

8/16/24 Friday

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Kim Dotcom to Be Extradited After Losing 12-Year Legal Battle

Two of the mogul's former business partners pleaded guilty to related charges against them last year. In response, the US dropped their extradition efforts.

Kim Dotcom, born Kim Schmitz in Germany, has lost a 12-year fight to have his deportation to the US halted on charges of copyright infringement, money laundering and racketeering, a US-based news source [reported](#).

On Friday, New Zealand's Justice Minister Paul Goldsmith said he had decided that Dotcom should be surrendered to the US to face trial. Although, a date for the extradition has not yet been reported.

[Dotcom](#) is an internet Mogul who was born in Germany but holds residency in New Zealand. The charges he faces are related to his file-sharing site Megaupload, created in 2005, which was shut down by US authorities in 2012.

Shortly after his site was shut down, the mogul was arrested by New Zealand police following a raid on his mansion that the US authorities had requested. The 50-year-old entrepreneur posted bail and thus began his lengthy legal process to avoid extradition.

Prosecutors have said that Dotcom's site took in at least \$175 million primarily from those who used the site to illegally download songs, television shows and movies. Those defending the internet entrepreneur say it was the decision of those who used the site to pirate materials, not its founders.

In response to the judge's decision, Dotcom wrote on X on Thursday that he "loves New Zealand" and that he is not leaving.

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Israel Struggles to Hide Its Violence From World's Eye

Hamas has expressed that they no longer have confidence in the US to bring about a ceasefire deal, reports said. The US has shown its unconditional support by supplying Israel militarily, even after tens of thousands have been killed in a conflict that is nearing a year in length. Officials from the US, Israel, Egypt and Qatar met in Doha for a second day of talks on Friday, a US media reported. The US, Egypt and Qatar revealed that a "bridging proposal" had been presented to both Hamas and Israel, with the three negotiators expected to reconvene in Cairo before the end of next week.

[Hamas](#) was not present for the meeting after previously having agreed to a US-presented ceasefire deal that Israel had allegedly sabotaged by presenting new demands. Mohamed Gomaa, a journalist and correspondent, joined [Sputnik's The Final Countdown](#) on Friday to

discuss the recent settler riot in Jit, as well as the ongoing ceasefire negotiations between Israel and Hamas.

"...they have to have some mediators to close the gaps [...] between both, even Hamas or the Israeli government. Because we know that Benjamin Netanyahu wants to continue this war. He continued this war until eliminating Hamas, and this will be hard for them," the analyst explained.

On Thursday, a settler rampage broke out in the village of Jit which is located near the city of Nablus in the northern West Bank, a US-based news source reported. The riot resulted in the killing of one Palestinian and the serious injuries of others, Palestinian health officials said. Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued rare condemnations of the incident, with the prime minister issuing a call for settlers to stand down, US media said.

However, human rights group have said that arrests and prosecution for settler violence is rare. "Those who fight terrorism are the [Israeli Defense Forces] and the security forces, and no one else," the Israeli prime minister said. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant also condemned the attack and said the settlers did not "represent the values" of settler communities.

The strong rebuke could be a reflection of the intense scrutiny Israel has fallen under as it conducts its war against Hamas which has reportedly killed over 40,000 people and drawn the ire of human rights groups and even governments.

"They have a tough situation. The Israeli government, because the condemnation comes from everywhere around the world now. Even for the continued war in Gaza. Even for the settlers who already attacked the people in the West Bank or Gaza. So I think they are in a tough situation," said Gomaa.

"They already have some issues, I think, in the government itself," he added. "Maybe they will know that they're already under the, you know, threat from the [ICC](#). That's why I think we will see more issues or more condemnation comes from everywhere, even from inside Israel. The people, I think they are fed up from this continued war. More fed up because they are, or the government cannot release the hostages until now."

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Violent Israeli Colonization Surges in Gaza, as Peace Talks Hang in Balance

Top officials from the US, Israel, Egypt and Qatar met in Doha for a second day of talks on Friday, a US news source said. A joint statement from the US, Egypt and Qatar said a "bridging proposal" had been presented to both Hamas and Israel. Those three parties are scheduled to reconvene in Cairo next week.

On Tuesday, it was reported that a senior Iranian security official had warned that if Israel's ceasefire talks with Hamas fell through then Iran would attack Israel. The attack would be in response to the assassination of Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh who was visiting Iran at the time of his killing. However, Iran is expected to abstain from its retaliatory strikes on Israel as a way to allow ceasefire talks to continue, officials from Gaza, the US, Iran and Israel reportedly said.

Leila Hatoum, a Lebanese-based journalist, economist, and geopolitical analyst joined [Sputnik's Fault Lines](#) on Friday to discuss the tension in the Middle East as well as the colonization of Israeli settlers on Palestinian land.

" Hamas did not attend the negotiations table in Doha," Hatoum explained. "Because Hamas anticipated that the Israelis are going to come with new demands despite the fact that Hamas had agreed to the previous paper."

"But you have to understand the main division between all of these states is not only ego, or fear that the Americans will create instability inside of these countries. Because if you stand against the Israelis in that case, the Americans at one point in time, you will start facing destabilization, riots, revolutions that are man-made, artificial revolutions," the analyst explained. Hamas had previously agreed to a US-presented ceasefire deal, yet Israel complicated negotiations by creating new demands as a way to sabotage the deal. The two parties have been negotiating on and off for months over the three-phase deal which would allow for the release of hostages held in each country.

The group has reportedly expressed that they no longer see the US as being able to bring about a deal that would solidify a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. And following the assassination of one of their leaders, as well as attacks on Iran in April, the US has continued to support Israel indefinitely.

"And at one point, you will reach basically an explosion or an assassination of the ruler. Like, what happened to the former Saudi king, King Faisal, may his soul rest in peace. He was assassinated shortly after rallying the world to cut off oil from the West because they were supporting the Israelis at one point in time. He did it in favor of the Palestinians," she added. A deadly settler rampage broke out in the Israeli-occupied West Bank late on Thursday, an American news source [reported](#). The riot, which occurred in the village of Jit, resulted in the killing of one Palestinian and the serious injuries of others, Palestinian health officials said. Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued rare condemnations of the incident, with the prime minister issuing a call for settlers to stand down, US media said.

"Those who fight terrorism are the [Israeli Defense Forces] and the security forces, and no one else," the Israeli prime minister said. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant also condemned the attack and said the settlers did not "represent the values" of settler communities.

According to the report, at least 100 masked settlers entered the village, "shot live ammunition at Palestinians, burned homes and cars and damaged water tankers." Flames reportedly engulfed the village which residents said was left to defend itself without the help of the military for two hours.

"We do have information that the Israeli occupation forces escorted those settlers, like they did in other towns as well. It's a purge. It's a whole purge. The idea they used to poison wells in the past and they claimed otherwise, but there is proof of that," Hatoum explained.

"They now, basically, this shows that they're polluting, basically, water sources. They try to kill anything that's living. They use live ammunition. Guess where they got it from? 90,000 Israeli illegal settlers in the occupied Palestinian territories in the West Bank were armed by Ben-Gvir, Itamar Ben-Gvir, personally," the analyst added.

While settler violence in Palestine is nothing new, it has reportedly spiked since the conflict between Israel and Hamas began. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) recorded more than 1,200 Israeli settler attacks against Palestinians which has resulted

in possibly more than 120 deaths and 1,000 instances of property damage since the start of the conflict, a Doha-based news outlet [reported](#).

"And those settlers in the West Bank, they came from New York, they came from all of the US, all of Europe, across the world. And those people believe, at one point or another, that this land is theirs. They should not coexist with the Palestinians. They need to drive them out and disperse them across the Arab countries," Hatoum explained.

"The funny part, when you have a European white person coming and telling a native Semite Palestinian that, 'you're not native over here. I belong to this land, not you.' It makes either a joke or something that's out of the - it's a fictional story at one point or another. Then, some of them, they come to you and they tell you, God promised us this land."

"Alright," the analyst said, pointing out the irony of settlement support. "Anybody who was kicked out of the United States basically 300 years ago can come now to the US, start shooting people and killing them and telling them, 'this is my land.'"

Violent Israeli colonization surges in Gaza, as peace talks hang in the balance

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Biden Escalates Again, Threatening Russia with Long-Range Cruise Missiles

Washington is once again considering granting Ukraine high-power armaments to use against Russian civilians.

President Joe Biden's support for Ukraine in its proxy war against the Russian Federation has been marked by careful efforts to manage the narrative accompanying US involvement.

Biden has consistently attempted to paint the United States as a cautious and responsible party to the dispute, warning of the potential of a dangerous escalation of the conflict with the nuclear-armed power. To this end the president has often resisted calls to provide Ukraine with certain high-power armaments, only to relent months later as Kiev's forces appear to be at the end of their rope.

