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7/30/24 Tuesday

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No Primaries, No Alternatives, No Scrutiny: 'Anti-Democracy' Reigns In US

On July 21, US President Joe Biden announced he would not seek reelection. The announcement came after Democratic primary voting had completed, leaving Democratic voters with no say in the party's nominee. Meanwhile, third-party candidates are being stonewalled at every turn and the media pretends this is all normal.

The American electoral process has degraded into a shambling shell of its former self, propped up with vapid, slick and committee-tested PR campaigns rather than debate. Over the past week, with the tickets of the two major parties all but finalized, the media can not bring themselves to ask a substantive question of either person likely to sit in the White House in less than six months.

"My question is," YouTube personality and WWE United States Champion Logan Paul asked former US President and Republican nominee Donald Trump, "for other young people in this country who are looking to get ahead, cause for a lot of them, times are tough right now. What would you say to them, kids who want to pursue their own version of the American dream and try to achieve their wildest dreams?"

Trump answered that young people should vote for him.

Meanwhile, Harris sat down for a non-televised interview with People, which asked her about her relationship with her husband, how much sleep she gets and her favorite nickname ("Momala" as it turns out) but not any policy positions on the economy, immigration, Ukraine or Gaza.

Even Paul and his "Impaulsive" co-host Mike Majlak had the good sense to ask Trump about those topics, even if they didn't challenge him on them.

This is what passes for scrutiny in American politics. Worse, the incumbent president's party all but refused to hold a primary. Then Biden suddenly resigned from the campaign after weeks of refusing to and his vice president was anointed the new nominee without receiving a single vote. On Saturday, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh reported that Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Barack Obama threatened to invoke the 25th amendment and force Biden out of office if he did not drop his reelection campaign.

"The lords of capital decided that he had to go and, in fact, they made it quite clear he had to go because they said that not only would they stop contributing to his campaign, but they told the DNC get rid of Joe Biden or don't expect any financial support for any Democrat candidate down ballot," argued political activist and the 2016 Green Party Vice Presidential nominee Ajamu Sibeko Baraka on Sputnik's Political Misfits. "This is clear elite extortion."

"So, this was, in fact, a coup. A coup by the donors and we need to deal with that in that way because it exposes the true nature of this anti-democratic process we have in this country. So, people [who] are committed to democracy, [who] would like to see something that approximates democracy. You can't continue to support these two anti-democratic parties. That's a very important point," he added.

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To shore up the perception of support, the Harris campaign hosted a series of Zoom calls, bizarrely segregated by race and gender. Black Men for Harris came first, then Black Women for Harris. Then White Women for Harris and finally, White Dudes for Harris.

“It is sort of a silly Zoom call,” said Baraka. “But it does reflect the kind of identity reductionist policies we have in this country.”

“I mean, why are people supporting Harris? Based on what? What policies? There’s no serious political conversation taking place. This is just a very slick PR process that, again, has been engineered by the same elements that got rid of Joe Biden.”

On the other side of the aisle, things were only slightly more democratic. The Republicans actually held debates, though the only candidate anyone really cared about didn’t participate. In a healthy democracy, Trump’s refusal to face Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley and the rest would have been seen as a sign of arrogance–if not fear– in a healthy democracy. This year, few seemed to care.

When the most democratic thing you can say about the two-party system is that one of the parties’ candidates received actual votes in the primary, and that's the party that is accused of trying to end democracy, it is clear things have gone off the rails.

As the Democratic party argued in court after being sued for allegedly rigging the 2016 primaries in favor of Hillary Clinton, the two-party system is not technically part of the government, and are free to run their primary process however they like, even picking a candidate no one voted for, as they have done with Harris.

But in the media, and even in some classrooms, the US system of politics is often described as a two-party system and the two parties make sure it stays that way.

In 1992, Reform Party candidate Ross Perot led both Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush in the polls after a strong debate performance. His campaign sank after he inexplicably dropped out in the summer before reentering right before the election. Perot claimed the GOP blackmailed him with doctored pictures of his daughter but the accusation was never seriously investigated. The close call nevertheless scared the two parties enough that they worked to make sure it would never happen again.

After the ‘92 campaign, the Commission of Presidential Debates, which touts its “bipartisanship” because it is staffed with Republicans and Democrats, increased the requirements for third-party candidates, increasing the national poll numbers a candidate needs to qualify from 5% to 15%.

That Perot did not reach 15% until after he appeared on the debate stage with Clinton and Bush was not lost on the Perot campaign, which ran a series of ads in 1996 decrying the decision to no avail. In the 1990s and early 2000s, it was virtually impossible for a candidate to achieve those numbers without the assistance of the media.

As the internet grew and surpassed traditional media in importance, that began to change. Early in this election cycle, it looked like Independent candidate Robert F Kennedy Jr might come close to reaching the 15% required to earn a spot on the debate stage. Perhaps not coincidentally, the two parties dropped the debate commission entirely and partnered with media outlets to devise a new set of requirements that Kennedy and other alternative candidates had no chance of reaching.

“This was the entity that was supposed to be managing the debate process for the candidates, for the parties. But that was a process in which, even though it was a difficult one, that third

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parties could participate," explained Baraka. "But they decided that they weren't going to have any possibility of third party participation. And so, they abandoned that process and developed a relationship between the parties and the news media, and [so it's] also reflective of the anti-democratic character."

Earlier this month, Sputnik reported that the US Treasury halted funds awarded by the FEC to the campaign for Green Party candidate Jill Stein after the campaign hit the required milestones.

"This, again, is another reflection of the poverty of politics in this country," Baraka said, noting that the Democrats have been suing to get Green candidates off the ballot in many states.

In March, the New York Times reported that Democrats were preparing an "aggressive counter" to "third-party threats," writing that "[c]onventional wisdom within the Democratic Party now is that any vote not for Mr. Biden benefits Mr. Trump, and there are concerns that giving people more choices on the ballot is more likely to hurt Mr. Biden."

Now, presumably, it must be that any vote not for Harris benefits Trump, and no one outside of the leadership of the DNC had any say in it.

"These are all examples of why the struggle has to be in this country, to redefine what real democracy is and have people prepared to struggle for them and not fall prey to this appeal to a lesser of two evils that is backward, reactionary, anti-democratic and profoundly dangerous," concluded Baraka.

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US Pausing Over $95Mln in Assistance to Government of Georgia - Blinken

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) – The United States is pausing over $95 million in assistance to the government of Georgia as part of review of relationship with the country in response to its "foreign agent" law, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"On May 23, after anti-democratic actions by the Georgian government, I announced a comprehensive review of bilateral cooperation between the United States and Georgia. As a result of that review, the United States is pausing more than $95 million in assistance that directly benefits the Government of Georgia," Blinken said in a statement.

The US will continue assistance to programs and activities aimed at strengthening democracy, the rule of law, independent media, and economic development, Blinken stated.

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Prison Gang Brawl in Nevada Leaves 3 Inmates Dead, 9 Injured - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Three people were killed and nine were injured in a fight between two gangs at a maximum-security prison in the US state of Nevada, CBS News reported on Wednesday.

The state's Department of Corrections said on Tuesday that the "altercation" took place on

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Tuesday in a prison in the rural mining city of Ely in eastern Nevada, the report said.
No officers were injured as a result of the incident that took place amid a feud between two rival gangs and there are concerns about possible retaliation, according to the report.
The prison was still on lockdown as of late Tuesday as local authorities investigated the deaths and injuries, the report added.
According to media reports, the prison is located about 300 miles north of Las Vegas and holds state death row inmates.
In 2022, approximately 40 of the prison inmates started a hunger strike demanding better conditions, KLAS-TV reported.

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Russian Embassy in US Says No Comment Regarding Potential Prisoner Swap

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The Russian Embassy in Washington told Sputnik on Wednesday that it has no comment regarding a potential prisoner swap with the United States, amid speculation about preparations for an exchange on both sides.
"The embassy has no comment to provide," a spokesperson for the embassy told Sputnik in a statement.
On Tuesday, Telegram channels reported that several convicts, including those in treason cases, had allegedly disappeared from the colonies and pretrial detention centers where they were serving their sentences. Eva Merkacheva, a member of the Presidential Council on Human Rights, did not rule out that the reason for the alleged disappearance of convicts could be a "group exchange."
The US database of federal prisoners as of Wednesday morning no longer shows Alexander Vinnik and other high-profile Russian nationals in federal custody.
Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday he had no comment on alleged preparations for a prisoner exchange between Moscow and Washington that reportedly might include Wall Street Journal journalist Evan Gershkovich.

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US Prison Bureau Website Does Not Show Alexander Vinnik, Other Russian Inmates in Custody

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The US database of federal prisoners as of Wednesday morning no longer shows Alexander Vinnik and other high-profile Russian nationals in federal custody, amid widespread speculation about an impending prisoner swap between the United States and Russia.
A search of the US Federal Bureau of Prisons inmate locator database turns up no results for Vinnik, Maxim Marchenko, Vadim Konoshchenok or Vladislav Klyushin, all of whom were serving sentences in the United States.

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Information can still be found about other Russian inmates, including Vladimir Dunaev, who the website shows remains in detention at FCI Terminal Island in Los Angeles.

The Bureau of Prisons did not immediately respond to Sputnik's request for a comment on the matter.

Sputnik has also reached out to the US State Department for comment, but has not yet received a response.

The development comes amid reports that several prisoners in Russian custody have allegedly disappeared from the colonies and pretrial detention centers where they were serving their sentences.

Eva Merkacheva, a member of the Presidential Council on Human Rights, did not rule out that the reason for the alleged disappearance of convicts could be a "group exchange."

The Kremlin said it would not comment on the topic of possible preparations for a prisoner exchange.

