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7/31/24 Wednesday

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The US Failed to Coup Maduro Because He Has the Respect of the People

On Monday, the National Electoral Council of Venezuela announced that incumbent President Nicolas Maduro had won reelection. The opposition disputed the result and received significant public support from Western countries.

The United States hoped to overthrow Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro by supporting a coup. It failed because the people of Venezuela support Maduro and the Bolivarian revolution, researcher and geopolitical analyst Christopher Helali told Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Wednesday.

"Of course, we've seen this playbook before… not only in Latin America, we've seen it in Eastern Europe, we've seen it in the Caucasus in Georgia, we've seen it all throughout Central Asia," Helali explained. "Anywhere the United States feels that its interests are threatened, or that a country doesn't kowtow to Washington or Brussels."

On Monday and Tuesday, supporters of the opposition started violent riots in the streets, utilizing Molotov cocktails and firearms to fight police. By Wednesday, the government had regained control and tens of thousands of Venezuelans from across the country traveled to the capital Caracas, and took to the streets supporting Maduro. The President joined them in what appeared to be a jubilant and peaceful celebration.

"[The West] already were giving people the heads up that there was going to be chaos and disorder if President Maduro was reelected. And, lo and behold, it happened. They said it. It happened," he explained. "They're trying to spin it as a crackdown by the government, but that's not the case. In fact, the government is trying to maintain peace and order. It's the opposition that wants disorder and chaos, [which is] just the recipe for the US to come in and gobble up all of Venezuela's oil and natural resources and begin plundering the country like they did before Hugo Chavez's time."

While the United States has a long history of successfully supporting coups in other countries, it has had a string of failures that raise the question of whether it is as effective as it used to be.

"You're seeing that if a county is isolated and it remains isolated, it is weak and it's ripe for the US and its proxies to come in and dismember it. We remember what happened with Chile in the 1970s," Helali began. "Now you're see that these multilateral relations, this emerging multipolar world, it's strengthening those countries that are most under threat, that are most under assault, that are the most sanctioned, so it provides for greater stability and ultimately each of these color revolutions in most of these countries have failed because [the governments] have the support of the people. They have the support of the everyday working class."

Helali noted that they may not have the support of "the elite" in the countries who have "dreams of plundering the countries once more with the help of the West." However, the working class is "fighting to defend their sovereignty and their territorial integrity and their own mode of development and prosperity outside of Western imperialism."

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Ultimately, the people decided that they were “not going to allow some gringos from the north to come and take [Venezuela] and plunder it,”Helali said.
The United States has been trying to overthrow the democratically elected government of Venezuela since Hugo Chavez’s time and the leader of the opposition, Maria Corina Machado, was arrested for taking payments from the US-funded Non-Governmental Organization National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in the early 2000s and met with then-US President George W Bush in 2005.
Diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks revealed that the meeting was primarily designed to strengthen the opposition and anger then-Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.
“Opponents of President Chavez greeted the May 31 meeting with high fives for poking Chavez in the eye, and momentarily put aside differences, reveling in having one of their own being received at such a high level,”the diplomatic cable read.
“On balance, in our judgment, the attention the White House meeting brought Sumate [the Venezuelan NGO founded by Machado] has been exceptional. It is important now to let the organization ride this surge largely on its own. A continuing, too evident, public identification with the U.S. could now be counterproductive. At the same time, however, we need to ensure that Sumate has the resources it needs to exploit this new vantage point it enjoys.”
As was the case during the Cold War, the United States remains desperate to stop socialist countries from succeeding, particularly in the Western hemisphere, because they fear success could cause it to spread.
“Why does America fear little Venezuela? Because they know that if Venezuela becomes a shining beacon, an example, it will be another pink tide across Latin America. They don’t want that. They don’t want the Venezuelan people to stand up and that’s the real point of this. It’s the Monroe Doctrine continued on. This is the United State’s hemisphere and nobody can go beyond that," Helali explained.

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An Empty White House Gives Netanyahu Free Reign

At around 2 am local time on Wednesday, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh was assassinated in Tehran in an apparent attack by Israel. The attack came hours after an Israeli strike killed Hezbollah commander Fuad Shukr in Beirut. The United States denied foreknowledge of either attack and had previously warned Israel against striking Beirut.
The United States is either a party to the recent assassinations by Israel or Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu believes there is no one behind the wheel in the White House freeing him to take any action without repercussions from the United States, veteran war correspondent Elijah Magnier told Sputnik’s Fault Lines on Wednesday.
The attacks could not "happen without the approval of the Americans unless Benjamin Netanyahu believes there is nobody in the White House,” Magnier explained. “Which most probably in some cases is the reality, because we don’t know who’s leading America today.”
After concerns over his mental acuity became too large to ignore, US President Joe Biden ended his campaign for reelection but said he planned to finish his current term in office. The

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President was silent for three days following that announcement then gave an 11-minute speech that appeared to not include any press. He has only made sporadic appearances since and has not taken questions from the media.

On Sunday, it was reported that US officials warned Israel against attacking Beirut, saying that it may be a "red line" for Hezbollah. A few days later, Israel not only struck southern Beirut but assassinated a guest of the Iranian government following President Masoud Pezeshkian's inauguration.

"It is obvious that Netanyahu wants a wider war. He wants to force the Americans to come in because America cannot leave Israel on its own because it's part of its doctrine," explained Magnier. "They have to support the Israelis by all means, even if they disagree with the way Benjamin Netanyahu is conducting the war."

"Either [the Americans] cannot control Netanyahu and he's doing whatever he wants and is dragging the US administration behind him, or, they know, and they are saying they don't know," explained Magnier, noting that either way they are complicit. "If they really don't want the war, why do they continue supplying the Israelis with tens of thousands of [munitions]? Without this ammunition, Israel cannot go to war. So, there's a big difference between what they are saying and what they are doing."

While Iran showed extreme restraint after Israel bombed its consulate in Syria, Israel is giving them no choice but to respond.

"Today, we have Netanyahu cornering everybody – the Americans, the Iranians, the Syrians, the Lebanese, the Yemeni and the Iraqis – and saying 'Come to the battlefield, I want a bigger war.' That's the message we understand.

"If they don't respond, he's going to continue hitting them. If they respond – this is what he wants – then they have to play in his field. So what is the solution? This is where everybody is stuck now. They have to respond."

On Tuesday, the Iranian mission to the UN warned that its response will be "special operations."

"The response to an assassination will indeed be special operations– harder and intended to instill deep regret in the perpetrator," the mission wrote on X.

"This is going to be a very difficult 24 to 48 hours that the Middle East is going to [experience] and we're going to see the result very shortly," Magnier concluded.

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Delta Airlines Suspends New York-Tel Aviv Flights Through Friday

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) – Delta Airlines suspended flights between New York's JFK airport and Tel Aviv from Wednesday to Friday, amid heightened fears of an escalating regional war following Israel's dual assassinations of Hezbollah and Hamas leaders in Lebanon and Iran, respectively.

"Delta flights between New York-JFK and Tel Aviv will be paused through Friday, Aug. 2, due to ongoing conflict in the region. Sales of flights for DL234 on Jul. 31 and Aug. 1, and DL235 on Aug. 1 and Aug. 2. are suspended," the airline stated in a release on Wednesday.

Delta has issued travel waivers for all customers who booked travel to or from Tel Aviv for dates

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prior to August 14.

It added that it was "continuously monitoring the evolving security environment and assessing our operations based on security guidance and intelligence reports and will communicate any updates as needed."

Another US airline, United Airlines, also announced on Wednesday that it would suspend all flights to Tel Aviv for an indefinite period over "security reasons."

On Tuesday, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) launched an airstrike on a residential building in the southern suburbs of Beirut. Its stated target, Hezbollah commander Fuad Shukr, was killed along with at least four civilians. More than 80 people were also injured. Hours later, Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh was also assassinated, along with a bodyguard, while visiting Tehran for the presidential inauguration ceremony.

On Saturday, an apparent rocket attack on a soccer field in the village of Majdal Shams in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights killed 12 Druze children and injured 20 others. While Hezbollah, which has only launched attacks on military sites in Israel since October 7, denied Israel's allegations that it had targeted the village, the IDF nonetheless cited the Majdal Shams incident as a basis to launch its latest round of retaliatory attacks.

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Konoshchenok's Lawyer Says Unable to Locate His Client Since July 30 - Court Document

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) – Sabrina Shroff, the lawyer for Russia national Vadim Konoshchenok, informed a US court on Thursday that she has been unable to locate her client since July 30 amid speculation that he was included among the prisoners to be exchanged between Russia and the United States.

"Vadim Konoshchenok has been detained at the Metropolitan Detention Center (MDC) since his presentment in the Eastern District of New York on July 15, 2023. I have been unable to locate Mr. Konoshchenok since July 30, 2024; his son has not heard from him since July 29, 2024," Shroff said in a letter to the judge on the case.

Estonian authorities extradited Konoshchenok to the United States in July 2023.

The US government accused Konoshchenok of conspiring to circumvent sanctions, illegally purchasing items for the Russian defense sector, and of related financial fraud.

The trial in Konoshchenok's case was supposed to start in November.

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Total of 24 Prisoners to Be Freed in Multi-Country Swap Involving Russia, US - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) – A total of 24 prisoners including eight Russian nationals will be freed as part of historic prisoner swap deal among six countries, including Russia the United States and Germany, CBS reported on Thursday.

The swap is expected to result in the release of three US citizens accused of espionage,

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including Wall Street Journal journalist Evan Gershkovich, Marine veteran Paul Whelan, and Russian-American radio journalist Alsu Kurmasheva, the report said.

The swap deal also provides for the return of 12 German citizens from Russia to their homeland, and the release of eight Russian nationals, according to the report.

Bloomberg reported earlier in the day that Gershkovich and Whelan, who were jailed in Russia on espionage charges, are now en route to destinations outside of Russia.

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Prisoner Exchange Involving Russia, US, Germany, Other Countries Underway - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - A large scale prisoner exchange involving Russia, the United States, Germany and other countries is currently underway, CNN reported on Thursday, citing a senior administration official.

