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6/24/24 Monday

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Window to Return Stranded NASA Astronauts Home From ISS Begins to Close

The astronauts' return journey was first delayed until June 14 and more recently it was scheduled for June 26. Now, the NASA crew will reportedly stay aboard the ISS until some time in July as their window to return begins to close.

Two NASA astronauts are currently thought to be stranded at the International Space Station (ISS) after NASA delayed their return for the third time. The astronauts, Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams, were originally scheduled for a nine-day visit, but will stay aboard indefinitely until some time in July.

Engineers discovered numerous issues with Boeing's Starliner spacecraft including thruster failures and leaking, Boeing reportedly said.

Following years of delays, the aircraft first launched on June 5 with a known leak no larger than a shirt button and reportedly "thin", said one outlet. But during the 25-hour flight, engineers found that Starliner had encountered five separate helium leaks affecting its 28 maneuvering thrusters.

"Additionally, given the duration of the mission, it is appropriate for us to complete an agency-level review, similar to what was done ahead of NASA's SpaceX Demo-2 return after two months on orbit, to document the agency's formal acceptance on proceeding as planned."

Starliner's return module is currently docked to the ISS's Harmony module. NASA may be forced to launch a rescue mission to save the stranded astronauts, experts reportedly said, and that mission may prompt them to use one of SpaceX's Dragon capsules and abandon Starliner altogether. However, Harmony's fuel is limited which means Starliner can only stay docked for 45 days leaving a narrow window to rescue the astronauts.

"We are taking our time and following our standard mission management team process," said Steve Stich, manager of NASA's Commercial Crew Program. "We are letting the data drive our decision making relative to managing the small helium system leaks and thruster performance we observed during rendezvous and docking."

News of the system's failures will undoubtedly add weight to Boeing's growing list of public embarrassments. This is Boeing's third attempt to launch a crew to the ISS with two previous efforts setback by similar technical issues.

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'A Global Managerial Elite': Macron's Unpopularity Could Tank His Party and Lift Up the Right

Macron is essentially betting against his voters as his decision sends a message that, though they may be angry at him and his government, they are not so angry that they will turn to the right-wing pick of Le Pen, whom they have shot down previously.

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French President Emmanuel Macron has dissolved the French National Assembly and called for snap parliamentary elections at the end of this month and the beginning of next month, following a major victory for his right-wing rival, Marine Le Pen's National Rally in the European Parliament vote.

Le Pen's party came first in the EU ballot with 31% of the French vote. But Macron is betting that those votes are in protest against him, and that they will not hold up in France's election.

On Monday, George Szamuely, a senior research fellow at the Global Policy Institute and author, sat down with Sputnik's Fault Lines. Szamuely suggested that while French elections are complicated - with previous elections failing to help the National Rally translate their parliamentary success into success at France's national assembly elections - France's right appears to be making strides.

"The polls are showing that the National Rally is doing well. This boat vote has fallen since the European election," said Szamuely. "However, we should take a deep breath and recall that the National Rally won the European parliamentary elections in 2019. National Rally also won in 2014. And the National Rally was unable to translate that into any substantial vote in the subsequent French National Assembly election."

Szamuely added that while the National Rally was unable to gain any substantial vote in the French National Assembly election, their votes have increased since that time.

"Macron is a deeply unpopular politician. He's personally intensely disliked. He represents a kind of global managerial elite," said Szamuely. "He's a banker. His policies have been kind of neoliberal policies. He's raised the retirement age, he's cut public expenditure. It certainly doesn't show any real interest in improving the lives of ordinary people."

"He only got elected really because twice he was against Le Pen and the name Le Pen has had a very toxic reputation in France," he added. "If you do have a name like Le Pen, it's going to be hard to win an election."

"The French are beginning to express their intense dislike of him. And, ultimately, you can't go on playing the Le Pen and the National Rally card and just hope that, 'oh, they're always going to come around and support me because they're so terrified of Le Pen,'" the author said.

"Macron is seen as someone who doesn't care about the plight of ordinary people, that he is primarily interested in his banker friends. He's interested in the EU bureaucracy. He's interested in this little globalist agenda. He's someone who is out of touch."

On Sunday, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said he was "concerned" about the ongoing elections in France. Meanwhile, Scholz's party, the center-left Social Democrats, scored their worst results ever with just 14% of the vote, said Politico.

"I am concerned about the elections in France," Scholz told public broadcaster ARD. "I hope that parties that are not Le Pen — to put it that way — are successful in the election. But that is for the French people to decide."

"I just think it's just bizarre," said Szamuely of Scholz's comment. "He's just got an absolutely horrific drubbing in his own country. You know, kind of a record low for the Social Democratic Party, never in its history. And in fact the German Social Democratic Party has a very distinguished history."

"It's one of the oldest social democratic parties in the world. He got its lowest vote ever. He will almost certainly be defeated next year. He may even have to be forced to resign later this year if

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the provincial elections turn out to be a total humiliation for him. So, an endorsement from Scholz, it's nothing to brag about."
Sputnik's Jamarl Thomas asked Szamuely for his take on what the French right are seeking in their policies.
"I think that the big issue for the right in France and really for the right throughout Europe is immigration. That basically that immigration is out of control and therefore France is out of control and so basically France will just be lost," the analyst said, adding that the French fear that in a few years France will bear "no resemblance" to what people have been accustomed to.
"I think that the right and, in some ways, the left do want to somehow get the French economy moving. The French economy really is in the doldrums. I mean, there's just no economic growth at all; in fact, it's a negative growth when you count inflation. So they want to somehow return to some form of Keynesian spending and, again, there's a similarity in some ways with the left there."
"So, I think, get out of the economic doldrums and address the issue with immigration. But in both cases, they're going to come head to head with the European Union because the European Union doesn't tolerate deficit spending and it doesn't tolerate countries simply locking down their barriers to immigration."
Thomas then noted that "Macron was allowed by the European Union" to essentially "deficit spend" during the Yellow Vests Protests - during which protestors said they couldn't afford fuel price hikes because they live in rural areas where driving is strenuous. "If they don't spend money, there's no way for France to be able to control this group of people," Thomas added.
"The European Union has wedded itself to this policy of the national debt to be a certain percentage of the GDP. The budget deficit also has to be a particular percentage of the GDP. Now, they do have a certain flexibility when it comes to leaders that they favor and I think Macron is someone that they favor. And so they gave him a certain latitude. They wouldn't give any kind of latitude if you had a National Rally government or even if you had a leftist government," he said.
"Macron pursued essentially an EU agenda. The EU agenda was the Green agenda. The Green agenda was obviously on the backs of working people. They had to suddenly pay a hell of a lot more for their fuel. The Green agenda was on the backs of farmers. They also had to pay a lot more for their fuel."

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Nearly Half a Million Gazans Facing Catastrophic Levels of Food Insecurity - UN Draft Report

Israel's military assault on Gaza has not only destroyed large portions of Gazan farmland, but Israeli forces have also repeatedly blocked aid deliveries into northern Gaza, despite demands from top UN court and the Security Council to allow for open aid access, UN News said in April.
One in five of Gaza's population - that's nearly 500,000 people - are now facing "catastrophic levels of acute food insecurity" The Guardianreported, citing a draft report from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), which is the United Nations hunger monitoring system.

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According to the IPC, in March and April food deliveries reaching northern Gaza had successfully increased, helping to “avert” what seemed to be an unavoidable famine, but in recent weeks following renewed hostilities the situation has worsened and now a “high risk of famine persists across the whole of the Gaza Strip”. For instance, the report found that half of Gaza’s households have had to sell or trade their clothing for food.

“More than half [of households] also reported that, often, they do not have any food to eat in the house, and over 20% go entire days and nights without eating. The recent trajectory is negative and highly unstable. Should this continue, the improvements seen in April could be rapidly reversed," the report says.

Children of Gaza are experiencing the direct impact of “an extreme lack of food, starvation, and exhaustion”. In one instance, a baby named Majd who was born at a healthy weight of 3.5 kg (7.7 lbs), weighed about 3 kg less than what is normal for a baby his age in May when he was six months old, Reuters reported.

After suffering from malnutrition the baby had to be treated for an injection and given fortified milk to help bring his weight back up. After the hospital where the baby was staying was evacuated following an Israeli raid, the news agency was unable to trace Majd’s health for an update.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), one in three children in northern Gaza are acutely malnourished or experiencing emaciation. Ismail Al-Thawabta, the director of the Hamas-run government media office, believes a majority of malnutrition deaths in Gaza (29 of the 33 fatalities) have been children, but believes that number could be higher.

While Israeli forces have reportedly blocked aid deliveries into the famine-stricken region, more than a dozen Palestinians have also been tragically killed by airdrops of aid delivered by multiple nations. Some either died by drowning while trying to recover the food deliveries, while others were fatally struck by falling pallets with failed parachutes, according to a UN News report from April.

The IPC has not officially declared a famine, but will do so when 20% of households have an extreme lack of food, 30% of children suffer from acute malnutrition and two adults or four children per 10,000 people begin to die daily. A famine early warning system based in the US (Fews Net) said it was “possible, if not likely” that a famine in northern Gaza would begin in April, and two UN organizations have said more than 1 million Gazans were “expected to face death and starvation” by mid-July.

Among other alleged crimes, the International Criminal Court’s prosecutor accused Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant of using starvation of civilians as a warfare method.

"Since October 7 of last year the death toll from Israeli aggression has grown to 37,551 and 85,911 people were injured. Over the past 24 hours the occupation forces have committed three mass killings of families in the Gaza Strip that left 101 dead and 169 injured," the Gaza Health Ministry said in a statement on Sunday.