The White House [signaled](#) one such escalation Thursday when Western media reported Washington was "open" to providing Ukraine long-range cruise missiles with a range of over 230 miles. The Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM) is reportedly the US Air Force's most powerful and longest-range weapon, but questions remain over whether Ukraine possesses the aircraft and trained pilots necessary to put it to use.

"I don't think I'm overstating the reality when I say that Russia has been fairly measured in its response to the proxy aggression that Ukraine has been engaged in," said host Wilmer Leon on [Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Friday](#), responding to the development. "If they are now considering sending missiles further into Russia, that's not going to bode well for Ukraine. It's not going to bode well for NATO. This is not a very good idea."

"I think at this point we should... not think of this as a war between Ukraine and Russia, but rather think of this as a war between the United States and Russia, with Ukrainians doing the fighting for the United States," said author and independent journalist Caleb Maupin. "Ukraine is simply acting as a proxy. The flow of American weaponry and the direction from American intelligence and American military personnel, the oversight of everything Ukraine does, is very, very apparent."

"Attempts to distance itself from what Ukraine has done may serve diplomatic purposes for the United States, but at the end of the day Russia knows what's going on, and so does much of the world," the analyst noted. "Even though there are not directly American troops involved, this is American weaponry, this is done with American oversight, this is an American operation against Russia, and has been since 2014, when the Ukrainian government was toppled."

Host Garland Nixon claimed Russia is on a path to win the conflict, having successfully liberated territory in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. Ukraine's nationalist government has targeted ethnic Russians in the country since 2014's Euromaidan coup, attempting to suppress Russian heritage and the use of the Russian language.

The Russian military moved to protect citizens in the formerly-Ukrainian territory at the request of local authorities, intervening after several years of the Kiev regime's targeting of the region's inhabitants. The Odessa trade union massacre represented [one of the most shocking incidents](#) of the Ukraine regime's war against its own people; dozens perished when neo-Nazi paramilitaries set fire to a union hall after attacking a group of anti-Maidan protesters.

"Unfortunately, I don't think there was ever any intent for Ukraine to 'win,'" said Maupin, acknowledging that the US has merely used Kiev as a battering ram against Moscow.

"The Donbass, those folks made clear [their intentions] in 2014 when they voted for independence, and then they have been operating as independent and autonomous for quite some time. And the idea that the Kiev government is going to retake every territory that it claims as its own, it's not going to happen. And it was never going to happen."

"I think it's pretty clear this whole operation has just been about costing Russia in terms of lives, in terms of resources, and in terms of morale," he continued. "It's a cynical waste of human life and a waste of resources. And if you look at the details and you see that the US has never

really had any intention for Ukraine to win and very much provoked this whole thing from the beginning with that understanding, you're going to have to look on and be very disgusted if you have any basic sense of human decency or morality.

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US Lashes Out Abroad, Represses Dissent at Home as Global Hegemony Slips Away

Host Wilmer Leon noted rising repression within the United States alongside its efforts to maintain global influence, with the recent FBI raid of the home of former US Marine intelligence officer Scott Ritter representing authorities' latest attempt to intimidate domestic critics.

US hegemony has taken a beating in recent years.

The use of the dollar is on the decline, threatening to undermine the basis of the country's economic power. Its proxy war in Ukraine is faltering, with the prospect of a second Donald Trump presidency threatening to deliver the finishing blow. In Gaza, it is widely considered to be backing a genocide. Its global image has suffered, with [favorability ratings cratering in the Middle East](#) in particular.

The United States has responded by attempting to shore up its influence where possible, most recently in Libya, which is still suffering the consequences of a coup backed by former President Barack Obama. There the US is [attempting](#) to cement the military role of AFRICOM, countering growing Russian influence as Sahel countries turn to Moscow for assistance in combating jihadist groups in the region.

Black Alliance for Peace chair Ajamu Baraka and Pan-Africanist organizer Netfa Freeman joined [Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Friday](#) to discuss the development, noting the United States' repressive efforts at home and abroad as it attempts to salvage an empire in decline.

"They inject themselves into the life of the nation of Libya, assassinate the head of their revolutionary process, destroy the country, create the conditions for arms to be shipped from Libya across the Sahel that increase the military capacities of various jihadist groups that destabilize nations across northern and western Africa," said Baraka, criticizing US influence in the North African country.

"Now they pretend that they're concerned about destabilization in Africa coming from the Russians, and that they are concerned about creating conditions in Libya that would be beneficial to the Libyan people."

"Well, nobody is buying that," he claimed. "The logic of AFRICOM is a logic that is being driven by a Western interest. And, Western interest at this point in history is only concerned with creating the conditions of chaos that provides the rationale for their continued presence on the African continent. This struggle to do that is interrupted or challenged by the presence of the Russians as a viable partner to some states and even the Chinese. So this is the context that we are operating in, one in which that context is informed by US imperialist interests."

Freeman questioned the United States' genuine motivation to stem the influence of terrorist groups in North Africa, with their activity providing a continued justification for the US presence. Funding for jihadist groups in the region is frequently alleged to originate from backers in US-allied Gulf monarchies.

Historically, the United States backed Mujahideen forces in Afghanistan to combat the Soviet Union, ultimately giving rise to Al-Qaeda*. The US has also backed Islamist groups in Syria during its long running effort to topple President Bashar al-Assad.

"This is a hot war where they're competing and then bringing their war against Russia to other places," Freeman claimed. "Afghanistan and Syria, we saw it. We also saw them destabilize Somalia... going back all the way to the 1990s, where they overthrew that government there and then destabilized what emerged."

"They used a proxy there through the TPLF in Ethiopia to destabilize that," he continued. "This is what they do, and they always have... it's really about the United States, which is now the offspring of Western European colonialism. It's serving that, and it's trying to maintain that kind of access to Africa."

Freeman speculated the United States would seek to foment a civil war in Libya to attempt to force Russia out of the country. Baraka recalled the creation of AFRICOM as a tool to expand US influence in Africa in 2008, after which it was expanded dramatically by President Obama. Host Wilmer Leon noted rising repression within the United States alongside its efforts to maintain global influence, with the recent FBI raid of the home of Sputnik's contributor Scott Ritter representing [authorities' latest attempt to intimidate domestic critics](#). A number of political prisoners such as Mumia Abu Jamal, Leonard Peltier, and Jamil Al-Amin remain incarcerated on trumped up charges.

"People need to understand that these are moves being made by the state that will have a deleterious impact on all of us," noted Baraka. "We've already seen [the state pick up its repression](#)."

"But the desperation of the state – it has lost the narrative on Gaza and the entire rationale for the imperialist project. Their objective is to silence voices to intimidate potential opposition. That's why they reacted in such a violent way to the anti-genocide protests that were taking place on college campuses."

"So this is the fascistic environment that we find ourselves in today," Baraka concluded. "And the cutting edge of the main target of this is going to be, and always has been, the Black liberation movement, Black radicals. So we are getting ourselves ready for the intensified scrutiny and repression."

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Will the Real Volodymyr Z Please Stand Up?

"Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive"

Western governments' statements after the 2022 explosion of the Russo-German Nord Stream pipeline have gone from unconvincing to implausible as claims Russia blew up its own infrastructure have given way to the assertion an amateur diver by the name of "Volodymyr Z" was responsible for the massive act of sabotage.

Observers have speculated over the motivations for the new story. Recent polling suggests the environmental catastrophe is still fresh in Europeans' minds, with large majorities of citizens concerned over the lack of clarity over the incident [according](#) to recent polling. A full 71% of

Germans are worried over the lack of results from recent investigations into the matter; the country's economy has cratered in the wake of its loss of access to cheap Russian natural gas, with industry shuttering and economic growth sputtering.

The latest explanation from German authorities, revealed to the public with the announcement of the latest suspect, has similarly been met with skepticism, with observers doubting the ability of anyone other than highly-trained military or intelligence personnel to pull off the complex act of sabotage.

"We're being told that these are not professional [divers]," noted analyst Ted Rall, referring to the small group of co-conspirators who are claimed to have assisted the suspect. "You think about the logistical challenge. You have to go to 260 feet. It's pitch dark. It's freezing cold. It's freezing cold in the Caribbean at 260 feet. But this is the Baltic Sea, so it's bitter."

The saboteurs would also likely have to break through the concrete casing protecting the pipeline, Rall noted, and finish planting the bomb and flee to safety during the limited amount of time they would have sufficient oxygen to operate at such a depth. "This is not only not true, this cannot be true," he claimed, "at least not using the laws of physics as they exist on our planet."