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White House Takes Next Step in Alternative Student Debt Relief Program – Education Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Education announced on Wednesday that it will soon begin to contact all federal student loan holders to enable them to choose whether to participate in US President Joe Biden's new debt relief policy, offering them an alternative to the plan rejected by the Supreme Court last year.

"Starting tomorrow, the US Department of Education will begin emailing all borrowers with at least one outstanding federally held student loan to provide updates on potential student debt relief, and to inform them they have until August 30 to call their servicer and opt out if they do not want this relief. The rules that would provide this relief are not yet finalized, and the email does not guarantee specific borrowers will be eligible. The Department will provide additional information to borrowers once the rules are finalized this fall," the release stated.

In April, the Biden administration released draft rules proposing that the Secretary of Education to grant student debt relief to tens of millions of borrowers. If the draft rules are finalized, partial or full debt relief would be available to borrowers who owe more now than they did at the start of repayment; who have been in repayment for decades; who are otherwise eligible for loan forgiveness but have not yet applied; or who previously enrolled in low-financial value programs.

A White House release said that the policy would cancel student debt for approximately 30 million Americans. "By providing more information to borrowers on how they can take advantage of our upcoming debt relief programs, borrowers will be prepared to benefit swiftly once the rules are final," it added.

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Austin, Gallant Discuss 'Israel's Response' to July 27 Attack in Wake of Haniyeh's Killing

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WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin spoke with his Israeli counterpart to discuss "Israel's response" to the attack on the Golan Heights village of Majdal Shams, the Pentagon said on Wednesday, in the wake of the killing of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in a rocket strike in Tehran.

Earlier in the day, the Palestinian movement Hamas confirmed the death of Haniyeh as a result of an Israeli strike on his residence in the Iranian capital. Haniyeh had attended the inauguration ceremony of the new president of Iran. Israel has not claimed responsibility for the killing.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke with Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant about Israel's response to Lebanese Hizballah's July 27 attack on Israel, which killed twelve innocent civilians, mostly children," the Pentagon said in a readout.

The two also discussed the threats to Israel posed by a "range of Iranian-backed terrorist groups, including Lebanese Hizballah."

Austin reaffirmed his "unwavering" commitment to Israel's security and right to self-defense.

The Israeli army said last Saturday that 12 people had been killed in a rocket strike on the Golan Heights, which it blamed on Hezbollah. The Lebanese movement denied the claim. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Hezbollah would pay a price "it has never paid before."

On Tuesday, the Israel Defense Forces announced that it had carried out a strike in the southern suburb of Beirut targeting a "commander responsible for the murder of the children in Majdal Shams and the killing of numerous additional Israeli civilians." Later, the IDF said that the "most senior military commander" of Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah, Fuad Shukr, was killed in the strike.

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US, Chinese Officials on Wednesday to Discuss Efforts to Combat Illicit Fentanyl -Official

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - US and Chinese government officials will meet on Wednesday to discuss joint efforts to disrupt the supply of illicit fentanyl into the United States, a senior Biden administration official told reporters.

"The conversations with the PRC continue," the official said. "In fact, there is a delegation of senior officials that is coming to meet [Wednesday] to continue discussions."

The United States and China continue to coordinate on specific law enforcement matters to crack down on this issue, the official added.

Moreover, US officials continue to hold discussions with their Chinese counterparts on how to more effectively tackle illicit financing, the official added.

However, the official mentioned that the United States wants Beijing to do a lot more to effectively shut down the companies that are supplying the precursor chemicals that are used to make illicit fentanyl and other synthetic opioids that are killing Americans.

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Biden Issuing New Memorandum to Bolster US Crack Down on Illicit Fentanyl - Official

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is issuing a new directive that will bolster his administration's fight against illicit fentanyl being smuggled into the United States, a senior Biden administration official told reporters.

"The President is signing a national security memorandum that will take our fight against illicit fentanyl to the next level," the official said.

The official explained that the new national security memorandum calls on US federal departments and agencies to step up efforts to stop the supply of illicit fentanyl and synthetic opioids into the United States.

The memorandum will specifically lead to increased intelligence collection, increased coordination, increased disruption efforts, and will also help spearhead some key work with the private sector, the official also said.

Moreover, Biden will also call on Congress to pass a legislative proposal that would close key loopholes and engage further in this fight against deadly fentanyl and all other synthetic opioids, the official added.

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US Air Force Spending $975Mln on Tech Program to Sustain Global Force - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force has issued a combined contract worth nearly a billion dollars to carry out sustainment and maintenance operations for its aircraft, the Department of Defense said.

"[The companies] have been awarded a combined ... $975 million ... contract for the Air Force Rapid Sustainment Office," the department said in a press release on Tuesday.

The contract enables the Air Force to optimize the operational readiness and life cycle sustainment costs of its fielded weapon systems by rapidly identifying testing and scaling up emerging technology applications.

These endeavors will be carried out "in advanced manufacturing, automation and robotics, advanced composites, corrosion prevention and control, artificial intelligence and machine learning, and several other high-impact technical focus areas," the department explained.

Work on the program will be carried out at Air Force bases around the world over the next decade and is expected to be completed by July 29, 2033, the statement read.

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Iran Calls on UNSC Members to Condemn Israel's Strike on Lebanon - Document

UNITED NATIONS, July 31 (Sputnik) - The Iranian Mission to the United Nations has sent sent a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the Russian Mission to the UN, which holds the presidency of the Security Council, demanding that they condemn Israel's strike on

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Lebanon.

On Tuesday, the Israel Defense Forces announced that it carried out a strike in the southern suburb of Beirut targeting a "commander responsible for the murder of the children in Majdal Shams and the killing of numerous additional Israeli civilians." Later, the IDF said that the "most senior military commander" of Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah, Fuad Shukr, was killed in the strike. Lebanese media reported that at least three people were killed and 74 others were injured as result of the attack.

"The heinous crime constitutes a blatant violation of Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the UN Charter, and international law, particularly international humanitarian law." the letter, obtained by Sputnik, said. "It must be unequivocally and immediately condemned by the Security Council."

The Israeli army said last Saturday that 12 people had been killed in a rocket strike on the Golan Heights, which it blamed on Hezbollah. The Lebanese movement denied the claim. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel would not leave the attack on the Golan Heights unanswered and Hezbollah would pay a price "it has never paid before."

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US Conducted Strike in Iraq Against Militants It Assessed Threatened Coalition - Official

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States carried out a "defensive" airstrike in Iraq targeting militants it assessed were preparing to launch a one-way attack drone against US-led Coalition forces, a US defense official said in a statement to Sputnik.

"Tonight, US forces in Iraq conducted a defensive airstrike in the Musayib in Babil Province, targeting combatants attempting to launch one-way attack uncrewed aerial systems (OWAUAS)," the official said on Tuesday. "Based on recent attacks in Iraq and Syria, U.S. Central Command assessed that the OWAUAS posed a threat to US and Coalition Forces."

The official said the United States maintains the inherent right to self-defense and will not hesitate to take appropriate action.

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White House Reaffirms Commitment to Israel Amid Heightened Tensions With Hezbollah

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The White House National Security Council reaffirmed the US commitment to Israel's security and supported its decision to defend itself following the airstrike that allegedly killed a top Hezbollah commander in southern Beirut.

"Our commitment to Israel's security is ironclad and unwavering against all Iran-backed threats, including Lebanese Hezbollah," a White House National Security Council spokesperson said in a press release on Tuesday.

Israel has a right to defend itself against the severe threats it faces, the White House added.

The release noted that the United States is continuing to work on a diplomatic solution to end

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violence between Israel and Hezbollah.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said earlier that Fuad Shukr, commander of Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah, was killed in an Israeli airstrike in southern Beirut. The Israeli strike was in response to an alleged strike by Hezbollah in the Golan Heights over this past weekend.

On Saturday, the Israeli military said that 12 people had been killed in a rocket strike on the Golan Heights, which it blamed on Hezbollah. The Lebanese movement denied the claim. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel would not leave the attack on the Golan Heights unanswered and Hezbollah would pay a price "it has never paid before."

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Biden, Brazilian President Discuss Venezuela Election - White House

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden spoke with Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva about the recent Venezuelan presidential election as well as bilateral issues, the White House said.

"President Joe Biden spoke today with President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil to discuss a range of bilateral and regional issues, including the emerging political situation in Venezuela following the July 28 presidential election," the White House said in a statement on Tuesday.

Biden and Lula said they viewed the Venezuelan election as crucial for regional democracy and agreed to maintain close coordination on the matter, the statement said.

"The two leaders agreed on the need for immediate release of full, transparent and detailed voting data at the polling station level by the Venezuelan electoral authorities," the statement added.

The Venezuelan presidential election of July 28 saw Nicolas Maduro win a third term in office. The announcement of the results sparked the US-backed opposition to protest in the capital of Caracas and beyond, with clashes reported between the police and opposition supporters. The Venezuelan government accused several countries of election meddling.

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US Navy Says Has Not Ordered Warships in Eastern Mediterranean to Head Toward Lebanon

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has not ordered several of its warships in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea to head toward Lebanon to aid with any potential civilian evacuations, a defense official told Sputnik.

Saudi media reported earlier that US Navy warships were heading toward Lebanon amid heightened tensions between Israel and Hezbollah. Most recently, Israel conducted a strike that reportedly killed a top Hezbollah commander in Beirut.

"There has been no official tasking," the official said on Tuesday.

Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh told reporters over the weekend that the US warships Wasp, Oak Hill and New York entered the Eastern Mediterranean Sea last week as

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part of a pre-planned deployment to support US allied and partner interests in the region.

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US Air Force Orders Almost $50Mln in F-16 Radar Components From Northrop - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman Systems has received an almost $50 million US Air Force contract to manufacture F-16 radar components for 16 Allied nations, the Defense Department announced.