UN draft report shows nearly half a million Gazans facing catastrophic levels of food insecurity

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Beijing Warns of Resolute Response If Canada Raises Tariffs on Chinese EVs - Embassy

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) – Beijing will take "resolute actions" to defend its rights and interests if Canada goes forward with imposing a surtax on imports of Chinese-made electric vehicles, the Chinese Embassy in Ottawa told Sputnik.

On Monday, Canadian Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland announced that the country would be launching on July 2 a 30-day consultation period on potential policy responses to China's "unfair competition" in the electric vehicle industry. The measures could include a surtax on imports of Chinese EVs under Section 53 of the Customs Tariff Act, Freeland said.

"If Canada insists on politicizing and weaponizing economic and trade issues to unilaterally impose tariffs on Chinese exports, China will take resolute actions to defend its legitimate rights and interests," the embassy said in a statement.

China’s development and competitive advantage in the EV industry is the result of persistent technological innovation, well-established industrial supply chains and full market competition, the statement said. The Chinese industry does not depend on government subsidies and the accusation over China's alleged overcapacity is "completely groundless," the embassy stated.

The diplomatic mission also pointed out that Canadian media have reported that the only Chinese-made EVs imported to Canada are Tesla vehicles manufactured in Shanghai. The embassy warned that the new tariffs would be in violation of World Trade Organization (WTO) rules and have negative consequences for Chinese-Canadian ties.

The Biden administration said in mid-May it was slapping a 100% tariff on Chinese-made electric vehicle imports to the United States in a bid to stop cheap Chinese EVs from flooding the domestic market.

In lockstep with the US, the European Commission in June made a provisional decision to

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impose extra duties on imports of Chinese EVs due to alleged unfair subsidization starting from July if talks with China did not result in an effective solution. Beijing has warned it will file a lawsuit with the WTO if the EU goes ahead with the plan.

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US Department of Justice Declines to Comment on Assange Plea Deal - Spokesperson to Sputnik

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Fed Not Yet at Point Where Rate Cut Will Be Appropriate - Governor Bowman

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve is not yet at a point where a cut in US interest rates is necessary, Michelle Bowman, one of the central bank's seven governors, said Tuesday.

"We are still not yet at the point where it is appropriate to lower the policy rate," Bowman said in a speech at a banking forum in London. "In my view, we should consider a range of possible scenarios that could unfold when considering how the FOMC's monetary policy decisions may evolve."

The FOMC refers to the Federal Open Market Committee, the policy-making arm of the Fed. The committee meets on July 31 to decide whether to lower rates that are at two-decade highs.

Bowman said she might actually opt for a rate hike if inflation remained stubbornly above Fed targets.

"I remain willing to raise the target range for rates at a future meeting should progress on inflation stall or even reverse," she said. "Given the risks and uncertainties regarding my economic outlook, I will remain cautious in my approach to considering future changes in the stance of policy."

Inflation, as indicated by the US Consumer Price Index (CPI), stood at 3.3% per annum in April. That is well above the Fed's 2%-per-year target.

Bowman said the FOMC was wary about making a rate cut that it may have to reverse.

"Reducing our policy rate too soon or too quickly could result in a rebound in inflation, requiring further future policy rate increases to return inflation to 2 percent over the longer run," she said.

Until 2019, inflation grew for more than a decade in opposite fashion to now, with the Fed struggling to get to its 2% per year target in order to stimulate the economy.

The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 changed all that, with inflation supercharged by the resulting shutdown of the economy, disruption of supply chains and trillions of dollars in recovery spending by the government.

By June 2022, the CPI hit a four-decade high 9.1% a year. It came down to current levels of around 3% after the Fed hiked interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023.

The current range for rates, at between 5.25% and 5.5% is at the highest since 2002, compared with the pre-pandemic low of between zero and 0.25%.

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If the FOMC forgoes a rate change on July 31, it has three more opportunities to make amends before the year ends: September 18, November 7 and December 18.

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Putin's Proposals on Ukraine Reasonable, Not Extreme - US Senate Hopeful

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The recent peace proposals on Ukraine voiced by Russian President Vladimir Putin are reasonable and not extreme, while the Ukraine summit hosted by Switzerland without Russia's participation was a complete farce, independent candidate for the US Senate from New York Diane Sare told Sputnik.

"I think that what Putin put forward is actually rather reasonable because there were referenda in these new regions, the former Ukrainian oblasts. I know Russia has been investing a great deal in rebuilding and building to take care of the people living there," Sare said. "I was surprised, I think other people were surprised that he didn't say anything about taking Odessa. So, it's clear that his proposal is not an extreme proposal."

Earlier in June, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia would immediately cease fire and begin negotiations with Ukraine after Kiev withdraws troops from the regions incorporated into Russia in 2022 and officially abandons plans to join NATO. Russia demands a neutral, non-aligned, nuclear-free status for Ukraine, as well as its demilitarization and denazification, Putin stated.

Sare underscored that the demand for the denazification of the country is also a reasonable one, though it might prove to be a challenge given the position of some NATO countries.

"That is more challenging since you have people in NATO apparently who don't consider the glorification of Nazism to be a major problem," she said. "But I am aware that there is a group of East Germans who have just put out a letter saying that they're going to come forward now to support Putin's proposal. I saw that even Newsweek magazine finally interviewed Ambassador Antonov about this. So it may be that some people are beginning to realize that they should take it into consideration."

Commenting on the Swiss-hosted summit on Ukraine earlier this month, to which Russia was not invited, Sare called it a "complete farce."

"Because you can't have negotiations without Russia. So that was really ridiculous," she stated.

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US Voters Worried About War, Want to Stop Supplying Arms to Ukraine - Senate Hopeful

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - American voters are worried about wars and want Washington to stop sending arms, particularly to Ukraine, independent candidate for the US Senate from New York Diane Sare told Sputnik.

"I and my campaign team spoke with hundreds of thousands of New York voters, and what is on people's mind is war," Sare said. "They're very worried about war. They don't think we should

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keep sending weapons, particularly to Ukraine."

Commenting on the most recent supplemental appropriations package for Ukraine, Sare stressed that a peace process or negotiations are not achieved by continually sending weapons.

"I can't think of any crisis that ever was solved by deliberately trying to inflict harm on other human beings. That only escalates things," Sare said.

Sare also shared that another issue that is on voters' minds is inflation.

"People are really upset about the price of food, the price of housing, the fact that they are paying more and more and their standard of living is going down no matter how much they pay," she explained.

Western countries have provided hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of aid to Ukraine since the start of Russia's military operation in February 2022. The Kremlin has consistently warned against the West's continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict.

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Washington's Persecution of Julian Assange to Remain Stain on US - Activist

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The release of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is positive news, however, it is sad that he needs to plead guilty to one count, and his persecution overall will remain a stain on the United States, a member of DC Action for Assange and the Director of the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press, Martha Allen, told Sputnik.

Assange has been released from prison in the United Kingdom and is flying to Australia, WikiLeaks said earlier.

"As a member of DC Action for Assange and as the Director of the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press, I would like to express my happiness that Julian Assange will finally be free after five years in solitary prison," Allen said. "While I am sad that he needed to plead guilty to one count when he is innocent, I am relieved that he will be free."

Allen went on to say that the US president and attorney general should have dropped the charges long ago and supported a free and independent press.

"It is a stain on our country to have persecuted a journalist and publisher," she stated. "We appreciate that Julian Assange gave so much of his life for truth and a free press."

Earlier in the day, court documents revealed that Assange is expected to plead guilty to a US espionage charge as part of a plea deal with federal prosecutors. Wikileaks statement confirmed reports that Assange has a deal with the US Department of Justice, which is yet to be formally finalized.

Assange, an Australian citizen, was transferred to London's high-security Belmarsh prison in April 2019 on bail breach charges. In the US, he faced prosecution under the Espionage Act for obtaining and disclosing classified information that shed light on war crimes and human rights violations committed by US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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US Senate Hopeful Urges Reviving Dialogue With Russia

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - Direct contacts between Moscow and Washington are vital, and the US Congress can contribute to launching talks between the two sides, independent candidate for the US Senate Diane Sare told Sputnik.

"Absolutely, I think that such discussion is necessary. In fact, the more the military situation seems to be difficult, the more talks are necessary," Sare, who is vying for one of New York's two Senate seats, said.

Sare noted that back channel-talks between former President John F. Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev helped both nations avert a nuclear catastrophe.

"I think such conversations are absolutely urgent. None of us is perfect, and none of us can read the minds of each other. So it is a very dangerous mistake to think that you know what is going on in the mind of other world leaders if you are not talking to them," she said.

Sare went on to say that the US Congress can play a role in encouraging such talks and pointed out that there are many different steps they could take.

"Perhaps some of them should travel to Russia and meet with their counterparts in the Russian Duma," she said.

Members of Congress could also write an open letter to President Joe Biden or Secretary of State Antony Blinken calling for dialogue, or hold a hearing in which military experts explain the dangers of the current situation and how talks could help reduce risks.

"I think there are many ways that they can use their voice," she said.

Sare said that if elected, she would encourage intra-parliamentary dialogue with every nation, including Russia.

"I think this is something we have to do, especially in the era of nuclear weapons," she said. "Since the mankind has the ability to annihilate itself, I think we owe it to everyone on the planet to do everything we can to improve relations among nations and develop an understanding among different people across the globe."