The supposed break in the case comes one year after it was [claimed](#) the US Central Intelligence Agency had suspected a six-person team of Ukrainian special operations personnel of planning the explosion. Investigations into the incident carried out by authorities in Sweden and Denmark have been closed due to an alleged lack of evidence, with Kelley Beaucar Vlahos of the Quincy Institute [noting](#) the investigations likely got "too close for comfort" to the truth for the US allies.

"We will bring an end to it," [said](#) US President Joe Biden in February 2022, promising the United States would move to end the transfer of gas via the Nord Stream pipeline if Russia took action to liberate ethnic Russian citizens in the Donbass. "I promise you: We will be able to do it."

Western governments sell farfetched Nord Stream tale to wary public

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Two-thirds of European Union citizens remain concerned over the lack of clarity surrounding the 2022 Nord Stream pipeline explosion, a survey by a Hungarian-based thinktank in May revealed. It was in this context that German officials unveiled a surprising break in the case this week, claiming a Ukrainian diving instructor known as Volodymyr Zhuravlev was responsible for the pipeline's sabotage.

"My feeling is that this is a cover for something, whether for Kursk or something else that they're planning," said Serbian-American journalist Nebojsa Malic on Sputnik's The Final Countdown program. "Nobody's really yet offered a rebuttal to Seymour Hersh's allegations from last year that pretty much conclusively point a finger to either the British or the Americans."

Host Ted Rall doubted German officials' claim that an amateur diver could have been responsible for the sabotage, noting the difficulty of the operation.

"The Nord Stream 2 pipeline explosion took place at a depth of 260 feet," Rall said, noting the pipeline was twice as deep as the 130-foot depth limit for recreational divers. "You think about the logistical challenge. You have to go to 260 feet. It's pitch dark. It's freezing cold... This is the Baltic Sea, so it's bitter."

"Then, you have to locate this thing. You have to break through the external casing of the thing. You have to plant the bomb. And you have to get away from it, you know, before it blows up and kills you and the rented pleasure craft that you got from Poland or wherever... this is not only not true, this cannot be true... So, why on earth are they so lame at their cover story?"

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Biden escalates again, threatening Russia with long-range cruise missiles

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"I don't think I'm overstating the reality when I say that Russia has been fairly measured in its response to the proxy aggression that Ukraine has been engaged in," said host Wilmer Leon on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Friday. "If they are now considering sending missiles further into Russia, that's not going to bode well for Ukraine. It's not going to bode well for NATO. This is not a very good idea."

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"Attempts to distance itself from what Ukraine has done may serve diplomatic purposes for the United States, but at the end of the day Russia knows what's going on, and so does much of the world," the analyst noted. "This is American weaponry, this is done with American oversight, this is an American operation against Russia, and has been since 2014 when the Ukrainian government was toppled."

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US lashes out abroad, represses dissent at home as global hegemony slips away

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"They inject themselves into the life of the nation of Libya, assassinate the head of their revolutionary process, destroy the country, create the conditions for arms to be shipped from Libya across the Sahel that increase the military capacities of various jihadist groups that destabilize nations across northern and western Africa," said Baraka.

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"The desperation of the state – it has lost the narrative on Gaza and the entire rationale for the imperialist project," said Baraka. "Their objective is to silence voices to intimidate potential opposition. That's why they reacted in such a violent way to the anti-genocide protests that were taking place on college campuses."

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Republican-led House Panels Find Biden Committed Impeachable Offenses - Report

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - Three Republican-led House committees released a report on Monday alleging that President Joe Biden committed impeachable offenses by abusing his office for influence peddling in order to enrich his family.

"Joe Biden knew of, benefitted from, and participated in his family's influence peddling schemes. The entire Biden influence peddling model relied on Joe Biden's presence—at meetings, on the phone, or at dinners—to demonstrate his family members' influence over him, and he repeatedly provided it," House Committee on Oversight and Accountability Chairman James Comer stated in a release.

The report by the oversight, judiciary, and ways and means panels makes several key allegations. It alleges that from 2014 to the present, Biden's family members and their associates received over \$27 million from foreign individuals or entities and set up shell

companies to obscure their sources.

It also alleged that Biden used his office when vice president to help Hunter Biden in his business dealings with Russian, Romanian, Chinese, Kazakh, and Ukrainian individuals and companies by meeting or speaking with these foreign associates.

Additionally, during Biden's presidency, the Department of Justice and FBI allegedly afforded special treatment to Hunter Biden during their criminal investigation of him. The White House allegedly obstructed the committee's impeachment inquiry by withholding key documents and witnesses.

"The Committees present this information to the House of Representatives for its evaluation and consideration of appropriate next steps," the report said.

The White House has long maintained that President Biden has never done business with his son.

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AMD Says Will Buy ZT Systems for \$4.9Bln to Boost AI Capabilities

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) – US computer parts producer AMD announced on Monday that it will acquire server maker ZT Systems for \$4.9 billion to enhance its artificial intelligence (AI) systems capability.

"AMD (NASDAQ: AMD) today announced the signing of a definitive agreement to acquire ZT Systems, a leading provider of AI infrastructure for the world's largest hyperscale computing companies," AMD said in a statement.

The transaction marks the next major step in AMD's AI strategy to deliver leadership AI training and inferencing solutions based on innovating across silicon, software, and systems, it added.

"AMD has agreed to acquire ZT Systems in a cash and stock transaction valued at \$4.9 billion, inclusive of a contingent payment of up to \$400 million based on certain post-closing milestones. AMD expects the transaction to be accretive on a non-GAAP [Generally Accepted Accounting Principles] basis by the end of 2025," the statement said.

The acquisition is expected to close in the first half of 2025, subject to certain regulatory approvals and other customary closing conditions, according to the statement.

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RPT: PREVIEW - US Democratic Party Holds National Convention in Chicago Ahead of 2024 Election

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The US Democratic Party will hold its national convention on August 19-22 in Chicago to rally support behind their 2024 ticket of US Vice President Kamala Harris and Minnesota Governor Tim Walz.

Harris and Walz have already secured the party's nominations to run as president and vice president, respectively. During the convention, Democrats will celebrate achievements under the

Biden administration and chart a path for the future, according to the convention website.

The Democratic Party chose to hold their 2024 convention in Chicago because it is a Midwest union city and Democratic stronghold that represents the diversity of the party and was crucial to Biden's victory in 2020, the website said.

Harris and Walz are conducting a bus tour dubbed "Road to Chicago" in advance of the convention, during which they will travel from Pittsburgh to Chicago meeting with voters.

Walz is expected to speak on Wednesday and Harris is set to give her acceptance speech on Thursday.

US President Joe Biden is also scheduled to speak at the convention on Monday night.

Other prominent Democrats including former US Presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton are also expected to speak at the convention. Former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is also set to deliver remarks at the convention.

The Republican Party held their national convention last month in Milwaukee, where they nominated former US President Donald Trump and Sen. JD Vance as their 2024 ticket.

The Harris campaign said that they agreed to two presidential debates – one on September 10 and another sometime in October. The campaign also proposed just one vice presidential debate for October 1.

Voters from around the United States will cast their votes in the 2024 presidential election and other races on November 5.

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Walz is expected to speak on Wednesday and Harris is set to give her acceptance speech on Thursday.

US President Joe Biden is also scheduled to speak at the convention on Monday night.

Other prominent Democrats including former US Presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton are also expected to speak at the convention. Former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is also set to deliver remarks at the convention.

The Republican Party held their national convention last month in Milwaukee, where they

nominated former US President Donald Trump and Sen. JD Vance as their 2024 ticket.

The Harris campaign said that they agreed to two presidential debates – one on September 10 and another sometime in October. The campaign also proposed just one vice presidential debate for October 1.

Voters from around the United States will cast their votes in the 2024 presidential election and other races on November 5.

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UN Refers Questions About Potential Ukrainian Attack on Russian Nuclear Plants to IAEA

UNITED NATIONS, August 17 (Sputnik) - The UN Secretary-General's office declined to comment on reports that the Ukrainian military is preparing to attack the Kursk and Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plants, instead referring questions about the matter to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"Please contact the IAEA," deputy spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General Farhan Haq said in response to Sputnik's inquiry.

Earlier on Friday, a Russian security agency told Sputnik that the Ukrainian armed forces are planning to use warheads with radioactive substances to attack the Kursk and Zaporizhzhia plants.

The military-civil administration of the Kharkov region also said on Friday that Ukraine intends to accuse Russia of provocation using the strikes.

Additionally, the coordinator of the pro-Russian underground network in Nikolaev, Sergei Lebedev, told Sputnik that the plan is being overseen by Western intelligence services, mainly the United Kingdom's.

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US Air Force Awards Combined \$12.5Bln to Multiple Firms to Upgrade Bases - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force awarded a combined \$12.5 billion to multiple companies to upgrade the department's bases, the US Defense Department said in a press release.

