

9/18/24 Wednesday

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The Good, the Bad and the Funny of the Senate Hearing on Election Threats

On Wednesday, the US Senate Intelligence Committee called tech leaders to testify about “foreign threats to elections in 2024.” The committee predictably focused on Russia, China and Iran, as well as the threat posed by AI.

The Good

A few Republican senators spoke out against censorship of dissenting voices, albeit without pushing back on the idea that freedom of speech belongs exclusively to Americans.

Cmte. Vice Chair Marco Rubio (R-FL) brought up the Hunter Biden laptop story as evidence of when government and tech censorship can go wrong.

“There was a concerted effort... to silence a media outlet in the United States for something that turned out not to be Russian disinformation,” the Senator lamented, also bringing up the censorship of the COVID lab leak origin theory.

Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AZ) echoed those statements and noted that it was far more influential than anything Russia, China or Iran had been accused of.

“There are a lot of threats that our adversaries could pose to us and our elections. I just don’t think that memes and YouTube videos are among the top. Especially when we have the example of election interference here in America that was so egregious. Some of your companies’ efforts, in collusion with Joe Biden’s campaign, led by the current Secretary of State to suppress the factual reporting about Hunter Biden’s laptop.”

“Again, this is domestic information operations if you’d like to say. Far more influence on our elections than memes or YouTube videos or articles that Russian intelligence agents or Chinese intelligence agents posted.”

Cotton also defended political humor and satire, noting that the recently signed California anti-deepfake law would target deep fakes of former US President Donald Trump saving ducks and geese. “It’s fine. People laugh at them. Satire and political humor are as old as our country.”

The Bad

Anti-Russian, Chinese and Iranian sentiments were high in the hearing, as was the desire to quiet speech from anyone originating from those countries.

Cmte. Chair Mark Warner (D-VA) complained that Meta* and Google have allegedly allowed their ad tools to be used by sanctioned entities (read: companies in China, Russia and Iran). He also slammed Elon Musk for not cooperating with their efforts to fight “disinformation.”

“I think it’s a real shame that in the previous investigations, Twitter was a very collaborative entity. Under X they are absent and some of the most egregious activity is taking place,” Warner said, later thanking the Meta* president of global affairs for the axing of Russian sites (see: Sputnik and RT) from the platform.

He also accused Iran of infiltrating US protests against Israeli actions in Gaza.

"And we've seen... efforts to infiltrate American protests over the conflict in Gaza by Iranian influence operatives to seek to sow division and in many cases degenerate former President Trump," Warner said without presenting evidence.

Finally, Warner thanked Meta President of Global Affairs for removing Russian sites (including Sputnik and RT) from the platform.

"I want to thank Meta, I hope that our committee's interest in this subject helped move you yesterday when you guys decided to take down RT and related Russian influence operations," he said.

Finally, Meta* President of Global Affairs Nick Clegg called for cooperation with countries across the West, potentially exporting the rules of the EU and US across the supposedly "democratic world."

"I would also suggest cooperations between different jurisdictions across the democratic world globally is important, particularly between the United States, Europe, India and so on," Clegg argued. "I think one of the greatest risks is a fragmentation of different regulatory approaches around the world for technologies that by definition are borderless."

The UK and EU have censorship laws far in advance of the US. In August, a UK man was jailed for 20 months over a Facebook post.

The Funny

Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) accused China of using the Sister Cities program to sow discord.

"China is attempting to build relations with state and local officials. We see the sister cities programs, we see the Confucius Institutes and educational institutions, so how are your platforms trying to help safeguard the down-ballot races?" she asked.

The Sister Cities program was created in 1956 by US President Dwight Eisenhower to foster "bonds between people from different communities around the world." More than 140 countries and 300 communities participate in the program.

Meanwhile, after showcasing fake sites meant to mimic The Washington Post and Fox News, Warner implied Americans are too brainless to read URLs.

"I don't know... how a normal American consumer, even a relatively sophisticated one, would have the expertise to read the URL that closely when everything else looks so closely like Fox or Washington Post," he said.

Fake websites are not new and have likely existed for nearly as long as the World Wide Web itself. Warner blamed AI, but fake websites are typically created by modifying the HTML files of an existing website. He also said Americans "trust" Fox News and the Washington post, raising the question of if he's ever been on the internet.

*Meta and Facebook are banned in Russia for extremist activities

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Is the Pager Attack Only the Beginning?

At around 3:45 local time, thousands of handheld pagers exploded in Lebanon and parts of Syria, injuring thousands and killing more than a dozen people. The pagers were commonly

used by Hezbollah fighters, but some civilians were killed, including an eight-year-old girl. Hezbollah and the Lebanese government blamed Israel, who has not commented.

"After examining all the facts, current data, and available information about the sinful attack that took place this afternoon, we hold the Israeli enemy fully responsible for this criminal aggression that targeted civilians too," a statement from Hezbollah reads, adding that the group will continue to support the Palestinian resistance.

CCTV footage from Lebanon showed the devices exploding in civilian areas, including a grocery store. The Lebanese Ministry of Health has urged all citizens with pagers to dispose of the devices immediately.

Former senior security policy analyst at the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Michael Maloof, [told Sputnik's The Final Countdown](#) that the attack seems to be a precursor to a larger attack by Israel on Lebanon.

"One of my sources said... this is the beginning of what they believe is going to be [an] attack from Israel. And we just heard yesterday that [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] said that they were going to look to take on Hezbollah now," Maloof argued.

According to Maloof, the attack was designed not only to kill and injure but also to interrupt Hezbollah's communications, a common military tactic before a larger attack.

"The fact that they hit the communications first - that's what you always go after anyway," Maloof explained. "This way, it minimizes the ability [of the target] to coordinate and communicate with the elements throughout the country."

Maloof is not alone in his speculation. Mohamad Elmasry told Al Jazeera that it could [portend a large-scale](#) invasion by Israel. "It seems to me what you want to do before a large-scale invasion is to disable or disrupt the communication network of the enemy. I do think we'll have to pay close attention to what happens over the next few hours and potentially a couple of days." Elmasry also noted that Hezbollah has been increasing its use of couriers to send messages and may have to rely on that tactic more heavily in the wake of the attack.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu has convened a meeting with top defense officials including Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi to discuss "readiness for attack and defense in all arenas."

"I would expect if Israel is going to do anything, they would do it at this vulnerable moment,"

Maloof speculated, adding that he isn't sure how the attack will come. "Are they going to launch missiles? I haven't heard any assessments of indications or warnings of troops massing. I think they do have some tanks near the border and troops. Does this mean there's going to be boots on the ground? I don't know. Israel is not communicating any of that."

It is still unclear how the attack was pulled off. A Hezbollah official speaking anonymously told media outlets that the pagers were a new model that included lithium batteries and unnamed security sources told US media that the devices were recently acquired by the Lebanese group, but the reports did not specify a timeline.

