC, Brown had a negative net worth at the time and no past or present holdings in the space industry.

The deal quickly broke down since Brown had nothing to invest and Virgin Orbit filed for bankruptcy on April 4, 2023, the release noted.

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US Navy Faces Delays Soaring Costs on Kennedy, Enterprise Aircraft Carriers - Report

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - The US Navy is facing further delays and massive cost overruns on its next two Ford-class nuclear aircraft carriers, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a new report.

"CVN 79 [the USS John F. Kennedy]'s construction cost limitation baseline, resulting in an increase to $12.9 billion - more than $1.5 billion over the same baseline since 2021," the GAO report said on Monday. "As we reported last year, CVN 79 costs increased $1.3 billion largely due to contract overruns."

Construction delays are also emerging on the building of the USS Enterprise, CVN 80 because of ongoing industrial base challenges, the GAO said. Program officials project that the ship will not meet its planned March 2028 delivery date and are conducting a schedule assessment with the shipbuilder, the report cautioned.

"CVN 80 is 36% complete and facing supply chain delays, as well as challenges with shipyard and vendor workforces," the report said.

Program officials explained that the shipbuilder was struggling with a smaller, inexperienced workforce that was less efficient at completing work, especially after many skilled, senior workers retired during the COVID-19 pandemic, the report noted.

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US Stands With Philippines in Row With China Over Ships Collision - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - The United States supports the Philippines in the matter of its vessel colliding with a Chinese Coast Guard ship while delivering supplies in the South China Sea, the US State Department announced.

"The United States stands with its ally the Philippines, and condemns the escalatory and irresponsible actions by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to deny the Philippines from lawfully delivering humanitarian supplies to service members stationed at the BRP Sierra Madre on June 16," the State Department said in a statement on Monday.

China accused the Philippines of causing a ship collision in the South China Sea, while Manila said Beijing's accusations that its ship provoked the collision were misleading.

The escalatory incident is the latest in a series of Chinese provocations to impede critically needed supplies from reaching service members stationed at the BRP Sierra Madre, the statement read.

In late May, the Philippines opened a coast guard post on the Itbayat Island near Taiwan to boost security amid China's increasing presence in the South China Sea, Philippine National Security Adviser Eduardo Ano said.

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Progress Made on Fire Near Lake Sonoma, Evacuations Continue Amid Spread Risk - Statement

SAN FRANCISCO, June 18 (Sputnik) — The CalFire Sonoma-Lake-Napa Unit said in a statement that overnight containment efforts increased the Point Fire near Lake Sonoma to 20%, now spanning 1,100 acres.

"Morning update for the #PointFire off Stewarts Point Skaggs Springs Road near Lake Sonoma. Crews made good progress overnight building and strengthening containment lines thanks to favorable conditions. The fire is 1,100 acres with containment slightly up to 20%," the statement said on Monday.

The statement said that the potential for the fire to spread remains, prompting continued evacuation orders and warnings in the surrounding areas to ensure public preparedness.

"Ground resources committed to the Point Fire Monday includes 50 engines, 12 hand crews, 10 dozers, and 10 water tenders. Additionally, four type-1 helicopters and three fixed-wing aircraft have been ordered. Total personnel assigned to the fire Monday is approximately 400," the statement read.

According to reports, the Point Fire, which started on Sunday near Lake Sonoma due to strong winds and high temperatures, quickly expanded, leading to evacuation orders for homes and wineries in Sonoma County's Dry Creek Valley, while spreading smoke into Santa Rosa and surrounding areas.

Furthermore, the report added that over 400 individuals were mandated to evacuate, with approximately 4,000 more advised to prepare for potential evacuation as conditions could escalate.

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US Designates Iran-Backed Iraqi Militia Group as Terrorists - State Department

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - The United States classified an Iran-backed militia group in Iraq as specially designated global terrorists, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a statement.

"The Department of State today designated Harakat Ansar Allah al-Awfiya (HAAA) and HAAA Secretary General Haydar Muzhir Ma'lak al-Sa'idi as Specially Designated Global Terrorists," the statement said on Monday.

HAAA is part of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI), which is a front group that includes multiple Iran-aligned terrorist and militia groups, the statement said.

IRI has claimed responsibility for dozens of recent attacks against US forces in the Middle East region, the statement said. HAAA was involved in a drone attack on US forces in Jordan in January that killed three service members, the statement said.

The US remains committed to using all available tools to counter Iran's support for terrorism and disrupt the ability of Iran-backed groups to conduct terrorist attacks, the statement said.

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NATO Allies Increasing Defense Spending by 18%, Biggest Jump in Decades - Stoltenberg

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - NATO allies this year are going to increase defense spending by 18%, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said ahead of a meeting with President Joe Biden at the White House.