Multiple firms "were awarded a \$12,500,000,000 ceiling, multiple awards, indefinite-delivery/indefinite-quantity contract for base infrastructure modernization," the release said on Friday.

These contracts will help modernize, operate, and maintain the network infrastructure on all Air Force bases, including Air National Guard and Reserve bases, the release added.

The release noted that work for these contracts is expected to be completed by August 15, 2034.

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FBI Raid of Journalist Simes' Home Demonstrates Renewed 'Witch Hunt' in US - Antonov

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - The raid on the home of prominent Russian-American journalist Dimitri Simes showcases the intensified witch-hunt unfolding in the United States, Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov said.

"The current attacks by the US authorities on the TV presenter of Channel One are one of many facts of the 'witch hunt' unfolding here with renewed vigor," Antonov said on Friday. "All this is happening against the backdrop of the presidential election campaign. There is a nationwide crackdown on those allegedly working for the Russian government in violation of foreign agent laws."

Earlier in the day, agents from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) confirmed to Sputnik that it had been conducting searches in Simes' house, in Rappahannock County, Virginia, adding that the raid was court-authorized.

Simes told Sputnik that he had not been to the US since 2022, and had not been notified ahead of time that FBI agents would be conducting a search of his property.

"We are certainly concerned about what is happening," Antonov said. "Washington is mired in 'double' standards in the field of democracy and freedom of speech. Hundreds of people are declared objectionable simply because they dare to contradict the administration's policies. They are prohibited from having their own point of view. Home break-ins, searches, seizure of documents - this is a small list of the actions of the US intelligence services."

Antonov went on to say that the crackdown on dissent has become the norm, while at the same time, US officials continue to lecture the world about democratic values and human rights.

Dimitri Simes Jr., son of Dimitri Simes, told Sputnik that he does not know the purpose of the FBI's investigation but suspected it could be an intimidation tactic.

According to Simes, there were "no available items or information of interest" in the family home.

The search in Simes' house may have been carried out under the influence of Ukrainian authorities or activists who persuaded the US to take such a step, he added.

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Biden Says Directed US Negotiating Team on Gaza Deal to Pave Way to Close Agreement

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said in a statement that he ordered his negotiating team participating in Gaza deal negotiations to put forward a proposal that offers the basis to facilitate a final agreement.

"Earlier today, I received an update from my negotiating team on the ground in Doha and directed them to put forward the comprehensive bridging proposal presented today, which offers the basis for coming to a final agreement on a ceasefire and hostage release deal," Biden said on Friday.

Biden added that the conclusion of the Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal is now in sight and underscored that no one in the region should take action to undermine this process.

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biden directed negotiators in Doha to put forward proposal offering basis for final agreement on ceasefire and hostage release deal- white house

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) –
MIDDLE EAST

* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Israel on Saturday to participate in diplomatic efforts to broker a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal between the Israeli government and the Palestinian movement Hamas, State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Friday.

* There was no reaction to initiatives by Hamas at the Gaza talks in Doha, Israel put forward additional conditions, Hamas spokesman in Lebanon Walid Kilani told Sputnik.

* US President Joe Biden said that a ceasefire deal between the Palestinian movement Hamas and the Israeli government is closer than ever.

* The United States, backed by Egypt and Qatar, presented Israel and Palestinian movement Hamas with a cease-fire proposal aimed at narrowing differences between the sides, according to a joint statement.

SITUATION IN KURSK REGION

* The Ukrainian armed forces have lost up to 220 soldiers and 19 armored vehicles, including four tanks, in the Kursk Region over the past day, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday.

* Small arms manufactured by the United States and Sweden were retrieved at the destruction site of a Ukrainian sabotage group near the village of Kremyanoe in the Kursk Region, a representative of the Russian security agency told Sputnik.

* The Russian Foreign Ministry said that it had summoned the Italian Ambassador in Moscow Cecilia Piccioni to express a protest in connection with the illegal entry of Rai journalists into the Kursk Region to cover Ukraine's attack.

* The planned attack by Ukraine on the Kursk and Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plants (NPPs) is supervised by Western intelligence services, mainly by the UK, the coordinator of the local pro-Russian underground network, Sergei Lebedev, told Sputnik.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Russian aviation has carried out strikes against Ukrainian military ammunition and fuel depots in the Sumy Region, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Friday that Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov is at one of the control points of the special military operation.

* Ukraine has lost up to 3,825 soldiers in the area of operations of Russia's Yug (South) group of forces in the past week, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Russian Mi-8 and Ka-29 helicopters destroyed five Ukrainian unmanned boats in the Black Sea en route to Crimea, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

CROCUS CITY HALL TERRORIST ATTACK INVESTIGATION

* The Basmanny Court of Moscow has extended the investigation period of the terrorist attack in Crocus City Hall until November 22, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Friday.

* The Basmanny Court of Moscow announced that the investigation has filed a new charge against the alleged perpetrators of the terrorist attack in Crocus City Hall of participating in a terrorist organization and undergoing training in order to carry out terrorist attacks, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

* The Basmanny Court of Moscow extended the arrest of the alleged perpetrators of the terrorist attack in Crocus City Hall until November 22, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the courtroom.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MOLDOVA

* Moldova's autonomous region of Gagauzia in case of attempts to unite Moldova with Romania, head of Gagauzia, Yevgenia Gutsul, told Sputnik.

* Russia is today's pillar of security for Moldova amid global and regional instability and Chisinau should re-establish relations with Moscow, opposition candidate for presidency Vasile Bolea said.

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Texas Continues to Install More Barriers on Border With Mexico to Deter Migrants -Governor

EL PASO, August 16 (Sputnik) - The state of Texas continues to install more border wall along its border with Mexico to deter illegal migration in the region, Texas Governor Greg Abbott said on Friday.

"More wall panels were recently installed on the Texas border wall in Zapata County," Abbott said in a statement via X. "Texas is the first and ONLY state in US history to build our own border wall."

Zapata County is near the Texas border town of Laredo in southern Texas.

Abbott signed a border security bill in December to bolster security along Texas' border with Mexico as a means to deter record levels of illegal migration that have overwhelmed the state over the last several years.

Since December, the state has been constructing a new border wall along its border with Mexico and has deployed additional law enforcement officers and state National Guard troops to help stop the influx of migrants arriving at the Texas-Mexico border.

As of early August, the state of Texas has built 37 miles of border wall along the Texas-Mexico border, according to the Texas Facilities Commission.

Abbott's actions have led to a drastic drop in illegal crossings. The states of California and Arizona are now the hotspots for illegal migration.

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Former US Secret Service Director Given Security Detail Due to Threats - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - Former US Secret Service Director Kimberly Cheatle has been given a security detail due to threats against her, CNN reported on Friday.

Cheatle has received threats online and confronted in person, the report said, citing a law enforcement source.

It is not common for either former or current Secret Service directors to receive a security detail, the report said.

Cheatle resigned as head of the Secret Service following the July 13 assassination attempt against former US President Donald Trump at a campaign rally in Pennsylvania.

Cheatle described the incident as the agency's most significant operational failure in decades.

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UPDATE - US Stocks Notch Best Week Since November as Wall Street Goes From Bust to Boom

(Updates with more details in paras 2, 11-13; modifies headline and lede)

NEW YORK, August 16 (Sputnik) - US stocks captured their biggest weekly gain since November as Wall Street resumed its rollercoaster ride for August, a month characterized by dizzying climbs - as well as heart-stopping plunges - in equity prices.

As the second full trading week of the month came to a close, the three key US stock indexes - the S&P 500, the Nasdaq Composite and the Dow Jones Industrial Average - rose between 3% and 5% each for the week.

The picture could not have been more different two weeks ago, when trading began for August. Then, the three indexes plummeted with other global stock indicators in an episode some have called Black Monday 2.0. The phrase serializes the original Black Monday of October 19, 1987, when a global crash in stocks presaged one of the darkest days of the modern investing era.

The early August selloff was triggered by a sharp hike in US unemployment, which hit two-and-a-half years, intensifying worries about a potential recession.

Since then, calm had set in on the prognosis for the US economy, with positive inflation, retail sales and consumer sentiment data heartening investors.

"Data released over the past week has struck the right balance, being not too-hot, nor too-cold," Mark Haefele, who heads UBS' investments on global wealth management, said in a note issued Friday. "This should help allay both concerns of a looming recession or that sticky inflation will hamper the Federal Reserve if swift rate cuts are needed to defend growth."

The Federal Reserve will decide if it should carry out the first US interest rate cut in four years when its policy-making committee meets on September 18. The central bank has raised rates 11 times instead over the past years, bringing the cost of borrowing to the highest in two

decades - in order to quell inflation running at 40-year highs after the COVID-19 outbreak.

