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8/27/24 Tuesday

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Zuckerberg's Letter Portends More - Not Less - Censorship

The founder of Meta,* Mark Zuckerberg, expressed regret that he did not push back against pressure from the US government to censor speech on Meta's Facebook platform in a letter to US House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan (R-OH). The tech billionaire asserted that his platform is ready to "push back" against similar attempts.

The letter, made public on Monday, comes days after Telegram CEO Pavel Durov was detained in France over allegations that Durov did not moderate content on his platform extensively enough to satisfy European Union censorship laws thoroughly enough.

The letter noted that Meta was pressured into suppressing posts about COVID-19, even satirical ones, and was also primed in advance to censor stories about the infamous laptop of Hunter Biden, the son of President Joe Biden during the 2020 presidential campaign.

Zuckerberg's letter has largely been celebrated by free speech advocates as both a confirmation of their suspicions and as one of America's most influential billionaires joining the fight against the crackdown on online speech. However, a close reading of Zuckerberg's letter and recent comments reveals that his intention likely is not to end or reduce censorship but rather to increase censorship, just in a non-partisan way.

"I think Zuckerberg is trying to rebrand. I think that's really what this is. I think he's wanting to get out of politics entirely," independent journalist and political talk show host Kim Iverson told Sputnik's Political Misfits on Tuesday. "He's losing people on the right that feel like Facebook and Meta in general is censoring everybody and then he's losing people on the left that are pointing the finger at him and saying that it's his fault for [Former US President Donald] Trump winning."

In an interview with US media last month, before Durov was arrested, Zuckerberg said his platforms are making changes to become less political.

"The main thing I hear from people is they actually want to see less political content on our services because they come to our services to connect with people," Zuckerberg explained in the interview, reportedly also saying that his platforms already are recommending less political content to their users.

"He flat out said they're going to be demoting content that is political," Iverson explained. "They're really going to try to limit it because they want their platforms to be more about connection and social rather than political."

As Political Misfits host Michelle Witte noted, Facebook recently banned news outlet The Cradle from its platform. The Cradle has published significant investigations into the Israeli war on Gaza and its banning is another sign that Zuckerberg's letter does not portend a more open platform.

"I think that Mark Zuckerberg is clearly very much afraid of Congress. He's afraid of the government and he's still behaving that way," Iverson asserted. "[He is] literally just saying I'm

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going to censor all of you, in particular anything that's going to get me in trouble, which is everything and anything."
*Meta, which owns Facebook, is banned in Russia for extremist activities

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Fitch Says Outcome of November Election Could Result in Revival of US Trade Protectionism

WASHINGTON, August 28 (Sputnik) - The outcome of the US November elections could lead to a new rise in American trade protectionism, Fitch Ratings said on Wednesday.
"The outcome of November's US elections could result in a renewed surge in US trade protectionism," Fitch Ratings said in a press release.

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US Intelligence Agencies See Diversity, Agile Workforce as Essential - Director Haines

WASHINGTON, August 28 (Sputnik) - The US intelligence community is focusing on encouraging its workforce to be agile and show initiative in recognizing threats and it sees increased gender and other forms of diversity as essential to achieving that goal, Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Avril Haines told a national security summit in Baltimore hosted by the Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association International (AFCEA) and the Intelligence and National Security Alliance (INSA).
"Most of us [leading the main US intelligence agencies] see the workforce, the institution, our capacity to be agile and capable of addressing the threats as a consequence of having the talented and diverse workforce that you need in the institutions," Haines said.
The recruitment and then the retention of the talented workforce that was required to maintain US national security was the most important part of the job and was vital to create a lasting national heritage in the intelligence institutions for the future, Haines continued.
"It is so important. We have an extraordinarily talented workforce and often they feel they cannot do that job because of other barriers around them," she said.
The US intelligence community had focused a great deal on recruiting more science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) talent and also needed to recruit from the humanities too, Haines added.

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Northrop to Boost Trident Target ICBM Missile For Tests With New Mortar - Release

WASHINGTON, August 28 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman is providing its old Trident C4, submarine-launched intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) target vehicle with a new rocket

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motor, the company announced in a press release.

"Northrop Grumman Corporation is redesigning the ICBM target vehicle for the Missile Defense Agency (MDA)," the release stated on Tuesday.

The new design will replace the target's heritage Trident C4 first-stage solid rocket motor with a Peacekeeper SR119 motor to provide extended range, lift capability, and payload capacity for ICBM target missions, the company explained.

"Northrop Grumman modified the retired SR119 rocket motor to serve as a first-stage motor, meeting mission performance requirements with minimal changes to its original design. The new ICBM design creates target longevity to support future missile defense testing," the release said.

The company completed the Critical Design Review of its redesigned ICBM target earlier this month, and the redesigned vehicle is slated to take its first flight in late 2025, the release said.

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Texas Has Removed 1Mln Ineligible People from Voter Rolls in States Sine 2021 - Governor

WASHINGTON, August 28 (Sputnik) - The state of Texas has removed more than 1 million ineligible people from its voter rolls since 2021 as a means to prevent potential illegal voting, Texas Governor Greg Abbott's office said in a press release.

"Since signing Senate Bill 1 into law in 2021, Texas has removed over one million people from the state's voter rolls, including people who moved out-of-state, are deceased, and are noncitizens," the release said.