"They show that across Europe and Canada, our NATO allies are this year increasing defense spending by 18%. That's the biggest increase in decades," Stoltenberg said on Monday.

Stoltenberg added that 23 allies are going to spend 2% of GDP or more on defense, which is double the number compared to four years ago.

Stoltenberg is in Washington laying the groundwork for the upcoming NATO leaders summit in the US capital that is scheduled for July 9-11.

The NATO chief will meet with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) -

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CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Fierce battlers are ongoing in Vovchansk and in the Lyptsi area of the Kharkiv region, while the Ukrainian armed forces have pulled up their reserves and are making attempts to counterattack, the head of Russia-controlled territories in the region, Vitaly Ganchev, told Sputnik on Monday.
* China will continue to work with the international community and make efforts to promote a political solution to the Ukrainian crisis, the Chinese Foreign Ministry told Sputnik.
* The Ukrainian military has lost up to 535 soldiers in clashes with Russia's army group South in the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

UKRAINE CONFERENCE IN SWITZERLAND

* Russia considers the Ukraine conference hosted by Switzerland on June 15-16 to be a failure, as the collective West and Kiev need to understand that Moscow's peace initiative has no alternatives, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Monday.
* The conference failed to make any contribution to the peaceful settlement of the conflict in Ukraine, Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov said.
* Indonesia did not sign the joint communique adopted after the Switzerland-hosted conference on Ukraine due to Russia's absence from the event, Indonesian Foreign Ministry spokesman Rolliansyah Soemirat said.
* Russian President Vladimir Putin's peace initiative made the Switzerland-hosted conference irrelevant, Ushakov said.

HUNTER BIDEN COURT CASE

* Hunter Biden filed a motion for a new trial on all counts in the federal gun case against him, citing the court's lack of jurisdiction, a US District Court for the District of Delaware filing said on Monday.

VIETNAM-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin will pay a state visit to Vietnam on June 19-20, the Kremlin said on Monday.
* A meeting between Putin and Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh will take place in the working breakfast format, and the sides will discuss economic issues, Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov said.
* Putin's conversation with reporters after his state visits to North Korea and Vietnam this week is not ruled out, Ushakov said.

EXPLOSION IN CHECHIA

* An ammunition explosion in the eastern part of the Czech Republic killed one soldier on Monday, the Czech military said.
* The explosion was a tragic accident and unrelated to sabotage or the current global situation, Defense Minister Jana Cernochova said.

PUTIN VISIT TO NORTH KOREA

* Russian President Vladimir Putin will hold informal talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong

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Un during his visit to the Asian country from June 18-19, Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov said on Monday.

* Russia and North Korea are working on a new comprehensive partnership treaty that may be signed during Putin's visit to Pyongyang, Ushakov said.

* Trade between Russia and North Korea increased nine times last year and reached $34.4 million, and Moscow stands for the review of the UN Security Council sanctions against Pyongyang, Ushakov said.

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NATO Chief Says Expects Alliance to Agree to Play Lead Role in Providing Aid to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on Monday that he expects the alliance will agree next month to play the lead role in providing security assistance to Ukraine, lessening the burden on the United States.

"I expect that when we meet here next month, we will agree to have NATO in the lead role in providing security assistance and training, and also that allies will agree to step up financial and military support to Ukraine. This will reduce the burden on the United States," Stoltenberg told President Joe Biden ahead of their meeting at the White House.

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stoltenberg says expects nato will agree to play lead role in providing security assistance and training to ukraine, reducing burden of us

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US Reiterates Opposition to Israeli Escalation of War in Lebanon - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US Department of State on Monday reiterated that it did not want to see Israel's war with Lebanon escalate.

"We have made clear we don't want to see escalation at all in the north. We've made that clear directly to the government of Israel," State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said during a press briefing.

Miller added that the United States' preference was for the situation to be resolved diplomatically and that it was also the Israeli preference.

Israeli forces and Hezbollah in Lebanon have been exchanging fire, primarily over the southern border, since Hamas' October 7 attacks in Israel, leading to hundreds of deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians.

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State Dept. Says Xi's Statement on US Goading China Into Invading Taiwan 'Not Accurate'

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US State Department on Monday dismissed Chinese President Xi Jinping's reported accusation that the United States is attempting to goad China into invading Taiwan.

"That's certainly not accurate," State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said during a press briefing. "We have made clear, including directly to senior members of the Chinese government, that our One China policy has not changed, it will not change and we continue to urge calm and stability across the Taiwan Strait."

On Saturday, the Financial Times reported that Xi told European Commission head Ursula von der Leyen during an April 2023 meeting that the United States was trying to "goad Beijing into attacking Taiwan."