Friday's session itself brought just nominal returns for the three US stock indexes, which gained about 0.3% on the average.

It was a different story though with the weekly changes. The S&P, which tracks the stocks of 500 high-performing US companies, finished up 4% for the week, its best since the week ended November 3, when it rose almost 6%.

The technology-heavy Nasdaq, which comprises pricey stocks such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix, and Google, climbed 5% on the week, gaining its most since the November 3 week when it jumped nearly 7%.

The Dow, the broadest indicator for US equity markets and one that often reflects value, ended the week up almost 3% - a close not seen since its 5% surge in the week to November 3.

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Trudeau Govt. Waging 'Undeclared War' Against Russia - Russian Embassy

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - The government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has reaffirmed that it is waging alongside the collective West an undeclared war against Russia by allowing Ukraine to use Canadian-supplied military equipment in Russia's Kursk region, the Russian Embassy in Ottawa told Sputnik on Friday.

On Thursday, Department of National Defense spokesperson Andree-Anne Poulin said that Canada places no geographic restrictions on the use of military equipment donated to Ukraine amid the latter's incursion in the Kursk region.

"We have never had any illusions about the West's so-called self-restraint. It is all lies and fakes. And Trudeau's cabinet has just reaffirmed that it is waging - alongside the rest of the collective West - an undeclared war against Russia," the embassy said.

Thugs, foreign mercenaries and all the Western-supplied weaponry and equipment will be destroyed, the embassy said. The Kiev regime is doomed to collapse, it continued.

Russian presidential aide Nikolai Patrushev said earlier that Ukraine's attack on the Kursk region was coordinated with the NATO member states and Western intelligence services.

On August 6, Ukrainian forces crossed the border into Russia and launched an offensive in the Kursk Region capturing several settlements.

Russian President Vladimir Putin accused Ukraine of carrying out another large-scale provocation, firing indiscriminately at civilian settlements and vowed it will receive a proper response.

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UPDATE - Oil Dragged Down By China, US Demand Worry And Gaza Peace Talks

(Modifies headline and lede; updates with settlement prices for crude, in paragraphs 9-10)

NEW YORK, August 15 (Sputnik) - Crude prices fell on the day and were mixed on the week —

reverting to the red pattern seen thus far in August — as worries mounted over demand in China, a surprise build in US stockpiles and a potential ceasefire to the Gaza war which had been a major support to this year's rally in oil.

In China, crude imports fell for a second straight month in July in the largest oil-importing nation, while a rash of economic readings turned mostly red, data showed. The world's number two economy remains a source of concern for energy traders as it struggles to return to pre-COVID growth, four years after the pandemic and well after the recovery of the United States and other major economies.

Oil imports aside, China's diesel demand fell by 11% year-on-year in June to 3.9 million barrels per day, the biggest percentage drop since July 2021, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) said.

Also, crude stockpiles unexpectedly rose last week in the United States by 1.357 million barrels, the EIA said. Prior to that, draws for six straight weeks emptied some 30 million barrels from US crude inventories as domestic refiners doubled down on the production of gasoline, diesel, and airplane fuel, among others, to meet projected summer demand for energy.

The crude supply-and-consumption trends in China and the United States have created the notion that "global demand growth [in oil] might not be as strong as some people had originally thought," said Phil Flynn, energy analyst at Chicago-based broker Price Futures Group.

Compounding the problem, "global oil markets are also getting sucked into the belief that somehow this time peace talks between Hamas and Israel may have a different outcome," Flynn said.

Negotiations for a Gaza cease-fire and hostage release deal, framed by the United States as a "final stage" bid to end the conflict, resumed among peacemakers and Israeli officials, without Hamas in attendance. The 10-month-long war has caused several disruptions to crude shipments from the Middle East. Peace in the region, while welcome, could significantly ease the geopolitical support for oil, traders say.

In Friday's New York trading, both West Texas Intermediate (WTI) and Brent crude remained below the key \$80 per barrel level critical to the confidence of oil bulls.

WTI, the benchmark for US crude, settled down \$1.51, or 1.9%, at \$76.65 per barrel. It hit a one-week low of \$75.54 earlier in the session. For the week, WTI was down 0.2%, after rallying 4.5% the prior week. Year-to-date, the US crude benchmark is up around 7%.

UK-origin Brent finished the New York session down \$1.36, or 1.7%, at \$79.68 per barrel, after an intraday low at \$78.64. For the week, Brent was flat after the prior week's rally of 3.7%. Year-to-date, the global crude benchmark is up 3%.

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US Approves Sale of AIM-9X Sidewinder Missiles to Canada in \$265Mln Deal - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) – The US State Department has approved a potential \$264.6 million sale of 168 AIM-9X Sidewinder Tactical Missiles and related program support to Canada, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Friday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to

the Government of Canada of AIM-9X Sidewinder Block II+ and Block II Tactical Missiles and related elements of logistics and program support for an estimated cost of \$264.6 million," DSCA said in a statement.

The sale will include 48 AIM-9X Sidewinder Block II+ Tactical Missiles, 120 AIM-9X Sidewinder Block II Tactical Missiles, as well as 96 training missiles and 24 Tactical Guidance Units.

The proposed sale will support US foreign policy and national security objectives by improving the security of a NATO ally that is a "force for ensuring political stability and economic progress and is a contributor to military, peacekeeping, and humanitarian operations around the world," the statement said.

The sale will not alter the basic military balance in the region or adversely impact US defense readiness, the statement added.

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Harris Outlines Plans To Tackle Food Prices, Housing Shortages, Provide Tax Relief

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - Vice President and Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris on Friday announced her commitment to banning food price gouging, addressing housing shortages and offering significant tax cuts.

"I will work to pass the first-ever federal ban on price gouging on food. My plan will include new penalties for opportunistic companies that exploit crises and break the rules, and we will support smaller food businesses that are trying to play by the rules and get ahead." Harris said during a rally.

Harris also said that if elected, her administration would address the housing shortage by constructing 3 million affordable homes and offering \$25,000 to assist first-time homebuyers with down payments.

"Finally, there's one more way. I will help families deal with rising costs, and that's by letting you keep more of your hard-earned money," Harris said.

Harris added that her plan would provide tax cuts to over 100 million Americans by restoring and expanding existing cuts, including \$6,000 in relief for families during a child's first year.

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US, Egypt, Qatar Aim to Close Gaza Deal Talks 'Once and for All' Next Week - Official

(Adds details in paras 3-9)

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - The parties involved in Gaza ceasefire negotiations hope they will be able to achieve a deal in Cairo next week that will conclude talks "once and for all," a senior US administration said on Friday.

"We will be reconvening in Cairo at this level before the end of next week with an aim to close out this process once and for all," the official said.

US President Joe Biden and his Egyptian and Qatari counterparts have reached a consensus that the Gaza ceasefire negotiations are now in the endgame, according to the US official.

The US official explained that a lot of progress was made at the resumption of Gaza ceasefire talks this week and the deal is now ready to come to a close.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will participate in meetings in Israel starting on Sunday and will be engaged in talks over the coming days with regional leaders who are contributing to the peace plan, the official said.

Working-level talks will take place in Doha and Cairo leading up to the second-round of high-level Gaza deal negotiations next week.

The lower-level meetings will work on sorting out remaining issues pertaining to the exchange of hostages, such as the sequence by which hostages would be released, the official noted, adding that this is an extremely complicated process.

There are also significant humanitarian provisions in the proposed deal related to the flow of humanitarian aid, the clearing of rubble, rehabilitation of medical services, electricity, among other needs, the official said.

The proposed deal also includes a provision that prohibits displaced Palestinians in southern Gaza to have any weapons if they return to their homes in northern Gaza.

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US Stocks Eye Best Week Since November as Wall Street Goes From Bust to Boom

NEW YORK, August 16 (Sputnik) - US stocks were on track Friday to their biggest weekly gain since November as Wall Street resumed its rollercoaster ride for August, a month characterized by dizzying climbs as well as heart-stopping plunges in equity prices.

As the second full trading week of the month headed to its close, the three key US stock indexes - the S&P 500, the Nasdaq Composite and the Dow Jones Industrial Average - were poised for weekly gains of between three and five percent each.

The picture could not have been more different two weeks ago, as trading began for August.

Then, the three indexes plummeted with other global stock indicators in an episode some have called Black Monday 2.0. The phrase serializes the original Black Monday of October 19, 1987, where a global crash in stocks presaged one of the darkest days of the modern investing era.

The early August selloff was triggered by a sharp hike in US unemployment, which hit two-and-a-half years, intensifying worries about a potential recession.

Since then, calm had set in on the prognosis for the US economy, with positive inflation, retail sales and consumer sentiment data heartening investors.

