

8/21/24 Wednesday

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Protesters Must Confront the Empire - Including in Ukraine & China - to Free Palestine

If the anti-genocide protesters across the United States want a truly free Palestine, they need to expand their horizons to confront the American Empire as a whole, particularly in its actions against Russia in Ukraine and China in Taiwan.

The anti-genocide protests that are disrupting the Democratic Convention in Chicago, have occupied college campuses, and continue to attract large crowds in the United States' biggest cities have been, understandably, focused on the ongoing genocide and not on the other wars and provocations that the United States is involved in.

That seemingly makes tactical sense from the protester's perspective. The genocide in Gaza is significantly less popular than the NATO proxy war in Ukraine. And Taiwan, despite the ever-increasing tensions in the area, is not a significant concern for most people at all, because there isn't any active fighting going on. So it would make sense to focus on the conflict that is the most unifying and has the most attention.

But this is a mistake. Morally, the proxy war in Ukraine should horrify any anti-war activist. Men young and old are being forcibly grabbed off the street to die in a conflict that the United States knows is already lost.

The dead don't include nearly as many women and children, but these are human lives being snuffed out and in numbers even higher than in Gaza.

The war is continuing only to prevent Washington from admitting defeat before they're ready and to kill as many Russians as possible. If Gaza is the most immoral action the American Empire is engaged in, then Ukraine is undoubtedly the second.

"These protests outside the DNC should [also] be protesting the insanity of [a] potential World War III and this hawkish, irrational, anti-Russia fervor that gripped the Democratic Party in the last decade," Jeremy Kuzmarov, the managing editor of Covert Action Magazine argued on Sputnik's [The Final Countdown](#).

Like Gaza, Ukraine also has the possibility of escalating into World War III, but the NATO proxy war is a direct confrontation with the world's largest nuclear power. Gaza is among the most dangerous things the empire is doing, but Ukraine is undoubtedly the first. Taiwan, likewise, has the potential to end civilization as we know it, all for an island less than a hundred miles off the coast of mainland China.

"And, what in return are American taxpayers getting? They're just getting [the] deaths of the eastern Ukrainian people and potential World War III with these dangerous provocations into Russia. So there should be great outrage about that alongside the weapons to Israel, alongside the situation with Taiwan," Kuzmarov said.

"The US has been arming Taiwan to the teeth and building up [its] military base network, including in the Pacific Islands, for a potential war with China, and that would be a devastating war," Kuzmarov continued. "They're threatening three major [wars] at a time when there's huge

problems domestically, where there's armies of homeless in American cities, where the education system is in crisis."

In March, US President Joe Biden approved a new strategic plan that includes preparations for a simultaneous nuclear war with Russia, China and North Korea. This is where the war in Ukraine and the United States' provocations of China has led us.

"I think it's a recognition of how much the aggressive US policy of primacy and hegemony and poking all of these countries in their own backyards has led to them acting enough together in strategic military partnerships that the US feels it would be necessary, if a nuclear war breaks out, to engage with all three of them," international relations and security analyst [Mark Sleboda told the Sputnik's The Critical Hour](#). "That is something I believe that the US has very much provoked."

"The US views [this] as an inevitable Thucydides trap war with China in the short term, something in roughly around the next five or so years," Sleboda warned.

Even if the protests are successful in obtaining a ceasefire or even an arms embargo on Israel, without confronting the empire, those victories will be temporary –even if we ignore that a nuclear war will make everything else a moot point. If the goal is to end US support of Israel indefinitely, establish a Palestinian state and prevent the US from funding genocide again, then confronting the empire –the entirety of the empire– is critical.

This is the same military apparatus that gave Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden and Ngô Đình Diệm weapons and later killed them. It is the same military apparatus that funded a 34-year genocide in Guatemala and supported apartheid in South Africa until the very end. If a ceasefire is achieved, who doubts that the United States government will continue to support Israel for as long as it exists? Who doubts that the United States will be first in line to assist the Israelis in their "relocation" efforts of the Palestinian people?

"At the end of the day, if they're getting the arms from the United States, that's all they need. And the United States is not going to really threaten sanctions or something that would really make life difficult for the Israelis and hinder the operations," Kuzmarov explained.

There are a lot of young people on the streets in support of Gaza. More than that, there are a lot of people who are realizing for the first time what their government is truly capable of. Many seem to still be operating under the belief that Gaza is a black mark on American history and not what it is: a continuation of what the empire has always done. There are also a lot of old heads out there. Those who became aware of what America really is when they saw Vietnam, South Africa, Grenada, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, or a litany of other countries. They should know better and should start talking about it before this protest movement dissipates like the Vietnam protests did: before getting any real reforms other than an end to one particular conflict among many.

"The protesters have to put all this together. And we need a vast social movement for a change in the US government away from warfare and toward a government that works for its people," Kuzmarov concluded.

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US Arrests New York Resident for Operating as Unregistered Agent of China - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - The United States has arrested a New York resident for operating as an unregistered agent of the Chinese government, the US Justice Department said.

"Yuanjun Tang, 67, a naturalized citizen of the United States and resident of Queens, New York, was charged by criminal complaint with acting and conspiring to act in the United States as an unregistered agent of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and making materially false statements to the FBI," the Justice Said in a statement.

Court documents revealed that Tang was imprisoned in China for his activities as a dissident but defected to Taiwan in 2022 and was subsequently granted political asylum in the United States, the statement said.

"Between at least in or about 2018 and in or about June 2023, Tang acted in the United States as an agent of the PRC by completing tasks at the direction of the PRC's Ministry of State Security (MSS), which is the PRC's principal civilian intelligence agency. The MSS is responsible for, among other things, the PRC's foreign intelligence, counterintelligence, espionage and political security functions," the statement said.

Tang of contacted an MSS intelligence officer through emails, encrypted chats and other ways to report US-based Chinese democracy activists and dissidents, the statement said.

Tang is charged with one count of conspiring to act as an agent of a foreign government without notifying the Attorney General, which carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison; one count of acting as an agent of a foreign government without notifying the Attorney General, which carries a maximum penalty of ten years in prison; and one count of making false statements, which carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison, the statement added.

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Biden's New Nuclear Strategy Not Response to Any Single Country, Threat - White House

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - A White House National Security Council spokesperson confirmed to Sputnik that President Joe Biden approved a new nuclear strategy earlier this year and said it is not directed at any single country or threat.

On Tuesday, The New York Times reported that Biden approved the new nuclear strategy in March, which refocuses on China's growing nuclear arsenal but also addresses concerns of potential coordinated nuclear challenges by China, Russia, and North Korea against the United States. An unclassified report is expected to be given to Congress before Biden leaves office. The revised nuclear strategic plan is called Nuclear Weapons Employment Planning Guidance.

"While the specific text of the Guidance is classified, its existence is in no way secret," the spokesperson said on Thursday. "The Guidance issued earlier this year is not a response to any single entity, country, nor threat."

The official added that the United States will continue to focus its efforts on reducing nuclear risk by enhancing deterrence and aim to resolve differences through arms control diplomacy.

In June, White House National Security Council Senior Director for Arms Control and

Nonproliferation Pranay Vaddi said during a panel discussion that the United States is now taking a more competitive approach to nuclear arms control and non-proliferation in the face of the developing arsenals by Russia, China and North Korea.

Vaddi later told Sputnik on the sidelines of the event that the United States takes seriously Russian President Vladimir Putin's remarks on how nuclear weapons should never be used and hopes he is true to his word. He added that Russia is welcome to make any proposals on possible leader-to-leader discussions with the United States on arms control issues.

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white house national security council tells sputnik new us nuclear strategy not a response to any single entity, country or threat

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white house national security council confirms to sputnik that us updated nuclear strategy, says new text classified though its existence not secret

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Canada Begins Public Consultations on CUSMA Ahead of 2026 First Joint Review - Ministry

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has begun a public consultation to obtain feedback on the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) and inform of Ottawa's priorities ahead of the 2026 first joint review, Global Affairs Canada said on Thursday.

"This week the government of Canada launched public consultations to gather Canadians' views on CUSMA. The consultations will provide Canadians with an opportunity to share their views on and experiences with key areas of CUSMA, including elements of the agreement that are working well and those that can be further improved," Global Affairs Canada said in a statement.

Moreover, the feedback received from the consultations will allow Canada to select its priorities in preparation for CUSMA's first joint review in 2026, and ahead of Canada's chairing of the 5th meeting of the CUSMA Free Trade Commission, in 2025, the statement said.

The consultation will take place throughout October 31 and Canadians are encouraged to participate, the statement added.

CUSMA, the successor of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), spans a market of nearly 500 million people, representing close to a third of the global economy. The three countries imported some \$2 trillion in goods from each other or some \$5.3 billion in trade on a daily basis.

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Judge Orders Elon Musk to Disclose List of X Shareholders - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge ordered Elon Musk's social media company X to disclose the list of shareholders holding stock in the company and make it public for the first time since the US billionaire acquired Twitter in 2022, according to a court filing.

"Pursuant to the Court's Order Granting Plaintiffs' Administrative Motion Directing Defendants to Supplement Corporate Disclosure Statement, Respondents disclose the following persons and entities who are owners/shareholders of X Holdings Corp.," the filing said on Tuesday.