"Northrop Grumman Systems Corporation [of] Linthicum Heights, Maryland, was awarded a $49,999,999 ... contract for F-16 System Program Office Foreign Military Sales support," the Defense Department said in a release on Tuesday.

The contract provides for the repair and return of F-16 radar (AN/APG-68 version 9) components for 11 foreign military sales countries, the release said.

Work on the contract will be performed at Linthicum Heights, Maryland over the next six years and is expected to be completed by July 30, 2030, the release said.

The contract involves foreign military sales to Chile, Iraq, Egypt, Greece, Morocco, Pakistan, Turkey, Indonesia, Oman, Thailand and Poland, the release added.

The contract was a sole source acquisition, according to the release.

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No Request Yet for UNSC Meeting Following Israeli Strike on Beirut - UN Source to Sputnik

UNITED NATIONS, July 31 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council has not yet received a request for a meeting following the most recent Israeli strikes on Beirut, Lebanon, a United Nations source told Sputnik.

"No one has requested the meeting yet," the source said on Tuesday evening.

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Navajo Official Says Hopes Uranium Transport Blockade on Its Land Puts Spotlight on Issue

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Navajo Nation Washington Office Executive Director Justin Ahasteen told Sputnik that there is hope the tribe's decision to block the transport of uranium ore through its reservation will help draw national attention to the issue.

Earlier, Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren announced that he deployed Navajo police to stop the illegal transport of uranium across the tribe's reservation in the United States.

"I think a police blockade would be effective in gaining the attention of national leaders to understand the Navajo Nation's position," Ahasteen said on Tuesday.

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The Navajo Nation, the largest native tribe in the United States, is concerned that as the United States seeks to revive its domestic nuclear fuel industry following a ban on US imports of Russian uranium, increased transportation of uranium ore through their land will expose their members to health risks.

Navajo Nation officials had been in talks with US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officials to put together regulations on the transportation of uranium ore through their reservation.

Ahasteen said discussions are still ongoing with the EPA on the creation of potential regulations to address the Navajo Nation's concerns on this matter.

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Harris Gains Ground on Trump in US 'Battleground' States - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris erased much of Republican nominee Donald Trump's lead over President Joe Biden in so-called battleground states, a new Bloomberg/Morning Consult poll revealed.

Earlier this month, an Emerson College poll found that Trump held an advantage over Biden in seven swing states, which include Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

However, Harris replaced Biden as the Democratic Party's presumptive presidential nominee for the 2024 race after Biden ended his campaign.

Trump only holds an advantage over Harris in two swing states, the new poll report said on Tuesday.

Harris leads Trump by two percentage points in Arizona, Nevada and Wisconsin, as well as by 11 points in Michigan, the poll report said.

Trump leads Harris by four percentage points in Pennsylvania and two points in North Carolina, the poll report said. Trump and Harris are tied in Georgia, the poll report added.

Overall, Harris leads Trump by one percentage point across all seven swing states, the poll report said.

Whereas Trump held a 14-point advantage over Biden on the question of who would better handle the economy, Trump only holds an eight-point lead over Harris, the poll report added.

The poll surveyed 4,973 registered voters in the seven swing states from July 24-28. The poll has a margin of error of plus-or-minus one percentage point across the seven states, three percentage points in Arizona, Georgia and Pennsylvania, four points in Michigan, North Carolina and Wisconsin, and five points in Nevada.

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Oil Price Sinks Deeper Into Red as US Crude Breaks Below $75

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NEW YORK, July 31 (Sputnik) - The crude oil market continued its tumble on Tuesday, with benchmark US prices closing beneath the key $75 per barrel mark after hitting a near two-month low, as weakening Chinese macroeconomic data suggested there could be less buying of oil by the commodity's largest importer.

Fresh tremors ran across the crude market after data out of China showed manufacturing activity in the world's number two economy likely shrank for a third month in July, according to a Reuters poll China's government has vowed to step up support for the economy but investors have not been excited thus far by Beijing's announcements.

Also weighing on crude prices were signs that Israel may be readying for a ceasefire to the seven-month long Gaza war.

Since fighting broke out between Israeli and Hamas forces in December, the proximity of the Gaza war zone to some of the world's biggest oil producers helped sent a barrel beyond $85 in March and June - especially after interruptions to some crude cargoes from rockets exchanged by the two sides.

If a Israel-Hamas ceasefire is to occur, it has "the potential to (remove) $4 to $7 (a barrel) of risk premium out of the market" for crude oil, Bob Yawger, director of energy futures at Mizuho, said in a note to the firm's clients.

In Tuesday's trade, US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude settled at $74.73 per barrel, down $1.08, or 1.4%. WTI's low for the session was $74.61, marking a bottom not seen since its June low of 74.06.

July had been a torrid month for bulls in the oil market, with WTI on track to lose about 10% — its most since September 2023, when it tumbled 11%.

UK-origin Brent crude finished Monday's New York session at $78.63 per barrel, down $1.15, or 1.4%. For July, Brent was on track to fall 9%, its biggest losing month since October 2022.

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US Supreme Court Taking Away Democracy, Needs Urgent Reform - Senate Leader

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court led by Chief Justice John Roberts is stripping Americans of their rights and is destroying democracy with its rulings: Therefore it urgently needs reform as President Joe Biden has proposed, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said.

"Roberts has fallen down on the job," Schumer told a Capitol Hill press conference on Tuesday. "This court is taking away people's rights. It is taking away democracy. I think they need a whole lot of changes."

The Supreme Court of nine justices is currently dominated by six conservatives who had been approved by the Federalist Society. Schumer said recent rulings had turned the Supreme Court into a chaotic mess that undermined the US political process.

"The Supreme Court is a morass. It's outrageous," Schumer added.

In a speech at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library in Austin on Monday, outgoing President Joe Biden, who has announced that he will not be running for a second term in November, proposed reforms to the Supreme Court. The proposed reforms include lifting the immunity it had

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conferred on former presidents for actions undertaken before they became president.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) -

VENEZUELA
* As many as 749 people had been detained in Venezuela, some of them on suspicion of inciting hatred and even terrorism, Venezuelan Prosecutor General Tarek William Saab said on Tuesday.
* The United Nations is closely observing the latest demonstrations in Venezuela after the presidential election there and is concerned about reports that the authorities are arresting protesters, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.
* The United States is reviewing electoral data shared by Venezuela's civil society and international observers as it continues to monitor the outcome of Sunday's election, National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said.
* The joint Russian-Venezuelan projects are not under threat after the Venezuelan presidential election, Russian Ambassador to Venezuela Sergey Melik-Bagdasarov said.

GERMAN NATIONAL COURT CASE IN BELARUS
* Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has pardoned German national Rico Krieger, who was sentenced to death in Belarus, Belta reported on Tuesday, citing the president's press office.
* The German Foreign Ministry was relieved to hear the news that Krieger was pardoned, a spokesperson for the ministry told RIA Novosti.
* Lukashenko's spokeswoman Natalya Eismont told Sputnik that Minsk was ready to consider Germany's requests regarding Krieger, but it seems like Berlin did not care about his fate.

MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS
* The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said on Tuesday that it carried out a strike in Beirut, targeting a commander responsible for the killing of Israeli civilians.
* An Israeli attempt to kill Fuad Shukr, commander of Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah, has failed, a source holding a senior position in the movement told Sputnik.
* At least 17 people, including six children, were injured as a result of the Israeli drone strike of the southern suburb of Beirut, Lebanese broadcaster Al Jadeed reported.
* The Russian Foreign Ministry told Sputnik that the latest Israeli strikes in Beirut are in violation of international law.
* White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said that the United States will allow Israel to speak to its own military operations, following Israel's strike in Beirut.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

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* The United States has agreed to arm the Ukrainian F-16 fighter jets with advanced US-made missiles and other weapons, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday.
* Ukraine has lost up to 650 soldiers in the area of operations of Russia's army group South in the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* A US mercenary has been sentenced in absentia for participating in the fighting on the side of Ukraine, the Russian Investigative Committee said.

INCIDENT IN GERMANY
* A supermarket roof collapsed in the town of Ratzeburg in northern Germany, with firefighters classifying the incident as one with a large number of casualties, the German newspaper Lubecker Nachrichten reported on Tuesday.
* Fourteen people were wounded as a result of the roof collapse in Ratzeburg, Lubecker Nachrichten reported.

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More Than 900 Native American Children Died in US Boarding School - Interior Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - More than 900 Native American children died while being forced to attend US boarding schools between the 1800s and 1960s, the US Department of the Interior said in a report released on Tuesday.
"After removal and confinement from their Indian Tribes and families to Indian boarding schools, many children did not return home," the report said. "Based on available records, the Department concludes at least 973 documented Indian child deaths occurred across the Federal Indian boarding school system between 1819 and 1969."
The Interior Department's continued investigation has identified 74 marked and unmarked burial sites at 65 different schools across the US Federal Indian boarding school system based on available records.
The report pointed out that the actual number of children who died is probably greater than what they've found so far in the investigation.
The report is the second and final by the Interior Department examining 417 federal boarding schools that operated from 1819 to 1969 across 37 states.

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Bank of America Hits 3-Week Low On Warren Buffet's Stock Dump

NEW YORK, July 30 (Sputnik) - Shares of Bank of America (BoA) hit a three-week low before rebounding to close slightly higher on Tuesday after news that legendary Wall Street investor Warren Buffett had dumped another chunk of his equity there.
Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway Inc. sold $767 million of BoA stock from July 25 to July 29, paring

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its stake in the second largest US bank by more than $3 billion, a regulatory filing by the lender showed.

Berkshire has had BoA in its portfolio since 2011, becoming the bank's top shareholder over time. Buffett began his liquidation in the stock in mid-July, when BoA's price was up 31% that year.