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US Prosecutors to Recommend Justice Dept. Pursue Criminal Charges Against Boeing - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - US federal prosecutors will recommend to the US Justice Department that it pursue criminal charges against Boeing for allegedly breaching a 2021 deferred-prosecution agreement following two fatal 737 MAX aircraft crashes, the Washington Post reported citing two people familiar with the matter.

The report said on Monday that criminal charges are one of several options the Justice Department is considering in this case, but no final decision has been made.

The New York Times reported on Friday that the Justice Department intends to extend the

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deferred prosecution agreement with Boeing, mandating the installation of a federal monitor to oversee safety enhancements.

On May 14, the Justice Department notified Boeing that the company breached a 2021 agreement between them to avoid criminal charges for the two fatal 737 MAX crashes. Under the agreement, Boeing paid $2.5 billion in penalties and vowed to improve its safety and compliance protocols.

However, the Justice Department notified Boeing that it is now subject to criminal prosecution after going through a series of safety mishaps this year, including a door plug that blew off an Alaska Airlines flight shortly after takeoff.

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US Navy Orders Almost $1Bln in Radio Terminals From L3 Harris Technologies - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - L3Harris Technologies has received an almost $1 billion US Navy contract to provide Multifunctional Information Distribution System (MIDS) Joint Tactical Radio Systems (JTRS) terminals, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"L3Harris Technologies [of] Salt Lake City, Utah was awarded a ...contract with a maximum potential value of $998,828,164 for the production, retrofits, development, and sustainment of the Multifunctional Information Distribution System (MIDS) Joint Tactical Radio Systems (JTRS) terminals," the release stated on Monday.

Currently, there are three variants of MIDS JTRS terminals: the Concurrent Multi-Netting-4, the Tactical Targeting Network Technology, and the F-22 variant, the release acknowledged.

The contract combines purchases for the US Navy, Air Force, and MIDS Program Office, as well as purchases for NATO and all NATO nations under the FMS [Foreign Military Sales] program, the Defense Department said.

Work on the project will be performed in Salt Lake City, Utah (50%); and Carlsbad, California (50%) over the next five years and is scheduled to be completed by the end of June 2029, the Defense Department said.

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Five Companies Receive $1.5Bln Cybersecurity, IT Consulting Defense Order - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - Five defense consulting corporations have received a combined $1.5 billion Washington Headquarters Services contract to perform cybersecurity; IT; information enterprise, and command, control, and communications services, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

“Analytic Services [of] Falls Church, Virginia; Booz Allen Hamilton (BAH) [of] McLean, Virginia; CACI [of] Federal, Chantilly, Virginia; Leidos [of] Reston, Virginia and Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) [of] Reston, Virginia are awarded a ...contract valued at $1.5 billion," the release stated on Monday.

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Under the contract, the five companies will perform cybersecurity; IT; information enterprise; command, control, and communications; IT management analytics, and data analytics, the Defense Department said.

Services provided will include "strategic planning, capital planning, technology performance, assessments, research and analysis, architectures, modeling, hardware and/or software development and/or acquisition," the Defense Department explained.

Other services will cover standards development and evaluation, customization of software analytical tools, models, decision aids, screening methods, simulation and war-gaming, the release said.

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UPDATE- Assange to Plead Guilty to US Espionage Charge As Part of Deal With Federal Gov't - Filing

(Updates with background, details in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange is expected to plead guilty to a US espionage charge as part of a plea deal with federal prosecutors, court documents revealed.

The court document filed on Monday shows that Assange plans to plead guilty to one count of conspiracy to obtain and disclose national defense information.

Assange was charged with criminal information, which usually signifies a plea deal.

According to CBS News, the plea deal is expected to be finalized on Wednesday and resolve Assange's legal case in the United States.

The report said US federal prosecutors recommend Assange receive a 5-year prison sentence as part of the plea deal, but he will not be required to spend time in a US prison because he will be credited for the five years he spent in a UK prison fighting his extradition to the United States.

In the United States, Assange faces prosecution under the Espionage Act for obtaining and disclosing classified information that sheds light on numerous war crimes and human rights violations committed by US troops during the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. He initially faced up to 175 years in prison.

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Georgia Will Be Invited to Upcoming NATO Summit in Washington - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Georgia will get an invitation to take part in the upcoming NATO summit in Washington next month, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien announced.

"Now, to Georgia - yes, Georgia and all partners will be invited to participate in the partnership events," O'Brien said during a press briefing on Monday.

O'Brien pointed out that the United States is very troubled by the recent decisions and the rhetoric of Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party.

"We have tried to be very clear and I think the High Representative Josep Borrell has been very clear today that these recent actions - the violence against opposition figures, the violence against civil society, the Moscow-based foreign agent law, the apparent decision to award a new port to a Chinese company - all of these things are incompatible with wanting to join the US- and EU-based international organizations," O'Brien said.

The United States is asking the Georgian government to reconsider its positions, emphasizing that Washington will continue reviewing its bilateral and multilateral engagements with them.

In early June, Georgian parliament speaker Shalva Papuashvili signed the Foreign Agents bill into law, with the document having gone into effect, despite street protests and warnings from Western countries. EU Ambassador to Georgia Pawel Herczynski said on Thursday that the adoption of the bill has frozen Georgia's integration into the European Union.

After the adoption of the law, the United States imposed sanctions against a number of Georgian officials, and Western politicians believe that this law contradicts European principles and values.

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US to Discuss With Ukraine Deadly Missile Attack on Crimea - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The United States plans to soon have talks with Ukraine about the ATACMS strikes in Sevastopol that killed civilians over the weekend, Defense Department spokesperson Patrick Ryder told reporters.

On Sunday, the Ukrainian military attacked Sevastopol using US-made ATACMS long-range missiles with cluster warheads, four of which were shot down and one deflected and exploded over the city. According to the latest data, four people were killed and 153 others were injured in the attack, including children.

"We don't have any information to indicate whether or not civilians were killed," Ryder said on Monday. "Certainly, you know, as I understand it, that's something that we will talk to the Ukrainians about. We've been very clear about, you know, we don't want to see civilian

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casualties."
When pressed on whether the United States provided Ukraine with intelligence support and targeting data in the strike on Sevastopol, Ryder referred reporters to Ukraine to talk about their operations.
Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday that Ukraine's deadly strike on Sevastopol will be discussed during a UN Security Council meeting in July.

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UN's Calls for Parties to JCPOA, US For Cooperation 'Insufficient'- Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, June 25 (Sputnik) - Russia sees the UN's calls on the US and other parties for cooperation with regards to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as insufficient, the Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday.
"What is absolutely insufficient is the call from Antonio Guterres for the parties to the JCPOA and the US to pursue all possible avenues for dialogue and cooperation," Nebenzia said in the UN Security Council to his colleagues during a meeting on non-proliferation.
Earlier, Nebenzia also criticized the UN Secretariat for its position on the war in Ukraine.
Nebenzia listed several examples where the UN condemned Russia but did not show enough regret in response to Ukrainian attacks against Russians.

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US Judge Sentences Ex-Leader of Haiti Gang to 35 Years in Prison - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - A US judge sentenced the former leader of the notorious Haitian gang known as 400 Mawozo to 35 years in prison after he was convicted for smuggling firearms to Haiti and laundering money collected from ransoms of US hostages, the Justice Department announced.
"Joly Germine, 31, of Croix-des-Bouquets, Haiti, was sentenced today to 420 months in prison for his role in a gunrunning conspiracy that smuggled firearms to Haiti in violation of US export laws, and the laundering of ransoms paid for US hostages held by the notoriously violent Haitian gang known as 400 Mawozo," the Justice Department said in a press release on Monday.
Germine was accused of his role in the gang's effort to purchase at least 24 firearms in the United States, including AK-47s, AR-15s, an M4 Carbine rifle, an M1A rifle, and a .50 caliber rifle, which were smuggled to the gang in Haiti to further their criminal activities, according to the release.
These firearms, the release said, were bought using funds the gang collected from ransoms of US citizens held hostage by the gang in Haiti in 2021.
In the fall of 2021, the 400 Mawozo gang claimed responsibility for taking 16 US citizens hostage, including five children, and one Canadian citizen who were part of a missionary organization visiting an orphanage in Port-au-Prince, the release said, adding that the gang

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demanded a ransom of $1 million for each hostage.
The hostages were all released or had escaped by December 16, 2021.
Germine's wife, Eliande Tunis, who was described as the "Queen" of 400 Mawozo, was sentenced on June 5 to 150 months in prison for her role in the conspiracy as well, the release added.
Two other defendants in the case were also sentenced to prison for their involvement.

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Blinken Stresses Need to Protect Gaza Aid Workers in Call With Gallant - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stressed the need for Israel to protect aid workers in the Gaza Strip during a call with Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a statement.
"The Secretary emphasized the need to take additional steps to protect humanitarian workers in Gaza and deliver assistance throughout Gaza in full coordination with the United Nations," the statement said on Monday.
Blinken and Gallant also discussed ongoing efforts to achieve a ceasefire and release hostages in the Gaza Strip, the statement said.
Additionally, Blinken underscored the importance of avoiding escalation of the conflict, the statement said.
On October 7, 2023, the Palestinian organization Hamas launched an attack on Israel, killing nearly 1,200 people and abducting some 240 others. Israel subsequently began military operations in the Gaza Strip, which have killed more than 37,550 people and wounded more than 85,900 others, according to local authorities.