Xi's reported remark is the first known case of him making such a claim to a foreign leader.

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US Treasury Department Says Suspended 1992 Tax Treaty With Russia 'By Mutual Agreement'

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department said on Monday that the United States and Russia have suspended provisions of their 1992 tax convention "by mutual agreement."

The Treasury Department said the action comes nearly a year after Russia notified the US of its desire to suspend certain provisions of the treaty. Russian President Vladimir Putin on August 8, 2023 signed a decree on the suspension of certain provisions of Russia's tax treaties with 38 unfriendly countries, including the United States.

"The US Department of the Treasury today announced that the United States has provided formal notice to the Russian Federation to confirm the suspension of the operation of Paragraph 4 of Article 1 and Articles 5-21 and 23 of the Convention between the United States of America and the Russian Federation for the Avoidance of Double Taxation and the Prevention of Fiscal Evasion with Respect to Taxes on Income and Capital, signed at Washington, June 17, 1992, as well as the operation of its accompanying Protocol, by mutual agreement," the Treasury said in a press release.

The suspension will take effect on August 16 and will continue indefinitely, the release said.

"This action responds to notification by the Russian Federation on August 8, 2023, of its desire to suspend Paragraph 4 of Article 1 and Articles 5-21 and 23 of the Convention, as well as the Protocol," it added.

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US Will Attempt to Attend Reporter Evan Gershkovich's Trial in Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United States will try to attend the upcoming espionage trial of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich in Russia, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"We're going to attempt to attend the trial," Miller said during a press briefing. "I don't have an answer for you yet whether that's going to be possible."

Miller also said that the United States made a "significant offer" for the return of Gershkovich and another detained American, Paul Whelan, several months ago.

Gershkovich's trial will commence on June 26 and will be held behind closed doors.

Gershkovich has been imprisoned since his March 2023 arrest and faces 20 years in prison if convicted.

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New US Military Equipment Programs Now Take More Than 10 Years to Develop - Report

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Most new US armed forces procurement programs including major aircraft, warships, and software now take more than a decade to develop and be cleared for operational use from when they are conceived and ordered, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a new report on Monday.

"The average MDAP [major defense acquisition program] that has yet to deliver initial capability plans to take over 10 years to do so - slightly longer than last year," the report said. "GAO ...found that, for MDAPs that have delivered capability, the average amount of time it took to do so increased from 8 years to 11 years - an average increase of three years from their original planned date."

While the Department of Defense (DOD) plans to invest more than $2 trillion to develop and acquire its costliest weapon programs, it continues to struggle with delivering innovative technologies quickly, the GAO said.

Weapon systems are more complex and driven by software than ever before. However, most of the 53 software-intensive acquisition programs that the GAO reviewed reported challenges related to hiring and retaining the necessary skilled software labor force, the report acknowledged.

Also, the US Air Force's Boeing KC-46 aerial tanker program now faces at least a seven-year delay of its planned full-rate production decision from its original baseline, the GAO said,

The Boeing CH-47 Chinook heavy lift helicopter program continues to face related uncertainties based on the industrial base and alternate suppliers as it relies on proprietary components provided by a single supplier, and Boeing has not conducted an industrial base

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capability assessment to assess its own supplier's production capability, the report cautioned.

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Biden Monitoring Shootings in Texas, Michigan, Expresses Condolences - White House

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has been monitoring the recent shootings in Texas and Michigan, and expresses his condolences to the affected families, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Monday.

"The President has been tracking these tragedies. We are praying for the families who lost loved ones to this senseless violence and wishing all those who were injured a speedy recovery," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

The Biden administration is in contact with state and local officials, she added.

On Saturday, at least nine people — including two children, one of whom is in critical condition — were injured after a man opened fire at a Michigan splash park. The man later took his own life in a nearby home, according to media reports.

On the same day, two people were killed and at least six others were hospitalized with potentially serious injuries in a shooting in the US state of Texas during a Juneteenth celebration marking the end of slavery in the United States.

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White House Says Videos of Biden's Alleged Cognitive Decline 'Cheap Fakes'

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Videos appearing to demonstrate US President Joe Biden's alleged cognitive decline are "cheap fakes," White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Monday.

Several video clips appearing to show Biden acting strangely during public events have gone viral in recent weeks, including at a Group of Seven meeting in Italy, a Juneteenth celebration and a campaign event with former US President Barack Obama.

"They are cheap fake videos. They are done in bad faith," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing, when asked about the clips.

The videos are a form of misinformation, Jean-Pierre added.

Earlier this month, a Rasmussen Reports poll found that 57% of likely US voters believe Biden's mental sharpness is in decline.