That removal process of ineligible persons from the state's voter rolls will continue, the release added.

A majority of people removed from the Texas voter rolls were deceased people and voters on the suspense list, which is voters who the state has no confirmation of their current place of residency.

Abbott has previously said this measure is to protect the integrity of the US election.

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Trump Says Harris Should Call for Dismissal of New Indictment Filed Against Him

WASHINGTON, August 28 (Sputnik) — Former President Donald Trump said that Kamala Harris should immediately call for the dismissal of the new indictment, arguing that the case should be thrown out based on presidential immunity.

"This travesty is now on Comrade Kamala Harris, who is actively pushing it, rather than immediately calling for its dismissal, as should be done," Trump said on Truth Social on Tuesday.

Trump went on to say that Smith, aware of the US Supreme Court's clear ruling on presidential immunity, had attempted to circumvent this decision by rewriting the same case.

"The people of our Country will see what is happening with all of these corrupt lawsuits against

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me, and will REJECT them by giving me an overwhelming Victory on November 5th for President of the United States," Trump added.

Earlier today, a US grand jury returned with a new four-count indictment filed by Special Counsel Jack Smith against former US president Donald Trump for an alleged attempt to subvert the outcome of the 2020 election.

Smith's recrafting of the indictment comes after the US Supreme Court ruled in July that Trump was immune to prosecution on the basis of official acts conducted as part of his role as president.

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US Army Orders Nearly $1Bln Capability to Destroy Tanks, Vehicles at Distance - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 28 (Sputnik) - AeroVironment has won a nearly one billion dollar US Army contract to provide a stand-off capability to infantry forces to destroy tanks, light armored vehicles and hardened targets, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"AeroVironment [of] Simi Valley, California, was awarded a $990 million ...contract to provide an organic, stand-off capability to dismounted infantry formations capable of destroying tanks, light armored vehicles, hardened targets, defilade and personnel targets," the release stated on Tuesday.

Work on the project is scheduled to take five years with an estimated completion date of August 26, 2029, the Defense Department said.

The US Army Contracting Command located at the Aberdeen Proving Ground in the state of Maryland will oversee the work as its contracting activity, the Defense Department said.

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US Army Orders $494Mln More Assault Rifle Ammunition From Saab - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 28 (Sputnik) - The US Army has ordered nearly half a million dollars worth of small arms assault rifle ammunition from the Swedish company Saab, the Defense Department announced.

"Saab [of] East Syracuse, New York, was awarded a $494,350,000 ... contract for XM919 Individual Assault Munition," the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday

Work to fulfill the order is scheduled to take five years with an estimated completion date of August 26, 2029, the release said.

The US Army Contracting Command, Newark, New Jersey will oversee work on the order as its contracting activity, the release added.

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CNN Says Will Conduct First Exclusive Joint Interview With Harris, Walz

WASHINGTON, August 28 (Sputnik) - CNN announced that Vice President Kamala Harris and Minnesota Governor Tim Walz will participate in their first joint interview on Thursday.

The interview will be conducted by the media outlet's chief political correspondent and anchor Dana Bash, and is scheduled to air at 9:00 p.m. EST on Thursday.

The US presidential election is scheduled for November 5. In July, President Joe Biden said he was withdrawing from the race in the best interest of the Democratic Party and the nation.

Last week, delegates at the Democratic National Convention officially made Harris their nominee following a ceremonial vote.

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UPDATE - US Special Counsel Smith Files New Election Charges Against Trump - Court Papers

(Updates with more details, background in paras 2-11)

WASHINGTON, August 28 (Sputnik) - A US grand jury has returned a new four-count indictment filed by Special Counsel Jack Smith against former President Donald Trump for his alleged attempt to subvert the outcome of the 2020 election, court documents showed.

Smith said in the new indictment against Trump that "he lost the 2020 presidential election" but he "was determined to remain in power."

So, the former president "did knowingly, combine, conspire, confederate and agree with co-conspirators, known and unknown to the grand jury, to injure, oppress, threaten and intimidate one or more persons … the right to vote and to have one's vote counted," Smith added.

Smith's recrafting of the indictment comes after the US Supreme Court ruled in July that Trump was immune to prosecution on the basis of official acts conducted as part of his role as president.

Also, last month, Aileen Cannon, a district court judge in Florida appointed by Trump, ruled that US Attorney General Merrick Garland exceeded his constitutional authority in appointing Smith to the case. Cannon had described Smith as a prosecutor not subject to Congressional approval.

The special counsel has already filed an appeal against that judge's ruling, seeking to reverse her order that the case be dismissed.

Smith's amended 35-page indictment against Trump is 10 pages shorter than the preceding one. It contains a more narrow set of accusations against the former president, taking into consideration the Supreme Court's observation of immunity from prosecution for official acts.

US media reports said Smith has been consulting with officials inside the Justice Department for weeks to retool his case that accuses Republican Trump of leading a conspiracy to overturn the 2020 election won by his Democratic rival Joe Biden.

Smith has also tied his case against Trump to the storming of the US Capitol building by the

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former president's supporters on January 6, 2021, after Trump allegedly incited them. A total of nine people, including five police officers, died in relation to the incident.

Trump has denied all charges brought by Smith. His lawyers say his words and actions on and before Jan. 6, 2021, amounted to legitimate inquiry about possible election fraud. Supreme Court judges he appointed have sided with him, giving him "absolute immunity" for acts that are "core" to his official duties.