Former NSA contractor turned whistleblower Edward Snowden posted on X that it is likely explosives were planted inside the devices, rather than a hack that caused the batteries to overheat.

"As information comes in about the exploding beepers in Lebanon, it seems now more likely than not to be implanted explosives, not a hack. Why? Too many consistent, very serious

injuries. If it were overheated batteries exploding, you'd expect many more small fires & misfires," Snowden [said on X](#).

In a later post, Snowden condemned the attack as "reckless" and "indistinguishable from terrorism."

It could still be possible that intentionally overheated batteries were used to ignite implanted explosives. One anonymous Hezbollah official reportedly told [US media](#) that some Hezbollah members noticed that their pagers were heating up and managed to dispose of them before they exploded. Alternatively, modified devices could be used to reroute electricity to an implanted explosive after being given a signal, but that should result in an instant explosion without a heat-up period.

In Iraq, improvised explosive devices used against occupation forces utilized modified cell phones that when called, could be instructed to redirect electricity to an explosive charge. That tactic has continued to be used by the IS*. Israeli media reports stated that owners of the pagers received a message shortly before the attack.

Remnants of at least some of the exploded devices [appear to](#) have been manufactured by Gold Apollo, a Taiwan-based wireless company focusing on pagers. For explosives to be implanted into the device, they would have had to be intercepted and modified before entering the Hezbollah supply chain. Israel has a history of using explosives planted inside electronic devices. In 1996, Hamas member Yahya Ayyash was assassinated by Israeli intelligence forces who detonated implanted explosive materials while he was speaking on the phone.

According to the Lebanese Ministry of Health, at least 2,750 people were injured and nine were killed, while an additional seven people were killed in Syria, according to Iranian media.

Israel has not officially commented on the attack. According to [Israeli media](#), Topaz Luk, a former spokesman for Netanyahu, implied in a now-deleted social media post that the Israeli Prime Minister was behind the attack. "This didn't age well," Luk wrote on X in reply to a post that predicted Netanyahu would not make any moves against Lebanon before his trip to New York next week.

The office of the Prime Minister distanced itself from the comment, saying that Luk has not been the spokesman for months and "isn't in the close circle of discussion."

*also known as ISIS or the Islamic State, banned in Russia as a terrorist organization

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Harris Gains Support After Debate, But Race Faces Deadlock – Poll

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) – US Vice President Kamala Harris gained voters' support after last week's debate with former President Donald Trump, but she and her Republican opponent former President Donald Trump remain deadlocked nationally, a new set of polls released by the New Times, The Philadelphia Inquirer and Siena College showed on Thursday.

Over two-thirds of Americans said Harris performed well or very well in the debate, while only 40% gave a similar assessment of Trump. Conversely, 39% said that Trump performed "not well at all," and only 16% expressed the same opinion about Harris, the poll said.

However, both Trump and Harris now have the support of 47% of potential voters nationally, according to the survey.

Harris has a lead of four percentage points in the critical battleground state of Pennsylvania, the poll found. Every second voter there expressed readiness to support her during the November 5 election, while Trump has the support of only 46% of voters there, the poll found.

This represents a significant change since last October, when only 46% of Americans supported Harris, and 47% were ready to vote for Trump.

The survey also found that the economy remains a big issue for Americans. For instance, 53% of potential voters in Pennsylvania rated its current conditions as poor, and 26% said they are "only fair." Only 2% stressed that they are excellent, according to the poll.

The poll was conducted on September 11-16 among 2,437 voters nationwide.

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US Defense Chief, Israeli Counterpart Discuss Threats Posed By Iran, Hezbollah - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in a call with his Israeli counterpart discussed regional security developments and underscored US support for Israel against threats posed by Iran and Hezbollah, Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said in a readout.

"Austin... spoke with Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant today to review regional security developments and reiterate unwavering US support for Israel in the face of threats from Iran, Lebanese Hizballah, and Iran's other regional partners," Ryder said on Wednesday.

Austin also reaffirmed the priority of reaching a Gaza ceasefire deal to bring home hostages held by Hamas, and a diplomatic resolution to the conflict on the Israel-Lebanon border, the release added.

At least 12 people were killed and more than 2,800 injured on Tuesday as a result of the mass detonation of pagers in Lebanon, according to the country's health ministry. A second wave of mass detonations of communications devices on Wednesday killed at least nine people and injured another 300.

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Trump Calls Iran Hackers Sending Docs to Biden Campaign 'Real' Election Interference

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said Iranian cyber actors hacking his campaign and providing information to President Joe Biden's campaign constitutes real foreign election interference.

"Iran hacked into my campaign... They [Iran] gave it to the Biden campaign," Trump said in New York on Wednesday evening. "This is really foreign election interference. This is real election interference - not the phony crap they've been trying to pin on me with Russia for years."

Earlier on Wednesday, the FBI and Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA)

said Iranian cyber actors sent unsolicited emails to individuals linked to Biden's campaign in late June and early July, which contained non-public material stolen from Trump's campaign. The FBI and CISA also said Iranian cyber actors since June persisted in sending stolen, non-public material from the Trump campaign to US media outlets.

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Trump says Iran's transfer of stolen documents to Biden campaign constituted 'real' election interference

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US Awards \$51Mln to Extend Abrams Tank Tech Support - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - General Dynamics received a more than \$51 million US Army contract for Abrams Main Battle Tank systems technical support, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"General Dynamic Land Systems, Sterling Heights, Michigan, was awarded a \$51,011,943 modification to contract to exercise option hours for Abrams systems technical support," the release said on Wednesday.

Work will be performed in Sterling Heights, Michigan over the coming year with an estimated completion date of October 31, 2025, the Defense Department said.

The Army Contracting Command at Detroit Arsenal in Michigan will oversee the work as its contracting activity, the release added.

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Harris-Walz Campaign Condemns Election Interference, Unaware of Direct Targeting - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - Vice President Kamala Harris and Governor Tim Walz's spokesperson stated that they strongly condemn election interference and they were unaware of any material sent directly to the campaign, media reported.

Earlier on Wednesday, the FBI and Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) said Iranian cyber actors sent unsolicited emails to individuals linked to US President Joe Biden's campaign in late June and early July, that contained non-public material stolen from former President Donald Trump's campaign.

"We're not aware of any material being sent directly to the campaign; a few individuals were targeted on their personal emails with what looked like a spam or phishing attempt," Harris campaign spokesperson Morgan Finkelstein said in a statement quoted by The New York Post.

In a separate statement on Wednesday, Trump Campaign National Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said that the Iranian government's interference in the US election was intended to benefit

Harris and Biden.

"Kamala and Biden must come clean on whether they used the hacked material given to them by the Iranians to hurt President Trump. What did they know and when did they know it," Leavitt added.

The FBI and CISA also said Iranian cyber actors since June persisted in sending stolen, non-public material from the Trump campaign to US media outlets.

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US House Blocks Temporary Government Funding, Election Security Legislation

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives blocked legislation to temporarily fund the federal government before a shutdown deadline at the end of the month.