Biden, 81, is the oldest president in US history and would be 86 at the end of a potential second term in office.

Last week, Donald Trump campaign spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt said that US adversaries are plotting how to take advantage of Biden's alleged cognitive decline.

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State Dept Calls Putin's Peace Proposal 'Maximalist Statement'

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US State Department views Russian President Vladimir Putin's terms for peace in Ukraine as a "maximalist statement," spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"In Moscow, President Putin had a different message, another maximalist statement that called for Ukraine to surrender even more of its sovereign territory than what Russia currently occupies before negotiations could even begin," Miller said during a press briefing.

On Friday, Putin said that Russia would immediately cease fire and begin negotiations with Ukraine after Kiev withdraws troops from the territory of Russia's new regions and officially abandons plans to join NATO. Volodymyr Zelenskyy has called Moscow's proposal an ultimatum, while his adviser Mykhailo Podolyak alleged that the new Russian initiative did not contain a "real peace proposal."

Putin's proposal is not an ultimatum, but a peace initiative based on the realities on the ground, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said.

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Biden Monitoring Shootings in Texas, Michigan, Expresses Condolences - White House

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has been monitoring the recent shootings in Texas and Michigan, and expresses his condolences to the affected families, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Monday.

"The President has been tracking these tragedies. We are praying for the families who lost loved ones to this senseless violence and wishing all those who were injured a speedy recovery," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

The Biden administration is in contact with state and local officials, she added.

On Saturday, at least nine people — including two children, one of whom is in critical condition — were injured after a man opened fire at a Michigan splash park. The man later took his own life in a nearby home, according to media reports.

On the same day, two people were killed and at least six others were hospitalized with potentially serious injuries in a shooting in the US state of Texas during a Juneteenth celebration marking the end of slavery in the United States.

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US Says Not Concerned About Putin's Trip to DPRK But Troubled By 'Deepening Cooperation'

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WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – The United States is not concerned over Russian President Vladimir Putin's trip to North Korea but is troubled by deepening cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said on Monday.

"We are not concerned about the trip. What we are concerned about is the deepening relationship between these two countries," Kirby told reporters.

Kirby repeated Washington's position that Russia uses North Korean ballistic missiles to hit targets in Ukraine. He also pointed out that cooperation between Russia and North Korea may have an impact on the Korean Peninsula.

"We are certainly going to watch on that very-very closely," he said.

Earlier in the day, the Kremlin said that Putin will pay a state visit to North Korea from June 18-19. The Russian delegation will include Defense Minister Andrei Belousov, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, First Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov, Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak, and Roscosmos head Yuri Borisov, among others, according to the Kremlin.

Russian Deputy Ambassador to the UN Anna Evstigneeva said in late May that Russia is not using North Korean missiles in Ukraine as is widely claimed.

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US Comfortable With Current Level of Readiness of Nuclear Forces - Kirby

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is comfortable with the current level of readiness of its nuclear forces in Europe and around the world, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Monday.

"I'll just tell you that we're comfortable, as we have been comfortable with our strategic deterrence posture, not only on the European continent, but around the world," Kirby said during a briefing.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told The Telegraph on Sunday that NATO countries are discussing the possibility of deploying more nuclear weapons on standby.

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Biden to Announce 'Common Sense' Immigration Approach on Tuesday - Advocacy Group

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will announce on Tuesday a common sense approach to immigration in the United States to keep families together and provide stability for communities, America's Voice Executive Director Vanessa Cardenas said on Monday.

"What President Biden is announcing tomorrow is a common sense approach that will keep families together and provide stability for our communities," Cardenas said during a press briefing discussing the Potential Immigration Executive Actions to Protect American Families.

On June 10, the Biden administration signaled plans to unveil a policy to grant temporary legal

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status and potential paths to citizenship for undocumented immigrants married to US citizens.
The program, known as "parole in place," would allow undocumented spouses of US citizens to avoid deportation and obtain work permits in the United States. The program could also help undocumented spouses receive US citizenship.
The Biden administration has not made a final decision on the policy proposal and the number of people whom the program would impact is unclear.
Earlier this month, President Joe Biden took executive action to restrict migrants who illegally enter the United States from claiming asylum. The United States has experienced three consecutive record-breaking years of illegal crossings at the southern border under the Biden administration.
More than 60% of Americans support the deportation of illegal immigrants from the US, according to a YouGov/CBS News poll released on Sunday.

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US Not Baiting China Into Attacking Taiwan - White House

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is not attempting to bait China into launching an attack on Taiwan, White House National Security Communications Adviser John Kirby said on Monday.
“It’s bogus, for one. There’s absolutely no truth to it,” Kirby said during a press briefing, when asked about claims by Chinese President Xi Jinping that the US is trying to trick China into attacking Taiwan.