Trump is running for president again in November's election and faces Biden's deputy, Vice President Kamala Harris, as his Democratic challenger this time. Smith's case is expected to come to trial only after the election, and that too if Harris becomes president. If Trump wins, he will likely stop the case from proceeding.

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US General, Diplomat Meet Libya's Haftar to Discuss Partnership, Security – US Embassy

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) – Chief of the US Africa Command Gen. Michael Langly and the US Embassy Chargé d'Affaires Jeremy Berndt met with the Libyan National Army (LNA) commander Gen. Khalifa Haftar to discuss partnership and regional security, US Embassy in Libya said on Tuesday.

"General Langley and Chargé d'Affaires Berndt met today with LNA commander Haftar in Benghazi to discuss the commitment of the United States to strengthen our partnership with Libyans from all parts of the country," the embassy said on X.

The two sides also discussed Washington's support for Libyan efforts to safeguard sovereignty amidst regional security challenges, it added.

"They also highlighted the importance of preserving Libya's stability and of de-escalation in the context of current tensions. The United States urges all Libyan stakeholders to engage constructively in dialogue," the statement said.

Libya has been ruled by rival governments in the west and in the east of the country since 2014. The United Nations-backed Government of National Unity is based in Tripoli, while the east is governed by the Libyan army-backed Government of National Stability. The country's south has been overrun by tribal armed groups.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 28 (Sputnik) –

KURSK NPP

* International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi said on Tuesday after visiting the Kursk NPP that the situation at the plant was serious.

* Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom head Alexey Likhachev said that he had agreed with Grossi on the immediate reaction of the agency to any manifestations of aggression against

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Kursk and Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plants.
* Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom will do everything to launch the first unit of the Kursk nuclear power plant (NPP)-2 this year, CEO Alexey Likhachev said.
* The IAEA shares Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom's point of view that attack on the Kursk NPP will impact global nuclear energy industry, Likhachev said.
* The IAEA can propose a number of steps and measures to ensure the safety of the Kursk nuclear power plant (NPP), Grossi said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg will convene a meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Council on August 28 at the request of Kiev, Reuters reported on Tuesday, citing a representative of the alliance.
* Ukraine's demands to the West to allow the use of Storm Shadow missiles on Moscow and St. Petersburg are blackmail, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.
* Russia's Yug (South) group of forces has repelled one counterattack and eliminated up to 780 Ukrainian servicepeople over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

MIDDLE EAST

* The Israel military, in a joint operation with the Israel Security Agency (ISA), has rescued a hostage in the Gaza Strip who was kidnapped by the Palestinian movement Hamas during the October 7 attack, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said on Tuesday.
* The United Nations is going to pay close attention to bringing justice and accountability to the perpetrators who committed crimes against civilians in Gaza, UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.
* The Israel military, in a joint operation with the Israel Security Agency (ISA), has rescued a hostage in the Gaza Strip who was kidnapped by the Palestinian movement Hamas during the October 7 attack, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said.

SITUATION IN RUSSIA'S BORDER REGIONS

* The Ukrainian armed forces have lost more than 6,600 servicepeople and 73 tanks since the beginning of the operation in the Kursk direction, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Tuesday.
* The consequences of Russia's actions in response to the US involvement in Ukraine's attacks on the Kursk Region can be much more severe than they have been so far, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL

* Russia's doctrine on the use of nuclear weapons is currently under clarification, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Tuesday.
* China's initiative providing for the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, known as P5, concluding a treaty on non-first use of nuclear weapons, makes sense, Moscow is in contact with China on this issue, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

PUTIN-MODI TALKS

* Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has briefed Russian President Vladimir Putin on his visit to Ukraine during a phone conversation, noting India's interest in contributing to a possible settlement of the situation, the Kremlin said on Tuesday.
* Modi said that he had discussed with Putin bilateral relations and the conflict in Ukraine.

DUROV'S ARREST IN FRANCE

* Russia is ready to provide legal assistance to Telegram founder and CEO Pavel Durov, who

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was detained in France, given his Russian citizenship, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday.
* Russia is waiting for the response of France to its note regarding the detention of Durov, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

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US Special Counsel Files New Indictment Against Trump in Election Case - Court Document

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - A US grand jury has returned a new four-count indictment filed by Special Counsel Jack Smith against former US president Donald Trump for alleged attempt to subvert the outcome of the 2020 election, court documents showed on Tuesday.
The superseding indictment contains a more narrow set of accusations against Trump after the US Supreme Court ruled in July that he is immune to prosecution on the basis of "official acts" conducted as part of his role as president.
"Donald J. Trump did knowingly, combine, conspire, confederate and agree with co-conspirators, known and unknown to the grand jury, to injure, oppress, threaten and intimidate one or more persons … the right to vote and to have one's vote counted," Smith said in one of the new four charges against Trump.