House lawmakers opposed passage of a six-month continuing resolution on Wednesday in a vote of 202 in favor, 220 opposed and two present. Fourteen Republicans joined all but three Democrats to block passage of the legislation, which was backed by House Republican leadership.

The continuing resolution was tied to the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility (SAVE) Act, which requires people to present proof of US citizenship to register to vote in federal elections.

Former US President Donald Trump urged Republicans to decline to fund the government through a continuing resolution if they do not get "absolute assurances" from Democrats on election security.

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US House Blocks Temporary Government Funding, Election Security Legislation

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FBI, CISA Say Iran Cyber Actors Sent Emails to Biden Campaign With Trump-Related Content

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) said in a joint statement that Iranian cyber actors sent unsolicited emails to individuals linked to US President Joe Biden's campaign in late June and early July.

"Iranian malicious cyber actors in late June and early July sent unsolicited emails to individuals then associated with President Biden's campaign that contained an excerpt taken from stolen, non-public material from former President Trump's campaign as text in the emails," the statement said on Tuesday.

Iranian cyber actors have persisted since June in sending stolen, non-public material related to Trump's campaign to US media outlets, the statement said.

"There is currently no information indicating those recipients replied," the statement said.

The FBI has been tracking the hackers' activities and is staying in contact with the victims while continuing its investigation and disrupting the malign actors, the statement said.

"Foreign actors are increasing their election influence activities as we approach November," the statement added.

The US presidential election will be held on November 5.

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US Stocks End Down After 7-Day Rally Despite Rate Cut Wall Street Wanted

(Updates with more details, background in paras 2-10)

NEW YORK, September 19 (Sputnik) - US stocks snapped a week-long rally to end down on Wednesday after the Federal Reserve delivered the 50-basis point interest rate cut Wall Street wanted.

The three main stock indexes on Wall Street - the blue-chip laden S&P 500, the tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite and the broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average - finished down 0.3% each after the first US monetary easing announced by the Fed since 2020. All three indexes were up earlier, with the Dow especially rallying 1%.

Up until Tuesday, the debate had been whether the Fed would opt for a 25-basis point cut instead to take a more moderate path of easing since the US central bank had not fully reached its goal of 2% inflation per year.

Fed Chairman Jerome Powell signaled at a news conference on Wednesday that his attention was focused more on the labor market and the economy, even as he refused to declare victory against inflation.

The Fed's Summary of Economic Projections, updated after each rate decision, showed the forecast for unemployment among Americans had been raised to 4.4% this year, from a previous 4%.

That heightened worries about the labor market, especially after the United States added just 142,000 non-farm payrolls in August, some 23,000 jobs below Wall Street estimates. In comparison, non-farm payrolls grew by 315,000 in April.

The Fed projected that joblessness will taper to 4.2% by next year, just above its long-held "maximum employment" rate of 4%.

Even so, the central bank was not too rosy about the economy, lowering the 2024 gross domestic product growth forecast to 2% from a previous 2.1%, and expecting growth to stagnate there through 2025.

That was in contrast to inflation, which the Fed projected will reach 2.3% by end of this year and 2.1% by 2025.

The 50-basis point interest rate cut could therefore be characterized as a "hawkish 50-bps," Capital Economics said in a note.

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UPDATE - Fed Cuts 50-Basis Points From US Rates In First Reduction Since 2020

(Adds details, comments and context in paras 2-15, modifies lede)

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve dropped 50-basis points from US interest rates on Wednesday in the first monetary easing since 2020, saying more cuts will depend on forthcoming economic data as worries turned to the labor market after inflation proved to be less of a threat.

"We concluded this was the right thing for the economy, for the people that we serve," Fed Chairman Powell told reporters of the reduction that brought rates down to a peak of 5% from a prior two-decade high of 5.5%.

Up until Tuesday, the debate had been whether the Fed would opt for a 25-basis point cut instead to take a more moderate path of easing since the central bank had not fully reached its goal on inflation.

But Powell signaled that his attention was more on the labor market and economy, even as he refused to declare victory against inflation — evidently crumbling after last month's 2.5% annual growth in consumer prices, versus the 9.1% in mid-2022. The Fed's target for inflation is 2% per annum.

US stocks, which had rallied for seven prior days, ended lower despite the Fed delivering the 50-basis point interest rate cut that Wall Street wanted. Analysts said the market's verdict was the same as the Fed's: Worries about rising unemployment were top now, with inflation in the rear-view mirror.

The jumbo-sized rate cut could thus be characterized as a "hawkish 50-bps", Capital Economics said.

The Fed's Summary of Economic Projections, updated after each rate decision, showed the forecast for unemployment among Americans had been raised to 4.4% this year, from a previous 4%.

That heightened worries about the labor market, especially after the United States added just 142,000 non-farm payrolls in August, some 23,000 jobs below Wall Street estimates. In comparison, non-farm payrolls grew by 315,000 in April.

The Fed did project that joblessness will taper to 4.2% by next year — just above its long-held "maximum employment" rate of 4%.

Even so, the central bank wasn't too rosy about the economy, lowering the 2024 gross domestic product growth forecast to 2% from a previous 2.1%, and expecting growth to stagnate there through 2025.

That was in contrast to inflation, which the Fed projected will reach 2.3% by the end of this year and 2.1% by 2025 — virtually on par with its target.

Given the challenges outside of inflation, Powell said a 50-basis point rate cut was deemed more appropriate by 11 of the 12 Fed policy-makers who voted at Wednesday's rate decision.

The larger cut will "make sure we don't fall behind" in keeping inflation constrained and jobs and GDP growth supported, the Fed chair added.

With that, he left the door to more easing in the near term.

The Fed projected that the peak in US interest rates will drop to 4.4% by the end of this year from a current 5%. That technically meant a 60-basis point cut was possible between the two Fed rate decisions due on November 7 and December 18. Since the central bank typically does 25-basis point moves at a time, the real cut could be another 50 or 100 basis points before the year-end.

The White House also appeared to suggest that more could be done with rates to cool consumer prices, which Vice President Kamala Harris said were "still too high".

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US Disrupts Massive Botnet Allegedly Controlled by Chinese Hackers - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department announced in a press release a successful operation to disrupt a botnet of over 200,000 infected devices allegedly controlled by Chinese hackers working for Integrity Technology Group, also known as "Flax Typhoon."

"The Justice Department today announced a court-authorized law enforcement operation that disrupted a botnet consisting of more than 200,000 consumer devices in the United States and worldwide," the release said on Wednesday. "[T]he botnet devices were infected by People's Republic of China (PRC) state-sponsored hackers working for Integrity Technology Group, a company based in Beijing and known to the private sector as 'Flax Typhoon.'"

As a result of the operation, the US authorities managed to gain control over the botnet computer infrastructure, which included a wide variety of devices like office routers, IP cameras and digital video recorders, the release said.