The transfer of prisoners is currently underway and American prisoners are expected to soon be in US custody, the administration official said.

The administration official did not provide the names of the detainees or the parameters involved in the swap.

Meanwhile ABC News, citing a senior Biden administration official, separately reported that Russia and the US have agreed to a multiparty prisone swap that would allow Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gerskovich and former US Marine Paul Whelan to return to the US.

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multicountry prisoner exchange involving Russia, US, German, other countries currently underway - cnn, citing senior US administration official

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Russia Releases Gershkovich, Whelan in Multi-Country Prisoner Swap - Bloomberg

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - Russia has released Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich and former US Marine Paul Whelan in a multi-country prisoner exchange, Bloomberg reported on Thursday.

The two US citizens, who were jailed in Russia on espionage charges, are now en route to destinations outside of Russia, the report said.

Under the terms of the deal, the US and its allies will also return several prisoners to Russia, the report said, citing people who requested anonymity because the details of the agreement are not yet public.

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Raytheon to Build $2Bln Low Level Air Missile Defense System for US Army - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The US Army has awarded Raytheon a more than $2 billion contract to build a Lower Tier Air and Missile Defense System for the US Army, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Raytheon Missiles and Defense [of] Andover, Massachusetts was awarded a $2,089,200,000 ... contract for low-rate initial production of [the] Lower Tier Air and Missile Defense System," the release stated on Wednesday.

Work on the contract will be performed in Andover, Massachusetts over the next four and a half years with an estimated completion date of November 30, 2028, the Defense Department said.

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

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US Army Orders $274Mln Worth of 155mm Heavy Artillery With Ammunition - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The US Army has ordered more than $275 million worth of additional heavy 155mm self-propelled artillery howitzers and related ammunition carriers from BAE Systems, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"BAE Systems Land and Armaments [of] York, Pennsylvania was awarded a $274,426,742 modification ... contract for production and delivery of M109A7 Self-Propelled Howitzer and M992A3 Carrier, Ammunition, tracked vehicles," the release stated on Wednesday.

Work on the extended contract will be performed in York, Pennsylvania over the next two years with an estimated completion date of July 31, 2026, the Defense Department said.

The US Army Contracting Command at Detroit Arsenal, Michigan will oversee the work as the contracting activity, the Defense Department said.

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Russia Releases Gershkovich, Whelan in Multi-Country Prisoner Swap - Bloomberg

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The two US citizens, who were jailed in Russia on espionage charges, are now en route to destinations outside of Russia, the report said.

Under the terms of the deal, the US and its allies will also return several prisoners to Russia, the report said, citing people who requested anonymity because the details of the agreement

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are not yet public.

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Russian National Vinnik's Lawyer Says 'No Updates' on Possible US-Russia Prisoner Swap

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - Arkady Bukh, lawyer for Russian national Alexander Vinnik, told Sputnik on Thursday that there are no updates to provide about a potential prisoner exchange deal between the United States and Russia, and that his client is still in US custody.
"No updates. Just checked with my client. He is still there [in US custody]," Bukh said.
There's speculation that a major prisoner exchange deal between the United States and Russia may take place soon, media reported.

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Адвокат россиянина Винника заявил, что новостей по возможному обмену нет

ВАШИНГТОН, 1 авг – РИА Новости. Адвокат россиянина Александра Винника Аркадий Бух заявил РИА Новости, что на данный момент новой информации по возможному обмену заключенными между РФ и США нет, его клиент все еще находится в американской тюрьме.
"Новостей нет. Я только что связался со своим клиентом, он по-прежнему находится там (в тюрьме США - ред.)", - сказал Бух.

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vinnik's lawyer tells sputnik his client still in us prison

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RPT: PREVIEW - US Democratic Party Set to Select Harris as 2024 Presidential Nominee in Online Vote

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The US Democratic Party is set to select Vice President Kamala Harris as its presidential nominee for the 2024 race in a virtual vote starting Thursday, after President Joe Biden ended his reelection bid.
Nearly 4,000 Democratic delegates will begin voting for a nominee on Thursday. Harris must secure at least 1,976 votes to win the nomination.
Harris is running unopposed, because no other candidate managed to meet the threshold to challenge her. However, the vote is required to formalize her status as the party's nominee.

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The party will nominate Harris ahead of its national convention in Chicago on August 19-22.
Harris became the party's presumptive nominee after Biden withdrew from the 2024 race. Biden endorsed Harris as his replacement to challenge Republican nominee Donald Trump.
Harris has not yet announced who will serve as her running mate, although she must make her decision by August 7 to meet a ballot deadline in Ohio.
Whereas polling in mid-July found that Trump led Biden in seven so-called swing states, Harris holds an advantage over Trump in four swing states, according to polling data released Tuesday.
The United States will hold its presidential election on November 5.

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General Dynamics Wins $174Mln US Army Contract to Upgrade Stryker Vehicles - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - General Dynamics Land Systems has won a US Army $174,470,943 contract to retrofit and repair Stryker vehicles, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.
"General Dynamics Land Systems [of] Sterling Heights, Michigan was awarded a $174,470,943 ...contract for retrofit and repair to support [the] Stryker family of vehicles," the release said on Wednesday.
Work on the contract is estimated to take four and a half years with an estimated completion date of February 28, 2029, the Defense Department said.
The Army Contracting Command at Detroit Arsenal, Michigan will oversee the work as its contracting activity, the Defense Department said.

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General Dynamics Wins $174Mln US Army Contract to Upgrade Stryker Vehicles - Pentagon

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Убийство Хании может помешать восстановлению отношений между США и Ираном – бывший посол

ВАШИНГТОН, 1 авг - РИА Новости. Убийство политического лидера ХАМАС Исмаила Хании может свести на нет возможное восстановление отношений между США и Ираном и заблокировать инициативы по прекращению огня в Газе, заявил РИА Новости бывший посол Ирана в Германии Сейед Хоссейн Мусавиан.
"Убийство лидера ХАМАС Исмаила Хании в Тегеране является просчитанным планом Израиля, чтобы: убить новые надежды на возможное сближение Тегерана и Вашингтона после недавних выборов в Иране; заблокировать инициативы по прекращению огня в

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войне в Газе; заблокировать политику Камалы Харрис (вице-президента и кандидата в президенты США - ред.) по давлению на Израиль", - заявил бывший дипломат.

Он также добавил, что убийство Хании обострит региональный конфликт на Ближнем Востоке и втянет США и Иран в новую волну региональных конфронтаций.

В среду палестинское движение ХАМАС сообщило о гибели главы политбюро движения Исмаила Хании в результате израильского удара по его резиденции в Тегеране, куда тот прибыл для участия в инаугурации нового президента Ирана.

Движение возложило ответственность за смерть Хании на Израиль и США и заявило, что эта атака не останется без ответа. Глава Пентагона Ллойд Остин заявил, что ему нечего сказать на тему гибели главы политбюро ХАМАС и причастности к этому Израиля. Представители армии Израиля в свою очередь заявили, что "не реагируют на сообщения СМИ" об убийстве Хании. Jerusalem Post писала, что власти Израиля поручили министрам не высказываться об убийстве лидера ХАМАС.

Замглавы МИД РФ Михаил Богданов назвал гибель Хании абсолютно неприемлемым политическим убийством, которое грозит дальнейшей эскалацией в регионе.

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OAS Fails to Adopt Resolution Pressing Venezuela to Be Transparent With Election Results

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The Organization of American States (OAS) failed to adopt a resolution urging Venezuela to be fully transparent with the results of the presidential election that took place on Sunday.

The resolution needed 18 votes to pass on Wednesday but only had 17 votes in favor. No OAS member states voted against the measure but 11 abstained.

The presidential election of July 28 saw Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro win a third term in office. The announcement of the results sparked protests in the capital of Caracas and other cities. The Venezuelan government also accused several countries of election meddling.

The proposed OAS resolution did not include any language about rejecting the election results, but the measure pushed the Venezuelan government to be fully transparent about the election results in order to guarantee credibility.

Venezuela's National Electoral Council declared Maduro the winner of the election after securing 51% of the vote.

On July 29, protests started in Venezuela. Clashes between the police and protesters began in Caracas. Protesters threw stones and Molotov cocktails at law enforcement officers.

The Prosecutor General's Office said 77 law enforcement officers were injured; 1,062 people were detained on charges of destruction of state infrastructure, incitement of hatred and terrorism.

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US Government Not Meeting Needed Standards on Nuclear Waste Cleanup - Report

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Energy's Office of Environmental Management (EM) is not meeting required standards in its nuclear environmental cleanups and risk mitigation work, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report said.

"[The Department of Energy] DOE has not always demonstrated a commitment to addressing the underlying causes of quality assurance issues to prevent recurrence," the report said on Wednesday.

The GAO found that EM does not consistently assess the effectiveness of its contractor oversight or identify root causes of project deficiencies related to the office's management, the report said.

"In a 2021 root cause analysis, EM did not acknowledge its role in hiring an inexperienced contractor and not providing sufficient oversight. GAO also found that EM does not have guidance for assessing federal management performance or oversight effectiveness," the report added.

More effective oversight of nuclear waste environmental cleanups is needed, according to the report.

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UPDATE - Crude Rallies on Israel Strikes on Hamas, Hezbollah, Trimming July Loss for Oil Market

(Updates with more details in paras 5-7)

NEW YORK, August 1 (Sputnik) - Oil prices increased on Wednesday, rallying some 3% to cut losses for July, after Israel killed senior officials of the Palestinian and Lebanese groups Hamas and Hezbollah.

The tit-for-tat among the archrivals in the oil-rich Middle East brought geopolitical risk back to a market that had been floundering since mid-July. Crude prices had gone from a 2024 high of above $85 per barrel on the average in June to around $75 this week on talks of a potential ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war for Gaza and from weak economic data in top oil importer China.