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Advocacy Groups Call on Pentagon to Address Unsanitary Conditions on US Bases - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Eight US advocacy groups led by an organization called Hots&Cots are calling on the Defense Department to address unsanitary conditions on US military bases around the world, NBC News reported on Tuesday.
Hots&Cots has shared photos with NBC depicting mold-covered ceilings on a base in South Korea, a roach on a counter at a Texas Air Force base, and visibly dirty water flowing from a faucet on a New Jersey base, among other problems, the report said.
"The Department of Defense must act sooner rather than later to address the quality-of-life issues facing our service members," the report quoted Hots&Cots founder Rob Evans as saying. "Every day that these issues go unresolved is another day that the well-being and morale of those who serve are compromised."
Commenting on the poor sanitary situation on US bases, Congressman Richard Hudson pointed out that even though the US Army appropriates money for improving housing conditions, the funds are not being used efficiently to ensure necessary basic living conditions.

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us special counsel jack smith files new four-count indictment against trump in election subversion case - court document

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Artemis IV Moon Mission Mobile Launcher May Cost $2.7Bln, Be Delayed to 2029 - Report

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - NASA's costing and scheduling plans to build a second mobile launching (ML-2) for the Artemis Manned Lunar landing program's Space Launch System (SLS) are not sustainable and it will cost more than five times its original projected amount and be at least six years behind schedule, the US space agency's Inspector General announced in a new report.

"(O)ur projections indicate the total cost could reach $2.7 billion by the time Bechtel delivers the ML-2 to NASA. With the time NASA requires after delivery to prepare the launcher, we project the ML-2 will not be ready to support a launch until spring 2029," the Inspector-General said on Tuesday.

NASA officials disagreed with this analysis and they expect cost growth to be less, the report noted.

"In 2019, NASA estimated the entire ML-2 project from design through construction would cost under $500 million, with construction completed and the ML-2 delivered to NASA by March 2023. However, by December 2023, NASA estimated the ML-2 project would cost $1.5 billion, including $1.3 billion for the Bechtel contract and $168 million for other project costs, with the delivery of the launcher to NASA in November 2026," the report said.

NASA is developing the ML-2 second mobile launcher as another ground structure used to assemble, transport, and launch the Space Launch System (SLS) rocket and Orion crew capsule to support larger variants of the SLS, beginning with the planned manned Artemis IV mission, the report acknowledged.

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Chinese Hackers Exploit Zero-Day Vulnerability in Versa Director Servers - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Lumen Technologies' Black Lotus Labs said in a statement on Tuesday that a zero-day vulnerability in Versa Director servers was exploited by Chinese hackers to compromise several internet companies.

"The Black Lotus Labs team at Lumen Technologies discovered active exploitation of a zero-day vulnerability in Versa Director servers, identified as CVE-2024-39717 and publicly announced on August 22, 2024," the statement said.

Black Lotus Labs attributes the exploitation of the servers and the use of the VersaMem web shell to the Chinese state-sponsored groups Volt Typhoon and Bronze Silhouette, with the assessment suggesting ongoing attacks on unpatched Versa Director systems, the statement said.

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"The web shell's primary purpose is to intercept and harvest credentials which would enable access into downstream customers' networks as an authenticated user. VersaMem is also modular in nature and enables the threat actors to load additional Java code to run exclusively in-memory," the statement said.

The hack affected four US and one non-US victim in the Internet service provider (ISP), managed service provider (MSP), and information technology sectors, with the exploitation starting on June 12, the statement added.

Black Lotus Labs advised users of Versa Director to update to version 22.1.4 or later, while Lumen Technologies informed US Government agencies of emerging risks affecting national strategic assets, according to the statement.

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US Navy Shipbuilder Pleads Guilty to Multi-Million Financial Fraud Scheme - Justice Dept

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Alabama-based shipbuilding company Austal USA has entered a guilty plea to federal charges of securities fraud and obstructing a Pentagon audit and has agreed to pay $24 million to resolve the case, the Department of Justice announced on Tuesday.

Austal USA is a wholly owned subsidiary of Australian company Austal Limited.

"Austal USA, a Mobile, Alabama-based shipbuilder that constructs vessels for the US Navy and US Coast Guard, pleaded guilty today and has agreed to pay $24 million to resolve an investigation by the Justice Department," the release said.

The guilty plea related to an alleged accounting fraud scheme and efforts to obstruct the Defense Contract Audit Agency (DCAA) during a financial capability audit, the Justice Department explained.

"Austal USA, a shipbuilder for the US military, engaged in a years-long scheme to illegally inflate its profits on ships the company was building for the US Navy, reporting false financial results to investors, lenders, and its auditors," Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General Nicole Argentieri, head of the Justice Department's Criminal Division, said in the release.

According to court documents, from around 2013 to around July 2016, Austal USA and its co-conspirators conspired to mislead Austal Limited's shareholders, independent financial statement auditors and the investing public about the company's financial condition, the Justice Department said.

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Biden Says Texas Court 'Wrong' for Blocking His Plan to Protect Migrant Spouses

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that a US federal judge in Texas is wrong for temporarily blocking his plan to protect migrant spouses.

"Last night, a single district court in Texas ruled that our work to keep families together has to

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stop. That ruling is wrong," Biden said in a press release. "These families should not be needlessly separated. They should be able to stay together, and my Administration will not stop fighting for them."

Biden further said that his plan was not politically motivated but meant to help solve problems, including preventing families from being torn apart.

On Monday, a federal judge in Texas issued an order temporarily blocking Biden's plan to protect hundreds of thousands of undocumented spouses of US citizens from deportation.

The judge's order provides a 14-day pause amid a lawsuit from 16 Republican-led states that sued the Biden administration over the program.