In total, the list of shareholders contains 95 names and titles of companies that own X Holdings Corp., including former CEO and founder Jack Dorsey, Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal al Saud, venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz and former SpaceX engineer Scott Nolan.

X Holdings Corp. originally filed the list of its shareholders in June 2023 amid a legal case of former Twitter employees against the social network, alleging Musk failed to pay some fees in the wake of the company acquisition, according to a media report.

The impetus for publishing the list was a motion filed by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press in July on behalf of independent tech journalist Jacob Silverman asking the court to unseal it, the report said.

US District Judge Susan Illston granted the motion to unseal the list of X shareholders on Tuesday, the report added.

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Blinken, Qatari Emir Discuss Ceasefire in Gaza – State Department

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke by phone with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to discuss ongoing negotiations on a ceasefire agreement in Gaza, State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Thursday.

"They discussed ongoing efforts to negotiate a ceasefire agreement that would alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people and secure the release of the hostages to return to their families," Patel said.

Blinken underscored that the bridging proposal presented by negotiators addresses the remaining gaps in a manner that allows for swift implementation of the deal, Patel said.

Both counterparts called on all parties in the region to avoid actions that would undermine peace efforts. They also welcomed the next round of ceasefire talks in Cairo, according to the statement.

Blinken and the emir also discussed continued efforts to end the war in Sudan and "noted the importance of allowing unhindered humanitarian access to Sudanese civilians," Patel said.

On October 7, 2023, Israel was subjected to an unprecedented rocket attack from the Gaza Strip that saw Hamas fighters infiltrate the border areas, open fire on the military and civilians and take hostages. Israeli authorities say that about 1,200 people were killed during the raid.

The IDF launched Operation Iron Swords in the Gaza Strip and announced a complete blockade of the enclave. The enclave's health ministry says that the death toll from Israeli strikes on the Gaza Strip since October 7 has exceeded 40,000.

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FBI Director Says Worries About US Facing Combination of Many Threats Elevated at Once

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - FBI Director Christopher Wray said on Wednesday that he is concerned that the United States is facing many threats that may be elevated at once.

"I worry about the combination of that many threats being elevated at once, with the challenges facing the men and women in law enforcement more generally," Wray said in an interview with the Associated Press.

Wray said he he was "hard pressed to think of a time in my career where so many different kinds of threats are all elevated at once."

However, Wray declined to discuss specific threats or investigations but noted that investigations into cyberattacks, including to protect election integrity, required assistance from the private sector.

The FBI has been working to strengthen traditional partnership with state and local law enforcement and to create new ones with business and academia to counter cybersecurity and intellectual property threats, Wray said.

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Trump Says Democrats at Convention Mentioned Him 297 Times, Border Once

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said Thursday that speakers at the Democratic National Convention have mentioned his name 297 times, while mentioning the border once.

"I think they mentioned me 297 times, they mentioned the border once, they mentioned crime twice," Trump told Fox News.

Addressing a claim by Vice President Kamala Harris' running mate Tim Walz during his speech at the DNC that Trump would push for implementing Project 2025 if he wins, the former president stated that he has nothing to do with the strategy.

He also called Walz a "total lightweight" and a "terrible governor" with no capabilities.

In addition, Trump denied that his potential second administration would seek a federal ban on abortion. He said that the matter should remain "in the hands of the states."

The US Democratic Party is holding its national convention from August 19-22 in Chicago to rally support behind their 2024 ticket of Harris and Walz.

Harris is set to deliver the keynote address at the DNC on Thursday night.

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Canadian Trade Union Begins Strike After Failing to Reach Deal With 2 Railway Companies

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - Teamsters Canada, the country's largest transportation and supply chain union, announced on Thursday that it had begun a strike after failing to reach an agreement with two major railway companies.

Earlier this month, Teamsters Canada warned that a strike action could paralyze railroad transport if the Canadian National Railway Company (CN) and the Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC) did not reach an agreement by August 22. Both companies move around C\$1 billion (\$736 million) worth of goods on a daily basis, according to the Railway Association of Canada.

"Despite months of good faith negotiations on the part of the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference, parties remain far apart, and both CN and CPKC have begun their lockout of 00:01 today," the union said in a statement. "Over the past several days, the Teamsters have put forward multiple offers, none of which were seriously considered by either company."

The main obstacle to a negotiated agreement remains the companies' demands rather than union proposals, the statement said.

Neither the CN or CPKC have relented on their push to weaken protections around rest periods and scheduling, increasing the risk of fatigue-related safety issues, the statement added.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau urged the involved parties to find a negotiated outcome and avert a strike. Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland further added that it was unacceptable for either side to jeopardize Canada's economic recovery and called on Canadians to make clear to railway companies and the union alike that an "act of self-harm" to the Canadian economy is unacceptable.

Teamsters Canada is the country's largest federally regulated private sector as well as transportation and supply chain union, with more than 130,000 members. The union represents some 10,000 workers at the CN and CPKC and more than 1.2 million individuals across North America.

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Trump Says US Would Turn Into 'Big Version of Unlivable San Francisco' if Harris Wins

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said on Thursday that the United States will turn into a "big version of San Francisco," which he called an "unlivable" and crime-ridden city, if Vice President and Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris wins the November election this year.

"Everything she touched turned bad. California turned bad, San Francisco — you can't walk in San Francisco, you barely can go to California anymore. People say in state that it is in terrible terrible crime trouble ... and drugs all over the place, you cannot walk down the streets," Trump told Fox News.

Trump pinned the blame on Governor Gavin Newsom but "more" on Harris, who served as District Attorney of San Francisco, Attorney General of California and then senator for the state. "San Francisco is unlivable now, unlivable. Fifteen years ago it was the most beautiful city, one of greatest cities in the world. Today it's unlivable it is gonna have to be hopefully able to be brought back if possible," Trump said.

If Harris becomes the president, "this country would turn into a big version of San Francisco, a big version of California itself," Trump stated.

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US Destroyer Ralph Johnson Conducts Routine Transit Through Taiwan Strait – 7th Fleet

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - The US destroyer warship Ralph Johnson is conducting a routine transit through the international waters of the Taiwan Strait, the US 7th Fleet said on Thursday.

"The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Ralph Johnson (DDG 114) is conducting a routine Taiwan Strait transit on August 22 (local time) through waters where high-seas freedom of navigation and overflight apply in accordance with international law," the US 7th Fleet said in a statement.

The destroyer transited through a corridor that is far from the territorial sea of any coastal state, the statement added.

This transit by the warship demonstrates the United States' commitment to upholding freedom of navigation for all nations, according to the statement.

Taiwan has been governed independently from mainland China since 1949. Beijing views the island as its province, while Taiwan - a territory with its own elected government - maintains that it is an autonomous country. Beijing opposes any official contacts of foreign states with Taipei and considers Chinese sovereignty over the island indisputable.

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UPDATE 2 - Americans Tied to Russian State News Could Face Criminal Charges, More Searches - Reports

(Adds details, quotes in paras 10-12)

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department could conduct further searches and bring criminal charges against Americans who have worked with Russian state television networks, The New York Times reported, citing US officials briefed on the matter.

Earlier this month, FBI agents conducted searches at the homes of former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter and journalist Dimitri Simes. However, prosecutors have not revealed any criminal charges against the two men.

Investigators are expected to conduct more searches soon and prosecutors could also bring

criminal charges, the report said.

The Biden administration has alleged that Russian state news organizations are working with the country's intelligence agencies to influence elections worldwide.

The investigations have focused on possible violations of the sanctions regime imposed on Russia and a law mandating the disclosure of foreign government lobbying efforts, the report said.

Ritter said that he believes the search of his home was an "act of intimidation" triggered by his cooperation with Russian news organizations like Sputnik and RT. Ritter said that he has not committed any crimes and denied accusations that he is acting as a foreign agent.

Ritter told Sputnik that his passport was likely confiscated by authorities in connection with the FBI investigation.

Simes told Sputnik that he was not notified in advance of the search of his property and that he has not been in the United States since October 2022. Consequently, there is nothing at the property related to his current life and activities, he said.

Simes also said that the US government is possibly attempting to dissuade him from coming back to the United States and block any attempt to have a Russian-American dialogue.

The New York Times, however, acknowledged that such an investigation targeting US citizens could "bump up against the First Amendment's protection of rights to free speech."

The Department of Justice refused to comment on the reports about the investigation.

"We will decline to comment," the Department said.

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US Army Orders \$100Mln in Black Hawk Helicopter Variants From Sikorsky - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - The US Army has given Sikorsky an almost \$100 million contract to produce different versions of the H-60 Black Hawk utility military helicopter, the Department of Defense said in a press release.

"Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation [of] Stratford, Connecticut was awarded a \$97,262,416 ...contract for various H-60 Black Hawk configurations," the release said.

Work on the contract is scheduled to take five years with an estimated completion date of August 21, 2029, the Defense Department said.

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

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US Air Force Pays Northrop \$100Mln Extra to Complete 2 Polar Satellites - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force has extended the Northrop Grumman Space Systems contract to build two new High Earth Orbit (HEO) polar reconnaissance satellites by almost \$100 million, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Northrop Grumman Systems Corporation, Space Systems Division [in] Redondo Beach, California, was awarded a \$97,348,304 contract modification ...for Next Generation Overhead Persistent Infrared Polar Space Vehicles 1 and 2," the release stated on Wednesday.