Buffet has said that he was inspired to invest in the bank when he was in his bath. He did so via preferred stock, acquiring the right to buy common shares.

He began with a $5 billion investment in the Charlotte, North Carolina-based bank when it faced mounting legal liabilities after the 2008 financial crisis, and shareholders were getting wary about its capital.

His debut sent the stock higher and he became a huge moral support over the years for BoA Chief Executive Officer Brian Moynihan.

Thus, the dump of BoA stock by Buffett marks a remarkable departure for a man who just a year ago described it was "an investment worth keeping."

"I like Brian Moynihan enormously," the 93-year-old Buffett, arguably the world's most-followed investor, said as late as April. "I just don't want to sell it."

Even after reducing its stake by almost 7% over the past two weeks, Berkshire still holds 962 million shares in BoA worth almost $39.5 billion.

In Tuesday's trading, BoA hit a low of $40.81 — a bottom not seen since its July 8 nadir of $40.60 — before pulling back to close up 0.5% at $41.28.

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Ten Percent of US Teenage Girls Attempted Suicide in Single Year - Senator Markey

WASHINGTON, July 30 - Ten percent of all teenage girls in the United States attempted suicide in a single year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) figures, and a Surgeon General's report points the finger at social media for being a major reason why, Senator Ed Markey told a press conference on Capitol Hill on Tuesday.

"According to the CDC, two years ago one in three teenage girls contemplated suicide {and] one in ten teenage girls attempted suicide," Markey told reporters after the Senate had passed the bipartisan legislation, which will now go to the House of Representatives.

Earlier on Tuesday, the US Senate passed the Keep Our Children Safe (KOSA) bill by 91 votes to three, although its fate is still uncertain in the US House of Representatives. Powerful big tech corporations oppose the legislation because it would make them legally accountable for harmful content posted on social media.

However, Markey cited authoritative studies warning that such material played a major role in the mental health crisis among teenagers in the United States. Unless urgent action was quickly taken, the vastly increased computing power coming from the proliferation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) will make the crisis far worse, he said.

"AI is going to take what we have today and put it on steroids," Markey added.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer pledged to work to ensure that the KOSA bill and also sweeping tax credits to help the families of at least half a million poor children would be passed

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by Congress.

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US Senator Calls on Biden to Form Crisis Leadership Team After Trump Shooting

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - US Senator Roger Marshall on Tuesday called on US President Joe Biden to appoint a crisis leadership team to overhaul the US Secret Service following security lapses related to an assassination attempt on former President Donald Trump.

"Today, I'm calling for our commander-in-chief [Biden] to immediately point a crisis leadership team to go into the Secret Service, establish that leadership, turn things upside down, and begin providing adequate protection for President Trump and others," Marshall said during a press conference following a hearing on the security failures leading to the assassination attempt.

Marshall added that an independent, non-political commission is necessary to thoroughly investigate the Secret Service's handling of the recent Trump shooting.

On July 13, Trump suffered a gunshot wound to his right ear and was briefly hospitalized following an assassination attempt at his rally in Butler. The 20-year-old shooter, Thomas Crooks, killed a member of the audience and injured two others in the crowd before the Secret Service neutralized him.

The FBI continues to investigate the assassination attempt. US Secret Service Director Kimberly Cheatle was forced to resign following criticism of the agency for not preventing the assassination attempt.

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US, NATO Would Struggle to Accept Turkey's Potential Membership in SCO - O'Brien

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Tuesday the US and NATO would find it challenging to accept any Turkish decision to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

"Well, so Turkey is a very interesting ally. We have at the moment really effective cooperation in a number of fields. And a move like that would be very difficult to accept," O'Brien said during a Senate hearing.

Earlier in July, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told a news conference in Washington that Ankara aims to become a permanent member state of the SCO.

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US Designing New Requirements to Restrict 'Shadow' Fleet Carrying Russian Oil - State Dept

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - The United States is working to impose new restrictions on the alleged Russian "shadow" fleet carrying Russian oil, mainly to China and India, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Tuesday.

O'Brien claimed during a Senate hearing that Russia and Iran have built a "shadow fleet" to transport oil, and that Washington has been working over the last few years to build of regulations targeting these ships.

"We are layering in new requirements for ships and new warnings," he said. "Port cities are beginning to refuse to accept certain ships."

Western countries and their allies rolled out a sanctions campaign against Russia, targeting the country's economy, energy and banking services, among other areas, after it launched a military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. Moscow says that Western sanctions against it have failed.

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US Eyes Trade Route Via Armenia, Azerbaijan Bypassing Russia, China – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) – The United States is considering creating a new land route going from Central Asia through the territories of Armenia and Azerbaijan to global markets in Europe, bypassing Russia and China, US Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Tuesday.

"The Central Asian countries are incredibly rich, and right now their only options to the global markets fundamentally are through Russia or China. If we can open up a route that goes through Azerbaijan and Armenia, then they will have access to global markets and much less dependence on Russia and China," O'Brien told a Senate Foreign Affairs Committee in congressional testimony.

Earlier in July, USAID Deputy Assistant Administrator for Asia Anjali Kaur said that the 2025 funding will provide an opportunity for the United States to serve as a "reliable alternative" to Russia and China in Central Asia.

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In March, Armenian Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan said that the country was following the path of economic, political, and security diversification, acquiring partners not only in the West but also in Asia. He stressed that the Western countries were not forcing Yerevan to spoil relations with Moscow.

Russian Foreign Ministry deputy spokesman Andrey Nastasin stated that the United States was trying to tear Armenia and Azerbaijan away from Russia by inviting them to the NATO summit in Washington.

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State Dept. Says Some 30% of Machine Tools Come to Russia From US, Europe

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Tuesday that some 30% of machine tools come to Russia from the United States and Europe.

O'Brien claimed during a congressional hearing that China is providing 90% of the electronics that Russia depends on and 70% of the machine tools.

When asked where the other 30% of the machine tools come from, O'Brien said: "Probably the US and Europe."

"The difficulty with many of the products we are discussing, whether it's electronics or machine tools is that, you know, they are sold on to brokers and they are sold on and sold on," he said, adding that it's difficult for the companies to know the end user.

O'Brien noted that the United States is talking to its companies, and Europe is talking to its companies about understanding who they are really selling to.

The West stepped up sanctions pressure on Russia after the start of the military operation in Ukraine in 2022. President Vladimir Putin said that the West's long-term strategy of containing Russia was hurting the global economy instead.

Russia remains one of the main participants in world trade despite all obstacles and sanctions, Putin said in June.

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Navajo Nation Says Deployed Police to Stop Illegal Transport of Uranium Across Reservation

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren said on Tuesday that he deployed Navajo police to stop the illegal transport of uranium across the tribe's reservation in the United States.

"I am very disappointed that uranium is being hauled across our Navajo Nation right now," Nygren said in a statement. "I was notified 30 minutes ago, and I have ordered the Navajo Nation Police to escort the transport vehicles off our land."

The lack of notification to the Navajo Nation is a blatant disregard for the tribe's sovereignty and exposes its people to toxic uranium, which has devastated the Navajo community for decades,

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Nygren added.

The Navajo Nation, the largest Native American tribe in the United States, is concerned that as the United States seeks to revive its domestic nuclear fuel industry following a ban on US imports of Russian uranium, increased transportation of uranium ore through their land will expose their tribal members to health risks. Navajo Nation officials had been in talks with US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officials to put together regulations on the transportation of uranium ore through their reservation.

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US Aims to Help Armenia Move Away From Dependence on Russian Energy, Economy –State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) – The United States wants to help Armenia diversify its economy and get rid of its energy dependence on Russia so it can break away from Moscow entirely, US Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Tuesday.

"It [Armenia] is almost entirely dependent on Russia for its energy and its economy. We need to diversify it to make it possible for them to make the brave steps that [Armenian] Prime Minister [Nikol] Pashinyan leading them on, which is a break with Russia," O'Brien told a Senate Foreign Affairs Committee in a congressional testimony.

According to O'Brien, the United States is working to create conditions for Armenia to break away from Russia even further after this process began following the latest Nagorno-Karabakh crisis between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In March, Armenian Security Council Secretary Armen Grigoryan said that the country was following the path of economic, political, and security diversification, acquiring partners not only in the West but also in Asia. He stressed that Western countries were not forcing Yerevan to abandon relations with Moscow.

Russian Foreign Ministry deputy spokesman Andrey Nastasin stated that the United States, by inviting Armenia and Azerbaijan to the NATO summit, was trying to tear them away from Russia.

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ANALYSIS - Biden's US Supreme Court Reform Plan Just 'Red Meat' Rhetoric to Feed His Political Base

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's new plan to limit the powers of the US Supreme Court that he announced on Monday has no hope whatsoever of being implemented and enforced, US constitutional experts told Sputnik.

"Biden's plan is just red meat," University of Illinois Professor of Law Francis Boyle said.

In a speech at the Lyndon B. Johnson Memorial Library in Austin on Monday, Biden announced his determination to push through a constitutional amendment that would lift the immunity from

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prosecution that former presidents enjoyed after leaving the White House. The immunity would still apply to any acts they carried out while in office but would not extend to their previous activities while campaigning for the White House.

Biden has opposed in the past any constitutional measures to limit the powers of the Supreme Court or change its composition. However, Biden changed his position and made his new proposal just a week after announcing that he would not run for reelection in November.

Boyle dismissed the measure as an empty political ploy to impress Biden's core constituents in the Democratic Party.

"This is just 'red meat' that Biden is the tossing out in order to placate the base of the Democratic Party during this election cycle and he knows it," Boyle said.

Biden's so-called reforms would get nowhere under the current political conditions and if Biden and the Democrats were serious about reforming the Supreme Court they would announce a counter-packing campaign to increase the number of Justices by six.

Such a move is needed to counteract the six members of the Federalist Society who were put onto the Supreme Court by Republican presidents, Boyle said.