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us comfortable with current level of readiness of its nuclear forces in europe, around world - white house

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US Not Concerned About Putin's Trip to North Korea But Is Troubled By Deepening Cooperation, Watching Very Closely - White House

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Indian National Accused of Plotting to Kill Sikh Activist in US Pleads Not Guilty - Filing

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Indian national Nikhil Gupta, who is accused of plotting to kill a Sikh activist in the US state of New York, pleaded not guilty in US court on Monday, a court

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filing revealed.
"Plea entered by Nikhil Gupta (1) Count 1s,2s Nikhil Gupta (1) Count 1s,2s Not Guilty," the court filing stated.
In November, US media reported that the United States had thwarted a plot to assassinate US citizen Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, one of the leaders of Sikhs for Justice, an organization banned in India.
The US Justice Department announced charges against Indian government employee Nikhil Gupta in connection with his alleged involvement in the foiled plot to kill Pannun.
The Indian Foreign Ministry said New Delhi was concerned about allegations that one of its citizens was involved in the assassination plot, saying such actions were against the country's government policy.

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Blinken, Saudi Foreign Minister Discuss Action to End Sudan War – State Department

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed the "urgent need for collective international action to end the war in Sudan" with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, the US State Department said on Monday.
"They discussed the urgent need for collective international action to end the war in Sudan and prevent famine and further atrocities in what is the world's largest humanitarian crisis," the statement said.
In addition, Blinken expressed his concerns regarding the recent Houthi detentions of UN, diplomatic, and NGO staff, as well as the group's continued attacks in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.
They also discussed issues regarding Israel's war on Gaza, including reaching an "enduring" ceasefire, securing the release of hostages, surging humanitarian assistance, and coordinating post-war plans, the statement added.

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US Surgeon General Says Time to Require Health Warning on Social Media Platforms

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Social media platforms should be required to display a warning about the potential mental health impact on young users, US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy said on Monday.
"It is time to require a surgeon general's warning label on social media platforms, stating that social media is associated with significant mental health harms for adolescents," Murthy said in an opinion essay for The New York Times.
A surgeon general's warning label would require congressional action to implement, Murthy said. Such warning labels can increase awareness of an issue and change behavior, Murthy said.

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Moreover, social media companies should be forced to share all of their data on health effects with independent scientists and the public, Murthy said.

In May 2023, Murthy released an advisory on the links between social media use and youth mental health issues. Adolescents who spend more than three hours per day on social media face double the risk of developing symptoms of depression and anxiety, Murthy said.

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Former White House Press Secretary Psaki to Testify in July on US Exit From Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Former White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki will testify before the US House Foreign Affairs Committee next month about the chaotic United States withdrawal from Afghanistan, the panel said on Monday.

"Today, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul sent a letter to former White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki confirming her appearance for a transcribed interview before the committee on July 26, 2024, regarding her role in the Biden administration's disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan," the panel said in a press release.

The House panel highlighted Psaki's role in the Biden administration's misrepresentations regarding coordination with allies, contingency planning, the foreseeability of Afghanistan's collapse, among other issues.

The Taliban came to power in August 2021, toppling the US-backed government as NATO troops were leaving after almost 20 years of US military presence in Afghanistan.

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New Jersey Indicts Businessman George Norcross on Racketeering, Extortion Charges - Filing

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The State of New Jersey released a criminal indictment against businessman and Democratic Party power broker George Norcross on Monday, charging him with crimes including conspiracy to commit racketeering and extortion.

The indictment alleges that Norcross, a former member of the Democratic National Committee, led a criminal enterprise whose members and associates agreed to extort others through threats and fear of economic and reputational harm to achieve its goals.

"From approximately 2012 to 2013, members and associates of the Norcross Enterprise, including George E. Norcross, III, used their political influence to tailor New Jersey economic development legislation to their preferences," the indictment said.

The Norcross Enterprise allegedly conspired to, and did, extort and coerce others to obtain properties and property rights on the Camden, New Jersey waterfront for certain individuals and business entities, the indictment said.

The indictment charges Norcross and other defendants with racketeering conspiracy, conspiracy to commit theft by extortion, financial facilitation of criminal activity, misconduct by a

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corporate official and official misconduct.

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Russia's Increasing Presence in Africa 'Not Good' for EU - Military Staff Director General

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Russia's increasing presence in Africa is not good for the European Union, EU Military Staff Director General Michiel van der Laan said on Monday.

"Of course, it is not good. I mean, we see more Wagner presence, we see more Africa Corps presence, which both are Russian," van der Laan said during a discussion at the Center for European Policy Analysis in Washington.