The hackers sent disabling commands through that infrastructure to the malware on the infected devices, the release said.

The United States alleges that the hackers used the botnet to conduct malicious cyber activity disguised as routine internet traffic from the infected consumer devices.

In August 2023, the US software giant Microsoft said that it had identified a Beijing-based group of hackers named Flax Typhoon that was targeting dozens of Taiwanese companies with the likely intention of performing espionage. Flax Typhoon also gained access to multiple devices in Africa and North America.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) -

EXPLOSIONS IN LEBANON

* More than 2,800 people have so far been injured by the detonations of pagers in different parts of Lebanon, Lebanese Health Minister Firass Abiad said on Wednesday.

* The death toll from a new wave of mass detonations of communication and other devices in Lebanon has risen to nine, with at least an additional 300 people injured, the Lebanese Health Ministry said.

* The United States was not involved in the incidents in Lebanon and Washington calls for avoiding steps that lead to escalation, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Russia's army group South has repelled two counterattacks and eliminated up to 640 Ukrainian soldiers over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Wednesday.

* A Starlink satellite communication station used by the Ukraine military in the Chernigov Region has been destroyed, the Russian National Guard said.

* The United States has not been fully briefed on the "victory plan" that Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy is expected to unveil during the UN General Assembly next week, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said.

* The US Defense Department may have misused appropriated funds by training a Ukrainian military unit that may have engaged in gross human rights violations, according to a new oversight report published by the department's Office of the Inspector General.

DEVELOPMENTS IN RUSSIA'S BORDER REGIONS

* The Russian military has eliminated more than 14,600 Ukrainian soldiers and 121 tanks during military operations in the border areas of the Kursk region, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Wednesday.

* One woman was killed as a result of Ukraine shelling the village of Bezliudovka in Russia's Shebekino district, Belgorod Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said.

* Ukraine planned to use weapons from NATO countries to carry out a terrorist attack on the railway in Russia's Kursk region, Ukrainian prisoner of war Alexander Gusak told Sputnik.

US INTEREST RATES

* The Federal Reserve cut 50-basis points from US interest rates on Wednesday in the first monetary easing since 2020 and at least a year after the winding down of economic upheavals caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

* The Federal Reserve has projected the peak in US interest rates to drop to 4.4% by the end of this year from 5% now, leaving the door open for rate cuts totaling at least 60-basis points.

WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

* Chief of the General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Herzl Halevi assessed the situation at the northern command and approved defensive and offensive plans for the Lebanese direction, the IDF said on Wednesday.

* Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said that a new phase of the war has begun and that the center of gravity of Israel's military effort has shifted to the northern front.

* The office of the Israeli Prime Minister denies media reports that Benjamin Netanyahu held secret meetings with the country's defense minister and with the heads of law enforcement agencies ahead of the latest events in the north, Dmitry Gendelman, adviser to the prime minister, told Sputnik.

* The UN General Assembly passed a resolution urging Israel to adhere to the existing ruling of the International Court of Justice and to withdraw from the Palestinian territories.

RUSSIA-BRAZIL TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin told Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva that Russia is ready to provide assistance in overcoming the consequences of wildfires in Brazil, the Kremlin said on Wednesday.

* Putin and Lula da Silva discussed a schedule of further bilateral contacts during a telephone call and agreed to meet during the BRICS summit in the Russian city of Kazan, the Kremlin said.

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Teamsters Says Decides Not to Endorse US Presidential Candidate for First Time Since 1996

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) — The General Executive Board of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters announced on Wednesday that they had decided not to endorse a candidate for US president, marking the first time that they chose not to do so since 1996.

"The General Executive Board of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters on Wednesday elected not to endorse any candidate for US President," the International Brotherhood of Teamsters said in a statement.

According to the statement, after six months of polling and roundtable interviews, the union found little commitment on key issues from Donald Trump or Kamala Harris, with no clear support for either, though independent polling showed Trump as the preferred choice for a possible endorsement.

"The union's extensive member polling showed no majority support for Vice President Harris and no universal support among the membership for President Trump," the statement read.

The statement added that while Harris promised to sign the PRO Act, a crucial labor law that boosts union protections and condemned "right to work" laws aimed at weakening unions, Trump did not commit to vetoing national "right to work" legislation if re-elected.

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NASA Orders Monitors to Track Western Hemisphere Lightning From Deep Space - Lockheed

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - NASA has given Lockheed Martin an almost \$300 million contract to build two instruments to monitor lightning discharges across the Western Hemisphere from geostationary orbit 22,000 miles above the Earth, the defense contractor announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"NASA has awarded Lockheed Martin a contract to design and build the next-generation GeoXO Lightning Mapper (LMX) instruments for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration," the release said.

The baseline contract is valued at around \$297 million for two instruments with options for two additional instruments, the release said.

The LMX is "a single-channel, near-infrared optical instrument developed specifically to detect, locate, and measure the intensity, duration and extent of lightning flashes in near-real-time," the release also said.

The LMX instrument detects and measures lightning flashes while onboard the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's next-generation GeoXO weather satellites, the release added.

This lightning data will provide regular severe weather observations of the Western Hemisphere, improving storm analysis and prediction, according to the release.

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US Senator Says Navy Should Reopen Alaska Base in Response to Russian, Chinese Activity

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States should reopen the naval base in Adak, Alaska amid increased Russian and Chinese activity in the area, US Senator Dan Sullivan said in a statement.

The US military recently deployed a guided missile destroyer and Coast Guard cutter to the western region of Alaska, as well as more than 100 US Army soldiers to the Aleutian Islands in response to Russian and Chinese activity.

"While I was pleased with our military's response which included sending troops to the Aleutians as well as a guided missile destroyer and Coast Guard Cutter, these actions should have more of a permanent basis – like reopening the Navy base at Adak, Alaska, which I have been pressing to be done for years," the statement said on Tuesday.

Coordinated activity near Alaska by Russia and China is increasing, according to the statement. Senior US military leaders should be ready to respond with strength, the statement said.

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US Must Return to Cold War Levels of Military Spending, Higher Taxes - Strategy Report

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States needs to immediately return to its high levels of defense spending during the Cold War because a major war could break out with other world powers at any time, National Defense Strategy Commission Chair Jane Harman told a hearing of the House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday.

"We unanimously recommend returning to the levels of spending on national defense, proportionally, as we did in the Cold War," Harman said. "We also call for paying for it through higher tax rates and reforms to entitlements... if we are going to get serious about deterring and winning wars on the scale of the Cold War, this is necessary."

In the Commission's view, Harman added, Washington needs to be approaching national security as if the US could go to war at any time and do everything possible "to get ready now."

Commission Vice Chair Eric Edelman in his testimony warned that the US Defense Industrial Base had atrophied to the point that it could no longer meet military needs.

The commission called for increased industrial capacity, more competition and partnerships with US allies to share the burden, Edelman added.