Those justices had deliberately been appointed by presidents "acting in cahoots with the Federalist Society in order to pack the Court their way, which they have succeeded in doing," he said.

Boyle recalled that President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced his successful plan to pack the Supreme Court in 1937 by increasing its members by up to six.

Roosevelt made that proposal "in order to circumvent a reactionary Republican Supreme Court [that was] striking down his New Deal Legislation designed to deal with the Great Depression," he said.

Although the measure itself was defeated, Roosevelt won his battle in the end - he put the fear of God into the Supreme Court and got results, but Biden and today's Democrats are no Roosevelt, he said.

BIDEN'S PROPOSAL HAS NO CHANCE OF BEING IMPLEMENTED

US constitutional historian and political commentator Dan Lazare agreed that Biden's new proposal did not have a chance of being implemented.

"Biden's op-ed [making the case for his proposed reform in the US media] is pure unadulterated nonsense," Lazare said.

Biden was calling for three Supreme Court reforms - a measure striking down presidential immunity, a second imposing term limits and a third imposing a code of ethics, Lazare said.

However, the first two would require a constitutional amendment, while the third probably would as well since the Supreme Court justices are all but certain to strike down any such bill on the grounds that it constitutes a flagrant violation of separation of powers, he said.

The only way around an adverse Supreme Court ruling was a constitutional amendment; Congress and the states would probably have to go this route in this regard as well, Lazare said.

"Yet, changing the Constitution is not just difficult, but flat-out impossible and that is why it can be assessed that Biden indulged in an empty bluff which would fool and impress no one," he said.

"Biden should know that while you can fool some of the people some of the time, you can't fool all of the people all the time, especially on a topic as important as this," Lazare said. "Biden's

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latest bonehead move is further proof of why government in this country doesn't work - and why it never will."

The two-thirds rule in Article 5 of the US Constitution says that Congress must approve any proposed amendment by a two-thirds vote in each chamber, while the second means that three-fourths (i.e., 38) of the states must assent as well.

"Bad as the first one is, the second is an absolute killer since it means that 13 states representing as little as 4.4% of the population can veto any effort at constitutional reform, not just for a year or a decade, but forever," he said.

This explained why the United States has not seen a constitutional amendment since 1971 and why, given Washington's hyper-polarized atmosphere, it is not likely to see another for the next half-century as well, and the chances of anything similar happening again therefore were nil, Lazare said.

"The Supreme Court is another Washington institution that is broken beyond repair, yet is unfixable under anything resembling present circumstances," Lazare added.

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US Diplomat Travels to Kiev to Discuss Ways to Revive Ukraine’s Economy - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for Ukraine's Economic Recovery Penny Pritzker visited Kiev on July 29 to meet with senior officials and discuss ways to revive the country’s economy amid the ongoing military conflict with Russia, the State Department said on Tuesday.

"Special Representative Penny Pritzker traveled to Ukraine on July 29 to meet senior Ukrainian officials to discuss ways to further increase private sector investment and jumpstart Ukraine’s economy," the State Department said in a press release.

Pritzker had a chance to meet with Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, First Deputy Prime Minister Svyrydenko, Minister of Digital Transformation Fedorov, and Minister of Strategic Industries Oleksandr Kamyshi, among other officials, the release said.

Several CEOs of US private companies joined Pritzker on the trip to Kiev, the release added.

In June, the Group of Seven (G7) leaders agreed to provide Ukraine with a $50 billion loan using funds generated from frozen Russian assets.

Russian officials have said the seizure of more than $300 billion of Russian assets by Western countries is theft and violates international law.

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US Reviewing Electoral Data Shared by Venezuelan Civil Society, Int'l Observers - NSC

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) – The United States is reviewing electoral data shared by Venezuela’s civil society and international observers as it continues to monitor the outcome of Sunday’s election, National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said on Tuesday.

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"We continue to call for Venezuela's electoral authorities to release full, transparent, and detailed voting results, including by polling station … We are also reviewing other electoral data shared by civil society organizations and the reports of international election monitors," Watson said in a statement.

The spokesperson said that such steps are necessary considering that the election results announced by Venezuela's National Electoral Council "do not reflect the will of the Venezuelan people."

The July 28 presidential election saw President Nicolas Maduro win a third term in office. The announcement of the results sparked protests in the capital of Caracas and beyond, with clashes reported between the police and opposition supporters. The Venezuelan government accused several countries of election meddling.

Maduro's victory has been questioned by the US, Canada and several regional countries. The presidents of Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay in a joint letter requested an urgent meeting of the Organization of American States and demanded the complete revision of the voting results by independent electoral observers.

In response, the Venezuelan government recalled its diplomats from the Latin American countries that did not recognize the results of the presidential election. It also called on them to recall their own representatives working from Caracas.

Maduro's election victory has been recognized by Russia, China, Belarus, Iran, Nicaragua, Cuba and Bolivia among many others.

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White House After Beirut Strike Says Will Let Israel Speak to Own Military Operations

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday that the United States will allow Israel to speak to its own military operations, following an Israeli strike in Beirut.

"I leave it to Israel to speak for their own military operations," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Israel Defense Forces said that it conducted a strike in Beirut, which it claimed targeted a commander responsible for killing Israeli civilians.

The US still does not believe that an "all out war" between Israel and Hezbollah is inevitable, Jean-Pierre said.

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White house when asked about Israel's latest airstrike in Lebanon says US leaves it to Israel to speak to israeli operations

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Meta Reaches $1.4Bln Settlement With Texas For Alleged Privacy Law Violation - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Meta (banned in Russia as an extremist organization) agreed to a $1.4 billion settlement with the state of Texas over claims the social media company violated state privacy laws, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's office said on Tuesday.

"Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has secured a $1.4 billion settlement with Meta (formerly known as Facebook) to stop the company's practice of capturing and using the personal biometric data of millions of Texans without the authorization required by law," the Texas Attorney General's office said in a press release.

Meta will pay the state of Texas $1.4 billion over five years, the release noted.

In February 2022, the Texas Attorney General sued Meta for unlawfully capturing the biometric data of millions of Texans without obtaining their informed consent as required by Texas law.

The release explained that Meta rolled out a new feature in 2011 initially called Tag Suggestions that for more than a decade ran facial recognition software on virtually every face contained in the photographs uploaded to Facebook, capturing records of the facial geometry of the people depicted without the consent from users.

Texas law forbids companies from capturing biometric identifiers of Texans, including records of face geometry, unless the business first informs the person and receives their consent to capture the biometric identifier, according to the release.

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US Lawmakers Urge IOC to Condemn Vulgar Depiction of Last Supper During Olympics - Letter

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - The International Olympic Committee must condemn the vulgar depiction of the Last Supper during the opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, a bipartisan group of 30 US congressmen said on Tuesday.

"The International Olympic Committee (IOC) should formally condemn the mockery that occurred in Paris of one of the most sacred moments of the Christian faith," the lawmakers wrote in a letter to IOC President Thomas Bach.

In addition, the lawmakers called on the IOC to ensure that this situation is not repeated in the future given that the Olympic Games should unite diverse people.

"There is no place for anti-Christian bigotry at an event designed to bring the world together. The Games should celebrate the athletes, not denigrate anyone's faith," the letter said.

The 2024 Olympic Games opening ceremony took place in Paris on Friday and millions of viewers expressed their outrage at the parody of Christianity with representatives of the LGBT movement (banned in Russia as extremist).

One of the largest US telecommunications companies, C Spire, has announced the decision to withdraw its advertising from the Olympic Games in Paris.

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France is hosting the 2024 Summer Olympics from July 26 to August 11, with most of the events taking place in Paris and its suburbs.

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US Space Force Uses Atlas V 'Workhorse' to Launch Top Secret Space Force Mission - ULA

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - The US Space Force (USSF) successfully launched into space on Tuesday morning a top secret satellite payload, the United Launch Alliance (ULA) announced.

Mission USSF-51 was launched at 6:45 am Eastern Time (ET) on an Atlas V rocket for the USSF Space Systems Command (SSC) from Space Launch Complex-41 at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station, Florida.

It was the last scheduled launch of the venerable Atlas booster design. The first Atlas was launched in 1957, ULA said.

The USSF-51 mission was originally planned to be launched on the Atlas' replacement Vulcan booster but it has been delayed by development problems, according to published reports.

ULA officials have said USSF-51 has been identified as a critical mission and therefore the old Atlas booster was used once more to ensure a reliable launch.

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UN Concerned Over Latest Reports of Protester Arrests in Venezuela - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, July 30 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is closely observing the latest demonstrations in Venezuela after the presidential election there and is concerned about reports that the authorities are arresting protesters, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"We are obviously following very closely this latest round of demonstrations. We are very concerned about these reports of arrests," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

However, Dujarric also said that all forms of violence should be rejected.

Earlier on Tuesday, Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez said the country's US-backed opposition attempted a coup with the support of other Western countries.

Lopez also said that during the protests, one soldier was killed by the opposition protesters, while 23 soldiers and 25 police officers have been injured.

The July 28 election saw President Nicolas Maduro win a third term in office. The announcement of the results sparked clashes between opposition supporters and the police in the capital of Caracas and beyond. The authorities detained at least 15 people on charges of vandalism.

The Venezuelan government has accused several countries of meddling in the country's election.

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US Does Not Consider Israel-Lebanon War Inevitable, Thinks It Can Be Avoided- State Dept

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - The United States does not think that a war between Israel and Lebanon is inevitable and believes that it can be avoided, US State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Tuesday.

"We do not believe that all-out war is inevitable and we still believe that it can be avoided," Patel said during a press briefing.

Patel added that the US remains focused on diplomacy amid heightening tensions between the two countries.