Van der Laan also acknowledged the growing activity of China, Iran as well as other countries on the African continent.

"There are more and more actors active in Africa," van der Laan said.

The European Union does not like this situation but has yet to find a solution, while it also is faced with the problem of training people who may later choose to cooperate with the Wagner Group, he said.

"That is why we stopped the training operations in some countries and for the future, we need to think about how to make sure that they choose for us instead of for Wagner," van der Laan said.

In March, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia has never meddled in Africa or tried to squeeze Western countries out of there, while African leaders themselves want to work with Russia.

The Russian Defense Ministry had supported the Wagner Group as an organization from Russia and nothing more, Putin noted.

Putin also said that the Wagner Group does not exist in a legal sense since there is no law in Russia relating to private military companies.

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US, Cyprus to Launch Strategic Dialogue With First to Take Place in Fall - Blinken

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Washington and Nicosia will launch a strategic dialogue, with the inaugural meeting to take place this fall, Secretary of State Antony Blinken revealed ahead of the bilateral meeting with Cyprus Foreign Minister Constantinos Kombos said on Monday.

"This is an important moment in the relationship between the United States and Cyprus. We will be announcing, initiating strategic dialogue between our countries," Blinken said. "The first will take place this fall in Cyprus."

Blinken pointed out that the launch of a dialogue is evidence of the strengthening and broadening of the relationship between the two countries.

"It's a reflection of the fact that Cyprus is an important player in the region and a partnership

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with the United States that we deeply value," he added.
Blinken and Kombos are currently holding a bilateral meeting at the State Department in Washington DC.

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Stoltenberg Says Invited Indo-Pacific Countries to Upcoming NATO Summit

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - NATO partners from the Indo-Pacific region have been invited to the alliance's upcoming summit in Washington, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on Monday.
"The growing alignment between Russia and its authoritarian friends in Asia makes it even more important that we work closely with our friends in the Indo-Pacific," Stoltenberg said during a Wilson Center event. "I have therefore invited the leaders of Australia, Japan, New Zealand [and] the Republic of Korea to the NATO summit in Washington next month."
NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners can uphold the so-called rules-based international order and their shared values together, Stoltenberg said.
NATO's upcoming summit in Washington is scheduled for July 9-11.

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Ukrainian Membership in NATO Will Ensure Lasting Peace With Russia - Stoltenberg

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian membership in NATO is key to a lasting peace between Moscow and Kiev, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on Monday.
"We need to build the future Ukrainian armed forces… but we need also security guarantees, and the ultimate security guarantee is Article 5 [of] NATO. So in that sense, NATO membership will help to ensure that the war really ends, that Ukraine can prevail," Stoltenberg said during an event at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.
Nobody knows how and when the conflict in Ukraine will end, Stoltenberg said. However, when it ends, the involved parties must ensure that it is a true peace and not just a pause in hostilities, Stoltenberg said.
Ukraine will join the NATO alliance when there is unanimous agreement among members of the alliance, Stoltenberg added.

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Stoltenberg Says NATO Helps Multiply US Power, Advance Its Interests

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The NATO alliance is used to advance the United States'

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interests and power, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on Monday.

"[Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping] are adamantly opposed to NATO because they know that in NATO the United States have something they don't have: 31 friends and allies, which help advance US interests, multiply US power and keep Americans safe," Stoltenberg said during an event at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.

There is no guarantee of the United States and Europe standing together forever, Stoltenberg said.

The secretary-general said it is the responsibility of citizens and leaders to ensure that the alliance remains steadfast.

The United States is a big country but "not that big," Stoltenberg added.

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Number of Migrants Released into US Under Federal Program Reaches Nearly 8Mln - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The number of undocumented migrants released into the United States under a federal program has reached more than 7 million, Fox News reported on Monday.

The report said the program serves as an alternative to keeping illegal migrants detained in federal facilities for prolonged periods considering the backlog in the US immigration system.

This total number of released migrants has accumulated over the period of previous administrations as well. It stood at 3.7 million cases when President Joe Biden took office.

This level of cases is causing staffing issues, according to the report. There are some 6,000 deportation officers who are each responsible for processing up to 7,000 cases.

Illegal migration on the US southern border has gone through three consecutive record-breaking years since Biden took over the White House in January 2021, totaling nearly 8 million illegal encounters during that period, according to publicly available US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data.

Since October 2023, an estimated 1.5 million migrants have been apprehended for illegally crossing into the United States on the southern border, CBP data shows.

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Hunter Biden Files Motion for New Trial on All Counts in Federal Gun Case - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden filed a motion for a new trial on all counts in the federal gun case against him, citing the court's lack of jurisdiction, a US District Court for the District of Delaware filing said on Monday.