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US Launching Global Music Partnership With Video Sharing Website YouTube - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - The United States is launching a partnership with the video sharing platform YouTube to support the its Global Music Diplomacy Initiative, the US State Department announced.
"US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and YouTube's Global Head of Music Lyor Cohen announced today a new Department of State-YouTube partnership in support of the Department's Global Music Diplomacy Initiative, a worldwide effort to elevate music as a diplomatic platform to promote peace and democracy in support of the United States' broader foreign policy goals," the State Department said in a statement on Monday.
The State Department selected a new roster of Global Music Ambassadors, which include Herbie Hancock, Jelly Roll, Grace Bowers and Armani White, the statement said.
The State Department and YouTube will cooperate to enhance English language learning

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through music and across the YouTube platform, the statement added.

The State Department will also offer micro-grants to exchange program alumni worldwide who use music to expand access to education, economic opportunity, equity and inclusion, according to the statement.

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Austin to Meet Israeli Counterpart for Middle East Security Talks- Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin will discuss the security developments in the Middle East, including in Lebanon, with his Israeli counterpart Yoav Gallant during a meeting in Washington DC on Tuesday, Pentagon Press Secretary Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said.

The meeting will focus on Israeli operations in Gaza, humanitarian efforts in the region, and the rising tensions with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Ryder said on Monday.

"No doubt there will be discussions about the situation in Lebanon," Ryder said. "But we'll have much more to say, you know, post-meeting. So, more to come."

Ryder also said the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group has left the U.S. Central Command's area of operations and will be replaced by the USS Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group.

Despite a brief gap between the deployments of the two carrier strike groups, Ryder assured that the United States has adequate military capabilities in the region, including destroyers, aircraft, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets.

The situation on the Israeli-Lebanese border worsened after the start of hostilities between Israel and Palestinian movement Hamas in October 2023. The Israeli army and Lebanese Hezbollah fighters, who support Palestine in the conflict with Israel, have regularly exchanged fire across the border since then. On Tuesday, Israel said it approved and validated operational plans for an offensive in Lebanon.

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

More than 37,550 people have been killed and over 85,900 others have been wounded in Israel's military operations, according to local authorities.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

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WASHINGTON, June 25 (Sputnik) -

MISSILE ATTACK ON SEVASTOPOL

* The involvement of the United States in the deadly terrorist attack on Sevastopol is not under any doubt, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Monday.
* The Russian Foreign Ministry said that it had summoned US Ambassador to Russia Lynne Tracy to express a demarche in connection with the deadly missile attack on Sevastopol.
* The Kremlin considers the missile attack by the Ukrainian military on Sevastopol to be barbaric and understands who stands behind it, spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
* The United States has no assessment as to who was responsible for the deadly missile strike on Sevastopol in Crimea over the weekend, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

TERRORIST ATTACK IN DAGESTAN

* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres strongly condemns the recent deadly terrorist attack in Russia's Dagestan and expresses condolences to the families of the victim, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.
* Turkey expresses deepest condolences to Russia in connection with the deadly terrorist attacks in Dagestan, ruling Justice and Development Party spokesman Omer Celik said.
* The Iranian authorities are ready to provide assistance in the investigation of the terrorist attacks in Dagestan if necessary, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko told Sputnik.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Ukrainian armed forces have lost up to 610 soldiers in battles with Russia's army group South over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Monday.
* Peace proposals for Ukraine voiced by Russian President Vladimir Putin remain in force and the time frames have been announced, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
* Russia is not holding any undercover talks with the West on the situation in Ukraine, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.
* Budapest will not approve the allocation of 6.5 billion euros ($6.9 billion) from the EU peace fund for arms to Ukraine until the discrimination against Hungarian firms is stopped by Kiev, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said.
* The Biden administration strongly opposes a measure included in the $833 billion defense funding bill proposed by the House of Representatives that would terminate the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI), the White House Office of Management and Budget said.

GAZA

* Israel remains committed to the proposal for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, announced by US President Joe Biden, but will not stop the war until it eliminates the radical Palestinian movement Hamas and returns all hostages, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Monday.
* Operations at the US-built temporary pier off the Gaza Strip will be temporarily suspend due to planned maintenance activities, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) said.

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* The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said Monday it had eliminated a high-ranked Hamas member and commander who was in charge of arms production for the movement and led several group's units.

RUSSIA-BELARUS RELATIONS

* Russia and Belarus are seeking to improve the Collective Security Treaty Organization's (CSTO) foreign policy coordination and promoting the organization's observer and partner status, the joint statement of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Aleinik, published on Monday, read.
* Minsk and Moscow are considering contributing to the formation of a new sustainable international security architecture, the parameters of which should be the rules of conflict-free coexistence, the joint statement of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Aleinik read.
* Russia and Belarus will strengthen the military-technical cooperation, Lavrov said.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The European Union published its 14th package of sanctions against Russia in the official journal of the EU.
* Russia will analyze the European Union's 14th package of sanctions against Moscow and take response measures, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko said.
* Russia will expand the travel ban list of EU officials in response to the new European sanctions, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
* Proceeds from the Russian frozen assets should allow Ukraine to continue fighting until 2025, US Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said.
* Hungary has received an exception for all investments in the construction of the Paks-2 nuclear power plant from the new package of sanctions against Russia, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said.

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Trump Says Would Agree for Drug Test If Biden Takes One Too Ahead of Debates

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Donald Trump said on Monday that he is ready to be drug tested if his main opponent President Joe Biden agrees to this ahead of the landmark debates.

"Drug test for crooked Joe Biden??? I would, also, immediately agree to one!!!" Trump wrote in a Truth Social post.

The post comes just days after Trump suggested during a rally in Philadelphia that Biden will be "all jacked up," hinting the incumbent US president would take drugs to ensure he was in good cognitive shape at the debate against him.

In September 2020, Trump likewise called for a drug test for Biden in the lead-up to the debate.

Trump and Biden are set to participate in a debate hosted by CNN on Thursday. The second debate is scheduled to take place on September 10.

An aggregation of national polls by RealClearPolitics shows that Trump holds a half-a-point

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lead over Biden and leads him in all seven swing US states.

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Russia to Raise Issue of Sevastopol Attack During UNSC Meeting in July - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, June 24 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday that Ukraine's deadly strike on Sevastopol will be discussed during a UN Security Council meeting in July.

"I think that it [Sevastopol attack] will be raised during another regular meeting on Ukraine that will definitely follow in July, like we do every month," Nebenzia told UN journalists. "We will not hesitate to speak about what is happening."

On Sunday, the Ukrainian armed forces attacked Sevastopol, the largest city on the Crimean Peninsula, using US-made ATACMS missiles with cluster warheads, four of which were shot down and one deflected and exploded over the city. According to the latest data, four people were killed and 153 others were injured in the attack, including children.

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Gold Could Reach $3,000/Oz In 12-18 Months - Bank Of America

NEW YORK, June 24 (Sputnik) - Gold could reach $3,000 an ounce over the next 12 to 18 months, particularly if a US interest rate cut is carried out by the Federal Reserve, Bank of America (BofA) said in an outlook.

Benchmark US gold futures for August delivery settled at $2,316.40 an ounce on the COMEX division of the New York Mercantile Exchange on Monday. In global physical trading, gold hovered at $2,331 an ounce.

BofA said it was aware that its outlook called for a near $700 or 30% rally from current pricing, something that required intensive support from buyers. But on the same token, it was confident that its call would be met over the course of the next year and a half.

"Under this scenario, gold may fall initially on broad liquidations but should then gain," BofA's analysts said in their outlook.

A year ago, gold was just under $2,000 an ounce when there was less certainty over whether the Fed was done with its rate hikes.

The May reading for the US Consumer Price Index (CPI) showed inflation at 3.4% per annum.

Fed officials in recent weeks, led by Chairman Jerome Powell, have indicated that the central bank will leave rates as they are if the economy and inflation do not cool enough to warrant a cut.

Until 2019, inflation grew for more than a decade in opposite fashion to now, with the Fed struggling to get to its 2% per year target in order to stimulate the economy.

The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 changed all that, with inflation supercharged by the resulting shutdown of the economy, disruption of supply chains, and trillions of dollars in recovery

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spending by the government.
By June 2022, the CPI hit a four-decade high of 9.1% a year. It came down to current levels of around 3% after the Fed hiked interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and July 2023.
The current range for rates, at between 5.25% and 5.5% is at the highest since 2002, compared with the pre-pandemic low of between zero and 0.25%.
The Fed has four opportunities for a rate cut before the year ends: July 31, September 18, November 7, and December 18.
A recent World Gold Council survey also indicates central banks' intention to purchase more gold. This aligns with the growing concerns around US Treasury market fragility, potentially prompting further diversification into gold by both central banks and private investors.

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Nebenzia Says UN Secretariat Holds Double Standards When Condemning Ukraine's Crimes

UNITED NATIONS, June 24 (Sputnik) - The Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday that the UN has double standards when calling out Ukrainian crimes, not condemning them enough.
"This is an illustration of bias and hypocrisy in the UN Secretariat trying to shy away from calling a spade a spade. The crimes committed by the Kiev regime are invisible and NATO members are participants in these crimes," Nebenzia said to the UN journalists in front of the UN Security Council.
Nebenzia listed several examples where the UN condemned Russia but did not show enough regret in response to Ukrainian attacks against Russians.