"Data released over the past week has struck the right balance, being not too-hot, nor too-cold," Mark Haefele, who heads UBS' investment on global wealth management, said in a note issued on Friday. "This should help allay both concerns of a looming recession or that sticky inflation will hamper the Federal Reserve if swift rate cuts are needed to defend growth."

The Federal Reserve will decide whether to carry out the first US interest rate cut in four years on September 18. The US central bank has raised rates 11 times instead over the past years,

bringing the cost of borrowing to the highest in two decades to quell inflation running at 40-year highs after the COVID-19 outbreak.

Friday's session itself brought just nominal returns for the three US stock indexes, which gained about 0.3% on the average. It was a different story though with the weekly changes.

The S&P, which tracks the stocks of 500 high-performing US companies, was up about 4% for the week, its best since the week to November 3, when it rose almost 6%.

The technology-heavy Nasdaq, which comprises pricey stocks such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix, and Google, climbed 5.5% on the week, gaining its most since the November 3 week when it jumped nearly 7%.

The Dow Jones, the broadest indicator for US equity markets and one that often reflects value, was headed for a finish up of 3% - an unparalleled increase since its 5% close higher during the week of November 3.

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Senior US Official Says Iran's Goal is to See Gaza Deal Reached, Deescalation in Mideast

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - A senior US official told reporters on Friday that Iran's goal is to see a Gaza ceasefire deal reached in the coming days and a deescalation of tensions in the region.

"Iran claims to those that they are speaking with, including many of my colleagues here from Qatar who are in touch with senior Iranian officials over the last few days as we were here, that they want to see a ceasefire in Gaza, that that is their goal," the US official said. "They want to see a de-escalation of tensions."

The official said now is the opportunity for Iran to contribute to the conclusion of a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal over the coming week.

However, the United States has contingency plans prepared for any scenario in the Middle East, including one to deter a potential retaliatory strike by Iran against Israel, the official said.

This week, US officials warned that there was a possibility Iran could carry out a retaliatory attack against Israel this week.

Tensions between Iran and Israel escalated after Israel assassinated Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, where he arrived to attend Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian's inauguration. The Iranian authorities have vowed to retaliate.

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Blinken Will Be Involved in Gaza Ceasefire Talks in Coming Days - Official

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will be involved in the Gaza ceasefire negotiations throughout the week during his trip to the Middle East in the coming days, a senior US official said on Friday.

"Secretary Blinken will be traveling to the region... starting with meetings in Israel, and we will

be engaged with this throughout the week," the official said.

Earlier, the US State Department announced Blinken will travel to Israel on Saturday.

A lot of progress was made when Gaza ceasefire negotiations resumed this week and the deal is now ready to close if talks continue to go well in the coming days, the US official said.

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US Has Contingency Plans Prepared to Deter Potential Iran Threat in Region - Official

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - The United States has contingency plans prepared for any scenario in the Middle East, including to deter a potential retaliatory strike by Iran against Israel, a senior US administration official said on Friday.

"We have deployed military resources to the region that are needed for every possible contingency," the official said.

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US, Egypt, Qatar Aim to Close Gaza Deal Talks 'Once and for All' Next Week - Official

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - The parties involved in Gaza ceasefire negotiations hope they will be able to achieve a deal in Cairo next week that will conclude talks "once and for all," a senior US administration official said on Friday.

"We will be reconvening in Cairo at this level before the end of next week with an aim to close out this process once and for all," the official said.

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Biden, Qatar and Egypt Leaders Agree Gaza Ceasefire Talks Now in 'Endgame' - Official

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and his Egyptian and Qatari counterparts have reached a consensus that the Gaza ceasefire negotiations are now in the endgame, a senior US official said on Friday.

"There was a consensus between all three leaders that this process, which obviously is ongoing for months, is now in the endgame," the official said.

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us prepared for all possible contingencies amid threat of iran retaliation against Israel - Senior administration official

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Us, Egypt, Qatar aim to close gaza ceasefire deal 'once and for all' during talks in cairo next week - senior Official

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Kart LLC. Additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Speaks With Qatar, Egypt Leaders on Progress Made in Gaza Negotiations - White House

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has spoken with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Sisi to discuss progress in the talks on reaching a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal, the White House said on Friday.

"President Biden spoke with Amir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani of Qatar and separately spoke with President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi of Egypt to review the significant progress made in Doha over two days of talks on a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal," the White House said in a statement.

Earlier on Friday, Biden said that a ceasefire deal between the Palestinian movement Hamas and the Israeli government is closer than ever.

Representatives of the United States, Qatar, Egypt and Israel arrived in Doha on Thursday to participate in talks to reach an agreement on a ceasefire and release of hostages deal in Gaza.

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UN Polio Campaign Can Begin as Soon as Late August, September - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, August 16 (Sputnik) - The World Health Organization confirmed that the UN polio campaign can begin late as soon as in August or September, the UN Spokesman Farhan Haq said on Friday.

"The World Health Organization said earlier today that they believe that they can try to have a campaign going that will be in two phases, starting possibly as soon as late August or alternately in September," Haq told journalists at a UN briefing.

The UN is ready to kickstart its campaign against polio, however, it is calling for peace in order to avoid any impediments.

Earlier today, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that hundreds of thousands of children in Gaza are at risk of polio disease.

In late July, the Gaza Health Ministry declared the enclave a polio epidemic area, citing the months-long fighting as the main reason for the spread of the disease.

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Blinken to Visit Israel on Saturday to Help Finalize Gaza Ceasefire Deal - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Israel on Saturday to participate in diplomatic efforts to broker a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal between the Israeli government and the Palestinian movement Hamas, State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel to Israel on August 17 to continue intensive diplomatic efforts to conclude the agreement for a ceasefire and release of hostages and detainees through the bridging proposal presented today by the United States, with support from Egypt and Qatar," Patel said in a press release.

Blinken will underscore the critical need for all parties in the region to avoid escalation or any other actions that could undermine the ability to finalize an agreement, Patel added.

US media reported earlier that Blinken will meet with Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday.

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UN Spokesperson Says 'Good to Get Closer to Peace' in Gaza But Not Enough

UNITED NATIONS, August 16 (Sputnik) - Getting closer to reaching a ceasefire deal in Gaza between the Israeli government and the Palestinian movement Hamas is a positive development but it is not enough, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Friday.

"It is always good to get closer to peace. But ultimately, being close is not enough," Haq said during a press briefing.

The spokesperson also said that the United Nations has been encouraging the "ultimate peace scenario" regarding Gaza.

Earlier on Thursday, US President Joe Biden said that a ceasefire deal between the Palestinian movement Hamas and Israeli government is closer than ever.

On Thursday, representatives of the United States, Qatar, Egypt and Israel arrived in Doha to participate in talks to reach an agreement on a ceasefire and the release of hostages in Gaza.

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State Dept. on Reports of Blinken Trip to Mideast Says No Travel to Announce at Moment

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - A US State Department spokesperson in a statement to Sputnik on Friday declined to confirm reports claiming that Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to the Middle East this weekend.

"No travel to announce at the moment," the spokesperson said.

Earlier, Axios reported, citing sources, that Blinken will arrive in Israel on Sunday and meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday.

Blinken is also reportedly set to make stops in Egypt and Qatar as the three governments work towards finalizing a Gaza ceasefire and hostage deal between Israel and Hamas.

US media reported earlier this week that Blinken called off a trip to the Middle East on Tuesday due to heightened security concerns in the region amid Iran's imminent threat to carry out a retaliatory strike against Israel.

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Biden on Potentially Reaching Gaza Ceasefire Deal: 'We Are Closer Than We Have Ever Been'

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday that a ceasefire deal between the Palestinian movement Hamas and Israeli government is closer than ever.

"We're closer than we've ever been," Biden said in response to a reporter's question about the progress in the ongoing ceasefire negotiations.

On Thursday, representatives of the United States, Qatar, Egypt and Israel arrived in Doha to participate in talks to reach an agreement on a ceasefire and release of hostages in Gaza.

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Woman Arrested For Defrauding Elvis' Estate, 47 Years After 'Rock 'n Roll King's Death

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - A Missouri woman was arrested for attempting to defraud Presley's family out of millions by stealing their ownership stake in the Memphis home of the singing legend, the US Justice Department said on Friday.

"A Missouri woman was arrested this morning on federal charges in connection with an alleged scheme to defraud Elvis Presley's family of millions of dollars and steal the family's ownership interest in Graceland, the former home of Elvis Presley, located in Memphis, Tennessee," the statement said.

The accused, Lisa Jeanine Findley, 53 will appear in a Missouri court to formally face charges, it added.