US defense spending during the Cold War ranged from roughly 4.5% to over 10% of gross domestic product, according to Defense Department and World Bank data. In 2022, US defense spending was around 3.45% of GDP, World Bank data shows.

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Kirby Says Not Aware of US Communication With Japan, Taiwan On Devices Linked To Lebanon

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) — White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Wednesday that he was not aware of any communication with Japanese or Taiwanese counterparts regarding the explosions in Lebanon.

"I'm aware of no such communication," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby's remarks were in response to a reporter's question on whether the White House had reached out to Japanese and Taiwanese counterparts, after reports that the communication devices involved in the explosions in Lebanon were made in Japan and Taiwan.

At least 12 people were killed and more than 2,800 injured on Tuesday as a result of the mass detonation of pagers in Lebanon, according to the country's health ministry. A second wave of mass detonations of communications devices on Wednesday killed at least nine people and injured another 300.

The Lebanese government and the Hezbollah movement blamed the explosions on Israel.

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White House Refuses to Speculate on Israel's Role in Lebanon Explosions - Kirby

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) — White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Wednesday that he would not engage in speculation about Israel's potential responsibility for the explosions in Lebanon.

"I'm not going to engage in hypotheticals or speculate about what did or didn't happen or who might be responsible," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby's remarks were in response to a reporter's question asking whether Israel's actions constituted an escalation, questioning if Israel was doing what the US had been urging all parties involved to avoid.

"I'm simply not going to be able to address these incidents over the last couple of days in any level of detail, one way or another," Kirby added.

At least 12 people were killed and more than 2,800 injured on Tuesday as a result of the mass detonation of pagers in Lebanon, according to the country's health ministry. A second wave of mass detonations of communications devices on Wednesday killed at least nine people and injured another 300.

The Lebanese government and the Hezbollah movement blamed the explosions on Israel.

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Pentagon Continues to Struggle With Accountability for Weapons Supplied to Allies - OIG

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Defense (DoD) continues to face a range of issues related to accountability for weapon systems supplied to allies and partners, including Ukraine, a new oversight report by the department's Office of the Inspector General said on Wednesday.

"The challenges that the DoD faces regarding EEUM [enhanced end-use monitoring], accountability of equipment, financial management of appropriated funding, intelligence sharing, information security, and physical security are applicable to current and potential future security assistance operations around the world," the report said.

Challenges such as personnel shortages in theater or access to in-country equipment to conduct inventories, as in the case of Ukraine, will also continue to create accountability difficulties in other countries where the United States has limited reach, according to the report.

The report also notes that resolving the accountability issues concerning Ukraine will have a positive effect on the Pentagon's work on monitoring weapons supplied to Israel.

In August, the Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General (OIG) said in a quarterly report that Ukraine had run "critically low" on certain types of ammunition no longer produced or sourced by the United States.

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US Has Not Been Fully Briefed on Zelenskyy's 'Victory Plan' - White House

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has not been fully briefed on the "victory plan" that Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy is expected to unveil during the UN General Assembly next week, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"We have not been fully briefed on it," Kirby said during a press briefing.

The annual gathering of world leaders will take place next week at the UN General Assembly, where Zelenskyy is expected to appear as well.

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US Believes There Is Diplomatic Path Forward in Middle East, Lebanon – Kirby

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) – The United States still believes there is a diplomatic path forward to solve issues in the Middle East, particularly in Lebanon, despite the latest violence, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Wednesday.

“All I will say is that we want to see the war end, and everything we have been doing since the beginning has been designed to prevent the conflict from escalating. We still believe, for instance, that there is a diplomatic path forward, particularly in Lebanon,” Kirby told reporters.

At least 12 people were killed and more than 2,800 injured on Tuesday as a result of the mass detonation of pagers in Lebanon, according to the country's health ministry. A second wave of mass detonations of communications devices on Wednesday killed at least nine people and injured another 300.

The Lebanese government and the Hezbollah movement blamed the explosions on Israel.

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CORRECTION - US Outpaced by China in Key Military Capabilities - Defense Strategy Commission

(Corrects attribution to commission vice chair Edelman in lede, paras 2-5)

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US military is getting outpaced by China in key military capabilities and could find itself on the losing end of a war, Commission on the National Defense Strategy Vice Chair Eric Edelman said in testimony to the House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday.

"We find China is in some ways outpacing the United States," Edelman said. "The US still has the world's strongest military with the farthest global reach. But when we get within 1,000 miles of China's shore, we start losing military dominance and could find ourselves on a losing side of a conflict."

In addition to its growing and modernized conventional and strategic forces, China has infiltrated US critical infrastructure networks to prevent or deter the United States from engaging against it, Edelman added.

"China is likely able to contest our logistics, disrupt power and water at home, and otherwise remove the sanctuary of the US homeland that we have long enjoyed," Edelman said.

The American public was not aware of the consequences of an attack at home and the US government was not at present prepared to stop it, Edelman said.

Commission Chair Jane Harman in her testimony said China can build more ships and nuclear weapons in a year than the US can in a decade. If the Pentagon cannot move at speed and scale, "it will lose," Harman said.

US Congress created the commission to deliver an independent review of the 2022 US

National Defense Strategy (NDS).

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US Not Involved in Lebanon Explosions 'In Any Way' - White House

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States was not involved in the mass explosions of pagers and other electronic devices that occurred in Lebanon in the last two days, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"What I can tell you is we were not involved in yesterday's incidents or today's in any way," Kirby said during a press conference.

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Biden to Welcome UAE President to Washington on September 23 - White House

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will welcome United Arab Emirates President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to the White House on Monday, White House National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"Looking ahead to next week, on Monday, the 23rd of September, President Biden will welcome the President of the United Arab Emirates, Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ), to Washington," said Kirby during a press briefing.

This will be the first visit by a president of the UAE to Washington, Kirby added.

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Iran Informs UN Reserves Right to Respond to Attack That Injured Its Ambassador to Lebanon

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - Iran reserves the right under international law to respond to the attack that injured its ambassador to Lebanon, the Iranian mission to the United Nations said in a statement on Wednesday.

The statement was addressed to the UN secretary-general, UN General Assembly president and to the mission of Slovenia, which presides over the UN Security Council during the month of September.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran will duly follow up on the attack against its ambassador in Lebanon, which resulted in his injury, and reserves its rights under international law to take required measures deemed necessary to respond to such a heinous crime and violation," the Iranian mission said.

At least 12 people were killed and more than 2,800 were injured on Tuesday as a result of the mass detonation of pagers in different parts of Lebanon, according to the country's health ministry. The Lebanese government and the Hezbollah movement blamed the explosions on

Israel.

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Iran Calls on UN Chief, Security Council to Condemn Israel for 'Heinous Attack' on Lebanon

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - Iran calls on UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the UN Security Council to condemn the latest Israeli attack against Lebanon, the Iranian mission to the United Nations said on Wednesday.