The situation on the Israeli-Lebanese border worsened after the start of Israel's military operation in the Gaza Strip in October 2023. The Israeli army and Hezbollah fighters exchange fire almost daily in areas along the border.

Israel on Tuesday claimed responsibility for what it said was a "targeted strike" in the southern suburbs of Beirut.

The attack comes after Israel blamed Hezbollah for a deadly rocket strike on the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights on Saturday, a claim denied by Hezbollah.

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Son of Mexican Kingpin 'El Chapo' Pleads Not Guilty to US Drug Trafficking Charges - Court

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - Joaquin Guzman Lopez, son of the notorious Mexican drug kingpin 'El Chapo,' pleaded not guilty in federal court to US drug trafficking charges, US Judge Sharon Coleman's court clerk told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"Yes he did," the court clerk said when asked if Guzman pleaded not guilty during his arraignment.

Guzman appeared for his arraignment before Judge Coleman in the US District Court for the Northern District of Illinois.

Last week, US federal agents took into custody Guzman and Ismael Zambada Garcia, both alleged leaders of the Sinaloa Cartel, at an isolated airport near El Paso, Texas.

Guzman and Garcia are facing multiple charges in the United States for allegedly leading the cartel's criminal operations, including its deadly drug manufacturing and trafficking networks, according to the Justice Department.

Guzman faces charges for allegedly trafficking cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine, among other drugs.

Garcia, also known as El Mayo and a co-founder of the Sinaloa Cartel, faces charges for alleged fentanyl trafficking, money laundering, firearms offenses, kidnapping and conspiracy to commit murder.

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US Senate Passes Bills to Protect Minors From Online Harms

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Tuesday passed legislation to require online platforms to protect children from harms associated with using their products or services.

Senators passed the bills, dubbed the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) and the Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), in a vote of 91 in favor and three opposed.

"Too many kids experience relentless online bullying. Too many families have lost their kids because of what happened to them on social media. The Senate is working to pass the KOSA and COPPA 2.0 bills that will help protect our kids from these risks," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Monday in a statement on the bills.

KOSA requires platforms to implement measures to prevent and mitigate harms to minors that may arise from use of their applications, including sexual exploitation and bullying.

The bill also requires platforms to provide certain safeguards to minors, such as settings to restrict access to their personal data and tools for parents to supervise minors' use of a platform.

Moreover, platforms must allow parents, minors and schools to report certain harms, refrain from facilitating advertising of age-restricted products or services to minors and annually report on foreseeable risks to minors from using their platform.

The bill is enforced through the states and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The legislation also requires the commission to work with the National Academy of Sciences to study risks to minors posed by social media and other online platforms.

COPPA bans online companies from collecting personal information from users between the ages of 13 and 16 without their consent. The bill also bans targeted advertising to children and teens, as well as establishes a Youth Marketing and Privacy Division at the FTC.

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Gab CEO Says FBI's Description of Trump Shooter's Social Media Presence Inaccurate

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - The FBI's description of online activity potentially tied to Trump shooter Thomas Crooks is inaccurate, the CEO of the social media platform Gab, Andrew Torba, said on Tuesday.

During a US Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on Tuesday, an FBI official said that comments made by a social media account believed to be associated with Crooks reflected anti-Semitic and anti-immigration themes.

However, Torba said that the description of the account's activity is not consistent with what Gab found, following an FBI request for information on an account believed to belong to Crooks.

"This is not consistent with Gab's understanding of the shooter's motives based on an Emergency Disclosure Request we received from the FBI last week," Torba said in a statement.

To the best of Gab's knowledge, as of 2021, Crooks was a pro-lockdown, pro-immigration,

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left-wing Joe Biden supporter.

The FBI has said that Crooks' motive for the assassination attempt against former US President Donald Trump is unclear, but that identifying the motive is a priority for investigators.

On July 13, Crooks attempted to assassinate Trump at a campaign rally in Pennsylvania, shooting him in the ear, killing one audience member and wounding two others.

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US Senator Says Sentinel Program Must Move Forward Regardless of Challenges

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - US efforts to replace the Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) system with the new Sentinel system program must move forward despite several costly setbacks, US Senator Deborah FIscher said on Monday.

"We need to recognize that Sentinel has to move forward," Fischer said during remarks at a Heritage Foundation think-tank event. "We cannot continue to have a life extension program for a Minutemen three that was never designed to last as long as it had."

There are no alternatives to the Sentinel program, Fischer, a senior member of the US Senate Armed Services Committee, said.

Fischer also said the United States will address the challenges with the program, identify the best path forward and do everything possible to replace Sentinel as soon as possible.

Congressional oversight will be key to ensuring the Sentinel program is able to move forward as they deal with addressing the challenges, Fischer added.

The Sentinel is a three-stage intercontinental ballistic missile intended to replace the aging US arsenal of Minuteman III ICBMs by 2038, with the missile itself originally expected to be adopted by the US military around 2030. The missile is expected to carry several W87-1 thermonuclear warheads with a blast yield of 475 kilotons each, and has a range of at least 9,000 miles or 15,000 kilometers, according to published sources.

However, the modified Sentinel program is now on track to cost $140.9 billion, an increase of 81% compared to a 2020 estimate, according to a recent official report.

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US State Dept. Calls for Prioritizing Shipbuilding, Long-Range Air Capabilities - Campbell

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell called on Tuesday for the United States to focus on naval shipbuilding and long-range air capabilities in order to confront China.

"Now is the Navy and the Air Forces' time. They have to step up, they have to invest more. They have to be more innovative. They have to be more intrepid and they've got to understand that the Indo-Pacific arena requires the most capable naval and advanced long-range air capabilities that the United States has ever needed before, and that's where we have to put our focus," Campbell said at a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.

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Campbell called for the United States to shift its focus from building up ground forces in the Middle East for the past 20 years to shipbuilding in order to maintain its naval supremacy over China in the 21st century.

Campbell said that the focus should include both, surface ships and submarines.

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India Great Power With Own Interests, Will Never Become 'Formal Ally' of US - Campbell

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - India's status as a great power with its own interests prevents it from becoming a formal ally of the United States, US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said on Tuesday.

"One of the hardest things to keep in mind is that India is also a great power, and it has its own beliefs, its own interests. They will never be a formal ally or partner of the United States," Campbell said during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.

However, the US and India can still maintain strong relations on the global stage, Campbell said. The vast majority of people in India want a better relationship with the US, Campbell said.

The US has changed India's trajectory in consequential ways that benefit US interests, Campbell said.

There is likely to be news of India engaging more directly in regards to Ukraine, Campbell also said.

India seeks to play a responsible role globally, Campbell said. There are few countries with as much appeal to the global south as India, Campbell added.

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US State Department Says China Should Do More to Restrain Houthis

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - The United States would like China to use its diplomatic sway with Iran to restrain the attacks by Yemen's Houthis in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said on Tuesday.

"I think they are worried about the potential for escalation, but at the same time, they really haven't weighed in with their diplomatic might. In the situation involving the Houthis, they have not been as direct about their concerns about escalation to Iran. They have raised it in certain circumstances, but not with the power and influence of a great power like China. I think we would expect them to do more," Campbell said at a Senate foreign relations committee hearing.

Campbell described China's engagement in Israel's war on Gaza as "largely absent" and "largely shallow."

Campbell added that he did not believe China wanted an "enlargement" of Israel's war on Gaza.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry earlier said that Beijing has been in close communication with various parties and is working actively to alleviate the tension in the Red Sea.

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Iran has repeatedly rejected accusations from Western countries over Tehran's alleged involvement in Houthi attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea. In November, Houthi rebels began attacking what they say are ships associated with Israel in response to its military actions in the Gaza Strip.

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Harris Will Not Likely Hike Taxes on Middle-Income Americans if Elected President - Yellen

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris, who's running for president in the 2024 election, is expected not to raise taxes on middle-income Americans if she returns to the White House, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Tuesday.

"Vice President Harris has indicated her support for avoiding tax increases for middle class families," Yellen said after launching free tax filing for residents in the state of Pennsylvania. "So, I believe that's a principle that she would adhere to. And beyond that, well, she's played an important role in determining our economic policy and general approach to tax fairness over the last three-and-a-half years."

Yellen was responding to a question on tax changes President Joe Biden may have in mind for the 2025 US Budget and how Harris might factor into that.

Yellen declined to speculate about the vice president's potential course of action, saying, "I wouldn't want to speak about details with respect to how she might approach the upcoming negotiation."

Harris was thrust into the front and center of US political focus after agreeing to be the Democratic Party's presumptive nominee for the 2024 election when Biden suddenly withdrew from the race a week ago and endorsed his deputy for the top job.

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JD Vance to Visit US Southern Border in Cochise County, Arizona on August 1 - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - Republican Vice-Presidential Nominee JD Vance is planning to visit the US southern border in the state of Arizona on August 1, the Trump-Vance campaign press office announced on Tuesday.

"Vice Presidential Nominee and Senator JD Vance to visit the U.S. southern border in Cochise County, Arizona on Thursday, August 01, 2024, at 7:50AM MST [13:50 GMT]," the press office said in a statement.

The Trump-Vance campaign points out in the statement that if elected, Democrat presidential nominee Kamala Harris will decriminalize illegal border crossings and take executive action to provide mass amnesties for millions of illegal immigrants, the statement added.

The campaign reiterated that if elected, presumptive Republican nominee Donald Trump will conduct the largest deportation of illegal migrants in US history to restore law and order on the

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southern border.

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US Secret Service Head Blames 'Failure to Imagine' for Security Lapse in Trump Shooting

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - Acting United States Secret Service Director Ronald Rowe said on Tuesday that a failure to imagine potential dangers and challenge existing assumptions contributed to the security breach that resulted in the assassination attempt on former President Donald Trump.