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Biden Opposes End of Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative in Defense Bill - White House

(Updates with details in paras 4,5)
WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration strongly opposes a measure included in the $833 billion defense funding bill proposed by the House of Representatives that would terminate the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI), the White House Office of Management and Budget said in a press release on Monday.
"The Administration strongly opposes the elimination of funding for USAI," the release said. "Eliminating all USAI funding would undermine US national security, undercut Ukraine's ability to fight Russian aggression, and could cause Russia and other would-be aggressors around the world to question America's commitment to a critical partner on the frontline of aggression."
Biden would veto the House version of the Department of Defense Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2025 if it reached his desk as is, the release added.
Moreover, the release said the Biden administration is also concerned the bill fails to fully support the White House's shipbuilding plan as it provides $761 million less than initially

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requested and eliminates two ship procurements.

The White House also opposes the bill because it seeks to block funding to operate a pier off the coast of Gaza, it prevents the Defense Department from housing migrants at military bases in the United States, and it extends a ban prohibiting the use of defense funds to transport Guantanamo Bay detainees overseas.

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US to Provide $150Mln More in Munitions to Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is set to provide Ukraine with $150 million more in munitions for use against Russia, the Associated Press reported on Monday.

The US is expected to unveil the aid package on Tuesday, the report said, citing two US officials.

The package will include munitions for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), which are capable of launching long-range Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) rounds, the report said.

It is unclear whether the package will include ATACMS munitions, but it will not include cluster munitions, the report added.

The package will also include 155mm and 105mm artillery rounds, anti-armor weapons, small arms and grenades, the report said.

The package comes following a Ukrainian strike on Sevastopol on Sunday, which killed four people and injured 153 others, including children. The attack utilized US-provided ATACMS missiles with cluster warheads.

The US' involvement in the attack is "beyond any doubt," Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday.

The Kremlin has said that the continued delivery of aid to Ukraine will only prolong the conflict, and that arms shipments will be considered legitimate targets.

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Russia to Raise Issue of Sevastopol Attack During UNSC Meeting in July - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, June 24 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday that Ukraine's deadly strike on Sevastopol will be discussed during a UN Security Council meeting in July.

"I think that it [Sevastopol attack] will be raised during another regular meeting on Ukraine that will definitely follow in July, like we do every month," Nebenzia told UN journalists. "We will not hesitate to speak about what is happening."

On Sunday, the Ukrainian armed forces attacked Sevastopol, the largest city on the Crimean Peninsula, using US-made ATACMS missiles with cluster warheads, four of which were shot down and one deflected and exploded over the city. According to the latest data, four people

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were killed and 153 others were injured in the attack, including children.

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Biden Designates Kenya as Major Non-NATO Ally - Memorandum

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) – President Joe Biden designated Kenya as a major non-NATO ally of the United States, according to a memorandum published by the White House on Monday.

"By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, including section 517 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended…, I hereby designate Kenya as a Major Non-NATO Ally of the United States," the memorandum said.

In May, Biden announced his intention to designate Kenya as a major non-NATO ally during Kenyan President William Ruto's visit to Washington.

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Direct US Involvement in Terrorist Attack on Sevastopol Beyond any Doubt - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United States' direct involvement in the deadly terrorist attack carried out by Ukraine against Sevastopol is beyond doubt, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday.

"The fact that the US is directly involved in this crime is beyond any doubt," Nebenzia told UN journalists.

On Sunday, the Ukrainian armed forces attacked Sevastopol, the largest city on the Crimean Peninsula, using US-made ATACMS missiles with cluster warheads, four of which were shot down and one deflected and exploded over the city. According to the latest data, four people were killed and 153 others were injured in the attack, including children.

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White House Says Opposes FY2025 Appropriations Bill for State, Foreign Operations

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) said on Monday that the Biden administration opposes passage of the House of Representatives' fiscal year 2025 appropriations bill for state and foreign operations.

"The Administration strongly opposes House passage of HR 8771, making appropriations for the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs… If the President were presented with HR 8771, he would veto it," OMB said in a statement.

Although the Biden administration appreciated the inclusion of $2.1 billion for development,

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humanitarian and security assistance to advance its Indo-Pacific Strategy, it is concerned by sharp reductions to funding for the US State Department and US Agency for International Development's personnel and operations, the statement said.

Such cuts would hinder the administration's ability to implement programs in the Indo-Pacific region and erode the United States' diplomatic presence around the world, ceding diplomatic and development ground to China and other malign actors, the statement said.

Moreover, the administration is concerned about restrictions and requirements for aid for the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the statement said. The administration opposes attempts to constrain the president's ability to deploy resources and manage defense exports consistent with US foreign policy objects, laws and regulations, the statement said.

House Republicans are "wasting time" with their appropriations bills, which include funding cuts and partisan policy provisions, the statement said. The Biden administration is prepared to work with lawmakers as the FY25 appropriations process proceeds, the statement added.

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Biden Says 'Deeply Disturbed' by Attempted Drowning of 3-Year-Old Palestinian-American

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Monday that he is disturbed by the reports of an attempted drowning of a three-year-old Palestinian-American.

"I am deeply disturbed by the reports of an attempted drowning of a three-year-old Palestinian-American at a neighbourhood pool," Biden said in a social media post.

Biden also said that no child should ever face a violent attack, expressing sympathy for the family of the victim.

On May 19, a woman by the name of Elizabeth Wolf attacked a mother and her children at their apartment complex's pool, attempting to drown the three-year-old while making racist remarks, according to a statement from the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR),

The statement said that Wolf approached the hijab-wearing mother by uttering racist remarks, jumped into the pool, dragged her children to the deep end, snatched off her headscarf, beat her with it, kicked her away and forced her three-year-old daughter's head underwater.

An African-American man helped rescue the three-yer-old, according to the statement.

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Biden Opposes End of Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative in Defense Bill - White House

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration strongly opposes a measure included in the $833 billion defense funding bill proposed by the House of Representatives that would terminate the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI), the White House Office of Management and Budget said in a press release on Monday.

"The Administration strongly opposes the elimination of funding for USAI," the release said.

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"Eliminating all USAI funding would undermine US national security, undercut Ukraine's ability to fight Russian aggression, and could cause Russia and other would-be aggressors around the world to question America's commitment to a critical partner on the frontline of aggression."
Biden would veto the House version of the Department of Defense Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2025 if it reached his desk as is, the release added.

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US Has No Assessment About Those Responsible for Deadly Strike on Sevastopol - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has no assessment as to who was responsible for the deadly missile strike on Sevastopol in Crimea over the weekend, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.
"I don't have any assessment of the underlying attack, including who was responsible for it," Miller said during a press briefing.
On Sunday, the Ukrainian armed forces attacked Sevastopol, the largest city on the Crimean Peninsula, using US-made ATACMS missiles with cluster warheads, four of which were shot down and one deflected and exploded over the city. According to the latest data, four people were killed and 153 others were injured in the attack, including children.

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AFRICOM's Head Says Proportion of Terrorists in Africa Grew Tenfold Since 2008

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) – The proportion of Islamic jihadists grew from four to forty percent in the span of 26 years, the Commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) General Michael Langley said in a virtual interview with Fox News.
"We've been monitoring and identifying indications and warnings for a number of years. Just for statistics, back in 2008, Islamic jihadists on the global scene, only four percent was on the African continent. Now that number is up to 40%," Langley said on Sunday.
Langley added that AFRICOM's mission of providing indications, warning, monitoring, and responding to the threats posed by terrorists throughout the region is aimed at protecting US soil.
The General further noted that African states would lead the way in addressing the challenges facing the continent and that the US would be the one enabling their ability to face them.
Langley's remarks come amid the ongoing complete withdrawal of approximately 600 US troops from Niger from two air bases where manned and unmanned aircraft have been deployed on missions against terror groups. The withdrawal must be concluded no later than September 15.
The military pullout was initiated in March after a Nigerien military spokesperson said the country's transitional government, which took power in a coup in July 2023, had terminated the

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military agreement with the US with immediate effect, citing the interests of the Nigerien people.

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Ukraine Does Not Fully Meet Major Standards to Eliminate Human Trafficking - US State Dept

(Updates with more details in paras 8-13)

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Ukraine does not fully meet the major standards to eliminate human trafficking despite efforts to do so, the US State Department said in its new Trafficking in Persons report on Monday.

"The government of Ukraine does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so," the report said.

The report emphasized that Ukraine has made efforts to counter trafficking, noting the implementation of a national program, resumption of labor inspections and the identification of potential trafficking cases, while also collaborating with European counterparts on anti-trafficking investigations, the report said.

However, the report also said the Ukrainian government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas.

"Judges continued to issue lenient sentences that did not include prison time for most convicted traffickers, which weakened deterrence, did not adequately reflect the nature of the crime, and undercut broader efforts to fight trafficking. Despite persistent concerns of corruption fostering impunity for trafficking crimes and ongoing investigations of complicit officials, for the seventh consecutive year the government did not secure any convictions of complicit officials," the report said.

Despite ongoing reports of investigations and prosecutions of officials allegedly involved in trafficking, for the seventh consecutive year no complicit officials were convicted, which continued to worsen impunity for trafficking crimes, the report said.

The United States had urged Ukraine to vigorously investigate and prosecute alleged trafficking crimes and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms. Washington has also called on Kiev to increase protections for unaccompanied and separated children and make efforts to investigate, prosecute, and convict officials allegedly complicit in trafficking crimes under the trafficking statute.

In addition, the United States accused the Russian authorities of "forced transfers" of Ukrainian children to Russia.

"The government created significant vulnerabilities to trafficking for Ukrainian citizens in Russia-occupied territory in Ukraine by restricting access to a wide range of services and employment for those who did not acquire Russian citizenship," the report said.

Russian Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova said in late May that Moscow has handed over six boys, separated from their families during the military conflict to their relatives living in Ukraine. Lvova-Belova also pointed out that parties are working on returning another 29 children as a part of Qatar-mediated talks in late April.