"The UN Secretary-General and the Security Council must condemn unequivocally Israel's terrorist action and heinous crime against the head of Iran's diplomatic mission in Lebanon, as well as violations of Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and attacks and targeting of Lebanese civilians," the Iranian mission said in a statement.

At least 12 people were killed and up to 2,800 were injured on Tuesday as a result of the mass detonation of pagers in different parts of Lebanon, according to the country's health ministry. The Lebanese government and the Hezbollah movement blamed the explosions on Israel.

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us was not involved in explosions in lebanon in any way - white house's kirby

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

US Envoy to UN Says She Has Not Heard About Request to Remove Russia From UNSC

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Wednesday that she has not heard about Finland's request to remove Russia from the UN Security Council, but countries have a right to raise such questions.

"I have not heard, to be honest, about Finland's request to have Russia removed from the [UN] Security Council," Thomas-Greenfield told reporters.

She pointed out that Ukraine brings up this issue on a regular basis.

Thomas-Greenfield accused Russia of violating the values of the UN Charter by attacking its neighbor. Countries may question why Russia should be in the Security Council, she added.

Finland's President Alexander Stubb earlier in September called for removing Russia from the Security Council, according to media reports.

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biden to welcome uae president to washington on september 23 - white house

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US, Iraq Discuss Withdrawal of Coalition Forces - Envoy to UN

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States and Iraq continue to discuss the withdrawal of the coalition forces from this Arab country, US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Wednesday.

"Discussions are still taking place with the Iraqi government on this issue in particular," Thomas-Greenfield told reporters when asked about the negotiations.

She pointed out that the US will continue to defend its interests in the region until the withdrawal is completed.

"So the attacks we are experiencing will be a concern for us, and certainly we will respond," she said.

Western media reported in early September that the United States and Iraq agreed on the gradual withdrawal of US-led coalition troops from the country, with initial plans of hundreds of military personnel leaving by September 2025.

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US Stocks Up Just Slightly After 50-Basis Point Rate Cut Wall Street Wanted

NEW YORK, September 18 (Sputnik) - US stocks were up just slightly on Wednesday after the Federal Reserve delivered the 50-basis point interest rate cut Wall Street wanted, with analysts suggesting that the market had taken to worrying about rising unemployment after being comforted that inflation was no longer a major threat.

The three main stock indexes on Wall Street — the blue-chip laden S&P 500, the tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite, and the broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average — were all up less than 1% each after the first US monetary easing announced by the Fed since 2020.

Analysts said the stock market could be more preoccupied now by the Fed's projections on the US labor and economic situation.

The Fed forecast that unemployment among Americans could reach 4.4% by the end of this year, from its previous forecast of 4%. By next year, though, joblessness should fall to 4.2%, it said.

The central bank also lowered its forecast for economic growth in 2024 to 2% from 2.1% and projected a 2% growth for 2025.

On annual inflation, the Fed forecast 2.1% by 2025, almost at par with its 2% target.

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Iranian mission to UN calls on UN secretary general, members of security council to condemn Israel's terrorist action in Lebanon

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

Iran mission to un says blasts in Lebanon were vicious terrorist attack, pins blame on Israel

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Bloc Quebecois to Vote Against Tory Non-Confidence Vote on Trudeau - Leader

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The separatist Bloc Quebecois (BQ) party will not support the Conservative non-confidence motion set to be tabled next week, leader Yves-Francois Blanchet said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day media reported that Liberal House Leader Karina Gould informed the Tories they will get a day in next week's parliamentary agenda to put forward their proposal. The motion will be introduced on Tuesday and followed by a vote on Wednesday.

"To the question, the reply is 'no'. Will the Bloc Quebecois vote in favor of the Conservative motion next week, the answer is no," Blanchet told reporters from Parliament Hill, arguing that the motion only suggests replacing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau with Tory leader Pierre Poilievre.

Questioned on whether his decision amounted to a display of confidence in Trudeau, Blanchet stressed he had none. However, the leader said he "reasonably trusted" the possibility of advancing legislation favoring Quebec's priorities.

"If necessary and if the Liberals do not deliver on our demands, we'll have enough time to make them fall," Blanchet continued.

With support from the 33 Bloc lawmakers, the Tory motion is likely to be defeated. The Liberals currently holding 154 out of 338 seats at the House of Commons would survive the non-confidence vote with the Bloc's "nay", surpassing the 169 voices required for a majority.

Last Wednesday, Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre said that he would introduce at the HoC a non-confidence motion against Trudeau at the earliest possible opportunity. The pledge came in the wake of NDP leader Jagmeet Singh announcing the termination of the "confidence-and-supply agreement" with the Liberals which had ensured the survival of their minority government since March 2022.

The next Canadian federal elections are scheduled to take place on or before October 20, 2025.

Bloc Quebecois is a federal party that supports independence for the French speaking province.

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Fed Sees US Inflation At 2.1% By 2025, Almost At Par With 2% Target

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve expects US inflation to recede to 2.1% by 2025, almost at par with its annual 2% target, the central bank said in economic projections it issued Wednesday after cutting interest rates for the first time in four years.

The Fed, which previously forecast 2025 inflation at 2.3%, now anticipates that to be achieved this year itself.

However, the central bank also raised its forecast for unemployment among Americans to reach 4.4% this year from its previous 4% forecast. By next year, joblessness should fall to 4.2%, it said.

The Fed also lowered its forecast for US economic growth in 2024 to 2% from 2.1% and projected a 2% growth for 2025.

On Wednesday, the Fed reduced 50-basis points from US rates in the first monetary easing since 2020, and at least a year after the winding down of economic upheavals caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

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US Outpaced by China in Key Military Capabilities - Defense Strategy Commission

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US military is getting outpaced by China in key military capabilities and could find itself on the losing end of a war, Commission on the National Defense Strategy Chair Jane Harman said before the House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday.

"We find China is in some ways outpacing the United States," Harman aid. "The US still has the world's strongest military with the farthest global reach. But when we get within 1,000 miles of China's shore, we start losing military dominance and could find ourselves on a losing side of a conflict."

China, Harman added, can build more ships and nuclear weapons in a year than the US can in a decade. If the Pentagon cannot move at speed and scale, "it will lose," Harman said.

In addition to its growing and modernized conventional and strategic forces, China has infiltrated US critical infrastructure networks to prevent or deter the United States from engaging against it, Harman stated.

"China is likely able to contest our logistics, disrupt power and water at home, and otherwise remove the sanctuary of the US homeland that we have long enjoyed," she said.

The American public was not aware of the consequences of an attack at home and the US government was not at present prepared to stop it, Harman warned.

US Congress created the commission to deliver an independent review of the 2022 US National Defense Strategy (NDS).

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Federal Reserve Projects US Interest Rates at Peak of 4.4% by Year-End Versus Current 5%

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve has projected the peak in US interest rates to drop to 4.4% by the end of this year from 5% now, leaving the door open for rate cuts totaling at least 60-basis points.

The Fed on Wednesday reduced by 50-basis points the US interest rates in the first monetary easing since 2020.