The Israeli killing of Hamas' political chief Ismail Haniyeh and Hezbollah senior leader Fuad Shukr put to rest speculation of any pause in hostilities. Haniyeh was killed while he was in Iran - another Hamas ally which has historically been at conflict with Israel.

"We are back to geopolitics again with Hamas/Hezbollah/Iran/Israel overwhelming the bad China data with the market worried about supply rather than demand," Scott Shelton, an oil market broker and analyst at ICAP in Durham, North Carolina, wrote in his daily note.

In Wednesday's trade, US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude settled at $77.91 per barrel, up $3.18, or 4.3%. WTI's low until Tuesday was $74.61, marking a bottom not seen since its June low of 74.06.

Despite the rebound, July was still a losing month for the oil bulls who had backed WTI, with

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the US crude benchmark finishing down 6.6% - the most since September 2023, when it tumbled 10.8%.

UK-origin Brent crude finished New York trading at $80.72 per barrel, up $2.09, or 2.7%. For July, Brent fell 6.8%, its biggest losing month since April's 7% loss.

Also helping oil in the latest session was weekly US inventory data that showed draws in crude as well as gasoline, although stockpiles of distillates creeped higher.

The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) said there was a crude inventory decline of 3.426 million barrels for the week ended on July 26, adding to the prior week's tumble of 3.741 million. US crude inventories have fallen almost 30 million barrels in all over the past five weeks.

For gasoline, the agency cited a decline of 3.665 million barrels in the latest week on top of the drop of 5.572 million barrels the prior week. Analysts had forecast a deficit of 1.29 million barrels instead. Gasoline is the primary motor fuel in the United States and makes up the largest component of the country's energy mix.

In distillates, the EIA reported a build of 1.534 million barrels, against the dip of 900,000 forecast by analysts after the prior week's slump of 2.753 million. Distillates are primarily processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses, and ships, and also go into making airplane fuel.

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USAID Failing to Monitor Ukraine Aid Programs Thoroughly - Report

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The US State Department and the Agency for International Development (USAID) need to expand and impose far more through and exacting monitoring and accounting procedures to track the use of $174 billion in aid that has been sent to Ukraine since the beginning of the current conflict in 2022, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report.

"Congress appropriated more than $174 billion to support Ukraine since the start of the war," the report said on Wednesday. "[But while] USAID routinely monitors its NGO [non-governmental organizations] implementing partners' screening of their sub-partners for past performance, it does not perform this monitoring for its international organization partners and State does not perform this monitoring for either type of partner."

Without periodic monitoring of implementation, the agencies risk that partners may not have effectively screened sub-partners to help ensure they can implement assistance effectively, the report said.

"GAO is making five recommendations, including for State to screen all international organization partners for past performance," the report added.

The GAO also advised the State Department to improve its documentation of past performance reviews, and for the State Department and USAID to monitor partners' screening of sub-partners for past performance, according to the report.

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Biden Mulls Trips to Europe, Africa, Middle East in Final Months of Presidency - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's team is looking into setting up official trips to Europe, Africa and the Middle East through the final months of his presidency, Fox News reported, citing sources familiar with the planning.

The report said on Wednesday that these potential trips will align with his biggest foreign policy focus areas.

Biden wants to keep his promise to travel to Africa after he had planned to visit if he was reelected.

In addition, there's a possibility Biden may plan to attend the APEC Summit scheduled to take place in Peru from November 10-16.

Biden is already scheduled to attend the G20 summit in Brazil from November 18-19.

The report noted that plans for these trips are subject to change as the White House manages a considerable number of moving parts.

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Federal Reserve Says 'Time Approaching' for US Interest Rate Cut Possibly in September

(Updates with more details, context in paras 3-20)

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve said on Wednesday that it was closing in on its first interest rate cut in four-and-a-half years and that it could come as early as September.

"We think that the time is approaching," Fed Chairman Jerome Powell told reporters. " And if we do get the data that we hope that we get, then, you know, a reduction in our policy rate could be on the table at the September meeting."

Powell's remarks came after the US central bank's Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) held a meeting earlier in the day without making a change to interest rates.

The Fed has not announced any rate cut since making a 100 basis point, or 1%, reduction in March 2020, at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

Since then, the Fed has hiked interest rates 11 times, between March 2022 and July 2023. The current 5.25-5.5% range for rates is the highest in two decades and has been in force for a year.

The Fed's next decision on interest rates will be on September 18 but FOMC typically does not cite timelines or specifics for upcoming rate changes.

"In considering any adjustments to the target range for the federal funds rate, the Committee will carefully assess incoming data, the evolving outlook, and the balance of risks," the Fed said in a statement.

Powell tried to stick to that mantra, saying no rate change should be expected "until we have better confidence that inflation is moving towards 2%".

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Relentless probing by reporters, however, forced Powell to drop some hints on what to expect in September.

"If the labor market were to weaken unexpectedly, or inflation were to fall more quickly than anticipated, we are prepared to respond," Powell said.

The Fed's target for inflation is 2% per year. But the Personal Consumption Expenditure (PCE) Index that it closely follows - as well as the Consumer Price Index (CPI) - remain above that target, though both indexes have fallen way below the four-decade highs reached in the aftermath of the pandemic.

The PCE grew just 2.5% in the year to June this year, versus 6.1% in June 2022. The CPI expanded by 3% last month, against the 9.1% growth two years earlier.

Payrolls and wages are two measures that help the Fed gauge real inflation. Data on Wednesday showed US private payrolls data grew more modestly in July than forecast, boosting prospects for a Fed cut.

According to private payrolls processor ADP, non-government employment grew by just 122,000 this month, the slowest since January and below the upwardly revised 155,000 for June. Economists on Wall Street had forecast a minimal growth of 150,000 instead for July.

Private sector wages, meanwhile, increased by only 4.8% in July from a year ago, the smallest since July 2021.

The ADP data foreshadows Friday's release of the all-important non-farm payroll number for July by the US government. That is projected to grow by 175,000 versus the previously reported 206,000 for June.

The cooling job and wage situation has led to the notion that the Fed should no longer view labor as a prime mover of inflation.

"With wage growth abating, the labor market is playing along with the Federal Reserve's effort to slow inflation," ADP chief economist Nela Richardson said along with the private payrolls data released by the firm. "If inflation goes back up, it won't be because of labor."

Powell concurred, saying: "I don't think it [the labor] needs to, you know, cool off any more for us to get the inflation results that are related."

If the Fed skips a rate change on September 18, it has two more chances to make amends before the year ends, at the November 7 and December 18 FOMC meetings.

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NASA Moon-Orbiting Space Station Faces 'Significant Challenges' - Report

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - NASA's Gateway program - the first space station ever to orbit the moon - is scheduled to launch in 2027, but the program faces significant challenges, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report.

"This program ... faces some significant challenges," the report said on Wednesday. "The mass of the pieces is too high. So, if it isn't reduced, they might not be able to reach the correct lunar orbit once launched."

NASA committed to launching the Gateway initial capability by December 2027 at a cost of $5.3 billion and its launch will include as first components the space station's Power and

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Propulsion Element (PPE) and Habitation and Logistics Outpost (HALO), the report said.
"The Gateway program plans to update the analysis it used to inform its cost and schedule commitments at a fall 2024 program-level review. This will help determine the feasibility of the Artemis IV mission date," the report added.
In order to reach lunar orbit and ensure all systems work as planned, the PPE and HALO need to launch at least 12 months before the Artemis IV mission, or 3 months earlier than Gateway's current committed date, according to the report.

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US Enters Into Pre-Trial Agreements With Three September 11 Defendants - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The United States has entered into pre-trial plea agreements with three of the defendants accused of having a role in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the US Defense Department announced.
"The Convening Authority for Military Commissions, Susan Escallier, has entered into pretrial agreements with Khalid Shaikh Mohammad, Walid Muhammad Salih Mubarak Bin 'Attash, and Mustafa Ahmed Adam al Hawsawi, three of the co-accused in the 9/11 case," the Defense Department said in a press release on Wednesday.
The Defense Department has not yet disclosed the specific terms of the plea agreements, the release added.
The three defendants were initially charged and arraigned on June 5, 2008, along with Ali Abdul Aziz Ali and Ramzi Bin al Shibh, and later again jointly charged and arraigned on May 5, 2012, in connection with the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States.

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Israel Aiming to Expand War Through Entire Middle East - Iranian Mission to UN

UNITED NATIONS, August 1 (Sputnik) - Israel intends to expand the conflict in the Gaza Strip to include the entire Middle East region, Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations Amir Saeid Iravani said during an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council.
"In addition to its terrorist objective, Israel was also pursuing a political goal with this act, aiming to disrupt the first day of the new government of the Islamic Republic of Iran," Iravani said on Wednesday. "The warmongering leaders of this regime have shown complete disregard for the basic norms and principles of international law. Their crimes reveal a lack of commitment to peace and stability in the region, and suggest an intention to escalate conflict and expand the war through the entire region."
Earlier on Wednesday, Israel killed Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in an attack on his residence in Tehran.
Iravani said the attack is part of a broader pattern of Israeli aggression against other nations in

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the region.

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Haniyeh Assassination 'Serious Blow' to Israel-Hamas Negotiations - Polyanskiy

UNITED NATIONS, August 1 (Sputnik) - The assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh represents a significant blow to the negotiations between the Palestinian movement and the Israeli government to reach a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Wednesday.
"This is a serious blow primarily to negotiations between Hamas and Israel focused on a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and Ismail Haniyeh was a direct participant in this," Polyanskiy said during an emergency session of the UN Security Council on the issue of Israel assassinating Haniyeh.

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Assassination of Hamas leader in Iran means Israel aiming for war - Iran mission to UN

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) -

US-RUSSIA PRISONER EXCHANGE
* The high-profile Russian nationals whose names do not appear on a US database of federal prisoners are still in US custody amid speculation of a possible prisoner exchange deal between the United States and Russia, a source familiar with the matter told Sputnik on Wednesday.
* Arkady Bukh, lawyer for Russian national Alexander Vinnik, told Sputnik that any information about a potential US-Russia prisoner exchange is confidential at present.
* Russian national Roman Seleznev's attorney told Sputnik that he has received no official information from the US authorities about his client amid speculation about an impending prisoner swap.
* The United States continues to work to bring home Americans detained overseas, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said.

MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS
* The United States continues to believe that a ceasefire deal can be reached between the Israeli government and Hamas despite the assassination of the Hamas' political leader Ismail

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Haniyeh, US State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Wednesday.
* The body of Fuad Shukr, senior commander of Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah, has been found under the rubble in the southern suburb of Beirut following an Israeli airstrike, a local source told Sputnik.
* Russia has scheduled an extraordinary UN Security Council meeting on Israel's assassination of Hamas politburo chief Ismail Haniyeh, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

SITUATION IN VENEZUELA
* The United Socialist Party of Venezuela is ready to present 100% of the voting records that it has following Sunday's presidential election, President Nicolas Maduro said on Wednesday.
* At least six protesters were killed and dozens suffered injures in Venezuela following the country's disputed presidential election, the United Nations fact-finding mission on Venezuela said.
* A Russian Foreign Ministry deputy spokesperson called for an end to the meddling in Venezuela by foreign powers, saying that their claims of electoral fraud were a sign of disrespect for the will of the Venezuelan people.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* Moscow is open to any initiative to end the Ukraine conflict through diplomatic means, but there is no reciprocity on the part of Kiev at the moment, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday.
* The United States must find ways to support the Ukrainian economy beyond direct budget support, US Special Representative for Ukraine's Economic Recovery Penny Pritzker said.
* The first batch of NATO-supplied F-16 fighter jets has arrived in Ukraine, Bloomberg reported, citing people familiar with the matter.
* The Russian side continues to remain open to the negotiation process with Ukraine, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

US FEDERAL RESERVE DECISION ON INTEREST RATES
* The Federal Reserve announced no change to US interest rates at its policy meeting for July that concluded on Wednesday, setting up the possibility of the first rate cut in four-and-a-half years when it meets next in September.
* Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said the central bank was closing in on its first interest rate cut in four and a half years and it could come as early as September.

RUSSIA-INDONESIA TALKS
* Economic relations between Russia and Indonesia are developing successfully and bilateral trade has doubled in recent years, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Wednesday.
* Russia highly appreciates the efforts of Indonesia to end the Ukraine conflict peacefully, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
* Indonesian Defense Minister and President-elect Prabowo Subianto said that he had held intensive talks with the Russian first deputy prime minister and with officials responsible for defense policy.

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* Indonesia considers Russia as a great friend and would like to continue developing relations, Subianto said.

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PREVIEW - US Democratic Party Set to Select Harris as 2024 Presidential Nominee in Online Vote

WASHINGTON, August 1 (Sputnik) - The US Democratic Party is set to select Vice President Kamala Harris as its presidential nominee for the 2024 race in a virtual vote starting Thursday, after President Joe Biden ended his reelection bid.

Nearly 4,000 Democratic delegates will begin voting for a nominee on Thursday. Harris must secure at least 1,976 votes to win the nomination.

Harris is running unopposed, because no other candidate managed to meet the threshold to challenge her. However, the vote is required to formalize her status as the party's nominee.

The party will nominate Harris ahead of its national convention in Chicago on August 19-22.

Harris became the party's presumptive nominee after Biden withdrew from the 2024 race. Biden endorsed Harris as his replacement to challenge Republican nominee Donald Trump.

Harris has not yet announced who will serve as her running mate, although she must make her decision by August 7 to meet a ballot deadline in Ohio.

Whereas polling in mid-July found that Trump led Biden in seven so-called swing states, Harris holds an advantage over Trump in four swing states, according to polling data released Tuesday.

The United States will hold its presidential election on November 5.

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Pentagon Declines to Comment on Force Posture Changes After Iran 'Orders' Strike on Israel

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department on Wednesday declined to comment on any potential US force posture changes in the Middle East after Iran's reported threat to carry out a retaliatory strike on Israel in response to the assassination of Hamas' political leader Ismail Haniyeh.

Earlier, the New York Times, citing three Iranian officials, reported that Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ordered a direct strike on Israel in retaliation for Haniyeh's assassination.

"We have nothing to provide regarding changes to force posture or comments made by Iran's Supreme Leader," a Pentagon spokesperson said.

Hamas confirmed that Haniyeh was killed in an Israeli attack on his residence in Tehran after he took part in the inauguration of Iran's newly elected president, Masoud Pezeshkian.

White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said in earlier comments that the United States does not believe an escalation in the Middle East is inevitable and sees

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no signs that it is imminent.

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US Senator Introduces Bill to Establish Strategic Bitcoin Reserve - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - US Senator Cynthia Lummis said on Wednesday that she introduced legislation to establish a strategic Bitcoin reserve managed by the US federal government.

"Following her announcement of a historic proposal to supercharge the US dollar and pay down the national debt by establishing a strategic Bitcoin reserve, today US Senator Cynthia Lummis officially introduced the Boosting Innovation, Technology and Competitiveness through Optimized Investment Nationwide (BITCOIN) Act in the US Senate," Lummis said in a statement.

The legislation is a "Louisiana Purchase moment" to help the United States reach the next financial frontier, the statement said.

The BITCOIN Act establishes a decentralized network of secure Bitcoin vaults operated by the US Treasury Department, the statement said.

The bill also implements a one-million-unit Bitcoin purchase program over time to acquire a total stake of approximately 5% of total Bitcoin supply, mirroring the size and scope of the US' gold reserves, the statement said.

The legislation plans to pay for the reserve by diversifying existing funds within the Federal Reserve System and Treasury Department, the statement added.

The bill affirms self-custody rights of private Bitcoin holders and emphasizes that the strategic reserve will not infringe upon individual financial freedoms, according to the statement.

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Recent Attacks in Middle East Represent 'Serious and Dangerous Escalation' - UN Official

UNITED NATIONS, July 31 (Sputnik) - The recent attacks in Lebanon, Iran and Israel represent a serious and dangerous escalation of tensions in the region, UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary Di Carlo said on Wednesday.

"The various attacks over the past few days represent a serious and dangerous escalation," Di Carlo said at a UN Security Council meeting.

The Lebanese movement Hezbollah confirmed the death of Sayyed Mouhsen, also known as Fouad Shokur, following an Israel Defense Force strike in Beirut on Tuesday. The Israeli strike comes following an alleged rocket attack by Hezbollah on Israel-occupied Golan Heights.

An Israeli strike in Tehran also killed Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh on Wednesday.

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US Labor Market Strong But Cooling, Not A Major Inflation Risk Anymore - Fed Chair

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The US labor market is robust enough to support the livelihood of Americans even after cooling from its post-pandemic highs and is no longer a major inflation risk, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said Wednesday.

"What's in the data right now is an economy that's growing at a solid pace and a labor market that's cooled off," Powell told reporters. "You have strong economic activity, a good labor market and inflation that's coming down."

Data on Wednesday showed US private payrolls data grew more modestly in July than forecast, boosting the chance for an eventual rate cut by the Fed.

According to private payrolls processor ADP, non-government employment grew by just 122,000 this month, the slowest since January and below the upwardly revised 155,000 for June. Economists on Wall Street had forecast a minimal growth of 150,000 instead for July.

On top of that, private sector wages increased by only 4.8% in July from a year ago, the smallest since July 2021.

The ADP data foreshadows Friday's release of the all-important non-farm payroll number for July by the US government. That is projected to grow by 175,000 versus the previously reported 206,000 for June.

Payrolls and wages are two measures closely watched by the Fed for an idea of how real inflation is faring in the United States.

The central bank's target for inflation is 2% per year. But the inflation gauge it closely follows — the Personal Consumption Expenditure (PCE) Index — as well as the Consumer Price Index (CPI) remain above that target, though both have fallen way below the four-decade highs reached in the aftermath of the 2020 coronavirus outbreak.

The PCE grew just 2.5% in the year to June this year, versus 6.1% in June 2022. The CPI expanded by 3% last month, against the 9.1% growth two years earlier.

The Fed hiked rates 11 times in response to the runaway post-COVID inflation, bringing rates to a two-decade high of between 5.25% and 5.5%. The last time it cut rates was in March 2020 — at the onset of the pandemic — when it slashed a full 100 basis points, or 1%.

There has been a growing chorus among business leaders of late that the Fed should no longer view the labor market as a prime mover of inflation.

"With wage growth abating, the labor market is playing along with the Federal Reserve's effort to slow inflation," ADP chief economist Nela Richardson said on Wednesday, commenting on the private payrolls data released by the firm. "If inflation goes back up, it won't be because of labor."

Powell concurred with that, saying: "We've seen one quarter of good inflation and we've seen the labor market move quite a bit. I don't think it needs to, you know, cool off any more. for us to get the inflation results that are related."

His comments came after the Fed announced no change to interest rates at its policy meeting for July that concluded on Wednesday, setting up the possibility of the first rate cut in 4-½ years

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when it meets next on September 18.

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attacks in middle east over past few days represent serious and dangerous escalation, diplomatic efforts urgently needed - UN's dicarlo

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Brilliant Research Future Still Ahead For Intl. Space Station - NASA Senior Official

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The International Space Station (ISS) after 20 years in orbit still looks forward to a bright future as the greatest scientific research laboratory in microgravity ever operated, NASA Associate Administrator for the Exploration Systems Development Mission Directorate (ESDMD) Jim Free said in a speech on Wednesday.

"The ISS changed human history," Free told the International Space Station Research and Development Conference in Boston. "We are formulating a new strategy on the presence of humans in low earth orbit (LEO). ...This vision, bold and complex, is our North Star."

The new strategy will further focus NASA's priorities on scientific research, the exploration of space, its operational missions, developing its infrastructure and increasing cooperation with its many partners in the United States and around the world, Free said.