Russia repeatedly stated that it does not steal Ukrainian children but transfers them out of concern for their safety and security and returns them back to their families as soon as

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conditions allow.

In March 2022, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Lvova-Belova on the grounds of alleged "unlawful deportation" of Ukrainian children to Russia. The Kremlin denied the allegations.

In June 2023, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that the country had welcomed over 5 million Ukrainians since the launch of Moscow's special military operation in February 2022, more than 700,000 of them children. The vast majority of the minors were accompanied by their parents or other relatives, while only 2,000 were evacuated from orphanages, Lavrov added.

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New GOES-U Satellite to Boost Weather, Fire Warnings Over Americas - NASA

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - NASA's Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellite U (GOES-U) scheduled to launch on Tuesday will monitor hurricanes, volcanic eruptions and fire threats across the Americas and the Atlantic Ocean and improve previous fire detection capabilities on Earth by a factor of four, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) chief scientist on the program Dan Lindsay said on Monday.

"[The new satellite] will monitor North and South America and the Atlantic looking for hurricanes [and other weather," Lindsay said. "We are going to improve the spatial resolution of fire detection by a factor of four."

GOES-U is scheduled to be launched into geostationary orbit 22,000 miles above the surface of the Earth during a two-hour launch window starting at 5:16 pm Eastern Daylight Time (EDT) on Tuesday on a SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket from Launch Complex 39A at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida, NASA added in a press release.

"The GOES-U satellite, the final addition to [the] GOES-R series, will help to prepare for two kinds of weather - Earth and space weather. The GOES satellites serve a critical role in providing continuous coverage of the Western Hemisphere, including monitoring tropical systems in the eastern Pacific and Atlantic oceans," the release said.

GOES-U will also carry a new compact coronagraph that will image the outer layer of the Sun's atmosphere to detect and characterize coronal mass ejections, the release added.

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NASA Chief Praises China Moon Triumphs But Says US Will Get Back There First - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - China has accomplished major achievements by completing four successful soft unmanned landings of spacecraft on the Moon, but the United States will still beat Beijing in the race to return human explorers to the lunar surface and establish a space base there first, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson told the Washington Post in an interview published on Monday.

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Nelson said China has had repeated successes in its lunar missions in recent years as well as establishing its own space station in low earth orbit, but expressed confidence that NASA's Artemis program would still establish a long-term human presence there first close to the lunar south pole.

On NASA's current Artemis schedule, four astronauts will fly around the Moon in 2025, a feat first carried out by the Apollo 8 mission in 1968, and the first US astronauts will land there in late 2026.

However, the Washington Post report acknowledged that the Orion spacecraft designed to carry the US astronauts to the Moon and back experienced heat shield decay problems on a test flight in 2022 that could have doomed a lunar mission and killed the astronauts on board.

Space industry analysts have also repeatedly questioned whether the US industrial base is now large enough with sufficient resources to meet NASA's aggressive timetable for the Artemis program.

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AI-Powered Threats to Information Integrity Escalated Across Digital Platforms- UN Chief

UNITED NATIONS, June 24 (Sputnik) - AI-powered threats of unprecedented speed have surged, targeting pillars of society such as science, facts, human rights, public health, and climate action, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Monday.

“Threats to information integrity are not new, but they are proliferating and expanding with unprecedented speed on digital platforms, supercharged by AI technologies. Science, facts, human rights, public health, and climate action are under attack,” Guterres said to UN journalists in the press briefing room.

He added that digital misinformation tactics commonly target women, refugees, and migrants.

“The damage goes far beyond the digital realm, affecting billions of people who are not connected to the internet,” Guterres said.

Earlier this year, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted a US-drafted resolution to encourage the development of safeguards for AI.

The resolution encourages protecting personal data, strengthening privacy policies, monitoring AI for risks, and compliance with international human rights laws.

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US State Dept Says Nothing Specific on Possible Biden-Erdogan Meeting at NATO Summit

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - US Acting Under Secretary for Political Affairs John Bass said on Monday that there is nothing to announce regarding a possible bilateral meeting between US President Joe Biden and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during the NATO summit in Washington in July.

"I don't have anything for you on specific interactions between leaders at the summit," Bass

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said. "but I think it's fair to say that whether it's at the leader level or in the interactions between the official delegations, we look forward to continuing our discussions with the Turkish government on a wide range of issues impacting our collective security through the Alliance, but also a range of other security issues on which we've worked closely together in several other regions."

Erdogan was expected to visit the United States on May 9, but his visit was postponed to a later date "convenient for both parties because of the inconsistency in the schedules," the Turkish Foreign Ministry earlier said.

The Turkish broadcaster Haberturk reported last week that Erdogan will attend the NATO summit in Washington from July 9-11, and the Ukraine conflict will be high on the agenda. Erdogan is also expected to draw the attention of alliance leaders to the ongoing Israeli attacks in the Palestinian territories, the broadcaster cited sources as saying.

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Canadian Electric Vehicle Industry Facing Chinese 'Unfair' Competition - Finance Minister

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Canada's electric vehicle (EV) industry is facing unfair competition from China and Ottawa intends to discuss potential policy responses through a 30-day consultation period, Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland said on Monday.

"Canadians ... are facing unfair competition from China's internal state directed policy of overcapacity that is undermining Canada's EV sectors' ability to compete in domestic and global markets," Freeland said during a press conference.

China was intentionally engineering a worldwide oversupply of Chinese-made EVs that undermines other global producers along the way and a 30-day consultation period on potential policy responses will begin on July 2 to address its unfair practices, Freeland said.

The measure aims at "leveling" the EV playing ground, as well as preventing oversupply and transshipment through Canada. The potential policy includes a surtax on imports of Chinese electric vehicles under Section 53 of the customs Tariff Act, Freeland said.

"I do want to highlight that in our announcement we've been clear that nothing is ruled out, and all possible tools are on the table," Freeland said when asked about the approach preferred by Ottawa between US-like high tariffs on Chinese EVs and lower ones imposed by the European Union.

The Biden administration said in mid-May it was placing a 100% tariff on Chinese-made electric vehicle imports to the United States in a bid to stop cheap Chinese EVs from flooding the US market.

Following in the US steps, the European Commission in June made a provisional decision to impose extra duties on imports of Chinese EVs due to alleged unfair subsidization starting from July if talks with China did not result in an effective solution. Beijing threatened to file a lawsuit with the World Trade Organization if it went ahead with the plan.

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Kiev Worried About Pressure Russian Strikes Putting on Ukraine's Energy Grid - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Kiev remains concerned about the pressure Russia's air campaign is putting on Ukraine's energy grid despite renewed efforts by allies to aid Ukraine, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs John Bass said on Monday.

Last week, Bass was in Kiev to meet with senior Ukrainian government officials to discuss the United States support amid Russia's special military operation.

"There obviously is concern there about the ongoing pressure that the Russian air campaign is putting on power generation and the electrical grid," Bass told reporters.

Bass pointed out that during his meetings last week in Kiev, he found that Ukrainian leaders were reassured by the renewed support they were receiving from the United States and its allies, including commitments to bolster its air defenses.

In April, President Joe Biden signed a foreign aid bill that provided some $60 billion for Ukraine, replenishing funding for additional security assistance that had run dry in December.

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Trump Says 'Tortured' While Held in Fulton County Jail - Campaign Statement

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The Trump campaign on Monday sent a funding email to supporters in which it quoted former President Donald Trump saying he was tortured while held in Fulton County Jail and his mugshot was turned into a merchandise mug.

"I want you to remember what they did to me. They tortured me in the Fulton County Jail and took my mugshot. So guess what? I put it on a mug for the whole world to see," Trump said.

Trump earned $7.1 million for his campaign by selling shirts, posters, stickers and beverage coolers bearing his mugshot.

On August 24, 2023, Trump was arrested on election interference charges, booked and released on bail from the Fulton County Jail. On that day, Trump also posted his first message on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) since 2021 and shared his mugshot.

As part of the case, Trump was charged with 13 counts related to exerting pressure on local officials to change in his favor the results of the 2020 US presidential election.

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State Department Declines to Comment on Ukraine Using ATACMS to Strike Crimea

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - US Acting Under Secretary for Political Affairs John Bass on Monday declined to comment on the use of ATACMS in Sunday’s strike in Crimea.

"Not going to speak to any individual tactical decision, but I would observe that Ukraine's

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disciplined use of offensive munitions, I think throughout the course of the conflict has, in many instances, changed the way in which Russia has prosecuted the war and contributed to Ukraine's ability to successfully sustain its defense," Bass said.

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US Deeply Regrets Loss of Any Civilian Life in Ukraine Attack on Crimea - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United States deeply regrets the loss of any civilian life killed in any conflict, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs John Bass said on Monday in response to Ukraine's missile attack on Crimea over the weekend.

"So with regard to the reports of civilian casualties in Crimea, the United States, as it always does, deeply regrets the loss of any civilian life, any innocence, killed in a conflict," Bass told reporters.

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Harris Says Trump Guilty of 'Stealing' Reproductive Freedom from Women in US

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump is responsible for allowing states to limit women's access to abortion, Vice President Kamala Harris said on Monday.

"In the case of the stealing of reproductive freedom from the women of America, Donald Trump is guilty," Harris said during a campaign event in Maryland.

June 24 marks the second anniversary of the US Supreme Court's 2022 decision to overturn their previous ruling in the Roe v. Wade case, which provided federal protection for abortions. The decision did not ban abortions, but rather, returned the power to regulate the procedure to the state level.