The contract extension will provide the additional scope to complete the design, building, integration, and testing of the two satellites, the Defense Department explained.

"The modification brings the total cumulative face value of the contract to \$2,301,726,852," the release said.

Work on the satellites will be performed in Redondo Beach, and Azusa, California over the next two years and is expected to be completed by July 25, 2026, the Defense Department said.

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US Congressman Raskin Says 2024 Presidential Election Will Be Competitive, 'Serious Fight'

CHICAGO, August 22 (Sputnik) - The 2024 US presidential race between Republican nominee Donald Trump and Democratic nominee Kamala Harris will be a competitive and serious fight, Democratic Congressman Jamie Raskin told RIA Novosti on the margins of the Democratic National Convention.

"I think it's gonna be competitive. It could be a serious fight," Raskin said on Wednesday.

Raskin currently serves as the Ranking Member of the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability.

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Trump Expected to Make Concessions With Russia to End Ukraine Conflict - Congressman

CHICAGO, August 22 (Sputnik) - Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump is expected to make concessions to Russia to end the conflict in Ukraine, Democratic Congressman Jamie Raskin told RIA Novosti on the margins of the Democratic National Convention.

"Undoubtedly he will," Raskin said on Wednesday when asked if he expects Trump to make concessions to Russia to end the Ukraine conflict.

Raskin pointed out that Trump's running mate Sen. JD Vance has said that he wants to cut off US funding to Ukraine, "and he speaks for the whole ticket."

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Senior US State Dept. Official to Met His Holiness Dalai Lama in New York - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - Senior US State Department official Uzra Zeya traveled to New York City this week to meet His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the State Department said in a press release.

"On August 21, 2024, Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights and Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues Uzra Zeya traveled to New York City, New York for an audience with His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama," the release said on Wednesday. Zeya conveyed, on behalf of President Joe Biden, best wishes for His Holiness's good health and reaffirmed the US commitment to advocate for the human rights of Tibetans and support efforts to preserve their distinct historical, linguistic, cultural, and religious heritage, according to the release.

Zeya discussed with the Dalai Lama the United States' ongoing efforts to address alleged human rights abuses inside Tibet and support for resuming dialogue between China and His Holiness and his representatives.

Zeya was joined by Special Assistant to the President and National Security Council Senior Director for Democracy and Human Rights Kelly Razzouk, the release noted.

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PREVIEW - Wall Street Zeroes In on Interest Rate Cut on Eve of Federal Reserve Banking Summit

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve's annual banking symposium starts on Thursday but listeners will only be focused on two words from Chairman Jerome Powell - "rates" and "cuts" - that obscure the debate on the US central bank's over-tightening of monetary policy.

Powell will address bankers, academics, economists and financial media specialists from around the world at the annual Fed event in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, which will run through Saturday. Historically, the symposium has served as an important forum to assess the effectiveness of global central bank policy and explore new thinking. Until 2010, the forum was used to announce or predict changes the Fed will likely adopt.

But the hyperinflation in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic - and the surprising deflationary signs lately - has made the Fed wary about predicting anything, especially the specifics on the timing and size of interest rate changes. Powell has also become accustomed over the past six years in his role as chairman to the art of giving away little - or nothing more - than the official messaging on interest rates.

With Wall Street positive that the Fed will announce less than a month from now its first interest rate cut in four years, each word - even murmur - from Powell will be analyzed for the potential of a policy pivot when he takes the podium at Jackson Hole on Friday.

Speculation of an impending Fed policy change became more acute on Wednesday after the US Labor Department revised down by 818,000 the jobs growth it originally reported for the 12 months to March, citing a "statistical error."

"With all that we have going, Wall Street will, no doubt, make more of what Powell says on Friday, telegraphing his every observation on inflation and the economy as hints on the size of the cut that's to come," Ramesh Mohan, economics professor at Bryant University, told Sputnik.

On Wall Street, the bet is that the Fed will institute a cut as large as a half percentage point at its September 18 meeting. The central bank's last interest rate reduction was in March 2020,

after the COVID -19 outbreak. The Fed tightened policy 11 times after that, adding 5.25 percentage points to rates, as inflation hit four-decade highs in the aftermath of the pandemic.

"From Jackson Hole to September 18, the focus will be on whether the Fed cuts 50 basis points or less at its next meeting," Mohan said. "The more important debate that will be missed is why the Fed waited this long to make a pivot on its policy when there were signs that inflation was already loosening up."

The Fed's target for inflation is a mere 2% per year. Throughout the past two years, the central bank has steadfastly pointed to that and the runaway US labor market as reasons for holding interest rates high.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), hit a 40-year high of 9.1% per year in June 2022. But over the past year, the CPI had steadily crumbled, growing by only 2.9% per year in June 2024.

While some 20 million jobs were initially lost after the pandemic, they were quickly replaced in the months after. The labor market then saw its best run since the 1960s. But Wednesday's downward revision of 818,000 payrolls in the year to March has raised worries.

Raphael Bostic, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, said on Monday that evidence of accelerating weakness in labor markets may warrant a more rapid move, either in terms of the increments of movement or the speed at which the central bank tries to get back down on interest rates.

Bostic also said that the US economy has changed from just a couple of months ago, when he thought a rate cut might not be needed until October or beyond. Now, he says the Fed is more likely to get its 2% inflation target quicker than the mid-2025 or 2026 timeline forecast by some.

"We've seen labor markets weaken considerably relative to where they were," he said. "We might need to shift our policy stance sooner than I would have thought before."

Mohamed El-Erian, chief economic adviser at Allianz, the corporate parent of giant US bonds investor PIMCO, said the Fed, in holding rates higher for longer, had apparently prioritized structural and secular changes in the economy rather than "noisy" short-term data.

"None of these issues is easy to tackle," El-Erian said in an outlook on the Jackson Hole symposium published last month. "They are also outright uncomfortable for the Fed, which is yet to recover fully from its policy mistakes. Yet they are central to the effectiveness of monetary policy and the political independence of the world's most powerful central bank."

Like Mohan, El-Erian is of the view that the Fed's temptation to "shy away from hard questions" will put the central bank in a more difficult position to answer them later when there are "greater risks for the wellbeing of the US economy and global financial stability."

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Chicago Police, FBI Probe Possible Intentional Contamination At DNC Breakfast - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - The Chicago Police Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) are investigating whether maggots were intentionally placed in food served to delegates at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) breakfast, the WGN9 reported.

According to the report on Wednesday, unknown female offenders entered the building, placed

unidentified objects onto tables with food, and then left the scene.

Furthermore, multiple law enforcement sources indicated that maggots were allegedly brought into the hotel by activists aiming to send a message, the report read.

The report added that it remains unclear whether the contamination was identified before any delegates consumed the food.

The US Democratic Party is holding its national convention from August 19-22 in Chicago to rally support behind their 2024 ticket of US Vice President Kamala Harris and Minnesota Governor Tim Walz.

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UPDATE - Americans Tied to Russian State News Could Face Criminal Charges, More Searches - Reports

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Investigators are expected to conduct more searches soon and prosecutors could also bring criminal charges, the report said.

The Biden administration has alleged that Russian state news organizations are working with the country's intelligence agencies to influence elections worldwide.

The investigations have focused on possible violations of the sanctions regime imposed on Russia and a law mandating the disclosure of foreign government lobbying efforts, the report said.

Ritter said that he believes the search of his home was an "act of intimidation" triggered by his cooperation with Russian news organizations like Sputnik and RT. Ritter said that he has not committed any crimes and denied accusations that he is acting as a foreign agent.

Ritter told Sputnik that his passport was likely confiscated by authorities in connection with the FBI investigation.

Simes told Sputnik that he was not notified in advance of the search of his property and that he has not been in the United States since October 2022. Consequently, there is nothing at the property related to his current life and activities, he said.

Simes also said that the US government is possibly attempting to dissuade him from coming back to the United States and block any attempt to have a Russian-American dialogue.

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Americans Tied to Russian State News Could Face Criminal Charges, More Searches - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department could conduct further searches and bring criminal charges against Americans who have worked with Russian state television networks, The New York Times reported, citing US officials briefed on the matter.

Earlier this month, FBI agents conducted searches at the homes of former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter and journalist Dimitri Simes. However, prosecutors have not revealed any criminal charges against the two men.

Investigators are expected to conduct more searches soon and prosecutors could also bring criminal charges, the report said.

The Biden administration has alleged that Russian state news organizations are working with the country's intelligence agencies to influence elections worldwide.

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UPDATE - Biden Holds Call With Netanyahu to Discuss Gaza Ceasefire Deal - White House

(Updates with details in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris held a telephone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to discuss ongoing efforts to negotiate a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal, the White House said in a statement.

"President Biden spoke with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel to discuss the ceasefire and hostage release deal and diplomatic efforts to de-escalate regional tensions," the White House said on Wednesday. "Vice President Harris also joined the call."

The White House said in a separate press release that Biden during the call with Netanyahu stressed the urgency of bringing the Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal to a close. The two leaders also discussed the upcoming talks in Cairo to remove any remaining obstacles to finalizing a deal, the release added.

The two leaders also discussed active US efforts to support Israel's defense against all threats from Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis.