Biden's program went into effect last week and would apply to migrant spouses of US citizens who have been in the United States for at least 10 years. The program would also allow them to work in the United States legally.

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Mexico's Relationship With US Ambassador 'On Hold' Over His Recent Remarks - President

(Updates with comments in para 3, background in para 6)

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) – Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said on Tuesday that his country had paused its relationship with US Ambassador Ken Salazar over his recent remarks regarding a proposed judicial reform in the country.

"It's good but it's on hold … ever since he made the remarks," Lopez Obrador said, when asked about the status of the relationship with Salazar.

The US always works with utmost respect for Mexican sovereignty, Salazar replied as he shared an English translated version of the statement issued by the American embassy on August 23.

On Thursday, Salazar issued a statement voicing his opposition to a judicial reform put forward by the Mexican president that would allow for judges to be elected by popular vote. The ambassador said it posed a risk to the Mexican democracy and to the historic bilateral trade relations.

Lopez Obrador criticized the US ambassador for what he said was interference in Mexico's domestic affairs. The same day, the Mexican Secretariat for Foreign Affairs sent a diplomatic note protesting the interference.

On Saturday, the US Embassy issued a response to the diplomatic note saying the mission maintained that it supports Mexico strengthening the rule of law throughout judicial reform. However, the US Embassy also said that it remained concerned that electing judges via popular vote might not address potential corruption nor that it will enhance the Mexico's judicial power.

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Trump Says Reached Deal to Debate Harris on 'ABC Fake News' on September 10

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - US Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump announced on Tuesday that he has reached an agreement to debate his Democratic rival Kamala Harris on ABC news on September 10, but said she did not agree to a second debate on the Fox News network.

"I have reached an agreement with the Radical Left Democrats for a Debate with Comrade Kamala Harris," Trump said. "It will be Broadcast Live on ABC FAKE NEWS, by far the nastiest and most unfair newscaster in the business, on Tuesday, September 10th, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania."

Trump said the rules will be the same as they were during the recent CNN debate he had with President Joe Biden. During the CNN debate, microphones were muted when it was not a candidate's turn to speak, and candidates could not bring notes.

"Harris would not agree to the FoxNews Debate on September 4th, but that date will be held open in case she changes her mind or, Flip Flops, as she has done on every single one of her long held and cherished policy beliefs," he added. "A possible third Debate, which would go to NBC FAKE NEWS, has not been agreed to by the Radical Left."

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Oil Prices Swing Near August-End As China Worries Offset Libya, Iran Risks

NEW YORK, August 27 (Sputnik) - Crude prices are swinging dramatically as August trading nears its end, with softer economic data out of top importer China offsetting output disruptions in Libya and the potential for an Iran strike on Israel that could reignite geopolitical risk in the oil-rich Middle East.

US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude settled Tuesday's trade down $1.89, or 2.4%, at $75.53 per barrel, after rising almost 7.5% over the past three sessions.

UK-origin Brent finished its latest New York trading session down $1.88, or 2.3%, at $79.55 per barrel, rolling back part of the near 7% gain over three prior days.

With three sessions left until the final trading session of August, crude prices are headed for a second straight month of losses without a significant turnaround. Month-to-date, WTI is down 3% after a 4.5% drop in July. Brent is 2.6% lower, after last month's deficit of 6.5%.

Goldman Sachs, Wall Street's leading forecaster of oil prices, slashed its outlook on Brent by $5 to a wide range of between $70 and $85 for the remainder of the year. For 2025, it expected a barrel to average $77, versus $82 before.

Daan Struyven, head of oil research at Goldman, told the bank's clients in a Monday note that demand in China had softened as the world's second-largest economy turns from gasoline-powered cars to electric vehicles.

Crude supply in the United States was also beating expectations, Struyven said.

Economists say sputtering growth in top oil importer China has become glaringly evident in recent months.

Prices of newly-constructed Chinese home prices fell 4.9% in July from a year earlier, the

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fastest drop in nine years, according to calculations by Reuters. Unemployment ticked up last month by 0.2% to 5.2%, with the 16-24 age group, particularly, hit by a 17% jobless rate — the highest since such data became available in December.

Prior to Tuesday, oil traders focused on something else that boosted prices for three straight sessions: Production curbs in Libya and concerns of a major Iranian response to Israeli military actions.

A shutdown of Libya's oil fields could curtail the OPEC-member's roughly 1.2 million-barrel per day of output. The Middle East is also seeing renewed tensions from face-offs between Israel and the Iran-backed Hezbollah group in Lebanon.

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Harris Closing Gap on Trump's Lead on Economy, Crime in New Election Poll

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump is beginning to lose his edge over Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris on the economy and crime, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll released on Tuesday.

The poll showed 43% of likely US voters favored Trump's approach to the economy and employment compared to 40% who preferred Harris' plan.

A poll conducted by Reuters/Ipsos in late July showed Trump had an 11-point advantage on the economy.

On crime and corruption, this month's poll showed Harris and Trump were tied at 40% support on each topic among likely US voters, which shows the vice president is gaining momentum after trailing Trump by 5 points in the July poll.

The poll surveyed 1,028 adults nationwide from August 23 to 25 and has a margin of error of plus-or-minus 4%.