Trump appointed three justices to the court as president, all of whom joined in the decision to return the right to regulate abortions to the states.

In April, Trump released a statement outlining his position on abortion, which drew criticism from both pro-abortion and anti-abortion activists. Trump said that it is up to states to enact varying abortion policies as they see fit.

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US Postal Service Shares Mail Data With Law Enforcement Without Court Orders - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United States Postal Service (USPS) has been giving

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details from Americans' mail packages to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Department of Homeland Security for over ten years without a court order, the Washington Post reported on Monday.

The US Postal Inspection Service Mail Covers Program legally allows postal inspectors to view only the external parts of mail for tracking suspects, as opening the mail would require a warrant under the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution, which protects against unreasonable searches and seizures.

Since 2015, records from a congressional probe show that USPS officials have approved 97% of more than 60,000 mail monitoring requests from law enforcement, primarily to track fugitives or investigate crimes.

The USPS approved more than 158,000 mail surveillance requests in four years, primarily from the IRS, FBI and Department of Homeland Security.

The Postal Inspection Service has generally not disclosed the frequency of its surveillance requests, explaining in a 2015 audit that sharing such information could undermine the program's effectiveness by tipping off criminals.

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Ukraine Does Not Fully Meet Standards Of Combatting Trafficking – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) – Ukraine does not fully meet major standards of combatting trafficking, the US State Department said on Monday in its new Trafficking in Persons report.

"The Government of Ukraine does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so," the report said.

The report emphasized Ukraine's efforts against trafficking, noting the implementation of a national program. Ukraine has resumed labor inspections and is actively identifying potential trafficking cases, while also collaborating with European counterparts on anti-trafficking investigations, it added.

However, the report said the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas.

"Judges continued to issue lenient sentences that did not include prison time for most convicted traffickers, which weakened deterrence, did not adequately reflect the nature of the crime, and undercut broader efforts to fight trafficking. Despite persistent concerns of corruption fostering impunity for trafficking crimes and ongoing investigations of complicit officials, for the seventh consecutive year the government did not secure any convictions of complicit officials," it added.

The report stated that despite ongoing reports of investigations and prosecutions of officials allegedly involved in trafficking, for the seventh consecutive year, no complicit officials were convicted, which continued to worsen impunity for trafficking crimes.

The US urged Ukraine to vigorously investigate and prosecute alleged trafficking crimes and seek adequate penalties for convicted traffickers, which should involve significant prison terms. Washington also called on Kiev to increase protections for unaccompanied and separated children and make efforts to investigate, prosecute, and convict officials allegedly complicit in

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trafficking crimes under the trafficking statute.

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US Congresswoman Says Will Request Vote to Detain Garland for Contempt of Congress

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Republican US Congresswoman Anna Paulina Luna said on Monday that she will request a vote to hold US Attorney General Merrick Garland in inherent contempt of Congress, which would enable the House Sergeant at Arms to detain Garland.

Earlier this month, the US House of Representatives passed a measure recommending that Garland be held in contempt of Congress for defying subpoenas to provide lawmakers with recordings from Special Counsel Robert Hur's interview with US President Joe Biden as part of his investigation into Biden's mishandling of classified materials.

However, the US Justice Department, which Garland leads, said that it will not prosecute the attorney general for contempt of Congress.

"It is imperative that Congress uses its inherent contempt powers and instructs the Sergeant at Arms to bring Attorney General Garland to the House for questioning and compel him to produce the requested evidence," Luna said in a letter to colleagues.

Luna said that she will call up a resolution in the coming days to hold Garland in inherent contempt of Congress.

Inherent contempt is a process that allows Congress to hold an individual accountable for refusing to comply with congressional demands. The power enables lawmakers to bring an individual before the chamber for a trial by the bar and detain them in the Capitol or in Washington.

Unlike civil or criminal contempt, inherent contempt does not rely on another branch of government to enforce. Relying on other branches of government to enforce contempt of Congress charges undermines the separation of powers and puts the integrity and effectiveness of the legislative process at risk, Luna said.

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Kamala Harris Says Trump 'Guilty' of Stealing Women's Reproductive Freedom

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) – US Vice President Kamala Harris said on Monday that former US President Donald Trump is "guilty" of stealing women's reproductive freedom.

"Trump has not denied, much less shown remorse, for his actions. Instead, he proudly takes credit for overturning Roe," Harris said during a campaign event in the US state of Maryland. "In the case of the stealing of reproductive freedom from the women of America, Donald Trump is guilty."

Trump during his time in the White House appointed three of the Supreme Court justices who voted to overturn Roe v. Wade.

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US President Joe Biden said during his state of the union address in March that he would restore Roe v. Wade if Congress supported women's rights to reproductive health.

In June 2022, the US Supreme Court overturned the precedent established by the Roe v. Wade and ruled that states may regulate the practice of abortion. The Roe v. Wade decision upheld pregnant women's right to seek an abortion without government restrictions. As a result, the issue of access to abortion was left for the US states to decide.

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CNN Abruptly Cuts Off Trump Spokeswoman Days Before Network Hosts 1st Presidential Debate

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - US broadcaster CNN abruptly cut off Trump campaign spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt mid-air during her live interview on Monday after she pointed out some concerns with the network days before it hosts the first presidential debate.

CNN will host the first presidential debate between President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump on Thursday at 9 p.m. Eastern Time. The event will run for 90 minutes and will be moderated by CNN's Jake Tapper and Dana Bash.

"That's why President Trump is knowingly going into a hostile environment on this very network, on CNN, with debate moderators who have made their opinions about him very well known over the past eight years. And their biased coverage of him," Leavitt said during the interview.

Leavitt mentioned Tapper's previous comments against Trump comparing him to Adolf Hitler.

Leavitt's interview was suddenly cut off as she continued to highlight CNN's biased views against Trump as they're set to host the first debate.

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US, Philippines Had Close Consultations on Actions Plan if China Attacks – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) – The United States had close consultations with the Philippines to discuss a plan of action in the event of China's attack on the latter, US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said on Monday.

"We've had close consultations with the Philippines about those circumstances, we have taken some private steps," Campbell said during a Council on Foreign Relations event when asked under what circumstances the United States would enter into conflict if China attacked the Philippines.

China has been engaged in decades-long disputes with several Asia-Pacific countries, including the Philippines, over the territorial affiliation of a number of islands and reefs in the South China Sea. Significant oil and gas reserves have been discovered on the continental shelf of those islands, including the Paracel Islands, Thitu Island, Scarborough Shoal, and the Spratly Islands, with the Whitson Reef being part.

In mid-June, China accused the Philippines of causing a ship collision in the South China Sea,

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while Manila said Beijing's accusations that its ship provoked the collision were misleading.
In late May, the Philippines opened a coast guard post on 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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Plurality of US Voters Believe Trump Will Win First Debate Against Biden - Poll

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - A plurality of likely voters in the United States believe that former President Donald Trump will beat current officeholder Joe Biden in the first debate of the 2024 US presidential election cycle later this week, a new Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Monday.
Trump and Biden are set to participate in a debate hosted by CNN on Thursday.
Forty-seven percent (47%) of respondents believe Trump is most likely to win the debate, while 37% believe Biden will win, the poll report said.
Another 16% of respondents were unsure who will emerge victorious from the debate, the poll report added.
The poll surveyed 1,080 likely US voters from June 18-20. The poll maintains a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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Senior US Official Claims Russia, DPRK Discussing Long-Range Missile Development Plans

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) – The United States believes Russia and North Korea could be in talks regarding Moscow's potential assistance in Pyongyang's development of nuclear long-range missiles, Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said on Monday.
"We believe that there are discussions about what North Korea gets in exchange, and they could be associated with its nuclear long-range missile development plans, perhaps other things in energy and the like," Campbell said during an event hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations.
Campbell added that Washington is still studying the new agreement between Russia and North Korea on strategic cooperation but is already concerned about it.
The diplomat noted that he had a call with South Korean counterparts about the joint next steps to increase deterrence in the region in light of the deepening partnership between Moscow and Pyongyang.
Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un signed the comprehensive strategic partnership treaty in Pyongyang on Wednesday. The treaty includes a pledge by the two countries to provide military assistance if either comes under attack. Kim said the pact envisioned the development of economic, political, and military cooperation, while Putin

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did not rule out closer military cooperation with Pyongyang. The treaty will go into effect upon ratification.

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Gaza Pier Operations to Be Paused Monday for Scheduled Maintenance Activities - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Operations at the US-built temporary pier off the Gaza Strip will be temporarily suspend due to planned maintenance activities, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) said on Monday.

"Operations at the pier will pause for scheduled maintenance activities," CENTCOM said in a statement.

Following the re-anchoring of the temporary pier on June 19, CENTCOM achieved its largest single-day humanitarian aid delivery to Gaza, offloading more than 720 metric tons of aid last Sunday.

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UPDATE - US Expects Positive Decision on Ukraine's EU Bid After NATO Summit - State Dept.

(Adds details in para 4, background in para 5)

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United States expects a positive decision from the European Union on Ukraine’s path to membership in the union following NATO's summit in July, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James O’Brien said on Monday.

On Friday, the Council of the EU approved the beginning of negotiations on the accession of Ukraine and Moldova starting June 25.

"So, we'll have what I expect will be a positive decision from the European Union, making clear the path into membership in the EU, and we'll have a clear bridge laid out for Ukraine to join NATO," O’Brien said during a press briefing. "That includes a number of commitments for reform by Ukraine, as well as for continued engagement from the West."