These discussions regarding Israel's defense also included ongoing defensive US military deployments in the Mideast.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 22 (Sputnik) -

GAZA CEASEFIRE NEGOTIATIONS

* US President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris spoke by telephone with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to discuss ongoing efforts to negotiate a Gaza ceasefire and a hostage release deal, the White House said in a statement on Wednesday.

* Israel will sign an agreement on a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip in exchange for the release of hostages if mediators manage to bring the Palestinian movement Hamas to it, an Israeli government source told Sputnik.

* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan his recent trip to the Middle East and the ongoing efforts to reach a ceasefire in Gaza, State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Russia's army group South has eliminated more than 700 Ukrainian soldiers over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Wednesday.

* Ukraine allegedly continues to abide by US guidance policy that prohibits the use of US-provided Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) on Russian territory, including during its Kursk offensive, a US defense official told Sputnik.

* Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov congratulated the soldiers of the 9th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade on taking control of Novgorodskoye in the Donetsk People's Republic, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

SITUATION IN RUSSIA'S BORDER REGIONS

* The Ukrainian armed forces have lost more than 4,400 soldiers since the beginning of their attack in Russia's Kursk region, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Wednesday.

* One person was killed and two others were injured in the Kursk region after an explosive device was dropped from a Ukrainian copter on a car, Acting Governor Alexei Smirnov said.

* Russia prevented a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group from penetrating the Klimovsky district of the Bryansk Region, Governor Alexander Bogomaz said.

* The United States has not seen Ukraine move US-supplied High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) into the Kursk region, but they are being employed from within Ukrainian territory, a US defense official told Sputnik.

* The governor of Russia's Murmansk Region, Andrei Chibis, said on Wednesday that an aerial

drone threat was identified in the region, and necessary measures to ensure security have been taken.

* A visit of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief Rafael Grossi to the Kursk nuclear power plant is being prepared, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

CAUSES OF RAISI'S HELICOPTER CRASH

* The helicopter of the deceased Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi crashed due to bad weather conditions, the Iranian Fars news agency reported on Wednesday, citing a source in the Iranian state security agencies.

* The General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces rejects the statements of the Fars agency about the causes of the helicopter crash of Raisi, the Mehr news agency reported.

HUNGARY GAS SUPPLIES

* Gas supplies from Russia to Hungary are uninterrupted and are not affected by developments the Kursk Region, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said on Wednesday.

* The Hungarian government sent a letter to the European Commission explaining the inclusion of citizens of Russia and Belarus in the program of a preferential two-year work visa, adding that checks for obtaining a residence permit will remain strict, the Magyar Nemzet newspaper reported.

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Halliburton Says Aware of Issue Affecting Company's Systems, Working to Assess Impact

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - The US oil service firm Halliburton said in a statement on Wednesday that it is working to assess the impact of an issue that affected its internal network.

"We are aware of an issue affecting certain company systems and are working diligently to assess the cause and potential impact," a company spokesperson said. "We have activated our preplanned response plan and are working internally, and with leading external experts, to remediate the issue."

Earlier, Reuters reported that Halliburton was hit with a ransomware attack.

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halliburton says aware of issue affecting company systems, working to assess cause and potential impact

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Latvian National Extradited to US for Scheme to Provide Aircraft Technology to Russia

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - A Latvian national was extradited to the United States for his alleged role in a scheme to illegally provide US-origin aircraft technology to Russia, the US Department of Justice said on Wednesday.

"Oleg Chistyakov, also known as Olegs Citsjakovs, 55, of Latvia, made his initial appearance in a federal court in Kansas City, Kansas, today after being extradited from Latvia," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Chistyakov is charged with conspiracy, Export Control Reform Act violations, smuggling and money laundering violations, the release said.

The release said, citing court documents, that Chistyakov allegedly conspired with US citizens Cyril Gregory Buyanovsky and Douglas Edward Robertson to facilitate the sale, repair and shipment of US-origin avionics equipment to customers in Russia and in other countries that operate Russian-built aircraft, including the Federal Security Service of Russia (FSB).

Buyanovsky and Robertson were already charged and arrested in March 2023 and have both pleaded guilty, the release said. Buyanovsky is set to be sentenced on November 14 and Robertson is scheduled to be sentenced on October 3.

If convicted, Chistyakov faces up to 20 years in prison and up to a \$1 million fine, according to the release.

The United States tightened export controls for US-made advanced technology after the launch of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022.

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White House Says 'No Comment' on Reports Biden Mulling Long-Range Cruise Missiles for Kiev

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - The White House National Security Council told Sputnik on Wednesday that they have no comment on media reports claiming that US President Joe Biden is considering providing long-range cruise missiles to Ukraine.

"I don't think we're gonna have a comment on that one," a White House spokesperson said. Last week, US media reported that Biden is "open" to supplying Ukraine with the long-range cruise missile known as the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM).

While the Biden administration has not made a final decision, officials continue to review issues such as the transfer of sensitive technologies and making sure that Ukraine's fighter jets are capable of carrying the missile, the reports said.

Last week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a statement on the social media platform X called on certain allies to provide Ukraine with long-range capabilities.

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American Airlines Extends Suspension of Flights to Israel Through March 29 – Statement

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) – American Airlines is extending the suspension of flights to Israel through March 29 amid the ongoing conflict in Gaza, a spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik on Wednesday.

“American Airlines has suspended operations to and from Tel Aviv through March 29, 2025,” the statement said. “We will continue to work closely with our partner airlines to assist customers traveling between Israel and European cities with service to the U.S.”

American Airlines stopped flights to Israel on October 6 and has not resumed them since.

Earlier in August, credit rating agency Fitch downgraded Israel's rating, citing a high probability that the conflict in Gaza will continue well into 2025.

The Times of Israel reported on Tuesday that Delta Airlines also suspended its flights to Israel will September 30 citing an unstable security situation in the country.

Another major US airline, United Airlines, has not yet resumed flights to Israel after it suspended them in late July.

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Foreign Mercenaries Account for Majority of Troops Attacking Kursk Region - Viktor Bout

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - Foreign mercenaries from the United States and other NATO countries account for a majority of the Ukrainian force attacking Russia's Kursk region, Russian businessman and former US prisoner Viktor Bout said on Wednesday.

“Now they're trying to do this incursion and invade the Russian region of Kursk, where a majority of this invading force is mercenaries, including American private military companies, including many German, Polish, and Romanian soldiers, and the best equipment they can supply to them,” Bout said in an interview with The Alex Jones Show.

The main goal of Ukraine's attack on the Kursk region was to capture a nuclear station in the area, Bout said.

Ukraine intended to “blackmail” Russia for a territory exchange by threatening to blow up the nuclear reactor, Bout said. The plan was long in the making, Bout added.

Last week, the private US Forward Observations Group posted on social media a photo of its members allegedly participating in the Ukrainian incursion in the Kursk Region. In the photo posted on Instagram (owned by Meta, banned in Russia for extremism), three men in military gear holding weapons and carrying blue armbands are posing in front of an armed vehicle. The caption on the post read: “The boys in Kursk.” Geolocation data showed that the photo had been published from the Kursk Region.

Earlier this month, a resident of a village in the Kursk Region told Sputnik that foreign mercenaries had entered their village, including from France and Poland.

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US Army Seeking Experts to Support HAWK Missile Maintainers in Ukraine - Contract Notice

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - The US Army is seeking HAWK Missile Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) to support Ukrainian maintainers of the system, the US Army said in a contract notice on Wednesday.

"Specifically, the contractor is to provide CLS [Contract Logistics Services] Team of HAWK Missile SMEs to assist the United States Government (USG), the HAWK Forward CLS as expressly designated by the USG, and the Ukrainian maintainers with Ukraine's HAWK Systems," the notice said.

The contractor will be responsible for providing technical support availability to answer questions about operation, maintenance, troubleshooting and other matters within 48 hours of receipt in English, the notice said.

The CLS Team will also support Ukrainian maintainers in the performance of Field Level maintenance of their HAWK Systems, the notice added.

Interested contractors should provide information to the point of contact no later than August 23, according to the notice.

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Oil Prices Hit New 2024 Low as US 'Jobs Cut' Scare Offsets Crude Draws

NEW YORK, August 21 (Sputnik) - Crude prices hit 2024 lows on Wednesday as a downward revision in US jobs numbers sparked concerns about the economy that offset strong weekly consumption numbers for oil in the United States.

West Texas Intermediate (WTI), the benchmark for US crude, settled down \$1.24, or 1.7%, at \$71.93 per barrel, adding to its 5.5% decline over the past three sessions.

Earlier on Wednesday, WTI sank to \$71.47, its lowest since a December bottom of \$71.41. Year-to-date, the US crude benchmark is up 0.1%, after rallying 22% at one point.

UK-origin Brent finished the New York session down \$1.15, or 1.5%, at \$76.05 per barrel, adding to its 4.7% tumble over three prior sessions.

Earlier in the day, Brent tumbled to a November low of \$74.79. Year-to-date, the global crude benchmark is down 1.5%, after running up some 20% earlier.

The freefall in crude prices continued despite the US Energy Information Administration reporting an across-the-board draw in crude and fuel stockpiles for the just-ended week.

Crude inventories fell by 4.649 million barrels during the week that ended on August 16, reversing the prior week's build of 1.357 million, which itself came after a decline of some 30 million barrels over six straight weeks.