"I think this was a failure of imagination, a failure to imagine that we actually do live in a very dangerous world where people do actually want to do harm to our protectees. I think it was a failure to challenge our own assumptions, the assumptions that we know our partners are going to do everything they can, and they do this every day," Rowe said during a Senate hearing.

On July 13, Trump suffered a gunshot wound to his right ear and was briefly hospitalized following an assassination attempt at his rally in Butler. The 20-year-old shooter, Thomas Crooks, killed a member of the audience and injured two others in the crowd before the Secret Service neutralized him.

The FBI continues to investigate the assassination attempt. US Secret Service Director Kimberly Cheatle was forced to resign following criticism of the agency for not preventing the assassination attempt.

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UNSC Unanimously Lifts Arms Embargo on Central African Republic - Sputnik Correspondent

UNITED NATIONS, July 30 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council members unanimously lifted the arms embargo that had been imposed on the Central African Republic (CAR), a Sputnik correspondent reported on Tuesday.

The UN Security Council reaffirmed "its decision in this resolution to fully lift the arms embargo on the CAR established under resolution 2127 (2013) as amended, and emphasizing, for the avoidance of doubt, that there is no more arms embargo on the Government of the CAR."

The UN Security Council also strongly condemned the attacks and human rights abuses committed by armed groups in the CAR.

Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasssily Nebenzia said that the issue of illegal armed groups can only be solved "through sovereign efforts to stabilize and ensure security within national borders."

In June, Russian Ambassador in Bangui Alexander Bikantov told Sputnik that the UN Security Council may consider lifting the arms embargo imposed on the CAR, however, Western countries traditionally oppose the lifting of embargoes.

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US Sanctions 7 Entities, 5 Individuals Linked to Iran's Defense Procurement - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department announced on Tuesday sanctions on five individuals and seven entities from Iran, China, and Hong Kong for facilitating procurements for Iran's Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is targeting five individuals and seven entities based in Iran, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and Hong Kong that have facilitated procurements on behalf of subordinates of Iran's Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL)," the US Treasury Department said in a statement.

According to the statement, PRC-based Beijing Shiny Nights Technology Development Co., Ltd. (Beijing SNTD) and Iranian national Sayyed Ali Seraj Hashemi were involved in procuring critical components for Iran's missile program. Hashemi coordinated with Iranian procurement agent Saeed Hamidi Javar, who oversees Buy Best Electronic Pars Company (BBEPC), to acquire these components.

"Those designated today procure various components, including accelerometers and gyroscopes, which serve as key inputs to Iran's ballistic missile and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) program. Iran's acquisition of critical missile and UAV components continues to enable its proliferation of weapons systems to its proxies in the Middle East and to Russia," the statement said.

Iran has never provided Russia with UAVs in the course of the Ukraine conflict, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani said earlier in July.

The new US sanctions also target Electro Optic Sairan Industries Co (SAPA) and its procurement official Mohammad Abdollahi, along with Hong Kong-based Thomas Ho Ming Tong and his associated companies, for their role in acquiring optical components. Azmoon Pajohan Hesgar Limited Liability Company (APH) and its managing director Ezzatullah Ghasemian Sorbani are designated for providing support to Iran's missile programs, the statement read.

The statement added Shenzhen Rion Technology Co., Ltd., based in the PRC, has been sanctioned for supplying items to Beijing SNTD.

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US Delays New Tariffs on Chinese Goods, Pushing Start to Beyond Mid-August - USTR

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - The United States will be delaying by at least two weeks new tariffs on Chinese goods, pushing their tentative start to beyond mid-August, as it reviews public comments that could modify the duties, the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) announced on Tuesday.

"USTR received more than 1,100 comments from the public … [and] continues to review all

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comments," the agency said in a statement, adding that it expects to finalize the review by mid-August.

USTR expects that the modifications slated for 2024 will take effect approximately two weeks after it makes the final determination public, the statement said.

The new tariffs are being deliberated under the so-called Section 301 investigation of China's Acts, Policies, and Practices Related to Technology Transfer, Intellectual Property, and Innovation.

Section 301 of the US Trade Act of 1974 has proposed tariffs on $18 billion of imports to the United States from China.

The Biden administration said in May that the duties were in response to China's alleged unfair trade practices and to counteract the resulting harms to US workers and businesses.

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Ukraine Membership in NATO Not Appropriate While Conflict Ongoing - US Defense Commission

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - It is not appropriate for Ukraine to become a member of the NATO alliance while the conflict in the country is still ongoing, Commission on the National Defense Strategy Vice Char Eric Edelman said in a congressional testimony on Tuesday.

"I think the alliance that just completed a summit of the alliance made clear that while there's an ongoing conflict in Ukraine, it's probably not appropriate to have Ukraine be a member," Edelman told the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

Edelman said the NATO alliance and the United States have undertaken a series of actions bilaterally with Ukraine to build a bridge toward Ukraine's potential future.

Earlier in July, NATO members released a joint Washington Summit Declaration, which outlines the alliance's efforts to further isolate Russia, bolster the alliance's security on its eastern flank, increase security assistance for Ukraine and claim Ukraine is on an "irreversible path" into NATO, among other initiatives.

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US State Department Calls for Boosting Efforts Against Chinese Influence in Africa

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell warned Tuesday that the US needed to ramp up its efforts in Africa to combat Chinese influence.

" I've now been to Africa twice, two extended trips. This is the place where we need to step up our game substantially … we need to do more and we have to contest Chinese actions not only in terms of their forward-facing strategy, but their desire to go after Africa's rare earths that will be critical for our industrial and technological capabilities," Campbell said at a Senate foreign relations committee hearing.

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Campbell highlighted that China was particularly challenging the US within international organizations.

He said placing diplomats in the region should be among the US's top priorities, explaining that the importance of a diplomatic presence in international organizations in the Global South, particularly in small countries in Africa, was underestimated.

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Russia's Alexey Miranchuk Signs Contract With Atlanta United Until 2027 - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - Russian soccer player Alexey Miranchuk has signed a contract with the Atlanta United until 2027, with an option to extend the contract for a year, the club said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Atlanta United today announced it has signed midfielder Alexey Miranchuk from Atalanta BC of Italy's Serie A to a contract through the 2027 MLS season with an option for 2028," the statement said, referring by acronym to the US Major League Soccer.

Miranchuk must receive an International Transfer Certificate and a P-1 visa for recognized athletes in order to be added to the Atlanta United team's roster, the statement said.

Atlanta's Vice President and Technical Director Carlos Bocanegra called the 28-year-old Russian midfielder an excellent chance creator capable of scoring goals.

"Over the last four years, he has been a consistent player in Serie A and has made more than 40 combined appearances in UEFA Champions League and Europa League, while helping Atalanta win the Europa League title in 2023-24. We're pleased to add a player with his experience and winning mentality to our group and we look forward to welcoming him to Atlanta," Bocanegra said.

Alexey Miranchuk began his professional career at Lokomotiv Moscow, where he won three Russian Cups (2015, 2017, 2019). He also participated in the UK Premier League (2018) and in the Russian Super Cup (2019-20).

Miranchuk transferred to Italy's Serie A Atalanta in September 2020 but spent the 2022-2023 season on loan to Torino FC.

Miranchuk will be the first Russian to play in the MLS since 2010.

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White House Rejects Claims of Informing Lebanon About Israeli Strike

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - The White House on Tuesday dismissed allegations that US officials had informed Lebanon in advance about the military actions Israel was taking in retaliation for the attack on the occupied Golan Heights.

"These reports are false," White House National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said on X.

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The Israeli army said on Saturday that 12 people had been killed in a rocket strike on the Golan Heights, which it blamed on Hezbollah. The Lebanese movement denied the claim. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel would not leave the attack on the Golan Heights unanswered and Hezbollah would pay a price "it has never paid before."

On Sunday morning, the Israeli army said it had carried out strikes on a number of Hezbollah targets deep in Lebanon and in the south of the country. Israeli media reported, citing a Lebanese official, that Biden's senior adviser Amos Hochstein notified Lebanon in advance of the Israeli strikes.

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US State Dept. Says 'Premature' for China to Join Ukraine Peace Process

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said on Tuesday that it was premature to invite China to participate in a peace process for Ukraine.

"I would generally say any kind of discussion like that is premature," Campbell said at a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.

Campbell pointed out that there was no sign of Russia's in any way easing up on its offensives with Ukraine, adding that "if you signal too early your interest in getting to the negotiating table, I think it sends the wrong message, and it's a signal of weakness more generally."

Campbell also warned that China' support for Russia's defense industrial base would shift the balance of military power not only in Ukraine, but more broadly in Europe for the next decades.

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US Agrees to Arm Ukraine's F-16s With Advanced Missiles, Other Weapons – Reports

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) – The United States has agreed to arm the Ukrainian F-16 jets with advanced American-made missiles and other weapons, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday.

Despite its limited inventory, the Pentagon will supply the F-16s with air-to-ground munitions, precision-guidance kits for bombs and advanced air-to-air missiles, the report said, citing a senior US official.

"We are confident that we will be able to supply all of those [weapons], at least the critical volumes that they need," the official said, as quoted by the report.

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US Troop Withdrawal From Niger to Be Completed by September 15 as Scheduled - General

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WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - The withdrawal of US servicemen from Niger will be completed according to schedule by September 15, US Air Forces in Africa and Europe Commander Gen. James Hecker said on Tuesday.

"We're getting out of Niger. That's going well. We had a date to get out and that date was September 15 and I can tell you we're on time and that's going to happen," Hecker said during a discussion at the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies.

Earlier in July, the US Defense Department announced that it had completed the withdrawal of its forces and assets from Air Base 101 in Niger.

The transition lasted almost two months and ended on July 7 ahead of schedule and without any complications during a turnover ceremony with the Joint Disengagement Commission following the final departure of a US Air Force C-17 Globemaster III from Air Base 101.