Northrop Grumman's unmanned cargo spacecraft with 8,200 pounds (3,719 kilos) of cargo and food supplies is on schedule to be launched to the ISS from Space Launch Complex 40 at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station, Florida later this week, Free said.

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US Air Force Making Huge Strides in Boosting Firepower Resilience - Pentagon Planner

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force has made "huge strides" in its striking capability and resilience in the face of countermeasures from peer and near-peer adversaries by downgrading the policy of further "hardening" its bases and launch sites in favor of diversity and sheer quantity of fire capabilities, Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Air Force Timothy Grayson said on Wednesday.

"We decided to go with diversity," Grayson told a webinar hosted by the Mitchell Aerospace Institute. "We have made huge strides in hitting capability through diversity and quantity."

The decision had been made and was being implemented to prioritize resources, not on hardening existing bases and launch sites but instead to multiply the number and types of weapons and platforms from which they could be deployed and launched, Grayson explained.

The Air Force has been widely successful in getting resources aligned to keep pace with and meet evolving threats, the official said.

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Bipartisan support from the four congressional committees in the House and Senate that dealt with funding Air Force resources has been of crucial importance in implementing this strategy, Grayson acknowledged.

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Kennedy Team Says Confident Can Get on Ballot in All 50 US States by End of Summer

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Independent presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is expected to be on the ballots in all 50 US states for the upcoming presidential election by the end of this summer regardless of legal challenges in several states, Kennedy campaign officials said on Wednesday.

"100% yes," a campaign official said regarding the ballot target goal.

Kennedy said during a conference call with reporters that as of Wednesday he has sufficient signatures to get on the ballot in 42 states. This will allow him to compete for 480 of the 538 total electoral college votes at stake in the election. A candidate needs 270 electoral votes to win.

The US presidential election will take place on November 5. Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump is narrowly leading the race trailed by presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris, according to national polls.

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Fed Chair Powell Says 'Time Approaching' for Rate Cut, Could Be at September Meeting

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said Wednesday the central bank was closing in on its first interest rate cut in four and a half years and it could come as early as September.

"We think that the time is approaching. And if we do get the data that we hope that we get, then you know a reduction in our policy rate could be on the table at the September meeting," Powell told reporters.

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US Air Force Enjoys Capability to Deal With Current, Emerging Threats - Senior Adviser

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - US Air Force planners are confident their modernization and force redesign programs are keeping pace with emerging and evolving threats around the world, including from peer and near-peer adversaries, Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Air Force Timothy Grayson said on Wednesday.

"Yes of course," Grayson told the webinar from the Mitchell Aerospace Institute. "We are

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certainly getting enough baseline capability. Absolutely, we'd like more. ... [However] even if we aren't where we ought to be, I'm very optimistic about where the flywheel has taken us."

Grayson said he advised seeding up the pace at which new weapons and force structures were developed and fully operationally deployed since even if and when mistakes were made, they contributed to the experience and learning processes and fed into faster rates of adaptability and learning.

"[When] we field capabilities quickly, we are going to learn and that is going to feed warfighters' learning. ...[It is a] continuous evolution. I think we've got that technology and operations [capacity] coming together in a really nice way so far," he said.

This combination of deploying new weapons systems and operational structures that focused on combining speed and agility in adapting to new challenges and evolving combat environments was central to the Air Force's strategy for keeping pace with developing threats, Grayson explained.

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US State Dept. OKs $600Mln Sale of AH-1Z Attack Helicopters to Slovakia – DSCA

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) – The US State Department has approved a potential $600 million sale of 12 AH-1Z attack helicopters and related equipment and services to the government of Slovakia, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Wednesday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Slovakia of AH-1Z Attack Helicopters and related equipment and services for an estimated cost of $600 million," DSCA said in a press release.

Besides the helicopters, Slovakia also requested to purchase 26 T-700 GE 401C engines, 1,680 Advanced Precision Kill Weapon Systems (APKWS), and 14 Honeywell embedded global positioning systems, among other equipment, the release said.

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New Boeing CEO Kelly Ortberg Says 'Much Work to Be Done' to Turn Company Around

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - New Boeing CEO Kelly Ortberg said on Wednesday there is much to do to turn around the world's second-biggest airplane manufacturer from the severe financial losses and a reputation tarnished by crashes and other safety concerns.

"There is much work to be done, and I'm looking forward to getting started," Ortberg said in a statement issued by Boeing.

Ortberg, 65, who was trained as a mechanical engineer, will take office as Boeing CEO on August 8, the statement said.

Boeing lost more than $1 billion in the quarter between April and June.

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Boeing has been saddled with woes since a January 5 scare where the door on one of its 737 MAX jets flown by Alaska Airlines blew out in mid-flight. No one on board, including 171 passengers, was hurt and the airplane made an emergency landing in Portland, Oregon.

Prior to that incident, two 737 MAX crashes in Indonesia and Ethiopia in October 2018 and March 2019 killed a combined 346 people, resulting in a temporary global grounding of the jets.

Boeing announced in 2019 that it would compensate families and communities impacted by the fatal crashes by payouts totaling $100 million.

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US Aware of Al Jazeera Journalists Killed in Gaza, Seeks Information – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) – The United States is aware of media reports that Al Jazeera journalists were killed in an Israeli strike earlier on Wednesday and is currently seeking more information on the incident, State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said during a press briefing.

"We've seen those reports and are tracking the details. We also have asked our counterparts in the region for additional information, should they have it," Patel said when asked to comment on the killing of Al Jazeera journalists in Gaza.

Earlier on Wednesday, Qatari broadcaster Al Jazeera said that its correspondent Ismail al-Ghoul and cameraman Rami al-Refee were killed in an Israeli attack on Gaza.

In May, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu banned Al Jazeera from operating in the country under a newly adopted law that allows the Israeli government to ban media activities if it threatens national security.

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United Airlines Suspends Flights to Tel Aviv for Security Reasons – Statement

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) – United Airlines is suspending flights between Newark Liberty Airport and Tel Aviv, Israel beginning on Wednesday evening amid security concerns over the situation in the Middle East, an airline spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik.

"Beginning with this evening's flight from Newark Liberty to Tel Aviv, we are suspending for security reasons our daily Tel Aviv service as we evaluate our next steps. We continue to closely monitor the situation and will make decisions on resuming service with a focus on the safety of our customers and crews," the statement said.

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Trump Says Would Consider Stepping Down as US President if Health Declining

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WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said on Wednesday that he would consider stepping down as president if he believed his health was in decline.

"Oh, absolutely," Trump said during an interview at the National Association of Black Journalists Convention, when asked if he would step down in the event he thought his health was declining.

Trump also reiterated his support for presidential candidates taking cognitive tests, adding that he has passed two of them.

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Biden Admin. Concerned Over Potential Impact of Haniyeh Assassination - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration expressed concern that Israel assassinating Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh might jeopardize ongoing negotiations on a Gaza ceasefire and hostage deal and could heighten the risk of regional conflict, Axios reported on Wednesday.

The Biden administration efforts for the Israeli government and Hamas to reach a hostage and ceasefire deal between have been central to its strategy in the Middle East, the report said.

Biden is personally involved in the efforts and sees them as a key factor in defining his legacy. Haniyeh was the key interlocutor with Qatari and Egyptian mediators in the negotiations over the deal.

Earlier on Wednesday, State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said the United States continues to believe that a ceasefire deal can be reached between the Israeli government and Hamas despite the assassination of Haniyeh.

White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby also said that the United States does not believe an escalation in the Middle East is inevitable and sees no signs that it is imminent.

Hamas confirmed that Haniyeh was killed in an Israeli attack on his residence in Tehran after he took part in the inauguration of newly elected Iranian president Masoud Pezeshkian.

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White House says Biden Was Briefed on Latest Events In Middle East

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden was briefed on the recent developments in the Middle East, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Wednesday.

“The president was briefed on reports coming out on the Middle East,” Kirby told reporters.

Earlier on Wednesday, Hamas said its political leader Ismail Haniyeh was killed in an Israeli attack on his residence in Tehran after he took part in the inauguration of Iran's newly elected president, Masoud Pezeshkian.

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On Tuesday, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said it carried out a strike in the southern suburb of Beirut, killing senior Hezbollah commander Fuad Shukr

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White House Amid Rumors of Prisoner Swap Says Working to Bring Home Detained Americans

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to work to bring home Americans detained overseas, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"All I'll say is that we have been consistently, since the beginning of this administration, working hard to bring home Americans that are wrongfully detained overseas," Kirby said during a press briefing, in response to a question about Paul Whelan's whereabouts.

The statement comes amid rumors of a potential prisoner swap deal with Russia. Several Russian nationals held in US federal custody no longer show up in a database of prisoners.

President Joe Biden has been personally attentive to Whelan's case, as well as the case of Evan Gershkovich, Kirby added.

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US Raises Lebanon Travel Alert to 'Do Not Travel' Amid Rising Tensions - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) – The United States has raised its Lebanon travel warning to 4 or "do not travel," discouraging nationals from traveling to the country amid increasing tensions between Israel and Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah, the State Department said on Wednesday.

"Do not travel to Lebanon due to rising tensions between Hizballah and Israel. If you are in Lebanon, be prepared to shelter in place should the situation deteriorate. The U.S. Embassy strongly encourages U.S. citizens who are already in Southern Lebanon, near the borders with Syria, and/or in refugee settlements to depart," the department said in a travel advisory update.

The update comes after Hezbollah confirmed the death of Sayyed Mouhsen also known as "Fouad Shokur," following an Israel Defense Force strike in the southern suburb of Beirut late Tuesday.

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US Does Not Believe Mideast Escalation Inevitable, Sees No Sings of Being Imminent - Kirby

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States does not believe that an escalation of the situation in the Middle East is inevitable and does not see signs that it is imminent, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Wednesday.

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"We do not believe that an escalation is inevitable, and there are no signs that an escalation is imminent," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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Federal Reserve Keeps Interest Rates Unchanged Boosting Chance for Rates Cut in September

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve announced no change to interest rates at its policy meeting for July that concluded on Wednesday, setting up the possibility of the first US interest rate cut in four-and-a-half years when it meets next in September.