Gasoline stockpiles fell 1.606 million barrels for the week to August 16, adding to the prior week's draw of 2.894 million. Distillate stockpiles tumbled by 3.312 million, after the previous week's deficit of 1.673 million.

Gasoline is the primary motor fuel in the United States and makes up the largest component of the country's energy mix.

"The market is raising questions about a major downward revision in US jobs numbers [that]

may suggest that the Fed was behind the curve in rate cuts," Phil Flynn, energy analyst at the Price Futures Group in Chicago, said.

Earlier on Wednesday, the US Labor Department said it has revised down by 818,000 the jobs growth it originally reported for the 12 months to March, citing a "statistical error."

Prior to the revision, initial payroll figures indicated an addition of some 2.9 million total jobs during the year to March, or an average of 242,000 per month. With the revision, the monthly pace of growth is at around 174,000 - still robust though a moderation from the post-COVID-19 peak of job growth, economists said.

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Russian Businessman Bout Says Tried to Warn Trump of Threats to His Life Last Year

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - Russian businessman and former US prisoner Viktor Bout said on Wednesday that he attempted to warn former US President Donald Trump last year about threats to his life, ahead of a failed assassination attempt against the 2024 Republican presidential nominee.

"Last year, in May, I tried to send him a telegram, warning him that his life is in danger, because the deep state will never let Trump protect the interests of the American people," Bout said in an interview with The Alex Jones Show.

Last month, a shooter attempted to assassinate Trump at a campaign rally in Pennsylvania, wounding the former president in his ear, killing one audience member and injuring two others.

The US Secret Service came under scrutiny in the wake of the failed assassination attempt, prompting Kimberly Cheatle to resign as the agency's director. The US House of Representatives established a special task force to investigate the incident.

On June 3, Bout also predicted an assassination attempt against Trump during an interview with Jones.

Trump must be "extremely cautious" moving forward, Bout said on Wednesday.

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RPT - Trump Says Wants Every Senior Military Official Engaged in Afghanistan Pullout to Resign

(Fixes para 4)

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump said on Wednesday that he wants every single senior military official who was involved in the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan to step down if he is elected as the next president.

"I will ask for resignations of every single senior military official who touched the Afghanistan disaster," Trump said during a rally in Asheboro, North Carolina. "I want their resignations immediately, and I want them on the desk in the Oval Office, the resolute desk, I want them on the 12 o'clock inauguration day, everybody involved with that disaster."

The Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) seized power in Afghanistan after toppling the US-backed government as US and NATO troops were leaving the country after almost 20 years of military presence.

On August 26, 2021, during the chaotic evacuation of foreign citizens and some vulnerable Afghan citizens via the airport in Kabul, a terrorist attack killed 13 US troops and 170 Afghans. The ISIS-Khorasan terrorist group (banned in Russia) claimed responsibility for the attack.

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Trump Says Biden Admin. Emptied US Munition Warehouses by Aiding Ukraine

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) – Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump said on Wednesday that the Biden administration has emptied US munition warehouses by giving everything it had to Ukraine and other countries.

"We have no ammunition at the time. We are the United States of America, you know. Why we gave it all up to Ukraine and various other places? We gave everything, emptied our warehouses of all of our munitions," Trump said during a rally in Asheboro, North Carolina.

The United States is the main supplier of artillery shells to Ukraine, including the 155mm version most in demand by Kiev. Since the armed conflict began in February 2022, the United States has supplied more than 3 million 155mm shells and more than 1.5 million shells of a different size.

The Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General said in a new quarterly report published earlier in August that Ukraine amid the conflict with Russia has run "critically low" on certain types of ammunition that are no longer produced or sourced by the United States.

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Trump Says Wants Every Senior Military Official Engaged in Afghanistan Pullout to Resign

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Biden Holds Call With Netanyahu to Discuss Gaza Ceasefire Deal - White House

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris held a telephone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to discuss ongoing efforts to negotiate a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal, the White House said in a statement on Wednesday.

"President Biden spoke with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel to discuss the ceasefire and hostage release deal and diplomatic efforts to de-escalate regional tensions," the White House said. "Vice President Harris also joined the call."

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RFK Jr. to Address Nation Aug. 23 Amid Reports of Him Dropping Out - Campaign

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) – Independent Presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is planning to address Americans this Friday to outline his “path forward” amid reports that he has been considering dropping out of the 2024 race, the Kennedy-Shanahan campaign announced on Wednesday.

RFK’s running mate Nicole Shanahan said on Tuesday that Kennedy is considering dropping out of the 2024 race and working with Republican nominee Donald Trump.

“Independent Presidential Candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. will address the nation live on Friday about the present historical moment and his path forward,” the campaign said in a press release.

The address is scheduled to begin at 2 p.m. EST (18:00 GMT) at an undisclosed location in Phoenix, Arizona.

Interestingly, Donald Trump is also expected to be in the US state of Arizona on Friday to hold a rally at Desert Diamond Arena in the city of Glendale, located about 10 miles to the northwest of Phoenix.

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UN Awaiting Sahel Alliance Letter on Ukraine, Will Share With Security Council - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, August 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has not yet received a letter from the Sahel Alliance urging action against Ukraine for supporting terrorism, and will share the letter with the UN Security Council when it receives it, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said

on Wednesday.

"The letter has not yet been received; will be shared with the Security Council members as needed. Our message is one of encouraging everyone to work toward the stability of the Sahel region, which is something we have been very actively involved in," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Dujarric made the comment in response to a reporter's question regarding a joint letter sent on Tuesday by Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger calling on the UN Security Council to take measures against Ukraine for its alleged support of terrorism in the Sahel region.

On August 6, Niger cut diplomatic ties with Ukraine due to Kiev's alleged aggression against Mali. The Malian interim government said that it had cut diplomatic ties with Ukraine as well.

Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the fact that Ukraine was cooperating with terrorists from the Sahel region was not surprising and Moscow actively drew the attention of the international community to such actions by Kiev.

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UN on Reports of New US Strategy: Rising Risk of Use of Nuclear Weapons Causes Concern

UNITED NATIONS, August 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is concerned about the heightened risk of nuclear weapons being used, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday, amid reports of the United States approving a new secret nuclear strategic plan refocusing on an alleged Chinese threat.

"The secretary-general is very concerned about the acute risk of nuclear weapons being used," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Dujarric stressed the importance of dialogue and diplomacy to move toward a nuclear-free world.

The remarks were in response to a reporter's question about a New York Times report that US President Joe Biden approved a classified US nuclear strategy plan that shifts focus to China, a country with significantly fewer nuclear warheads and a no-first-use policy. The new strategy is also said to address concerns of potential coordinated nuclear challenges by China, Russia, and North Korea against the United States.

The document is highly classified and has no electronic copies, the report said. Biden is expected to provide a notification to Congress in connection with the revised strategy before leaving office, the report said.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry expressed concerns with the reports about the new US strategy. The US is promoting a "Chinese nuclear threat" to evade its nuclear disarmament commitments, the ministry said.

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Blinken Consults With Jordan Counterpart on Gaza Ceasefire Deal Talks - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke by telephone with his Jordanian counterpart Ayman Safadi and discussed the ongoing efforts to broker a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release deal, US State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Wednesday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Jordan's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Ayman Safadi," Patel said in a press release. "The Secretary stressed the urgent need to finalize the ceasefire deal that would alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people and secure the release of hostages."

Blinken also highlighted that the so-called bridging proposal presented by the United States, Egypt and Qatar addressed the remaining gaps in a manner that allows for swift implementation of the deal, the release said.

Moreover, Blinken discussed with Safadi the importance of reducing tensions in the region, the release added.

The State Department said earlier that Blinken also consulted with his Turkish counterpart Hakan Fidan on the issue of the Gaza ceasefire deal talks.

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Senior Trump Advisor Says Harris Campaign's Attacks on Trump Ignore Real Americans' Issues

CHICAGO, August 21 (Sputnik) - American Senior Advisor to the Trump Campaign Bryan Hughes said on Wednesday that he doesn't see anything joyful about the Harris campaign attacking Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump and ignoring the problems the American people have.

"I don't know what is joyful about attacking your opponent and disavowing your record and ignoring the fact that Americans are hurting," Hughes said when asked by Sputnik about his evaluation of the Democratic campaign at Trump Tower in Chicago on the sidelines of the Democratic National Convention.

He suggested that to spread joy, one should explain to the American people the reasons for their failures over the past three and a half years and outline how they plan to hold themselves accountable for those shortcomings.

The US Democratic Party is holding its national convention from August 19-22 in Chicago to rally support behind their 2024 ticket of US Vice President Kamala Harris and Minnesota Governor Tim Walz.

In July, Biden said he was withdrawing from the 2024 election in the best interest of the Democratic Party and the US. He endorsed Harris as the Democratic nominee, which she accepted. The Democratic National Convention is taking place in Chicago from August 19-22, where delegates will officially appoint their candidate to face Trump in the November 5 election.

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Church in Ukraine Subject to Worst Persecution Since Early Centuries - ROCOR Metropolitan

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - The canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) is facing the most severe persecution from the authorities in Ukraine, reminiscent of that suffered by Christians in the early centuries of the new era, Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) Synod of Bishops Vice President and Metropolitan Mark Arndt told Sputnik.

"The stance of the present Ukrainian government reminds us only of the first centuries of persecutions of Christians. It is worse than any persecution after the first centuries," Metropolitan Mark said.