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UN Says Running Out of 'Safe Spaces' for Staff in Gaza as Polio Vaccine Campaign Looms

UNITED NATIONS, August 27 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is running out of safe spaces for its staff in Gaza amid the ongoing Israeli military operations as a polio vaccination campaign is set to kick off next week, Under-Secretary-General for Safety and Security Gilles Michaud said on Tuesday.

"Like most Palestinians in Gaza, we are running out of safe spaces for our own staff," Michaud said in a statement.

The timing could hardly be worse as the start of a massive polio vaccination campaign is scheduled for next week, with large numbers of staff needing to enter the Gaza Strip, Michaud said.

Actions by the Israel Defense Forces this weekend compound existing security threats and seriously impact the pace at which the UN can deliver vaccines safely, the statement said.

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Last week, the UN said that the polio vaccination of more than 600,000 children in the Gaza Strip will begin soon, with a second round planned four weeks later. The World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), along with other partners, have been preparing two rounds of polio vaccination campaigns targeting children under the age of 10.

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

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trump says has reached agreement for debate with harris on 'ABC fake news,' says she did not agree to fox debate

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Biden Questions Palestinian Death Toll in Gaza, Contradicts US Experts - Ex-Official

WASHINGTON, August 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden questioned the reported Palestinian death toll in the Gaza Strip, contradicting the estimates provided by US government experts, former US State Department diplomat Hala Rharrit said on Tuesday.

"President Biden questioned the number of Palestinians killed in Gaza. This is in direct contradiction to US government experts who from the start have always stipulated, even publicly, the number is likely higher than that is reported by the Gaza health ministry. But that narrative was pushed and it was a dehumanizing narrative," Rharrit said at an event hosted by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR).

The diplomat made the comment in response to a question about the impact of racism or Islamophobia on US policy.

Earlier on Tuesday, CAIR hosted an event on how Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism influence the Biden administration's policy toward Gaza.

Last year, the Palestinian Health Ministry reported 7,326 deaths and 18,967 injuries due to Israeli bombardments since October 7. However, on October 25 Biden expressed skepticism about those numbers, saying he had "no confidence" in the figures and remarked that innocent deaths are an inevitable consequence of war.

The ministry has subsequently said that more than 40,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces in Gaza to date.

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House Panel Probes Biden Admin. Attempts to Remove Age Limits for Transgender Care –Letter

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WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) – House Subcommittee on Health Care and Financial Services chairwoman Lisa McClain in a letter to US Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Xavier Becerra on Tuesday requested documents related to the Biden administration's attempts to remove age restrictions related to transgender surgeries.

The subcommittee is requesting the information related to an ongoing investigation into HHS' attempts to pressure the World Professional Association of Transgender Health (WPATH) to drop minimum age standards for pediatric transgender surgeries, according to the letter.

"[HHS] officials applied this inappropriate pressure by urging for the removal of age limits that expands the pool of children and adolescents recommended for irreversible gender transition surgical procedures. The Committee requests documents and information from HHS to assist our investigation of this matter," the letter read.

In her letter, McClain argues that by trying to pressure WPATH, the Biden administration has been seeking to use it for political advantage by satisfying "extremist elements" of its base.

According to the letter, in December 2021, WPATH published its draft recommendations on lowering the age minimums to age 14 for cross-sex hormone treatments, age 15 for transgender mastectomies, age 16 for transgender breast augmentation and facial surgery, and age 17 for transgender genital surgeries and hysterectomies.

However, the final version of the recommendations published in 2022 contains no age minimums after Assistant Secretary for Health Rachel Levine made WPATH remove them after a series of meetings.

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New Hampshire Health Dept. Announces Death of Adult With EEEV Infection - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 26 (Sputnik) - An adult from New Hampshire who tested positive for Eastern Equine Encephalitis Virus (EEEV) and was hospitalized with severe central nervous system disease has died, the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health Services has identified an adult from Hampstead, New Hampshire, who tested positive for Eastern Equine Encephalitis Virus infection, was hospitalized due to severe central nervous system disease, and has passed away due to their illness," the statement said.

EEEV has been found in one horse and seven mosquito batches in New Hampshire this summer and has also been detected in neighboring states, with cases reported in Massachusetts and Vermont, the statement said.

"EEEV is a rare but serious disease transmitted to people by infected mosquitos. The last reported human EEEV infection in New Hampshire was in 2014, when DHHS identified three human infections, including two fatalities," the statement added.

The virus may also cause severe neurological conditions and no vaccine or antiviral treatment exists for EEEV.

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UN to Focus on Justice For Crimes Against Civilians in Gaza- Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, August 27 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is going to pay close attention to bringing justice and accountability to the perpetrators who committed crimes against civilians in Gaza, UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"… there will need to be accountability for all the violations against civilians that we have seen in this conflict," Dujarric said during a UN briefing to journalists. "… this is something that we will be following extremely carefully."

In addition, the UN will focus on justice for crimes against civilians, particularly from October 2023, he said.

On Sunday, the Human Rights Watch concluded a report in which it claims that Israeli forces have "detained Palestinian healthcare workers in Gaza" ever since the fighting started last year in October 2023. The organization also accuses Israel of "torture and ill-treatment" in its detention facilities.

On Sunday, a new round of talks on a ceasefire and hostages release deal between Israel and Hamas took place in Cairo. CIA Director William Burns, Qatar Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani and senior officials from Israel and Egypt participated in the talks.