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US Faces Prospect of Major Wars With Russia, China, Iran Entirely Unprepared - Report

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States faces the prospect of a major war or wars in the imminent future with Russia, China, Iran and North Korea simultaneously yet it is entirely unprepared for such a conflict, a new report from the National Defense Strategy Commission (NDSC) presented to Congress said on Wednesday.

"Our basic message is this: Significant and urgent action is needed, but for years our government has failed to keep up," NDSC Chair Jane Harmon said in testimony to the US House Armed Services Committee.

Harmon pointed out that the threats to US national security have been mounting for two decades and are greater now than at any time since the height of the Cold War, if not World War II.

However, the entire system and the Defense Department in particular are risk averse and slow to act, he said.

Harmon explained that the partnership between China, Russia, Iran and North Korea is a major shift in the strategic environment and the United States could find itself in a global war on the scale of World War II.

"There is potential for near-term war and potential that we might lose such a conflict," Harmon said.

The NDSC had concluded that the Biden administration's national security strategy is already "woefully out of date" following the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and other developments, Harmon added.

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federal reserve lowers its forecast for inflation in us for 2024 to 2.3% from 2.6%, projection for 2025 down to 2.1% from 2.3%

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FED PROJECTS US RATES AT PEAK OF 4.4% BY END-2024 VS CURRENT HIGH OF 5%

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federal reserve raises its forecast for us unemployment in 2024 to 4.4% from 4%, increases projection for 2025 from 4.2% to 4.4%

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Fed Cuts 50-Basis Points From US Rates in First Reduction Since 2020

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve cut 50-basis points from US interest rates on Wednesday in the first monetary easing since 2020 and at least a year after the winding down of economic upheavals caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

"In light of the progress on inflation and the balance of risks, the Committee decided to lower the target range for the federal funds rate by 1/2 percentage point to 4-3/4 to 5 percent," the Fed's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee said in a statement after the conclusion of a two-day meeting where it had pondered on the direction of the economy and rates appropriate for that course.

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Federal Reserve lowers its forecast for US GDP growth in 2024 to 2% from 2.1%, keeps it at 2% for 2025

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Pentagon Likely Misused Funds by Training Ukrainian Unit That Violated Human Rights – OIG

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Defense (DoD) may have misused appropriated funds by training a Ukrainian military unit that may have engaged in gross human rights violations, according to a new oversight report published by the department's Office of the Inspector General on Wednesday.

"DoD personnel may have misused appropriated funds by training a Ukrainian unit that may have committed a gross violation of human rights, resulting in a violation of the Leahy Law, because they did not sufficiently document that Leahy vetting occurred for Ukrainian Armed Forces units that received DoD training," the report said.

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Canada Sanctions 4 Individuals, 2 Entities Over West Bank Settler Violence - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - Canada has sanctioned four Israeli individuals and two entities over their role in extremist settler violence against the Palestinian West Bank, the country's foreign ministry said on Wednesday.

As of today, Ottawa has imposed three rounds of sanctions on perpetrators of extremist settler violence in the West Bank.

"Effective immediately, Canada is imposing sanctions against four individuals and two entities in response to the grave breach of international peace and security posed by their violent and destabilizing actions against Palestinian civilians and their property in the West Bank," Global Affairs Canada said in a news release.

The sanctions were imposed on Neria Ben Pazi, Noam Federman, Eden Levi, and Shlomo Sharid, the release said. The two entities are Mount Hebron Fund and Shlom Asiraich.

Israeli extremist settlers have instigated violence leading to the loss of lives and destruction of property and farmland in the West Bank, the release said. The attacks have also resulted in the forced displacement of Palestinian communities and regional security, it added.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in February that settler violence in the West Bank was unacceptable and endangered the prospects for peace and stability as well as the path toward an "absolutely essential" two-state solution to the conflict.

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pentagon personnel may have misused appropriated funds by training a ukrainian unit that may have committed gross violation of human rights - audit

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US Has Yet to Declare China's Consul General in New York Persona Non-Grata - Campbell

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has yet to take steps to declare China's Consul General in New York Huang Ping persona non-grata or order his expulsion, US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said on Wednesday.

"We have not taken those steps yet," Campbell said on Wednesday during a hearing.

Campbell said it was his understanding that the Chinese Consul General was in the process of transitioning out of the United States and had left last week.

Earlier in September, the US government confirmed that the departure of China's Consul General in New York was due to the end of a regular rotation and not due to expulsion.

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Vance Says Harris 'Totally Uninterested' in Investigating Trump Assassination Attempt

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris is completely uninterested in investigating the circumstances that led to an assassination attempt against former President Donald Trump in July, US Senator and 2024 Republican vice presidential nominee JD Vance said in an interview with journalist Tucker Carlson.

"Kamala Harris runs the government right now, and Donald Trump came within millimeters of having his life taken by a massive security breakdown. She should be using every lever of power to force insight, force some sunlight into what's actually been going on," Vance said in the interview released on Wednesday. "The fact that she's totally uninterested I think is a real scandal."

Vance says that he does not trust the Biden-Harris administration's Justice Department to investigate the matter.

There is every incentive for the government to lie and suppress information about the assassination attempt, Vance said.

Trump was also the victim of an apparent assassination attempt on Sunday in Florida. US House Speaker Mike Johnson said that a special task force responsible for investigating the first assassination attempt will also expand the scope of its probe to include the second incident.

The state of Florida is also conducting its own investigation into the second apparent assassination attempt separate from the federal probe.

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US, Serbia Sign Energy Cooperation Agreement - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 19 (Sputnik) - The US and Serbia have signed a cooperation agreement that will expand opportunities for American companies to invest in Serbia's energy sector, the State Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

"Today, Under Secretary for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Jose W. Fernandez and Serbian Foreign Minister Marko Duric signed an agreement on US-Serbia strategic cooperation in the field of energy in Serbia," the release stated. "This agreement will expand opportunities for US companies to invest in Serbia's energy sector, including promoting US investments that will strengthen the US-Serbia strategic partnership."

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US Sues For More Than \$100M In Owner, Operator Of Ship In Baltimore Bridge Collapse

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The Justice Department said Wednesday it was suing for more than \$100 million the Singapore-based owner and operator of a container ship that rammed into a bridge in the US state of Maryland in March, killing six workers and disrupting activity at the port in the vicinity.

The suit against Grace Ocean Ltd. and Synergy Marine Group contends that the owner and manager, respectively, of the Dali vessel were “grossly negligent, willful, wanton, and reckless” in causing the collapse of Francis Scott Key Bridge in the port city of Baltimore in Maryland.

The companies had said their liability for the incident should be no more than \$44 million. “The owner and manager will have no further comment on the merits of any claim at this time, but we do look forward to our day in court to set the record straight,” Darrell Wilson, a representative for the two parties, said in comments carried by The New York Times.

The Justice Department cited a cascade of failures onboard the vessel and multiple instances where the disaster could have been prevented.