On Tuesday, the Ukrainian parliament passed a bill to ban the (UOC in Ukraine over its historic links to the Moscow Patriarchate. Russian Orthodox Church spokesman Vladimir Legoyda warned that the implementation of the law would unleash violence against millions of worshippers,

Metropolitan Mark, who was born in Nazi Germany during World War II, said the new Ukrainian law resembles the dictatorship of the Nazis under Adolf Hitler.

"We see the same dictatorial behavior in Ukraine. It all comes down to the same thing and it is a great tragedy for the people," Metropolitan Mark said.

However, the metropolitan expressed confidence that the church would survive in these critical circumstances despite the serious significant pressures it has been subjected to in the past and will be subjected to in the future.

Nevertheless, what is unfolding is a very serious tragedy for the believers, he said.

"It is an effort to show the sign or dissemblance of the legitimacy and make a law against the church, which has never been done in a civilized country," Mark said.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Tuesday that the purpose of banning the UOC was to destroy the "true Orthodoxy" and create a false church.

The pressure by the Ukrainian government on the UOC escalated after Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. Among other forms of pressure and harassment, the UOC monks were ordered to leave the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, a historic Eastern Orthodox Christian monastery whose jurisdiction is divided between a Ukrainian cultural organization and the UOC, for allegedly violating the terms of the lease.

The UOC has historic links with the Russian Orthodox Church but it announced its full independence from the Moscow Patriarchate in May 2022. The Russian Orthodox Church has not recognized changes to its relationship with the UOC.

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UN Remains Hopeful for Gaza Agreement, Urges Political Courage - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, August 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations remains hopeful that all parties involved in the Gaza conflict will find the political courage and will to reach an agreement, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"We are still very much hopeful that all the parties involved will find the political courage and the

political will to come to an agreement," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

The remarks were in response to a reporter's question about whether Dujarric remains optimistic regarding the Gaza ceasefire talks.

Last week, Qatar hosted Gaza ceasefire talks, which involved Egypt, Israel and the United States. However, the Palestinian movement Hamas refused to participate, citing the lack of specifics on the terms of the truce.

After the talks, the United States, Egypt and Qatar issued a joint statement saying their mediators had presented both parties by presenting a so-called bridging proposal on a ceasefire and on a release of the remaining hostages based on the relevant UN Security Council resolution and the principles laid out by US President Joe Biden in May.

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UPDATE - Trudeau Says It's in 'Best Interest' of Rail Companies, Union to Avert Strike

(Adds Freeland's remarks in paras 4-5)

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Wednesday said that it was in the "best interest" of rail companies and workers union to settle their differences at the negotiating table and avert a strike.

"My message is very straightforward. It is in the best interest of both sides [companies and unions] to continue doing the hard work at the table to find a negotiated resolution," Trudeau told reporters.

Millions of Canadians, workers, farmers and business nationwide are counting on the involved parties to work on finding a negotiated settlement, Trudeau said. Ottawa is following the rail negotiations "extremely closely," he added.

"It is entirely unacceptable for anyone to get in the way of that economic progress ... that has been so hard fought and won. So, I want ... to say to the companies, to say to the union: we are expecting you to work really, really hard, to negotiate in good faith, to negotiate with real energy and intensity and to get a deal done," Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland said during a separate press conference.

The minister further urged Canadians to send a clear message to the involved parties that an "act of self-harm" to the Canadian economy is not acceptable.

Earlier this month, Teamsters Canada, the country's largest transportation and supply chain union, warned that a strike action could paralyze railroad transport if the Canadian National Railway Company (CN) and the Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC) do not reach an agreement by August 22. Both companies move around C\$1 billion (\$736 million) worth of goods on a daily basis according to the Railway Association of Canada.

The looming threat of a strike resulted from railroad giants seeking concessions regarding crew scheduling, rail safety, and fatigue management, according to the trade union. The CN and CPKC notably seek to water down the collective agreement of all safety-critical fatigue provisions, which would oblige train crews to stay awake longer, increasing the odds for derailments and other incidents, the trade union said.

Teamsters Canada is the country's largest federally regulated private sector as well as

transportation and supply chain union, with more than 130,000 members. The union represents close to 10,000 workers at the CN and CPKC, and over 1.2 million individuals across North America.

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Chicago Police Says Arrested at Least 55 During Clash Near Israeli Consulate Tuesday Night

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - The Chicago Police Department arrested at least 55 protesters during a clash with pro-Palestine demonstrators near the Israeli consulate on Tuesday night, Chicago Police Department Superintendent Larry Snelling said on Wednesday. "We declared a mass arrest after our officers were physically confronted and attacked," Snelling said during a press conference. "We were not the initiators of violence, but we responded to it, and our officers responded exactly the way that they were trained to respond. Out of that, we had between 55 and 60 arrests."

Snelling added that three journalists were among those arrested on Tuesday night for allegedly obstructing police officers who were trying to make arrests.

Chicago Deputy Mayor Brandon Johnson said the protesters who clashed with police outside the Israeli Consulate came to the city to cause harm and wreak havoc.

However, Johnson said he expects the protests during the rest of the week to be peaceful.

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Police Across Canada Responding to Bomb Threats Targeting Jewish Organizations

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) – Canadian Law enforcement agencies reported on Wednesday that they were responding to multiple bomb threats targeting Canadian and Jewish institutions across the country.

Earlier, B'nai Brit Canada reported that more than a hundred Jewish institutions had received identical emails at 5:00 a.m. ET containing bomb threats, including at their Toronto and Montreal offices.

"We are aware of threats made via email to Jewish Organizations across Canada. Today, TPS [Toronto Police Service] attended bldgs. In Bathurst St & Sheppard Ave W area for a bomb threat. The Bldgs were evacuated as a precaution and cleared," the TPS said via X.

In a separate statement, Ottawa police said it was assisting the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) with an ongoing operation at several hospitals across the capital city and the region, targeted by bomb threats.

"Ottawa police are assisting the RCMP with an ongoing police operation at various Ottawa Hospitals. Police are taking precautionary measures to ensure public safety while the investigation continues," it said.

Jewish-Canadian communities, including several lawmakers from both sides of the aisle, have expressed their concern over a rise in antisemitism across Canada amid the societal rift over

Ottawa's position on the Israel-Gaza war.

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Trump Campaign Built on Dividing Americans, Personal Vendetta - Kentucky Governor

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - The election campaign of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump is based on personal revenge and on attempts to divide the American community in the face of real enemies the United States faces, Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear told RIA Novosti.

"If you look at at these two campaigns ... it becomes clear that Trump's is based on vengeance and retribution and trying to create an us versus them. We have real enemies abroad that want our country to fail," Beshear said on the sidelines of the Democratic National Convention.

Beshear was also referring to the campaign of Democratic candidate Kamala Harris and her running mate Tim Walz.

"One of the reasons I'm all in for Harris-Walz is because I believe they can not only win this election, but they can move us past this constant division, this constant us versus them," Beshear said.

Beshear did not answer when asked whether he counts countries such as Russia or China among the "real enemies" of the United States.

The Kentucky governor added that he expects Harris to win the US presidential election in November because he believes in her ability and that of Walz to overcome the division of American society into the categories of "us" versus "them."

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Terrorism Making Roaring Comeback in Afghanistan - US Congressman

CHICAGO, August 21 (Sputnik) - Terrorism is making a significant comeback in Afghanistan following President Joe Biden's botched withdrawal from the country, Congressman Mike Waltz said on Wednesday.

"Right now as we speak, in Afghanistan, terrorism is making a roaring comeback," Waltz told journalists during a press briefing at Trump Tower in Chicago on the sidelines of the Democratic National Convention.

Waltz said that although the terror groups Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (both banned in Russia) are resurgent and developing new training camps in Afghanistan, Democrats are unlikely to address the matter during the convention.

"We won't hear the term Afghanistan, you'll hear Trump hundreds of times," he said, referring to the Republican nominee, former President Donald Trump.

The US Democratic Party is holding its national convention from August 19-22 in Chicago to rally support behind their 2024 ticket of US Vice President Kamala Harris and Minnesota Governor Tim Walz.

In July, Biden said he was withdrawing from the 2024 election in the best interest of the Democratic Party and the US. He endorsed Harris as the Democratic nominee, which she accepted. The Democratic National Convention is taking place in Chicago from August 19-22, where delegates will officially appoint their candidate to face Trump in the November 5 election.

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US Can't Afford European Security Subsidies Due to Massive Debt - Congressman Waltz

CHICAGO, August 21 (Sputnik) - The US can no longer afford to subsidize European security due to its huge debt, US Congressman Mike Waltz said on Wednesday.

"We no longer can afford to subsidize European security," Waltz told journalists during a press briefing at Trump Tower in Chicago on the sidelines of the Democratic National Convention.

Waltz also addressed Ukraine, stating that Trump will focus on ending the conflict, unlike Biden's current non-strategy, which results in a stalemate.

The US Democratic Party is holding its national convention from August 19-22 in Chicago to rally support behind their 2024 ticket of US Vice President Kamala Harris and Minnesota Governor Tim Walz.

In July, Biden said he was withdrawing from the 2024 election in the best interest of the Democratic Party and the US. He endorsed Harris as the Democratic nominee, which she accepted. The Democratic National Convention is taking place in Chicago from August 19-22, where delegates will officially appoint their candidate to face Trump in the November 5 election.