"Mr. Biden moves for a new trial on all counts because the court was divested of jurisdiction when it empaneled the jury and conducted the trial without it," the court filing said.

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The motion for a new trial was later deleted from Hunter Biden's court file at the request of counsel.

Last week, a jury in the state of Delaware found Hunter Biden guilty of making a false statement to acquire a firearm, making a false statement with respect to information required to be kept in records and for possession of a firearm by a person who is an unlawful user of or addicted to a controlled substance.

Hunter Biden faces up to 25 years in prison and a $750,000 fine, although first-time offenders often receive a lighter sentence than the prescribed maximum.

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Stoltenberg Says Will Unveil NATO's New Defense Spending Figures on Monday

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on Monday that he will reveal new defense spending figures for all NATO allies during a meeting with President Joe Biden later in the day.

"Later today, when I see President Biden I will announce new defense spending figures for all allies. And I can only now reveal that this year, more than 20 allies spent at least 2% of GDP on defense," Stoltenberg said during a conversation at the Wilson Center titled "What to Expect from the Washington Summit."

Later on Monday, Biden will host Stoltenberg at the White House. The next day, the NATO chief will meet with Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

The NATO summit will take place from July 9-11 at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center.

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US Army Will Not Be Able to Field Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon Until FY 2025 - GAO

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United States Army missed its goal of fielding its first long-range hypersonic weapon (LRHW) battery by fiscal year 2023 and will now aim for fiscal year 2025, the US Government Accountability Office said in its annual report published Monday.

"The Army missed its goal of fielding its first LRHW battery—including missiles— by fiscal year 2023 due to integration challenges. Based on current test and missile production plans, the Army will not field its first complete LRHW battery until fiscal year 2025," the report said.

The Army cannot field an operational system until it conducts a successful end-to-end missile flight test, as the two most recent tests in 2023 were incomplete due to launcher and launch sequence issues, the report added.

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Russia Poses No threat to Canada, Ottawa Worked With US to Track Russian Flotilla - Blair

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Canadian Minister of National Defense Bill Blair said on Monday that Canada and the US jointly tracked the Russian flotilla docked in the port of Havana and stressed that its presence does not in any way pose a threat to Canada.

On Friday, Canada's patrol vessel Margaret Brooke arrived at the port of Havana for a three-day stay, ahead of the 80th anniversary of the two countries establishing bilateral relations.

"I want to be clear that this Russian flotilla presents no immediate threat to Canada or Canadians. However, in order to monitor and track the movements of the flotilla, we worked very closely in cooperation with the United States and have deployed a number of Canadian naval vessels," Blair said during a press conference.

When asked whether he was aware that the visit of the Margaret Brooke would coincide with that of the Russian flotilla, Blair responded affirmatively.

On Wednesday, a detachment of four Russian naval vessels, including the Admiral Gorshkov frigate and the Kazan nuclear submarine, arrived at the port of Havana on an official visit from June 12-17.

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US Designates 2 People, 5 Entities for Facilitating Weapons Procurement to Houthis

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on two individuals and five entities for facilitating weapons procurement for Yemen's Ansar Allah movement, whose supporters are commonly known as Houthis, the US Department of the Treasury said on Monday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is designating two individuals and five entities that have facilitated weapons procurement for Ansar Allah, commonly referred to as the Houthis," the statement said.

The United States also designated one individual, one company and identified one vessel for facilitating the shipment of commodities, the sale of which provides an important funding stream to the Houthis that aids in their weapons procurement, the statement said.

The sanctions target Abd-al-Wahhab Muhammad al-Wazir - a China-based Houthi-affiliated individual who plays a key role in procuring materials that enable Houthi forces to manufacture advanced conventional weapons inside Yemen, the statement said.

Al-Wazir uses his China-based company, Guangzhou Tasneem Trading Company Limited, to obtain these items and ship them to Yemen, the statement said.

Guangzhou Tasneem is a wholly owned subsidiary of Hong Kong-based Tasneem Trading Company Limited.

The United States also sanctioned the China-based firms Ningbo Beilun Saige Machine Co. Ltd and Dongguan Yuze Machining Tools Company Ltd., accusing them of procuring materials critical for manufacturing drones and other weapons as well as providing financial support to the Houthis, the statement said.

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In addition, the United States sanctioned the Oman-based International Smart Digital Interface LLC for purchasing and facilitating the transfer of cruise missile components, manufacturing equipment and other dual-use materials into Yemen and its operator, Muaadh Ahmed Mohammed al-Haifi for coordinating the procurements, the statement added.

Finally, the United States also sanctioned the Cameroon-flagged vessel Otaria, according to the statement.