"The Committee decided to maintain the target range for the federal funds rate at 5-1/4 to 5-1/2 percent," the Fed's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) said in a statement. "In considering any adjustments to the target range for the federal funds rate, the Committee will carefully assess incoming data, the evolving outlook, and the balance of risks."

The US central bank typically does not cite timelines or specifics for upcoming interest rate changes.

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US Would Not Speculate on Reasons for Possible Movement of Detainees in Russia - Patel

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States does not want to speculate on the reasoning behind the possible movements of some detainees in Russia, US State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel told reporters on Wednesday.

"I don't want to speculate on any reasoning," Patel said when asked whether the State Department has any information on whether or why some prisoners in Russia are being moved.

On Tuesday, Telegram channels reported that several convicts in Russia, including those in cases involving treason, have allegedly disappeared from the pretrial detention centers.

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

A US database of federal prisoners no longer shows several Russian nationals in US federal custody as of Wednesday morning.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday that he had no comment on alleged preparations for a prisoner exchange between Russia and the United States.

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us FED KEEPS RATES UNCHANGED FOR JULY, BOOSTING CHANCE FOR SEPT CUt

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US raises travel warning for lebanon to level 4 or 'do not travel,' citing rising tensions between hezbollah and israel - state dept.

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Assassination of Haniyeh Not Comparable to Attempted One on Trump - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, July 31 (Sputnik) - The assassination of the Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh by Israel is not comparable to the attempted assassination of the former US President Donald Trump, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"Let's not compare things that are clearly in our mind different," Dujarric said in response to a question as to why the United Nations condemned the attempted assassination of Trump and not the actual assassination of Haniyeh.

Dujarric noted that there is a conflict ongoing in the region and emphasized that the United Nations does not want to see the conflict escalate.

Earlier on Wednesday, Hamas confirmed that Haniyeh was killed in an Israeli attack on his residence in Tehran after he took part in the inauguration of newly elected Iranian president Masoud Pezeshkian.

On July 13, a gunman attempted to assassinate Trump during a campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, but Trump evaded death by tilting his head at the last second and only sustained a wound to his right ear.

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us state department says does not want to speculate on reasons detainees might be being moved in russia

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US Believes Ceasefire Deal Possible Despite Haniyeh's Killing - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) – The United States continues to believe that a ceasefire deal can be reached between Israel and Hamas despite the assassination of the Palestinian group's political leader Ismail Haniyeh, State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Wednesday.

"We have seen the Israelis engaged and constructive in conversations that we have been having about a ceasefire deal, and so, we continue to believe both that a ceasefire deal is both achievable and urgent, and it is something our partners in Israel want," Patel said during a press

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briefing.
Earlier in the day, Palestinian movement Hamas said that Haniyeh was killed in an Israeli strike on his residence in the Iranian capital. Haniyeh had attended the inauguration ceremony of new Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian.

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US Commitment to Israel 'Ironclad,' Includes Defense Against Iran - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) – The commitment of the United States to Israel's security is "ironclad" and includes the defense of the Jewish state in the event of threats from Iran, State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Wednesday.
Patel's response addressed a question on whether the US would assist Israel in the event of an Iranian retaliation over the assassination of Hamas' political leader Ismail Haniyeh.
"Our commitment to Israel security is ironclad and of course part of that includes the defense of Israel when faces threats from malign actors like the Iranian regime," Patel said during a press briefing.
Earlier in the day, Palestinian movement Hamas said that Haniyeh was killed in an Israeli strike on his residence in the Iranian capital. Haniyeh had attended in the inauguration ceremony of new Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian.

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state department says deal between israel and hamas achievable even after killing of haniyeh

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US Not Involved in Israel's Latest Operation in Lebanon - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States was not part of the recent operation by Israel in Lebanon, US State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Wednesday.
"We were not involved in this mission or operation," Patel said.

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Musk Says Accepts Maduro's Challenge to Fight, But Claims Leader Will 'Chicken Out'

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said on Wednesday that he accepts Venezuelan President Nicola Maduro's challenge to fight, although he claims that

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the leader will back out of the brawl.

Maduro reportedly said on national television that he is ready to fight Musk, who has been critical of Maduro's regime in the wake of his July 28 victory in Venezuela's presidential election.

"I accept," Musk said on social media platform X, in response to a post about Maduro's challenge.

However, Musk subsequently said that Maduro will "chicken out" of the fight.

Maduro's electoral victory has come under scrutiny by opposition figures and some foreign governments, including the Biden administration. The election results also sparked protests in Venezuela, prompting the Venezuelan government to accuse several countries of meddling in its affairs.

Russian Foreign Ministry deputy spokesperson Andrey Nastasyin said on Wednesday that Maduro's victory has been confirmed and urged foreign countries to stop using "baseless accusations" to attempt to influence the political situation in Venezuela.

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us state department says does not have information killing of haniyeh in tehran or possible reactions

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us was not involved in Israel's operation in lebanon - state department

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Royal Canadian Mounted Police Says Arrested 2 Persons on Terrorism-Related Charges

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) on Wednesday announced the arrest of two Toronto residents - a father and son - on terrorism-related charges.

"Threats to Canada's national security are a top investigational priority for the RCMP. This past weekend, GTA INSET arrested a father and son at a hotel in Richmond Hill, who were in the advanced stages of planning a serious, violent attack in Toronto," the RCMP said in a statement.

RCMP alleges that the two individuals facilitated terrorist activities in the greater Toronto area but nothing suggests that there is any remaining risk to the public, the statement said.

Ahmed Eldidi, 62, and his son Mostafa Eldidi, 26, have each been charged with participating in the activities of a terrorist group; facilitating terrorist activity; possessing a weapon for dangerous purpose; and conspiracy to commit murder, the statement said.

Ahmed Eldidi faces an additional charge for aggravated assault, the statement added.

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Both individuals are set to appear before court on August 1, according to the statement.

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Pentagon Says Requesting $1.6Bln Contract Ceiling Raise for Communications Equipment

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department said on Wednesday that it is requesting a $1.6 billion raise to the contact ceiling for radio and communication products in service of Foreign Military Sales (FMS) efforts.

"The requested $1.6B ceiling increase, which applies to both traditional FMS and Pseudo-FMS funds, will boost the current ceiling from $3.3B to $4,900,000,000 ($4.9B) for sole source procurements of L3HGCi radio and communication products, ancillary and spare parts, and related services in support of FMS program," the Pentagon said in a notice.

Pseudo-FMS efforts on the contract encompass funding for the Counter ISIS Train and Equip Fund, Global Train and Equip Programs, African Peacekeeping Rapid Response, the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative and Coalition Readiness Support Program, the notice said.

The increase is necessary due to the combined traditional FMS and Pseudo-FMS funds likely reaching the ceiling prior to the completion of the current June 2026 ordering period, the notice said.

The requested ceiling increase will allow projected traditional FMS and Pseudo-FMS buys through the remaining ordering period, ending 9 June 2026 at which point a new contract is anticipated to be awarded, the notice said.

The government runs a "tremendous risk" of not being able to fulfill the requests of the US coalition and partner nations if the ceiling request is not approved in a timely manner, the notice said.

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Russia's Marchenko Remains in US Custody Amid Rumored Prisoner Swap - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) – Russian national Maxim Marchenko, who is imprisoned in the US for money laundering and smuggling goods from the United States, remains in US custody, his lawyer Kerry Lawrence told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"He's still in custody here," Lawrence said.

The lawyer said he does not know about a potential prisoner swap between the US and Russia.

"I am unaware of any exchange going on," he added.

A US court sentenced Marchenko earlier in July to 36 months in prison and three years of supervised release on charges of money laundering and smuggling military-grade microelectronics goods from the United States.

On Tuesday, Telegram channels reported that several convicts in Russia, 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

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

A US database of federal prisoners, as of Wednesday morning, no longer shows Marchenko and several other 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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UN Chief Calls for Middle East De-Escalation, Restraint Alone Insufficient - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, July 31 (Sputnik) - United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urges all parties to de-escalate the situation in the Middle East, as restraint alone is not enough to achieve stability, UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"The Secretary-General believes that the attacks we have seen in South Beirut and Teheran represent a dangerous escalation at a moment in which all efforts should instead be leading to a ceasefire in Gaza," the statement said. "It is increasingly clear, however, that restraint alone is insufficient at this extremely sensitive time. The Secretary-General urges all to vigorously work towards regional de-escalation in the interest of long-term peace and stability for all."

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Assassination of Hamas Political Leader May End Gaza Deal Talks for Now - Ex-IMF Official

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Israel's assassination of Hamas politburo chief Ismail Haniyeh may temporarily end any prospect for reaching a Gaza ceasefire deal, Hossein Askari, former IMF Executive Board member and special adviser to the Saudi Arabian finance minister, told Sputnik on Wednesday.

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 Tehran. According to Hamas, Haniyeh was killed in an Israeli raid on his residence in Tehran after participating in the inauguration ceremony of the new Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian.

"For now, absolutely," Askari said when asked if the Haniyeh assassination could end the Gaza deal negotiations.

US officials along with other regional partners in the Middle East have recently been involved in intensive talks with Hamas and Israeli officials to negotiate a ceasefire deal. The Biden administration had said that a deal was close to being reached.

Askari explained that the assassination of Haniyeh creates difficult conditions to continue negotiations.

Askari also said he expects Hamas and its partners may likely retaliate with a reciprocal response.

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US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said it was difficult to predict the consequences of the killing, highlighting the need for a ceasefire and adding that the United States will continue to do everything it can to facilitate a deal.

A representative of the Hamas movement in Lebanon, Mahmoud Tah, told Sputnik that the assassination of Haniyeh could lead to a major war in the Middle East. He also called on the US to realize the extent of its responsibility for such an escalation.

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US Private Payrolls Up Modestly in July, Boosting Chance for Interest Rate Cut

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - US private payrolls grew in July more modestly than the forecast for the month, boosting the chance of a Federal Reserve interest rate cut by September.