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US Congressman Says Potential Harris Administration May Cause Escalation in Cyber Domain

CHICAGO, August 21 (Sputnik) - A potential Harris Administration could lead to an escalation in the cyber domain, US Congressman Mike Waltz said on Wednesday.

"So I am worried about escalation on every domain, but most, I think most dangerous, will be in the cyber domain under Harris," Waltz told journalists in response to a question from RiaNovosti during a press briefing at Trump Tower in Chicago on the sidelines of the Democratic National Convention.

Waltz also pointed out that adversaries might escalate tensions due to the ongoing appeasement strategy, prioritizing concessions, insufficient investment in the military, and a lack of accountability for past mistakes within the Pentagon.

In July, Biden said he was withdrawing from the 2024 election in the best interest of the Democratic Party and the US. He endorsed Harris as the Democratic nominee, which she accepted. The Democratic National Convention is taking place in Chicago from August 19-22, where delegates will officially appoint their candidate to face Trump in the November 5 election.

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FBI to Conduct Briefing Wednesday on New Findings of Attempted Trump Assassination - Waltz

CHICAGO, August 21 (Sputnik) - The FBI will hold a briefing later on Wednesday on their new findings regarding the attempted assassination of former President Donald Trump in Butler, Pennsylvania, US Congressman Mike Waltz told journalists.

"We have a briefing. Obviously, it will be remote with the FBI today. We still haven't learned a lot. We haven't learned much about those overseas accounts [of Timothy Crooks]," Waltz said during a press briefing at the Trump Tower in Chicago. "We do know that they were in, if I get this correctly, Belgium, New Zealand and Germany."

Waltz said he has been frustrated knowing that "the people responsible for the security plan that was clearly dramatically and ridiculously flawed haven't even been suspended."

The individuals responsible for the security plan are still in charge of security operations at present, Waltz added.

Twenty-year-old Thomas Crooks tried to assassinate Trump at a campaign rally in Butler 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.

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US Congressman From New Jersey Bill Pascrell Jr. Dead at Age 87 – Family

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) – US Democratic Congressman Bill Pascrell Jr. from the state of New Jersey died at age 87 after serving 28 years in the House of Representatives, the lawmaker's family announced in an X post on Wednesday.

"It is with deep sadness that we announce that Bill Pascrell Jr., our beloved husband, father, and grandfather, passed away this morning," the post read.

Born in 1937, Pascrell was a high school history teacher before launching his political career in the 1960s.

Throughout his career, Pascrell also served as a mayor of Paterson, a city in the state of New Jersey, between 1990 and 1997 and as a member of the New Jersey General Assembly between 1988 and 1997.

The congressman was one of 81 Democrats who endorsed the US invasion of Iraq in October 2002.

Pascrell is survived by his wife Elsie, 61, his three sons, and five grandchildren.

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Ukraine Says Hasn't Used ATACMS on Russia North of Border, US Ban in Place - US Official

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - Ukraine allegedly continues to abide by US guidance policy that prohibits the use of US-provided Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) on Russian territory, including during its Kursk offensive, a US defense official told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"Back in May, we gave Ukraine permission to use US-provided munitions, with the exception of ATACMS, to defend themselves against Russian troops north of the border and that is what Ukraine has said they are doing," the official said when asked about whether Ukraine has used US-supplied HIMARS in its Kursk offensive.

The Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday that Russian units, while repelling attempts by the Ukrainian Armed Forces to invade Russian territory in the Kursk region, had destroyed three HIMARS launchers in the Sumy region with high-precision missile strikes. The Russian Foreign Ministry said on Friday that Ukrainian Forces used Western-made missiles, probably HIMARS systems, for the first time to attack civilian facilities in the Kursk region.

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US Has Not Seen HIMARS Being Moved to Kursk Region - Defense Official

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has not seen Ukraine move US-supplied High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) into the Kursk region, but they are being employed from within Ukrainian territory, a US defense official told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"We have not seen them being moved to Kursk or inside of Russia and as far as we can tell, Ukraine's HIMARS are being employed from within Ukraine," the official said when asked whether Ukraine has used US-provided HIMARS units in its Kursk offensive.

The Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday that Russian units, while repelling attempts by the Ukrainian Armed Forces to invade Russian territory in the Kursk region, had destroyed three HIMARS launchers in the Sumy region with high-precision missile strikes. The Russian Foreign Ministry said on Friday that Ukrainian Forces used Western-made missiles, probably HIMARS systems, for the first time to attack civilian facilities in the Kursk region.

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Banning Canonical Church in Ukraine 'Spiritual Shock' to Entire Country - ROCOR Priest

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - Banning the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) in Ukraine would cause a spiritual shock for the entire country, the rector of the Russian St. John the Baptist Cathedral in Washington, archpriest Victor Potapov, told Sputnik.

"This is going to be a spiritual shock to the entire country, to the canonical UOC. It is going to

sow a lot of discord within the Ukrainian people and that is the last thing they need right now. It is a travesty, it is a scandal and I just pray and hope that the Lord will not let it happen," Potapov said.

On Tuesday, the Ukrainian parliament passed a bill paving the way to ban the UOC over its historic links to the Moscow Patriarchate. Russian Orthodox Church spokesman Vladimir Legoyda warned that implementing the law would unleash violence against millions of worshippers.

Potapov said the Western continues often praise Ukraine for allegedly being a democracy, but the country is in fact an autocracy, where a group of fanatical national-chauvinists want to sever all ties with Russia.

The archpriest also called on the Ukrainian government not to meddle in church affairs.

"Why would the government want to ban the largest church in its country, the church which most Ukrainian faithful Christians attend?" Potapov asked.

On Tuesday, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the purpose of banning the UOC was to destroy "true Orthodoxy" and create a false church.

The pressure by the Ukrainian government on the UOC escalated after Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. UOC monks were ordered to leave the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, a historic Eastern Orthodox Christian monastery whose jurisdiction is divided between a Ukrainian cultural organization and the UOC, for allegedly violating the terms of the lease.

The UOC has historic links with the Russian Orthodox Church but it announced its full independence from the Moscow Patriarchate in May 2022. The Russian Orthodox Church has not recognized any changes in its relationship with the UOC.

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Majority of Generation Z Has 'Very Little' Trust in US Congress, Presidency - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - A majority of Generation Z in the United States has very little trust in the US Congress and presidency, a new Gallup/Walton Family Foundation poll revealed on Wednesday.

Fifty-three percent (53%) of respondents, who are between the ages of 12 and 27, have "very little" trust in the Congress, the poll report said.

Only 8% of respondents had either "quite a lot" or "a great deal" of trust in the Congress, the poll report said.

A majority of respondents, 51%, likewise have very little trust in the presidency, the poll report said.

Moreover, a plurality of respondents, 44%, have very little trust in the US Supreme Court as well, the poll report said.

Nevertheless, a majority of respondents, 79%, say they believe that they have a great future ahead of them, although only 51% feel prepared for the future, the poll report added.

The poll surveyed 4,157 respondents across the US from April 26 to May 9, 2024. The poll has a margin of error of plus-or-minus 2.1 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

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Trudeau Says It's in 'Best Interest' of Rail Companies, Union to Avert Strike

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Wednesday said that it was in the “best interest” of rail companies and workers union to settle their differences at the negotiating table and avert a strike.

“My message is very straightforward. It is in the best interest of both sides [companies and unions] to continue doing the hard work at the table to find a negotiated resolution,” Trudeau told reporters.

Millions of Canadians, workers, farmers and business nationwide are counting on the involved parties to work on finding a negotiated settlement, Trudeau said. Ottawa is following the rail negotiations “extremely closely,” he added.

Earlier this month, Teamsters Canada, the country’s largest transportation and supply chain union, warned that a strike action could paralyze railroad transport if the Canadian National Railway Company (CN) and the Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC) do not reach an agreement by August 22. Both companies move around C\$1 billion worth of goods on a daily basis according to the Railway Association of Canada.

The looming threat of a strike resulted from railroad giants seeking concessions regarding crew scheduling, rail safety, and fatigue management, according to the trade union. The CN and CPKC notably seek to water down the collective agreement of all safety-critical fatigue provisions, which would oblige train crews to stay awake longer, increasing the odds for derailments and other incidents.

Teamsters Canada is the country’s largest federally regulated private sector as well as transportation and supply chain union, with more than 130,000 members. The union represents close to 10,000 workers at the CN and CPKC, and over 1.2 million individuals across North America.

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US Experiencing Worst Recruiting Crisis in History Under Biden, Harris - Congressman

CHICAGO, August 21 (Sputnik) - The US military is experiencing the worst recruiting crisis in its history under the watch of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, US Congressman Mike Waltz said on Wednesday.

"We have a military now under their watch that has a recruiting crisis, the worst since Vietnam, the worst in the history of the all volunteer military," Walz said during a press briefing at Trump Tower in Chicago.

The United States now has an army that is the smallest since World War II and a navy that is smaller than China's.

"They [China] are tripling their nuclear arsenal, tripling it in size and lethality," Waltz added.

Waltz, a Republican from Florida and the first Green Beret to be elected to Congress, made the comments as the Democratic Party holds its national convention in Chicago.