The US troops withdrawal was initiated in March after a Nigerien military spokesperson said the country's transitional government, which took power in July 2023, terminated the country's military agreement with the United States with immediate effect, citing the interests of the Nigerien people.

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Russia Reconstituted Its Military 'Much More' Rapidly Than Anticipated – US Official

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) – Russia has been able to reconstitute its military "much more" rapidly that many experts anticipated following the beginning of its special military operation in Ukraine, Vice Chair of the US Commission on the National Defense Strategy Eric Edelman said on Tuesday.

"Russia has reconstituted its own defense industrial base after its invasion of Ukraine much more rapidly than people anticipated. [Russian President] Vladimir Putin seeks to reassert Russia's a great power and is happy to destabilize the world in order to do so," Edelman said in a testimony for the Senate Armed Services Committee.

The assessment is in line with Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell's statement in April that Russia had managed to almost completely reconstitute and retool its military despite the initial setbacks on the battlefield in Ukraine.

Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said on several occasions that Moscow is not going to attack NATO countries. Russia does not threaten anyone, but will not ignore actions that are potentially dangerous to its interests, the Kremlin has said.

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US, Philippines Commit to Finalizing Military Information Sharing Agreement - Pentagon

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WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) – The United States and Philippines committed on Tuesday to finalizing a military information sharing agreement by the end of the year, according to a joint release.

Among various commitments made at the fourth Philippines-United States 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in Manila, the release listed "Conclude the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) by the end of 2024. Together with the Philippines-United States Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA), a Philippines-United States GSOMIA would lay the foundation for enhanced, expanded, and timely sharing of information and defense technology."

The dialogue was attended by Philippines Secretary for Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo, Philippines Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin.

They also committed to bolstering maritime security cooperation and expanding operational coordination with partners such as Australia and Japan. They welcomed the signing of the Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement and praised the Philippines-United States-Japan-Australia maritime cooperative activity in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone earlier in April.

The ministers also committed to annually convening their 2+2 ministerial dialogue, with the next meeting to be hosted by the US next year.

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Pentagon Needs Fundamental Change to Deal With Nat'l Security Threats - Defense Commission

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department requires fundamental change in order to deal with the current threats to the national security of the United States, Commission of the National Defense Strategy Chair Jane Harman and Vice Chair Eric Edelman said in a joint statement on Tuesday.

"Significant and urgent action is needed," the joint statement said. "We recommend fundamental change in the way the Pentagon and other government agencies do business, the way they incorporate private sector technology and a full embrace of our partners and allies."

The Commission believes unanimously that the threats to US national security and the country's interests are greater than at any time since World War II and are more complex than during the Cold War, the joints statement said.

The Commission, which received administrative and analytic support from the think-tank RAND Corporation, was tasked with examining and making recommendations based on the US National Defense Strategy.

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US Should Prepare for Wartime Mobilization in Case of War With Russia, China - Official

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - The United States should be ready for a wartime mobilization in case of a major conflict, including with Russia and China, amid persistent workforce shortfalls at the Department of Defense (DoD) and in the private sector, Commission on the National Defense Strategy Chair Jane Harman said on Tuesday.

"We should prepare now for what a wartime mobilization would entail. The civilian workforce at DoD and in the private sector also face critical shortfalls," Harman said in a written testimony prepared for delivery during a US Senate Armed Services Committee hearing.

A host of recruiting failures have shrunk the US military force, raising questions about the all-volunteer force in peacetime, let alone in major combat, the statement said.

The Defense Department said in December that fiscal year 2023 was tough in terms if meeting recruitment goals with only the Marine Corps and the Space Force being able to meet them.

One of the main concerns the Defense Department is facing is that only 23% of young people between 17 and 24 even qualify to join the military, according to defense officials.

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NASA Chief Says Goal to Send Humans to Mars in 2040s 'Very Possible' to Achieve

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - The goal to send humans to Mars in the 2040s is "very possible" to achieve, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said on Tuesday.

"Yes, it is very possible," Nelson said during a conversation at The Politico space conference in Washington.

The NASA chief emphasized the importance of returning to the Moon in order to eventually send people to Mars.

"We are going to the Moon to learn in order to be able to send humans to Mars," Nelson said.

Nelson pointed out that he does not worry about budget constraints related to the Moon program but expressed frustration over the canceling of the Volatiles Investigating Polar Exploration Rover (VIPER) project that sought to look for ice around the South Pole of the Moon that can be used by astronauts.

"With regards to VIPER, that is a science project. When you get cut $2 billion just in science in two years, you got a problem," Nelson said.

In January, Nelson announced that NASA delayed the first US manned mission to the Moon in more than half a century until September 2026 to work through the challenges of developing and integrating the spacecraft systems in the Artemis program.

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Microsoft 365 Experiencing Access Issues, Degraded Performance – Company

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WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) – Technology giant Microsoft said on Tuesday that it was investigating access issues and degraded performance affecting multiple Microsoft 365 services.

"We're currently investigating access issues and degraded performance with multiple Microsoft 365 services and features," the company said via the X platform.

The issue comes just weeks after a global failure of Windows-based systems affected telecommunications operators, banks, and airlines around the world on July 19.

US cybersecurity company CrowdStrike confirmed that the global outage had occurred due to its update for the Falcon Sensor cybersecurity application for Microsoft's Windows operating system.

On Wednesday, CrowdStrike announced that it would introduce additional checks and a "staggered deployment strategy" to decrease the risk of a potential error simultaneously affecting a significant number of devices and servers, following a global Windows outage.

The Guardian newspaper has reported, citing experts, that the full recovery of the systems affected by the global outage could take weeks.

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Republican Lawmakers Urge Biden to Sanction Maduro Over 'Unfair Elections' - Letter

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) – Three US House Republican lawmakers in a letter have urged President Joe Biden to impose sanctions on Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro over what they claimed were "unfair elections."

"We respectfully request that you roundly condemn the actions of the Maduro regime regarding the July 28, 2024 'elections' in Venezuela, and swiftly impose sweeping, robust sanctions on the regime as well as targeted sanctions on individuals responsible for subverting Venezuela's once democratic system," the letter issued on Monday said.

The lawmakers said that Sunday's presidential election in Venezuela was neither free nor fair.

Despite his alleged loss to the opposition, Maduro refuses to surrender the presidency willingly and continues his "brutal grip" on power, the letter added.

The July 28 election saw Maduro win a third term in office. The announcement of results sparked clashes between opposition supporters and the police in the capital of Caracas and beyond. At least 15 people were detained on suspicion of vandalism. The Venezuelan government accused several countries of election meddling.

Maduro's victory has been questioned by the US, Canada and several regional countries. The presidents of Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay issued a joint statement requesting an urgent meeting of the Organization of American States and demanding the complete revision of the voting results by independent electoral observers.

In response, the Venezuelan government recalled its diplomats from the Latin American countries that did not recognize the results of the presidential election. It also called on them to recall their own representatives working from Caracas.

Maduro's presidential victory has been recognized by Russia, China, Belarus, Iran, Nicaragua,

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Cuba and Bolivia among many others.

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Facebook Admits It Mistakenly Censored Trump Assassination Photo – Statement

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) – Facebook (banned in Russia as extremist) admitted that it mistakenly censored the Trump assassination photo and apologized for the error, a spokesperson for the social network Dani Lever said.

"This was an error. This fact check was initially applied to a doctored photo showing the secret service agents smiling, and in some cases our systems incorrectly applied that fact check to the real photo. This has been fixed and we apologize for the mistake," Lever said in a statement on Monday.

The photo in question shows former US President Donald Trump surrounded by Secret Service agents immediately after he was shot during a failed assassination attempt at a rally in Pennsylvania on July 13.

Trump on Tuesday responded to Facebook's statement by accusing the social network of yet another attempt to influence the outcome of the presidential election in November.

"Facebook has just admitted that it wrongly censored the Trump 'attempted assassination photo,' and got caught," the ex-president said in a Truth Social post. "Here we go again, another attempt at rigging the election!!!"

On Monday, US billionaire Elon Musk also accused Google of trying to influence the election after numerous users began posting screenshots and videos of search results for Donald Trump. Instead of the former president himself, the world's largest search engine returned articles and pages featuring Vice President Kamala Harris, Musk said.

The US presidential election will be held on November 5. The Democratic Party was expected to be represented by current US President Joe Biden, but after his disastrous performance in the June debates with Republican opponent Donald Trump, calls for Biden to abandon the race became increasingly loud among Democrats. On July 21, he decided to leave the race and supported the nomination of Vice President Kamala Harris.

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Secret Service Delayed Trump's Speech in Nashville Over Security Concerns - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 30 (Sputnik) - US presidential candidate Donald Trump in Nashville, Tennessee, over the weekend experienced a short delay in delivering his speech over security concerns by the Secret Service, Fox News reported on Tuesday.

As Trump was ready to step on the stage Saturday afternoon at the Music City Center for the 2024 Bitcoin conference, the Secret Service held on him while they removed two credentialed and screened attendees from the public for not following "proper" entry protocols, the report said, citing a spokesperson for the agency.

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Trump was told by his security detail to wait until the two individuals were located, the report said. At no time Trump's life was in danger, the spokesperson said.

The two individuals were found and removed from the conference, and were further questioned by law enforcement, the report said. Neither of them was charged in connection with the incident.

On July 13, Trump suffered a gunshot wound to his right ear and was briefly hospitalized following an assassination attempt at his rally in Butler. The 20-year-old shooter, Thomas Crooks, killed a member of the audience and injured two others in the crowd before the Secret Service neutralized him.

The FBI continues to investigate the assassination attempt. US Secret Service Director Kimberly Cheatle was forced to resign following criticism of the agency for not preventing the assassination attempt.

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