The Fed is expected to pass on any rate change at its July meeting on Tuesday. That leaves Wall Street's economists wagering heavily on the US central bank making a cut when its Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) meets again on September 18, in what would be its first rate reduction in four-and-a-half years.

The July numbers released by private payrolls-tracker ADP seemed to boost the chance of a September interest rate cut. According to ADP, non-government employment grew by just 122,000 this month, the slowest since January and below the upwardly revised 155,000 for June. Wall Street had forecast a minimal growth of 150,000 instead for July.

On top of that modest growth, wages for those who stayed in their jobs increased by only 4.8% from a year ago, the smallest since July 2021.

Payrolls and wages are two of the measures the Fed uses to best determine how real inflation is faring in the United States.

The US central bank's target for inflation is 2% per year. But the inflation gauge it closely follows - the Personal Consumption Expenditure (PCE) Index - as well as the Consumer Price Index (CPI) have both grown above 2% per year every month since 2022.

Responding to the runaway inflation, the Fed has kept rates at two-decade highs since July of last year, in a range of between 5.25% and 5.5%. The last time the central bank made a cut was in March 2020 - at the onset of the pandemic - when it slashed rates by a full 100 basis points, or 1%.

"With wage growth abating, the labor market is playing along with the Federal Reserve's effort to slow inflation," ADP Chief Economist Nela Richardson said on Tuesday, commenting on the data released by the firm. "If inflation goes back up, it won't be because of labor."

The ADP data foreshadows Friday's release of the all-important non-farm payroll number for July by the US government. That is projected to grow by 175,000 versus the previously reported 206,000 for June.

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un chief says Israeli attacks in south beirut, tehran represent dangerous escalation at moment in which all efforts should be leading to ceasefire

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Russian Nationals Whose Names Do Not Appear on BOP Website Still in US Custody - Source

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The high-profile Russian nationals whose names do not appear on a US database of federal prisoners are still in US custody amid speculation of a possible prisoner exchange deal between the United States and Russia, a source familiar with the matter told Sputnik on Wednesday.
"The defendants are in US custody," the source said in a statement.
Earlier, Arkady Bukh, lawyer for Russian national Alexander Vinnik, told Sputnik that any information about a potential US-Russia prisoner exchange is confidential at present.

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Russia Schedules Urgent UNSC Meeting on Israel’s Actions for Wednesday Afternoon - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, July 31 (Sputnik) - Russia has scheduled an extraordinary UN Security Council meeting on Israel's assassination of Hamas politburo chief Ismail Haniyeh, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Wednesday.
"At the request of Iran, supported by China, Algeria and Russia, our chairmanship has scheduled an extraordinary meeting of the UN Security Council in connection with the assassination of Hamas politburo chief I. Haniyeh in Tehran for 4:00 p.m. New York time (11:00 p.m. Moscow time) on July 31," Polyanskiy said.
Broadcast of the meeting will be available on UNWebTV and the Telegram channel of Russia's permanent mission to the United Nations.

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Canadian Frigate HMCS Montreal Sails Through Taiwan Strait – Defense Minister

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) – Canadian Defense Minister Bill Blair said on Wednesday that the HMCS Montreal frigate sailed through the Taiwan Straits as part of Ottawa’s

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commitment to increase its presence in the Indo-Pacific.

"As outlined in our Indo-Pacific Strategy, Canada is increasing the presence of the @RoyalCanNavy in the Indo-Pacific region," Blair said via the X platform. "HMCS Montreal as transited through the Taiwan Strait, reaffirming Canada's commitment to a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific".

The frigate conducted a "routine transit" through the Taiwan Strait, the Canadian Joint Operations Command said separately via X. Ottawa supports the so-called rules-based international order by operating according to international law, it added.

In November 2022, Canada unveiled its Indo-Pacific strategy in an effort to cement the country's alleged leading role in the region, including through a C$2.3 billion ($1.7 billion) investment over five years to boost military and cyber security in the region and through enhancing trade ties with regional partners.

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US Must Find Ways to Support Ukraine Beyond Direct Budget Support - Special Representative

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States must find ways to support the Ukrainian economy beyond direct budget support, US Special Representative for Ukraine's Economic Recovery Penny Pritzker said on Wednesday.

"I think our challenge is more the question you asked about resources: how much money and how much capital do we have to put forward? And you're starting to see, we've got to look to other places besides just our direct budget support, and that's becoming more and more challenging," Pritzker said during remarks at the Brookings Institution.

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US May Avoid Involvement in Mideast Unrest After Israel Killed Haniyeh - Ex-IMF Official

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The United States is not expected to get further dragged into the unrest in the Middle East for political reasons after Israel assassinated Hamas politburo chief Ismail Haniyeh in Iran, Hossein Askari, former IMF Executive Board member and special adviser to the Saudi Arabian finance minister, told Sputnik on Wednesday.

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. According to Hamas, Haniyeh was killed in an Israeli raid on his residence in Tehran after his participation in the inauguration ceremony of the new Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian.

"No. There is an ongoing election campaign and Biden does not want to impair Harris' chances," Askari said when asked if he expected the United States to get further involved in the Middle East unrest after the assassination of Haniyeh.

Askari said although an escalation of the situation in the Middle East is not certain, it could be possible.

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"No one, except [Israeli Prime Minister] Netanyahu, wants a regional conflict," Askari said. "The Lebanese remember the last time they were in a war, it was not good. Iran wants to improve economic conditions at home and save its resources."

Moreover, Israel has mounting economic issues and the US taxpayer cannot be expected to bail them out again, Askari said.

The United States military is stretched very thin dealing with other national security issues in Ukraine, the East and the South China Sea amid a competitive US presidential election, Askari added.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said it was difficult to predict the consequences of the killing, highlighting the need for a ceasefire and adding that the United States will continue to do everything it can to facilitate a deal.

Hamas representative in Lebanon, Mahmoud Tah, told Sputnik that the assassination of Haniyeh could lead to a major war in the Middle East. He also called on the US to realize the extent of its responsibility for such an escalation.

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Two-Thirds of Ukraine Not Damaged by Ongoing Conflict With Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Two-thirds of Ukraine's territory has not been damaged in to the ongoing conflict with Russia, US Special Representative for Ukraine's Economic Recovery Penny Pritzker said on Wednesday.

"Two-thirds of the country's [Ukraine's] territory has not been damaged by conflict," Pritzker said in her remarks during an event hosted by the Brookings Institution.

Pritzker urged commercial and investment banks to look for opportunities in Ukraine while carefully assessing the risks associated with doing business in the country engulfed in a military conflict with Russia.

In June, the leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) nations 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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Killing of Haniyeh Could Not Have Occurred Without US Authorization, Intel Support

UNITED NATIONS, July 31 (Sputnik) - The Iranian mission to the United Nations said in a letter to the UN Security Council shared with Sputnik that an Israeli rocket strike that killed Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh could not have occurred without the authorization and intelligence support of the United States.

"The responsibility of the United States, as the strategic ally and main supporter of the Israeli regime in the region, cannot be overlooked in this horrific crime. This act could not have

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occurred without the authorization and intelligence support of the U.S," the letter said.
The letter stated that "such a heinous crime, targeting a high-ranking official guest, is a serious infringement on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Islamic Republic of Iran." It also constitutes a blatant violation of international law, the letter said.
The Iranian mission called on the Security Council to take immediate action to ensure Israel's accountability for its acts of aggression, including "the potential imposition of sanctions and other measures."

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Ukraine Must Pursue Anti-Corruption Efforts to Bolster Economy - Special Representative

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Ukraine must pursue reform and anti-corruption efforts in order to facilitate economic investment and growth, US Special Representative for Ukraine's Economic Recovery Penny Pritzker said on Wednesday.
"Ukraine must continue to drive its reform and anti-corruption efforts, which are essential for investment at scale and a thriving economy," Pritzker said during remarks at the Brookings Institution.
In May, the US Defense Department Inspector General said that Ukraine remains one of the least accountable governments in Europe.
The conflict in Ukraine has created new opportunities for corruption, including bribes, kickbacks and inflated procurement costs, the watchdog said.
The European Union established a special commission in June to prevent corruption related to funds provided to Ukraine.
NATO seeks to address the issue of corruption in Ukraine before moving forward with the possibility of membership in the alliance, UK media reported last month, citing a senior US State Department official.

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US Imposes Sanctions Related to Houthi Weapons Procurement - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The US Department of the Treasury announced on Wednesday that it sanctioned two people and four companies who allegedly facilitated weapons procurement for Yemen's Ansar Allah movement, whose members are also known as Houthis, according to a release.
"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is sanctioning two individuals and four companies that have facilitated weapons procurement for Ansar Allah, commonly referred to as the Houthis," the release said.
The sanctions targeted Sanaa-based logistics company Al-Shahari United Corporation Ltd., which has allegedly facilitated shipments of components for Houthi missile and drone

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manufacturing from suppliers in China, and its Guangzhou-based branch, Guangzhou Alshahari United Corporation.

They also targeted Guangzhou Alshahari's owner in Hong Kong, Hongkong Alshahari United Corporation Limited, and its Director and General Manager Ahmed Khaled Yahya Al-Shahare .

Sanctions were also imposed on Sanaa-based Yemen Telecommunication Asset Company for Information Technology, which has allegedly supported weapons and component procurement for the Houthis, and its general manager Maher Yahya Muhammad Mutahar al-Kinai.

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Iran Requests Urgent UNSC Meeting After Haniyeh's Killing, Beirut Strike - Letter

UNITED NATIONS, July 31 (Sputnik) - The Iranian mission to the United Nations calls on the UN Security Council to convene an urgent meeting in the wake of the assassination of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh and an Israeli strike on Beirut, the mission said in a letter shared with Sputnik.

"In light of these grave consequences of Israeli criminal acts on regional peace and security, the Islamic Republic of Iran calls upon the United Nations Security Council to condemn unequivocally and strongly the acts of aggression against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, [and] to convene an urgent meeting to address Israeli aggression and terrorist attacks conducted in Iran and the region," the letter said.