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US National Weather Service Warns of Heat Wave Expanding From Midwest to East Coast

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is bracing for a heat wave expanding from the Midwest to the East Coast starting Monday and lasting at least through midweek, the National Weather Service's Weather Prediction Center said in a statement.

"A heat wave will expand from the central Plains across the Great Lakes, Ohio Valley, and the Northeast today and remain across the Northeast through midweek," the statement said.

According to the statement, a heat wave is emerging in the northwest, set to surge into the northeast by Tuesday with temperatures reaching +90 degrees Fahrenheit (+32 degrees Celsius) in Vermont and New Hampshire.

"By Wednesday afternoon, some locations in interior New England could see temperatures topping the century mark, which will break daily records at certain locations," the statement said.

The statement added that critical fire danger conditions are anticipated in the Four Corners region today due to persistently dry conditions and gusty winds with the approach of a sharp front.

Earlier today, Environment Canada issued a heat warning for large spans of the southern regions of Ontario and Quebec provinces as temperatures are expected to be 30 to 35 degrees Celsius with humidex values of 40 to 45, in the country's first major seasonal heat wave.

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No Way US Should Fight Russia, Time to Move Away From Enmity - American WWII Veteran

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Under no circumstances should the United States and Russia fight against each other on the battlefield, as it is time to get back to competition, not rivalry, American WWII veteran Frank Cohn told Sputnik.

In remarks during a D-Day commemoration ceremony in Normandy, President Joe Biden claimed that US troops who fought in the Second World War would want the United States to stand up against Russia in Ukraine today.

"Fighting the Russians? No way! We should make an effort to get back to the position where we were competitors but not enemies," Cohn, who participated in the historic meeting with the Soviet troops at the Elbe River in Germany in April 1945, said.

The 98-year-old retired US Army Colonel expressed belief that any normalization is impossible

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until the Ukraine conflict is over.

"Anyway, we just have to wait, and in some later years, our politicians might get smart again and repair the damage. There are so many things where both Russia and the US could plan together - like the environment," he said.

Cohn was invited to participate in the commemoration of the invasion in Normandy, France, earlier this month but decided to stay in the US at the last moment.

"I looked at the itinerary and decided that it was a bit too strenuous for me, although the invitation was certainly appreciated," he said.

The veteran said he did not participate in the Normandy invasion itself because he was still in training camp at that time. However, he arrived there just three months later and saw all the circumstances of the battle.

The D-Day invasion was the largest ever naval, air, and land operation conducted in history when nearly 7,000 allied naval vessels and more than 132,000 allied troops landed on five beaches in Normandy.

More than 4,400 allied troops were killed during the landings on June 6, 1944, including 2,509 US troops.

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canada's defense minister says russia presents no immediate threat to canada or canadians

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More Than 20 NATO Allies Will Spend at Least 2% of GDP on Defense This Year - Stoltenberg

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Environment Canada Issues Advisory Due to Major Heatwave Across Ontario, Quebec Provinces

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Environment Canada has issued a heat warning for large spans of the southern regions of Ontario and Quebec provinces as temperatures are expected to reach up to 45 Celsius in the country's first major seasonal heatwave.

"A prolonged heat event will begin today. Dangerously hot and humid conditions are expected through most of the week," the ministry said in an advisory for the National Capital region. "Daytime highs through much of the week are expected to be 30 to 35 degrees Celsius with humidex values of 40 to 45."

The National Capital region encompasses Ottawa and neighboring Gatineau, Quebec.

Environment Canada said there would be little respite throughout overnights as the lowest temperatures are expected to be between 18-23 degrees Celsius, with humidex values reaching up to 30. The ministry, however, pointed out that cooler temperatures might be observed near

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the shores of the Great Lakes.
Similar advisories are in places across southern Ontario, notably affecting the greater Toronto area, Sudbury and Hamilton.

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USAID Says Seeking Contractors for Public Communications Programs in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US Agency for International Development (USAID) said on Monday that it plans to issue a contract to bolster the agency's public communications programs in Ukraine.
"The United States Government, represented by the USAID Mission in Ukraine intends to issue a contract for the implementation of the USAID Communication Support Activity. The purpose of the Communication Support Activity is to assist the Mission's DOC [Development Outreach and Communications] staff in increasing awareness among communities and individuals across Ukraine about the purpose and positive impact of USAID assistance programs in Ukraine," USAID said in a contracting notice.
The support services may include public awareness campaigns, translation and interpretation work, press management, influencer engagement and photography, the notice said.
The expected period of performance is one year, although it could be longer or shorter, the notice said.
USAID plans to limit competition to local firms and anticipates releasing the solicitation on approximately July 1, 2024, the notice said. Interested parties should submit statements by June 25, the notice added.

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