However, the talks did not result in reaching an agreement because Israel and Hamas refused to accept a number of the mediators' proposals, according to media reports.

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UN Security Council Reform Process Must Contribute to Unity of Member States - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, August 27 (Sputnik) - The reform process of the UN Security Council must enhance unity among member states and seek to increase the representation of African countries, Chinese Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations Dai Bing said on Tuesday.

"The reform process must contribute to enhancing the unity of member states," Dai said during a meeting of the UN General Assembly. "[It must] effectively increase the representation and the voice of developing countries, and Africa's demand for redressing historical injustices [must] be given priority and special treatment."

Dai said China wishes to continue contributing to reforming the UN Security Council by forging the broadest consensus possible among the members.

Earlier in August, Russian Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said UN Security Council membership must remain limited in order to preserve its authority.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also has said that the UN Security Council needs a permanent voice for Africa among its ranks.

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US Consumer Confidence Spikes Despite High Interest Rates, Slower Jobs Growth - Report

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - A measure of US consumer confidence hit six-month highs in August although Americans continued to cite the impact of high interest rates on their lives, The Conference Board, a multi-organization initiative dedicated to tracking the economy, said on Tuesday.

The August reading on consumer sentiment by The Conference Board rose to 103.3 from July's 101.9. That was the highest since February, the board, which is made up of more than 1,000 public and private corporations and organizations that include research and non-profit groups, said.

Beyond the current month's reading, the board said a poll of consumer sentiment expectations for the next six months also rose in August, to a one-year high of 82.5.

The board offered two plausible reasons for the spike: Long-awaited interest rate-cuts by the Federal Reserve that are likely to begin by next month and the continued - albeit slow - easing of inflation from the heights of the economic destruction wrought by the pandemic measures.

Confidence remains well shy of the pre-pandemic highs seen in 2019, especially with the current decline in jobs growth, the board said.

"Overall consumer confidence rose in August but remained within the narrow range that has prevailed over the past two years," Dana Peterson, chief economist at The Conference Board, said. "Consumers continued to express mixed feelings in August."

While consumers were more positive about business conditions this month, they were also more concerned about the labor market, Peterson said.

"Consumers' assessments of the current labor situation, while still positive, continued to weaken, and assessments of the labor market going forward were more pessimistic," Peterson said. "This likely reflects the recent increase in unemployment."

Notwithstanding the overall improvement in consumer sentiment, confidence still declined among those earning less than $25,000 per year, Peterson added.

On a six-month moving average basis, consumers earning over $100,000 per year remained the most confident, she said. Confidence among those making $15,000 to $24,900 per year continued to trend down and was almost as low as for those earning less than $15,000.

The Labor Department last week revised down by 818,000 the growth in payrolls it originally reported during the 12 months to March, citing a "statistical error." That was the highest markdown in job estimates since the post-financial crisis era of 2009 and highlights the vulnerability of the labor market following the post-pandemic jobs boom.

Interest rates, at between 5.25% and 5.5%, are their highest in two decades. The Federal Reserve is widely expected to carry out its first post-pandemic rate cut at a rate decision scheduled on September 18.

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US Lawmakers Raise Concerns Over DJI's Use of Anzu to Circumvent US Restrictions -Letter

WASHINGTON, August 26 (Sputnik) — Two US House lawmakers have requested detailed information from the CEO of Anzu Robotics regarding the company's alleged ties with Chinese military drone manufacturer Da Jiang Innovations (DJI), the Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Chairman John Moolenaar (R-MI) and Ranking Member Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-IL) of the House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party wrote to the CEO of Anzu Robotics, demanding answers about his company's relationship with People's Republic of China (PRC) military drone company, DJI," the statement said.

According to the letter, research has found that Anzu's Raptor T drone is a rebranded DJI Mavic 3, suggesting DJI may be using Anzu to circumvent US restrictions.

Furthermore, Anzu's CEO admitted that the partnership aimed to avoid US regulations and noted unusual terms such as no royalties or joint ownership, despite DJI providing priority support, the letter said.

Due to Anzu's connections with DJI, Moolenaar and Krishnamoorthi requested answers from Anzu's CEO regarding the disclosure of DJI's involvement, contractual details, manufacturing sources, software contributions, technical support, data protection measures and compliance with US restrictions, the letter said.

The letter said Anzu is requested to provide the Select Committee staff with a briefing on its relationship with DJI by September 13, 2024.

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Trump Plans to Include RFK Jr., Tulsi Gabbard on His Transition Team - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump plans to include his former rival Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and former Democratic Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard on his presidential transition team, the New York Times reported on Tuesday, citing his campaign team.

The report said Kennedy and Gabbard, who both endorsed Trump over the last few days, would serve as co-chairs of the transition team.

The transition team will be responsible for helping to select policies and personnel for a potential second Trump presidency.

Kennedy confirmed he was asked to be on the transition team during an interview with US journalist Tucker Carlson that aired on Monday.

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Almost Half of Americans Say Biden Handing Poorly Russia-Ukraine Conflict - Poll

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WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Almost half of likely US voters rate as poor President Joe Biden's handling of the conflict in Ukraine, a new Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Tuesday.

"The latest Rasmussen Reports national telephone and online survey finds that 37% of likely US voters rate Biden as doing a good or excellent job handling the Russia-Ukraine war, while 45% give Biden a poor rating for his handling of the war," a report on the poll said.