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Israel's Killing of Hamas Leader May Block Rapprochement Between US, Iran - Ex-Iran Envoy

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Israel's assassination of Hamas politburo chief Ismail Haniyeh may have been designed to kill any new hopes for a possible rapprochement between Washington and Tehran following the presidential elections in Iran, former Iranian Ambassador to Germany Seyed Hossein Mousavian told Sputnik on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, the Palestinian movement Hamas confirmed the death of Haniyeh as a result of an Israeli strike on his residence in Iran. According to Hamas, Haniyeh was killed in an Israeli raid on his residence in Tehran after participating in the inauguration ceremony of the new Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian.

"The assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran is a calculated Israeli plan to kill new hopes for possible rapprochement between Tehran and Washington after the recent Iranian election," Mousavian said.

Mousavian further said that Israel may have also intended to block ceasefire initiatives in the Gaza war and block presumptive US Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris' policies to pressure Israel.

Israel's assassination of Haniyeh will escalate the regional conflict in the Middle East, and drag the United States and Iran into a new wave of regional confrontations, Mousavian added.

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US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said it was difficult to predict the consequences of the killing, highlighting the need for a ceasefire and adding that the United States will continue to do everything it can to facilitate a deal.

Hamas representative in Lebanon, Mahmoud Tah, told Sputnik that the assassination of Haniyeh could lead to a major war in the Middle East. Tah also called on the United States to acknowledge the extent of its responsibility for such an escalation.

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Crude Rallies on Israel Strikes on Hamas, Hezbollah, Trimming July Loss for Oil Market

NEW YORK, July 31 (Sputnik) - Oil prices increased on Wednesday, rallying some 3% to cut losses for July, after Israel killed senior officials of the Palestinian and Lebanese groups Hamas and Hezbollah.

The tit-for-tat among the archrivals in the oil-rich Middle East brought geopolitical risk back to a market that had been floundering since mid-July. Crude prices had gone from a 2024 high of above $85 per barrel on the average in June to around $75 this week on talks of a potential ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war for Gaza and from weak economic data in top oil importer China.

The Israeli killing of Hamas' political chief Ismail Haniyeh and Hezbollah senior leader Fuad Shukr put to rest speculation of any pause in hostilities. Haniyeh was killed while he was in Iran - another Hamas ally which has historically been at conflict with Israel.

"We are back to Geopolitics again with Hamas/Hezbollah/Iran/Israel overwhelming the bad China data with the market worried about supply rather than demand," Scott Shelton, an oil market broker and analyst at ICAP in Durham, North Carolina, wrote in his daily note.

In Tuesday's trade, US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude was at $76.97 per barrel by 10:30 a.m. ET (14:30 GMT), up $2.24, or 3%. WTI's low until Tuesday was $74.61, marking a bottom not seen since its June low of 74.06.

July remains a torrid month for bulls who had backed WTI, with the US crude benchmark on track to lose almost 6% - the most since September 2023, when it tumbled 11%.

UK-origin Brent crude was at $80.19 per barrel, up $2.12, or 2.7%. For July, Brent was on track to fall 7%, its biggest losing month since October 2022.

Also helping oil's comeback was weekly US data on oil, showing both draws in inventories of crude as well as gasoline, although stockpiles of distillates creeped higher.

The US Energy Information Administration (EIA) said there was a crude inventory decline of 3.426 million barrels for the week ended on July 26, adding to the prior week's tumble of 3.741 million. US crude inventories have fallen almost 30 million barrels in all over the past five weeks.

For gasoline, the agency cited a decline of 3.665 million barrels in the latest week on top of the drop of 5.572 million barrels the prior week. Analysts had forecast a deficit of 1.29 million barrels instead. Gasoline is the primary motor fuel in the United States and makes up the largest component of the country's energy mix.

In distillates, the EIA reported a build of 1.534 million barrels, against the dip of 900,000 forecast by analysts after the prior week's slump of 2.753 million. Distillates are primarily

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processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses, and ships, and also go into making airplane fuel.

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iran requests urgent UNSC meeting over assassination of hamas political leader, other Israeli acts of 'aggression' - letter obtained by sputnik

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Vinnik's Lawyer Says Information About Potential US-Russia Prisoner Swap 'Confidential'

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Arkady Bukh, lawyer for Russian national Alexander Vinnik, told Spunik that any information about a potential US-Russia prisoner exchange is confidential at present.

"The information at this stage is confidential; it cannot be released until things happen," Bukh said on Wednesday.

Bulkh also said Vinnik's legal defense team is always open to negotiate on a potential prisoner exchange involving his client.

"We cannot disclose details, but we are working," Bukh said.

Bukh also said he cannot disclose either where Vinnik is currently located.

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Most US Voters Believe Migrant Situation at US-Mexico Border Constitutes ‘Crisis’ - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - A majority of likely voters in the United States consider the migrant situation at the US-Mexico border a crisis, according to a Rasmussen Reports poll released Wednesday.

Most voters, 62%, believe that the current situation with migrants at the border constitutes a crisis, the poll report said.

Just over one-quarter of voters, 26%, do not view the situation as a crisis and 12% are unsure, the poll report said.

Moreover, a plurality of voters, 48%, believe that US Vice President Kamala Harris has done a poor job handling the situation at the border. US President Joe Biden tasked Harris with addressing the root causes of migration, leading to her colloquial "border czar" title.

The US has experienced three consecutive record-breaking years of illegal crossings at the southern border under the Biden administration, according to US Customs and Border Protection data.

Earlier this month, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning Harris’ failure to secure the US’ borders from illegal migration. Former US President Donald Trump also

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said that Harris would make the situation at the border "exponentially worse" if elected president in November.

The poll surveyed 1,089 likely US voters on July 24-25 and 28. The poll has a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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Seleznev's Lawyer Says Hopes His Client Part of Rumored Prisoner Swap

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The lawyer for Russian national Roman Seleznev told Sputnik on Wednesday that he has worked hard over the past year to ensure that Seleznev is included in any potential prisoner swap and hopes an exchange will happen.

A search of the US Federal Bureau of Prisons [BOP) inmate locator database turns up no results for Seleznev, Alexander Vinnik, Maxim Marchenko, Vadim Konoshchenok or Vladislav Klyushin, all of whom are serving sentences in the United States. It comes amid speculation about an impending prisoner swap between the United States and Russia.

"Over the past year I have been hoping very much that this [exchange] would happen. We tried, talked, suggested, but I did not receive any feedback," Igor Litvak said. "But I worked very hard on it, and now that his name has disappeared from BOP is very strange. I hope the exchange takes place."

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Lawyer of Russia's Seleznev Says Contacting Prison After Disappearance From BOP Website

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - The attorney for Russian national Roman Seleznev told Sputnik that he is trying to clarify the situation after the names of some of Russian inmates, including his client, disappeared from the US database of federal prisoners amid widespread speculation about an impending prisoner swap between the United States and Russia.

"I am trying to clear things up," Igor Litvak said. "I am contacting the prison."

A search of the US Federal Bureau of Prisons inmate locator database turns up no results for Seleznev, Alexander Vinnik, Maxim Marchenko, Vadim Konoshchenok or Vladislav Klyushin, all of whom were serving sentences in the United States.

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Lawyer of Russia's Seleznev Says No Info From US Gov't Amid Prisoner Swap Rumors

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) - Russian national Roman Seleznev's attorney told Sputnik that he has received no official information from the US authorities on his client amid widespread speculation about an impending prisoner swap between the United States and

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Russia.

"I haven't officially heard anything from the American government, either about Roman or anyone else," Igor Litvak said. "I don't know what this means and I don't have any other information about any exchange. I haven't heard anything official."

A search of the US Federal Bureau of Prisons inmate locator database turns up no results for Seleznev, Alexander Vinnik, Maxim Marchenko, Vadim Konoshchenok and Vladislav Klyushin, all of whom are serving sentences in the United States.

On Tuesday, Telegram channels reported that several convicts, including those in treason cases, had allegedly disappeared from the Russian 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."

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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Lawyer of Russia's Seleznev tells sputnik he has received No official Information From US Gov't Amid Prisoner Swap Rumors

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vinnik's lawyer tells sputnik cannot disclose details on potential prisoner swap, says we are working, comments prohibited until exchange happens

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vinnik's lawyer tells sputnik prisoners in russia are in transit, based on what he hears from colleagues representing them

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vinnik's lawyer to sputnik on speculation of us-russia prisoner swap: information at this stage confidential, cannot be released until things happen

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Florida Opera Invites Guests to Celebrate Russian Soprano Anna Netrebko on February 3

WASHINGTON, July 31 (Sputnik) – The Palm Beach Opera located in the US state of Florida announced on Wednesday that it invites opera lovers to celebrate world-famous Russian soprano Anna Netrebko during a concert on February 3.

"Save the date for an exclusive celebration of opera, elegance, and entertainment on Monday, February 3 at The Breakers Palm Beach. Enjoy an elegant dinner and experience the internationally acclaimed soprano Anna Netrebko," the opera said in a press release.

The Palm Beach Opera said the event will be a highlight of the year with Netrebko to give the concert accompanied by pianist Angel Rodriguez.

All proceeds from ticket sales for the concert will be donated by the opera to impactful educational programming, transformative artist training, and world-class mainstage performances, according to the release.

The West began a campaign of persecution against Netrebko after the start of a special military operation in Ukraine in 2022 after she refused to openly condemn Russia's actions

In March 2022, the New York City Metropolitan Opera announced that Netrebko would not take part in further productions because she had not complied with the requirement to give up public support for Russian President Vladimir Putin amid the Ukrainian conflict.

For the same reason, the Bavarian State Opera broke off relations with the singer. Netrebko resumed her opera and concert appearances after a short break.

A year later, a court ordered the New York opera to pay Russian soprano Anna Netrebko over $200,000 for performances the opera canceled in 2022.

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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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