"As a Memphian, I know that Graceland is a national treasure," Kevin G. Ritz, a member of the team prosecuting Findley, said in a statement. "This defendant allegedly used a brazen scheme to try to defraud the Presley family of their interest in this singularly important landmark."

Presley died on August 16, 1977, from heart failure believed to have been triggered by an overdose of prescription drugs.

Lisa Marie succumbed on January 12, 2023, to long-running complications caused by weight-loss surgery. She was the only child of the singer and his actress wife Priscilla Presley, and sole heir to Graceland and her father's estate after the death of her grandfather and her

great-grandmother.

Findley is charged with aggravated identity theft and mail fraud. If convicted, she faces a mandatory minimum of two years in prison for aggravated identity theft and a maximum of 20 years imprisonment for mail fraud.

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US Discusses Cyber Assistance, Longer-Term Resilience Needs With Ukraine - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) – The United States and Ukraine discussed additional avenues for cyber assistance to Kiev and its longer-term cyber resilience needs as they met for the sixth annual round of the US-Ukraine Cyber Dialogue, according to a joint statement released on Friday.

"During the dialogue, the US delegation reaffirmed its unwavering commitment to supporting Ukraine's cyber defense in the face of the Kremlin's unprovoked invasion," the release stated.

Senior US and Ukrainian officials met on Wednesday in Kiev for the dialogue, during which they discussed the current cyber threat landscape, protection of sensitive data and critical infrastructure, and cyber governance, and how the two countries could further cooperate.

They also discussed other avenues of cyber assistance to Ukraine, including through the Tallinn Mechanism, to "help Ukraine uphold its right to self-defense in cyberspace and address longer-term cyber resilience needs."

The US has contributed over \$120 million since 2016 to Ukraine in cyber and digital assistance, with a total of \$82 million since February 2022, calling the aid a "direct response to evolving Russian threat activity."

NATO countries are spreading a myth about Russia's cyber "aggression" while helping Ukrainian hackers in their attacks on Moscow, Artur Lyukmanov, the director of the international information security department at the Russian Foreign Ministry, told Sputnik in April.

Russia has seen a rise in DDoS, fishing and malware attacks on its critical computer networks since the start of the military operation in Ukraine in 2022, Lyukmanov said.

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UN Chief Says War Makes Polio Vaccination Impossible, Calls for Humanitarian Pauses in Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, August 16 (Sputnik) - All parties in the Gaza conflict must ensure humanitarian pauses to allow for a polio vaccination campaign, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday.

"I am appealing to all parties to provide concrete assurances right away guaranteeing humanitarian pauses for the campaign," Guterres told UN reporters during his media stakeout.

"In recent weeks, the poliovirus has been detected in wastewater samples in Khan Younis and Deir al-Balah. That means the virus is now circulating, with hundreds of thousands of children in Gaza at risk."

He added that the United Nations aims to launch a campaign in Gaza to vaccinate over 640,000 children under the age of 10, however, there are many obstacles blocking its progress, including non-functional hospitals, devastated sanitation systems, and the lack of safety for medical professionals.

On Friday, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) called on all sides of the conflict in the Gaza Strip to observe a humanitarian pause in the enclave in late August and early September to allow for polio vaccination of Palestinian children.

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UPDATE - White House Counsel Spokesperson Ian Sams to Join VP Harris's Campaign as Top Aide-Reports

(Updates with more information in para 3)

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - Spokesperson for the White House Counsel's Office, Ian Sams, is set to leave his current role at the White House to join Vice President Kamala Harris's campaign, the Washington Post reported on Thursday.

The report added that Sams was a prominent advocate for Harris during her 2020 presidential campaign will assume in the current campaign the position of top spokesperson.

According to a different report posted earlier on Thursday, White House principal deputy communications director Kristen Orthman is expected to leave her position to take on a planning role within the Harris campaign.

In July, President Joe Biden announced his withdrawal from the 2024 presidential race and endorsed Harris as the Democratic Party's nominee for US president.

At the same time, former President Donald Trump secured the Republican Party's nomination and picked US Senator JD Vance as his running mate.

The US presidential election is scheduled to be held on November 5.

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ANALYSIS - Biden's Plan For New US Nuclear Build-Up Makes No Sense Given More Urgent Crises

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's reported plan to start a massive new nuclear weapons expansion and revive the global nuclear arms race makes no sense when there are so many other issues that should have resource priority and is good news only for the giant American defense contractors, US and European experts told Sputnik.

On July 30, Under Secretary for Nuclear Security and National Nuclear Security Administration's (NNSA) administrator Jill Hruby, announced an enormous US nuclear weapon modernization program at the National Institute for Deterrence Studies Peace Through Strength Breakfast in Washington, DC.

Hruby said the NNSA has requested a 2025 budget of \$25 billion, including \$21 billion to design and build a new nuclear weapons arsenal and \$2 billion to develop new nuclear propulsion systems for the US Navy.

Also, The Economist reported on Monday that the Biden administration is drawing up plans for a massive expansion of the strategic weapons base and complex to begin as soon as the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction) Treaty expires in February 2026.

PROBLEMS IGNORED

However, Professor Jean Bricmont, Belgian theoretical physicist and philosopher of science at the Catholic University of Louvain, said that these ambitious plans make no sense for the United States.

Biden had decided that his overriding national priority was to launch a new program of nuclear arms that could not be used against nuclear-armed opponents such as Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea unless he wanted to commit national suicide, Bricmont pointed out.

In doing so, the 81-year-old US president had ignored the domestic crises of "a debt-ridden and ideologically divided country on the verge of civil disorders," he said.

Biden's decision was good news only for the gigantic US armaments manufacturers such as Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Dynamics, Raytheon/RTX, and Northrop Grumman, Bricmont explained.

Biden's decision was possible only because all free criticism and debate had been suppressed across the United States and the American people had no say whatsoever in their own destiny, Bricmont explained.

"Democracy in America is stone dead: that is, the general population has no influence. The electoral system is tied up in the money-owned two-party system and the minds of the general public are in the hands of the entertainment industry," he said.

INSANE DECISION

Biden's decision was insane, veteran independent journalist Dave Lindorff, a specialist in the history of the US nuclear program and national security issues, said.

"What the United States is doing (and it was started by Nobel Laureate Barack Obama in his second term when he approved a ten-year \$1.5 trillion 'upgrade' of the US nuclear arsenal) is madness, it's Cold War 2.0," he said.

Veteran Pentagon analyst Chuck Spinney pointed out that the new huge US nuclear build-up had already started.

"The B-21 [strategic bomber] and the new ICBM Sentinel Intercontinental Ballistic Missile} have already passed Milestone B," he said.

Consequently, a huge bow wave of modernization programs was already locked into the out years of the Pentagon's five-year budget plan, Spinney explained.

"As I speak, subcontracts and political patronage are now flooding into congressional districts. This is no accident, and it was easily foreseen. ...What is going on in nuclear modernization is really bad juju," he said.

Predictions of cost growth and political engineering associated with the distribution of the enormous new weapons contracts would lock in commitments to sustain the nuclear buildup far into the future, Spinney declared.

The B61-12, which began in 2010, was put into concurrent Engineering and Manufacturing Development in the 1st quarter of 2018, equivalent to Milestone B approval, Spinney continued.

Milestone B opened the door to political engineering of the social safety net through the spreading of subcontracts quickly to as many congressional districts as possible, he observed.

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Oil Back to Weekly Loss Vexed By China, US Demand and Gaza Ceasefire Negotiations Outcome

NEW YORK, August 15 (Sputnik) - Crude prices are staring at weekly losses on worries about demand in China, a surprise build in US stockpiles and easing tensions in the Middle East, where the war on Gaza had been a major support to this year's oil rally.

Negotiations over a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal, framed by the United States as a "final stage" bid to end the conflict, resumed on Thursday among peacemakers and Israeli officials, without Hamas in attendance. The ten-month long war has caused several disruptions to crude shipments from the Middle East. Traders say peace in the region, while welcome, could significantly ease the geopolitical support for oil.

In China, crude imports fell for a second straight month in July in the largest oil importing nation, while a rash of economic readings turned mostly red. China remains a source of concern for energy traders as it struggles to return to pre-COVID-19 growth, four years after the pandemic and well after the recovery of the United States and other major economies.

Oil imports aside, China's diesel demand fell by 11% year-on-year in June to 3.9 million barrels per day, the biggest percentage drop since July 2021, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) said on Thursday.

Also, crude stockpiles in the United States unexpectedly increased last week by 1.357 million barrels. Prior to that, draws for six straight weeks emptied some 30 million barrels from US crude inventories as domestic refiners doubled down on production of gasoline, diesel and airplane fuel, among others, to meet projected summer demand for energy.

The China and US situations, combined, have created the notion that "global demand growth [in oil] might not be as strong as some people had originally thought," Phil Flynn, energy analyst at Chicago-based broker Price Futures Group, said.