Most voters say they think former President Donald Trump would do a better job than his Democratic rival in the 2024 election race, Vice President Kamala Harris, the poll report added.

Last week, US Congressman Michael Waltz told RIA Novosti that Trump, if reelected in November, has a strategy to urge Russia and Ukraine to negotiate an end to the conflict.

Trump said on Friday that Biden did not understand what he did to Russia and Ukraine.

Russia has been conducting a special military operation in Ukraine since February 24, 2022. Putin said the operation aims to protect people subjected to genocide by the Kiev regime for eight years. Putin also said the ultimate goal of the operation is to liberate the Donbas and create conditions that guarantee Russia's security.

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Mexico's Relationship With US Ambassador 'on Hold' Over His Recent Remarks - President

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) – Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said on Tuesday that his country had paused its relationship with US Ambassador Ken Salazar over his recent remarks regarding a proposed judicial reform in the country.

"It's good but it's on hold … ever since he made the remarks," Lopez Obrador said, when asked about the status of the relationship with Salazar.

On Thursday, Salazar issued a statement voicing his opposition to a judicial reform put forward by the Mexican president that would allow for judges to be elected by popular vote. The ambassador said it posed a risk to the Mexican democracy and to the historic bilateral trade relations.

Lopez Obrador criticized the US ambassador for what he said was interference in Mexico's domestic affairs. The Mexican Secretariat for Foreign Affairs sent a diplomatic note protesting the interference.

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Latvian National Pleads Not Guilty to Smuggling Aircraft Tech to Russia – Court Filing

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) – Latvian national Oleg Chistyakov has pleaded not guilty at a US court to an alleged role in a scheme to smuggle aircraft technology to Russia in a breach of sanctions, according to a court filing published on Tuesday.

"The defendant, Oleg Chistyakov, appeared for arraignment and pleaded not guilty on August 26, 2024, before the undersigned U.S. Magistrate Judge Teresa J. James," the filing said.

The court has scheduled a status conference for October 3 at the US Courthouse in Kansas

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City, Kansas, according to the document.

Chistyakov, 55, is charged with conspiracy, Export Control Reform Act violations, smuggling, and money laundering violations. He was extradited to the United States from Latvia last week.

According to the US Justice Department, if convicted, the defendant faces up to 20 years in prison and a $1 million fine.

The United States tightened export controls for US-made advanced technology after Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022.

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Mexico's Relationship With US Ambassador in Country 'on Hold' Over His Recent Remarks - President

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Two Workers Killed, One Injured at Delta Air Lines Facility in Atlanta Airport - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Two workers were killed and one was injured at a Delta Air Lines facility in Atlanta's international airport on Tuesday, ABC News reported.

The airline has not provided details about the incident at its Technical Operations Maintenance facility, saying only that it is working with local authorities and conducting a full investigation to determine what happened.

Airport officials said the incident did not impact airport operations.

Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens offered his condolences and said that police and fire services were at the scene.

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Harris Leads White House Race, Boosts Democrats' Odds for Winning Congress - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - Vice President Kamala Harris is leading in the race for the White House and has also boosted her Democratic party's chance of winning both chambers of Congress in the November 5 US elections, The Hill reported on Tuesday.

Harris has a 55% percent chance of defeating her Republican Party rival, former President Donald Trump, in the run for the White House, the report said.

The numbers compare favorably to those of President Joe Biden - 44% - before he ended his reelection campaign in July and endorsed Harris instead.

Findings from a joint analysis by The Hill and Decision Desk HQ suggest that Republicans' chances of keeping control of the House of Representatives and wresting back the Senate from the Democrats have also deteriorated after Harris rose to the top of her party's ticket.

Republicans only have a 56% chance to win the House now, versus their previous 61% when

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Biden was still in charge of the Democrats' campaign. Their odds of winning the Senate have also fallen to 68% from a previous 78%, the report said.
However, all three fights will be close, the report added.

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Pentagon Resorts to Tinder to Dissuade Adversaries From Attacking US, Allies - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 27 (Sputnik) - The US Central Command (CENTCOM) thought it was a good idea to use the popular dating application Tinder as a venue for publishing a warning advertisement to the enemies of the United States in a clumsy attempt to dissuade them from attacking US forces of those of its allies, the Washington Post reported on Tuesday.
In an advertisement posted on Tinder to users in Lebanon, the CENTCOM posted a photo of F-16 and A-10 jets with a warning that the the United States is prepared to use them in response to any provocations from US adversaries, the report said.
"Do not take up arms against the United States or its partners," the report quoted the warning as saying in Arabic. "[The United States] will protect its partners in the face of threats from the Iranian regime and its proxies."
Tinder had to remove the advertisement because it breached its policies on violent and political messaging.
The incident served as a reminder of the fact that the Defense Department continues to conduct psychological and information operations in pursuit of US national interests and is willing to go as far as posting an advertisement on a dating application.
Broadly speaking and as a matter of policy, the Defense Department does conduct military information operations in support of US national security priorities, the report quoted a US defense official as saying.
The United States and its allies have amassed significant military resources in the Middle East to counter a potential Iranian attack on Israel in response to the killings of one of Hamas' leaders, Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, and Hezbollah commander Fuad Shukr in Beirut.

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