Regarding Ukraine's potential accession to the transatlantic military alliance, O'Brien underscored the importance of Kiev implementing various reforms, a priority emphasized earlier by US President Joe Biden.

Last week, media reported that Washington and its allies had yet to reach a consensus on how strongly they are going to commit to Ukraine's NATO membership during the alliance's anniversary summit in July.

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US Asking China to Help 'Bring Russia Back to Negotiating Table' - State Dept.

(Updates with more details in paras 3-5)
WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has been requesting that China uses its leverage to bring Russia back to the negotiating table with respect to Ukraine, US Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Monday.
"What we're asking is that China use its leverage to bring Russia … back to a negotiating table to resolve this conflict in accordance with the UN Charter," O'Brien said during a press briefing.
However, O'Brien said China had so far been unwilling to do so, exemplified by Beijing's refusal to attend the Switzerland-hosted conference on Ukraine held on June 15-16.
O'Brien alleged that the only reason Russia was able to continue its special military operation in Ukraine was because of China's assistance.
Some 70% of machine tools and 90% of electronic components used in Russia's production of armaments are manufactured by China, O'Brien added.
Earlier in June, President Vladimir 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. The US State Department called Putin's terms for peace in Ukraine "maximalist."

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operations at us-built gaza pier will pause on monday for scheduled maintenance activities - centcom

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US Aims to Boost Student Exchanges with China Amid Declining Numbers– State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) –US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said on Monday that he would like to see more education exchanges between the United States and China.
"I do think some level of people-to-people of society-to-society engagement between the United States and China is important and necessary. Frankly, I would like to see more American students studying in China to learn more about its culture, its politics," Campbell said during a discussion at the Council of Foreign Relations.
He highlighted a significant decline in the number of US students in China, which the State Department views as a priority to address.
Campbell also endorsed the idea of increasing the enrollment of Chinese students in American universities. "I hope to see more Chinese students coming to the US to study humanities and social sciences," he added.
Additionally, he emphasized the United States' interest in admitting more students from India,

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particularly those focusing on technology.

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Ukraine Needs to Undertake Reforms Before Being Invited to NATO - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The Ukrainian government needs to undertake a series of reforms before receiving an invitation to join NATO, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Monday.

"As the President [Joe Biden] has said, Ukraine needs to undertake some reforms so it's ready to be part of NATO," O'Brien said during a press briefing, when asked why Kiev will be provided with a "bridge" to the alliance during the NATO summit in July, but not a formal invitation.

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Senior US Official Claims Resurgence of Tensions Between Russia, China 'Likely' in Future

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said on Monday that a resurgence of tensions between Russia and China is likely to happen in the future.

"I think, there will likely be in the future a resurgence of tensions between Moscow and Beijing, but it's impossible to predict what that situation looks like in decades," Campbell said during an event hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations.

However, the alignment between Russia and China remains powerful and sustaining at present, Campbell said.

The Chinese and Russian leaderships are allegedly concerned and being very attentive to focus on how and whether the United States and other countries will try to split the two countries apart, Campbell added.

The United States continues to accuse China of a rapprochement with Russia as well as to allege that Beijing has been supporting Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. China and Russia have denied the US claims and emphasized the economic nature of their bilateral relations.

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UPDATE - Russian Frozen Funds Proceeds Should Allow Ukraine to Hold Until 2025 – State Department

(adds background in para 3)

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) – Proceeds from Russian frozen assets should allow Ukraine to continue fighting until 2025, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs

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James O'Brien said on Monday.

"We've also seen the G7 agree to create the resources needed for Ukraine to continue this fight. And this was the decision which hopefully will be confirmed soon, to use proceeds from immobilized Russian sovereign assets to create a loan vehicle that will provide Ukraine with 50 to $60 billion. And with that, they should be in a position to continue this fight in 2025," O'Brien said during a press briefing.

After the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, the G7 led by the United States and the European Union began discussing ways to confiscate the estimated $325 billion worth of Russian central bank assets frozen in Western accounts and allegedly use them to aid Kiev.

In mid-June, the Group of Seven countries agreed on a loan structure to provide at least $50 billion to Ukraine, funded by revenue generated from the interest on Russia's frozen assets, without confiscating the principal amount.

Moscow has maintained that any attempts to confiscate Russian assets amount to theft and a violation of international law.

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US Pays to Print Over 3Mln Textbooks for Ukrainian Students - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The US government will pay the cost of printing more than three million textbooks for Ukrainian students, CNN reported on Monday.

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) will provide some $8 million in funding to print textbooks for Ukraine, the report said, citing senior Biden administration officials.

The decision to provide the funding came after coordination talks took place between USAID, the White House National Security Council and the US Embassy in Kiev.

The funding will go toward producing 3.2 million textbooks for first and second year students and will be done at Ukrainian printing houses before the start of the school year in September.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan reportedly accused Russia of targeting Ukrainian printing presses to disrupt the production of such textbooks and the education of Ukrainian children.

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US Expects Positive Decision on Ukraine's EU Bid After NATO Summit - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United States expects a positive decision from the European Union on Ukraine's path to membership in the union following NATO's summit in July, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Monday.

"So we'll have what I expect will be a positive decision from the European Union, making clear the path into membership in the EU, and will have a clear bridge laid out for Ukraine to join

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NATO," O'Brien said during a press briefing. "That includes a number of commitments for reform by Ukraine, as well as for continued engagement from the West. "

On Friday, the Council of the EU approved the beginning of negotiations on the accession of Ukraine and Moldova starting June 25.

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Austin Says Derek Chollet to Become His Next Chief of Staff Starting July

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Monday that Derek Chollet, currently the counselor of the United States Department of State, will be his new Chief of Staff starting in July.

"I am delighted that Derek Chollet will start in July as my Chief of Staff. He is one of the most distinguished, far-sighted, and skillful national-security practitioners of his generation, and I am grateful to him for taking on this key assignment at such an important moment," Austin said in a statement.

Throughout his career, he has also served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs between 2012 and 2015 as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Strategic Planning on the National Security Council staff and as the Principal Deputy Director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, the statement said.

Chollet will replace Kelly Magsamen, whose departure was announced by Austin in early June.

In turn, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a statement announced the departure of Chollet from the department and thanked him for his three and a half years of service. Blinken appointed Tom Sullivan who has served as Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy since 2021, to take the position of the Counselor of the US Department of State.

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US Sees China Indirectly Involved in Changing Territorial Lines in Indo-Pacific - Campbell

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United States sees that China is involved indirectly and intimately in efforts to change territorial lines in the Indo-Pacific region, US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said on Monday.

"China is involved indirectly, and I would say, intimately, in an effort to basically change the nature of territorial lines and military balances in Indo-Pacific," Campbell said during a discussion at the Council of Foreign Relations.

Campbell characterized China's involvement as a "growing challenge" not only for the United States but for Europe as well.

"This is a challenge that is now well-understood and recognized," Campbell said.

The United States plans to focus on this issue and has recently conducted "deep" consultations with its European and NATO partners, Campbell added.

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US Asking China to Help 'Bring Russia Back to Negotiating Table' - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) – The United States has been requesting that China "use its leverage" to bring Russia back to the negotiating table on Ukraine, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Monday.

"What we're asking is that China use its leverage to bring Russia … back to a negotiating table to resolve this conflict in accordance with the UN Charter," O'Brien said during a press briefing.

Earlier in June, President Vladimir 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. The US State Department called Putin's terms for peace in Ukraine a "maximalist statement."

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Russian Frozen Funds Proceeds Should Allow Ukraine to Hold Until 2025 – State Department

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Moscow has maintained that any attempts to confiscate Russian assets amount to theft and a violation of international law.

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UN Chief Strongly Condemns Terrorist Attacks in Russia's Dagestan - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, June 24 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres strongly condemns the recent deadly terrorist attacks in Russia's Dagestan and expresses his condolences, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"The Secretary-General condemns in the strongest terms Sunday's terrorist attacks against Jewish and Christian religious sites and members of the security forces in the Republic of

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Dagestan of the Russian Federation, in which at least 20 people were reportedly killed and dozens of others injured," Dujarric said in a statement. "The Secretary-General conveys his condolences to the bereaved families and the people and the Government of the Russian Federation and wishes those injured a speedy recovery."

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un chief condemns in strongest terms terrorist attacks in russia's Dagestan, conveys condolences - spokesman

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48 Active Shooter Incidents Recorded Across the US in 2023 – FBI Report

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) – Forty-eight active shooter incidents causing 244 casualties were recorded throughout the United States in 2023, a newly released yearly report by the FBI said on Monday.

"In 2023, the FBI designated 48 shootings as active shooter incidents. Although incidents decreased by 4% from 2022 (50 incidents), the number of active shooter incidents increased by 60% since 2019 (30 incidents)," the report said.

According to the report, the 48 shootings in 26 states, spanning locations such as open space, commerce, education, health care, and residences, resulted in 105 deaths and 139 injuries, with nearly a third (15) categorized by the FBI as mass killings.

Moreover, the report indicates that of the 49 individuals involved in these incidents, 30 were apprehended, 7 committed suicide, and 12 were killed. Nearly three-quarters of the shootings (43) involved handguns, while 16 involved rifles, and one involved a shotgun.

The FBI stressed that it remains dedicated to assisting local, state, federal, and territorial law enforcement, among others, in preventing active shooter situations and responding to and recovering from them, the report continued.

"The FBI encourages safety and security through its options-based Active Shooter Attack Prevention and Preparedness (ASAPP) training," the agency said.

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