Compounding the problem, "global oil markets are also getting sucked into the belief that somehow this time peace talks between Hamas and Israel may have a different outcome," Flynn said.

In Friday's trading, both West Texas Intermediate (WTI) and Brent crude remained below the key \$80 per barrel level critical to the confidence of oil bulls.

WTI was down \$1.60, or 2.1%, to \$76.57 per barrel by 11:00 a.m. ET. It hit a one-week low of \$75.54 earlier in the session. For the week, WTI was down 0.4%, after rallying 4.5% the prior week. Year-to-date, the US crude benchmark is up around 7%.

UK-origin Brent was down \$1.42, or 1.8%, to \$79.62 per barrel, after an intraday low of \$78.64. For the week, Brent was almost flat after the prior week's rally of 3.7%. Year-to-date, the global crude benchmark is up 3%.

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US House Panel Launches Investigation Into Tim Walz's Ties to Chinese Entities - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - The US House Oversight Committee announced in a statement on Friday that it has launched an investigation into Minnesota Governor and Democratic vice presidential candidate Tim Walz over his alleged connections to Chinese entities.

"Today, House Committee on Oversight and Accountability Chairman James Comer (R-Ky.) is launching an investigation into Minnesota Governor Timothy Walz, Kamala Harris's recently announced vice-presidential running mate, following reports detailing the Governor's longstanding connections to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) entities and officials," the statement said.

Walz has had significant interactions with China, beginning in 1993 when he organized a school trip to the country, with expenses covered by the Chinese government, the statement said.

Later, Walz founded a company to facilitate similar trips until 2003 and continued to visit China frequently while also holding a fellowship at a Chinese university, the statement said.

"In a letter to Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Christopher Wray, Chairman Comer is requesting information, documents, and communications related to the CCP-connected entities and officials Governor Walz has engaged and partnered with, as well as any warnings or advice the FBI may have given to Governor Walz about US political figures being targeted by or recruited for CCP influence operations," the statement added.

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White House Counsel Spokesperson Ian Sams to Join VP Harris's Campaign as Top Aide-Reports

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - Spokesperson for the White House Counsel's Office Ian Sams is set to leave his current role at the White House to join Vice President Kamala Harris's campaign as a top spokesperson, the Washington Post reported on Friday.

According to the report, Sams was a prominent advocate for Harris during her 2020 presidential campaign.

In July, Biden announced his withdrawal from the presidential race and endorsed Harris as the Democratic Party's nominee for US president. At the same time, Trump secured the Republican Party's nomination and picked Ohio Sen. JD Vance as his running mate.

The US presidential election is scheduled to be held on November 5.

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Austin Discusses Potential Iran Attack, Gaza Ceasefire With Israel's Gallant - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin spoke with Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant on Friday to discuss a potential Iranian attack on Israel and a tentative ceasefire deal for the Gaza Strip, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said in a statement.

"Secretary Austin and Minister Gallant discussed regional instability and the growing risk of escalation from Iran, Lebanese Hizballah, and Iran-backed terrorist groups across the Middle East," the statement said.

Austin informed Gallant that the United States continues to monitor attack planning from Iran and its proxies and is well-postured across the region to defend Israel and protect US personnel and facilities, the statement said.

Austin and Gallant also discussed progress toward securing a ceasefire and hostage-release deal between Israel and Hamas, the statement said.

The risk of escalation in the Middle East increased after the assassinations of Hezbollah and Hamas top officials in Beirut and Tehran, respectively, at the end of July. Both Iran and Hezbollah have said that they will retaliate against Israel.

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US Intends to Provide \$100Mln In Military Aid to Nepal Air Capabilities - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - The United States intends to provide Nepal with \$100 million in military assistance in order to increase its rotary wing capabilities, US State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Richard Verma met with senior Nepali officials in Katmandu to discuss shared economic and energetic priorities, among others.

"Deputy Secretary [Richard] Verma shared the United States' intention to provide \$100 million in Foreign Military Finance to support Nepal's rotary wing capabilities, pending Congressional review and availability of funds," Patel said in a statement.

Verma emphasized that the US is committed to enhance Nepal's disaster response as well as air capabilities, the statement said.

Officials further discussed continued cooperation in support of Nepal's sustainable economic development, including through the Millenium Challenge Compact to increase access to clean energy in the country, and a USAID-funded Nepal Tea Collective trade promotion initiative, the statement added.

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US Lawmaker Accuses FBI of Scorched Earth Approach in Trump Attempted Assassination Probe

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - US Republican congressman from Louisiana Clay Higgins on Thursday accused the FBI of having a "scorched earth" approach to evidence in the investigation of former President Donald Trump's attempted assassination in July.

Thomas Crooks tried to assassinate Trump at a campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, on July 13, but the bullet grazed Trump's right ear. US Secret Service agents killed the gunman moments after he was able to fire several rounds toward the stage, killing one spectator and critically injuring two others. The US House of Representatives established a task force following the assassination attempt.

Higgins, in a preliminary investigative report, emphasized that the FBI released Crooks' body for cremation despite the ongoing investigation by the House of Representatives.

"This pattern of investigative scorched earth by the FBI is quite troubling," Higgins said.

The congressman pointed out that he visited Butler County in early August and spent 20 hours investigating the incident.

"Many questions and considerations remain, and our full investigation will require months of endeavor. However, after 20 hours on the ground in Butler, I have indeed listened carefully to the crime scene, and it has whispered to me many answers that America must know," he said.

Higgins said it was surprising that the FBI released the crime scene only three days after the events and emphasized that the first responders were astonished and dismayed regarding the agency's decision.

"The FBI was fully aware of the fact that Congress would be investigating J[uly] 13. The FBI does not exist in a vacuum. They had to know that releasing the J[uly] 13 crime scene would injure the immediate observations of any following investigation," Higgins said.

The congressmen also expressed bewilderment about several other FBI decisions, including cleaning up biological evidence from the crime scene.

"My effort to examine Crooks' body on Monday, August 5, caused quite a stir and revealed a disturbing fact... the FBI released the body for cremation 10 days after J[uly] 13. On J[uly] 23, Crooks was gone. Nobody knew this until Monday, August 5, including the County Coroner, law enforcement, Sheriff, etc," Higgins said.

US House task force Chairman Mike Kelly said on Monday that the panel is requesting information related to the crime from the heads of the departments of Justice and Homeland Security.

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Trump Announces 2025 Transition Team Ahead of Potential Return to White House - Campaign

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump announced the formation of an organization, Trump Vance 2025 Transition, that will be engaged in preparations for his potential next administration, the presidential candidate's campaign said on Friday.

"Donald J. Trump, the 45th President of the United States, today announced the formation of Trump Vance 2025 Transition, Inc., a 501(c)(4) organization that will ready his second administration," the campaign said in a press release.

The transition team will be led by two top donors to the Trump campaign — former Administrator of the Small Business Administration Linda McMahon and billionaire businessman Howard Lutnick. Sen. JD Vance, Donald Trump Jr., and Eric Trump were appointed honorary chairs.

"We will restore strength, competence, and common sense to the Oval Office. I have absolute confidence the Trump-Vance Administration will be ready to govern effectively on Day One," the release quoted former President Trump as saying.

In July, Biden announced his withdrawal from the presidential race and endorsed Harris as the Democratic Party's nominee for US president. At the same time, Trump secured the Republican Party's nomination and picked Ohio Sen. JD Vance as his running mate.

The US presidential election is scheduled to be held on November 5.

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US House Committee Calls for National Security Investigation into China's TP-Link - Letter

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) – The US House committee on the Chinese Communist Party has called for the Commerce Department to launch an investigation into Chinese company TP-Link Technologies Co., Ltd. for possibly posing a threat to national security, according to a letter.

"TP-Link's products account for a substantial part of the US market for Wi-Fi routers and related devices. Open-source information indicates that the company may represent a serious threat to US information and communication technology services (ICTS) security. We therefore request that Commerce investigate TP-Link under its ICTS authorities to determine whether the company poses a national security risk," Committee Chair John Moolenaar and Ranking Member Raja Krishnamoorthi said in the letter released on Thursday.

China-based TP-Link primarily manufactures Wi-Fi routers, Wi-Fi devices, and mesh Wi-Fi network devices, in addition to hardware and software components. It is the world's largest provider of Wi-Fi products, selling more than 160 million products annually in more than 170 countries.

The committee cited that 95% of US adults used the internet last year, with small office or home office routers serving as the key means for them to access the internet. It also noted that TP-Link products were used on US military bases, where they were supplied to army, air force, and navy military personnel and their families.

Beijing has on multiple occasions accused the United States of seeking to suppress the development of Chinese tech companies and abusing export controls.