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US Labor Dept Revises Job Growth Down by 818,000

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - The US Labor Department has revised down by 818,000 the jobs growth it originally reported for the 12 months to March, citing a "statistical error."

"The preliminary estimate of the benchmark revision indicates an adjustment to March 2024 total nonfarm employment of -818,000," the department said in a news release. The revision, which reduces by 0.5% jobs growth for the year, was due to a "statistical sampling error, [which] is greater at more detailed levels than at an aggregated level", the release said.

Prior to the revision, initial payroll figures indicated an addition of some 2.9 million total jobs during the year to March, or an average of 242,000 per month. With the revision, the monthly pace of growth is at around 174,000 — still robust though a moderation from the post-coronavirus peak of job growth, economists said.

"This one is quite a biggie," Julia Pollak, chief economist at ZipRecruiter, wrote on X platform, referring to the revision. She, however, added that the average monthly payroll gain "remains pretty strong post-revision".

Some say the revision highlights the vulnerability of the labor market, which until lately had been hailed as the juggernaut of US economic rebound from the COVID pandemic.

It could also influence how the Federal Reserve navigates US interest rate decisions going forth. The central bank raised rates 11 times over the last two years to fight post-COVID inflation that reached 40-year highs. Rates have been unchanged for the past year despite questions about the resilience of the economy, with the Fed often citing the stellar labor market as reason.

The next rate decision is on September 18, with bets growing that the central bank will have to make a cut.

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Vinnik's Attorney Does Not Expect He Will Be Exchanged Before Sentencing

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - The defense of Russian national Alexander Vinnik does not expect he will be part of a prisoner exchange between the United States and Russia before his sentencing early next year, Vinnik's lawyer Arkady Bukh told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"At this stage, we do not anticipate any prisoner exchange related to my client because he has not been sentenced. Usually, the US government does not exchange people who have not been sentenced yet," Bukh said.

The lawyer pointed out that the defense is preparing for the sentencing scheduled for the beginning of January.

"There are terabytes and terabytes of data related to the case, and that is what we are working with the government at this stage," he said.

Buk declined to speculate on the chance of a prisoner exchange after the sentencing, adding that there will be a change in the government in the US after the election in November.

"It will be a new president from either party, and it will be a definite shift in the political appetite, and we will see what will happen then," he said.

Vinnik's sentencing has been set for January 17, 2025, according to the court's database.

The US government accuses Vinnik of enabling criminal activity through the cryptocurrency exchange BTC-e by obscuring and anonymizing transactions and sources of funds.

One of the largest prisoner swaps between Russia and the United States, as well as several other European countries, took place in early August, bringing Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich and former Marine Paul Whelan back to the United States.

The list of Russians who returned home included Artem Dultsev, Anna Dultseva, and their children, Pavel Rubtsov, Vadim Konoshchenok, Mikhail Mikushin, Roman Seleznev, Vladislav Klyushin and Vadim Sokolov.

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Republicans Hold 5-Point Lead Over Democrats to Keep Control of US House - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - The Republican Party holds a five-point lead over Democrats on a generic ballot for US House of Representatives elections, a new Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Wednesday.

Forty-eight percent (48%) of respondents would vote for the Republican House candidate and 43% would vote for the Democrat, the poll report said.

However, 5% of respondents would vote for an alternative candidate and 4% are unsure, the poll report said.

Republicans currently hold a narrow majority in the House of Representatives, while Democrats aim to take control of the lower chamber of Congress on Election Day in November.

Republicans have a 19-point advantage among independents, the poll report said. Men favor Republicans by an eight-point margin whereas women are almost evenly split, with 45% supporting Republicans and 44% supporting Democrats, the poll report added.

The poll surveyed 1,142 likely voters in the United States on August 15, 18-19. The poll has a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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Blinken, Turkish Counterpart Discuss Efforts to Reach Ceasefire in Gaza - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan his recent trip to the Middle East and the efforts to reach a ceasefire in Gaza, State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Wednesday. "Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan today regarding the Secretary's recent trip to the Middle East," Patel said in a statement. "They discussed ongoing diplomatic efforts to prevent regional escalation and their shared commitment to creating conditions for a durable ceasefire, bringing the hostages home and ensuring vital humanitarian aid reaches those in need in Gaza."

The two diplomats also discussed a range of regional issues, the statement added.

Blinken's trip to Israel, Egypt and Qatar ended on Tuesday. It came amid renewed talks in Doha involving negotiators from Qatar, Egypt, Israel and the United States. The Palestinian movement Hamas refused to attend the negotiations, citing the lack of specifics on the terms of the proposed ceasefire.

The United States' ongoing efforts seek to make Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government and Hamas to sign a ceasefire and hostage-release agreement.

Blinken told the media on Tuesday that Israel had agreed to the terms of the updated peace agreement announced by US President Joe Biden in late May, adding that it contains a detailed schedule and locations for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza.

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Iran Will Retaliate Against Israel at 'Moment of Maximum Surprise' - Mission to UN

UNITED NATIONS, August 21 (Sputnik) - Iran will time its retaliation for the assassination of a Hamas political leader to catch Israel off guard, the Iranian mission to the United Nations told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"The timing, conditions, and manner of Iran's response will be meticulously orchestrated to ensure that it occurs at a moment of maximum surprise; perhaps when their eyes are fixed on the skies and their radar screens, they will be taken by surprise from the ground—or perhaps even by a combination of both," the Iranian mission said in a statement.

Iran's retaliation will be "carefully calibrated to avoid any possible adverse impact that could potentially influence a prospective ceasefire" in Gaza, the mission said.

The response is intended to induce "profound regret" within the Israeli government, the statement said.

Tensions between Iran and Israel escalated after the political chief of Palestinian movement Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, was assassinated in late July while he was in Tehran to attend the inauguration ceremony for Iran's new president. Tehran called the assassination an act of terrorism and infringement upon Iran's national sovereignty, vowing to retaliate.

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Republican Lawmakers Blast Tim Walz for Misrepresenting His Military Service - Letter

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - Fifty Republican lawmakers who are military veterans blasted Democratic vice presidential nominee Tim Walz for lying about the nature of his military service in a letter published on Wednesday.

"[T]here is no honor in lying about the nature of your service. Repeatedly claiming to be a 'Retired Command Sergeant Major' when you did not complete the requirements was not honorable. Nor was it honorable to claim to carry weapons 'in war' when you had not served in war, and abandoning the men and women under your leadership just as they were getting ready to deploy was certainly not honorable either," the letter said.

Walz, who served in the Minnesota Army National Guard, has faced renewed scrutiny about his characterization of his military service since becoming the vice presidential nominee. Critics say he has misrepresented or embellished his record to give the impression that he has served in combat.

The letter was signed by Congressman Brian Mast, who is the chair of Veterans and Military Families for Trump, as well as 45 other congressmen and four senators.

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US Official to Warn China of Sanctions Over Russia Trade During Hong Kong Trip – Reports

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Commerce for China and Mongolia Scott Shaw will visit Hong Kong and Beijing to raise the issue of China's trade with Russia and potential sanctions, The South China Morning Post reported on Wednesday, citing people familiar with the matter.

During his "end of August" trip to Hong Kong, Shaw intends to meet with his counterparts and "iron out some problems" between China's special administrative region and the United States, the report said.

After visiting Hong Kong, Shaw is expected to travel to Beijing to "communicate the US stance on various issues" to the Chinese government, according to the report.

In July, the Hong Kong government said that it "implements and strictly enforces" UN Security Council sanctions following a public call by Ukraine's foreign minister for the Asian financial hub to clamp down on alleged Russian efforts to use it to circumvent trade sanctions.

In May, the Biden administration imposed new Russia-related sanctions on several hundred entities, including 20 companies from mainland China and Hong Kong for their alleged support for the Russian military.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry has called the US interference with the normal trade and economic interaction between Russia and China "hypocritical and irresponsible," noting that the US has been "adding fuel to the fire" of the Ukraine conflict.

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US Official to Visit Argentina, Ecuador, Peru for Critical Minerals Talks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - US Undersecretary for Economic Growth, Energy and the Environment Jose Fernandez will travel to Argentina, Ecuador and Peru to discuss critical minerals supply chains and promote economic ties, the State Department said on Wednesday.

"Under Secretary for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Jose W. Fernandez will travel to Argentina, Ecuador, and Peru from August 21-29 to engage key partners in the Western Hemisphere on critical minerals supply chains and developments in the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity, and to promote trade and economic opportunities with the United States," the department said in a statement.

In Argentina, Fernandez will lead a delegation of State and Energy department officials that will meet with their Argentine counterparts on August 22 to sign a memorandum of understanding on critical minerals, the statement said.

The undersecretary will also open the US-Argentina Energy Security Dialogue and meet with provincial officials and the private sector to discuss cooperation opportunities in critical minerals supply chains, it added.

In Ecuador, Fernandez plans to meet with private sector representatives, including the Business Council for International Understanding (BCIU) and the American Chamber of Commerce, the release said. The undersecretary will also discuss key regional economic opportunities with the Ecuadorian ministries of energy, mining, finance and production.

Lastly, from August 28-29 the senior official will be join a series of discussions on the economic, investment, and infrastructure climate in Peru with groups convened by the BCIU. Fernandez will also mark the 15th anniversary of the US-Peru Trade Promotion Agreement, according to the statement.