Due to poor maintenance, or what it called “jury-rigged” fixes to serious problems aboard, the department said, “none of the four means available to help control the Dali — her propeller, rudder, anchor, or bow thruster — worked when they were needed to avert or even mitigate this disaster.”

Chetan A. Patil, acting deputy assistant attorney general at the department, detailed how the ship’s transformer failed and backup power could not come on soon enough with the automation disabled.

“Even when the crew finally did manage to regain power, the Dali lost power a second time, likely because the vessel had been using an inadequate, temporary fuel pump that could not restart after a blackout,” Patil said in a statement. “This was another legal safety requirement that the Dali failed to follow, in order to cut costs and save time.”

Without power, the ship couldn’t be saved from a head-on collision with the bridge, with steering complicated by problems with its anchor and bow thruster, Patil added.

Described to be as long as the height of Paris’ Eiffel Tower, the Dali slammed into the bridge in the early hours of March 26 after losing power. It became stuck in the twisted wreckage as the bridge collapsed into the Patapsco River, blocking the sea route to the Port of Baltimore, one of the busiest ports on the US East Coast.

Benjamin Mizer, principal deputy associate attorney at the Justice Department, cited costs of the sprawling emergency response to the disaster and federal aid to port employees put out of work by the disaster.

“Those costs should be borne by the ship’s owner and operator, not the American taxpayer,” Mizer said in a statement. “To try to keep this type of conduct from ever happening again, we are also seeking punitive damages,” he added in making the case for the \$100 million suit.

Temporary shipping channels on the waterway were opened and the Dali was dislodged in May and towed two-and-a-half miles back upriver before being moved to a shipyard in Norfolk for repairs. It wasn’t until June that the main shipping route, the 700-foot-wide Fort McHenry Federal Channel, was fully cleared.

Officials have said rebuilding the bridge could cost up to \$1.9 billion.

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us, serbia sign agreement to cooperate on energy, expanding opportunities for american companies to invest - state dept.

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UN Security Council to Meet on Lebanon Pager Blasts Friday - Slovenian Mission to Sputnik

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will meet on Friday to discuss the deadly pager blasts in Lebanon, the Slovenian mission, which presides over UN Security Council during the month of September, told Sputnik.

"The presidency confirms the meeting at 3:00 p.m. No details on the format though," it said.

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US, India, Other Allies to Hold Talks on Indian Ocean Cooperation - Campbell

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States, India and other allies will hold a session to discuss mutual concerns and potential collaboration, US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said on Wednesday.

"For the first time, the United States and India and others are going to hold a session on the Indian Ocean, and we're going to talk about what our mutual concerns are, how we can work together," Campbell said during a hearing.

Campbell said that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has asked US Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Samuel Paparo to help integrate the national military and security approach.

The White House and the departments of State and Defense are exploring new ways to collaborate with India, Campbell said.

The United States plans to work closely with India in the future, Campbell added.

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Majority of US Voters Think Harris Likely to Raise Taxes if Elected President - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - A majority of voters in the United States believe that US Vice President Kamala Harris is more likely to raise taxes than lower them if elected president in 2024, according to a Rasmussen Reports poll released Wednesday.

Most respondents, 52%, believe Harris is more likely to raise taxes, the poll report said.

One-quarter of respondents (25%) believe Harris is more likely to lower taxes and 17% think

she will keep them the same, the poll report said.

The poll surveyed 881 likely US voters on September 5 and 8-10. The poll has a margin of error of plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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Canada Sanctions 11 Individuals, 2 Entities Involved in Hamas Financial Network - Ministry

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - Global Affairs Canada announced on Wednesday that Ottawa has imposed sanctions on eleven individuals and two entities over their involvement in Hamas' financial network.

Hamas has been listed as a terrorist entity under Canada's criminal code since 2002. The latest measures mark the fourth round of sanctions against Hamas since February 2024.

"Today's sanctions apply to eleven individuals and two entities with roles in Hamas' financial network. They have directly or indirectly participated in facilitating, supporting and providing funding assessed as integral to the planning and execution of the attacks on Israel that began on October 7, 2023," Global Affairs Canada said in a news release.

The eleven individuals have been sanctioned for being "Hamas financiers," the release said, whereas the two entities are said to be financial exchange companies affiliated with the Palestinian group.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip and more than 1,100 Israelis - military and civilians - were killed during the attack. Israel imposed a complete blockade of Gaza and started military operations in the Palestinian enclave. More than 41,000 Palestinians have so far been killed in the Israeli attacks in Gaza.

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UNGA Passes Resolution Urging Israel To Withdraw From Palestinian Territories

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly passed a resolution on Wednesday urging Israel to adhere to the existing ruling of the UN court and withdraw from the Palestinian territories.

The resolution was adopted with 124 in favor, 14 against, and 43 abstentions.

The resolution states and demands "that Israel brings to an end without delay its unlawful presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which constitutes a wrongful act of a continuing character entailing its international responsibility, and do so no later than 12 months from the adoption of the present resolution."

Some of the countries that voted against the resolution include the United States, Czech Republic, and Hungary.

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US Seeks Greater European Support Amid Rising Ties Between Russia, China - Campbell

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) — The United States is pushing for increased European backing as Russia strengthens alliances with countries like China, US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said on Wednesday.

"The challenge is, we've [the US] got to get more support from Europe on this," Campbell said during a hearing.

Campbell previously remarked that other countries supporting Russia pose a challenge not only to Ukraine but also to long-term peace and stability in Europe.

However, Campbell added that the primary reason for spending significant time in Europe was the actions taken against Chinese firms, including sanctions and concerns about financing deals between Chinese tech companies and their Russian partners.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry has previously emphasized that China is focused on the path of its own development, and the protection of its own sovereignty, and will bring more stability around the world through external cooperation.

Moreover, Beijing has repeatedly rejected Western claims accusing China of facilitating the supply of goods to the Russian Federation, which it is allegedly using in the special military operation in Ukraine, urging them to refrain from groundless accusations.

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US Sanctions 12 Iranian Nationals for State Repression - Treasury

(Updates with more details throughout the text; modifies headline and lede)

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US Department of the Treasury on Wednesday sanctioned 12 Iranian nationals for their involvement in state repression of Iranian citizens at home and abroad, according to a release.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is designating 12 individuals in connection with the Iranian regime's ongoing, violent repression of the Iranian people, both within Iran's borders and abroad," the release said. "These designations target members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), officials of Iran's Prisons Organization, and those responsible for lethal operations overseas."

The imposition of sanctions was coordinated with the government of Canada and Australia, the release said.

The sanctioned individuals include several IRGC members: Hamid Khorramdel, commander of the IRGC's Fatah Corps of Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad province; Mustafa Bazvand, commander of the IRGC and Basij Resistance Force in Mazandaran province; Ali Malek-Shahkoui, commander of the IRGC's Golestan Corps of Golestan province; Saeed Beheshti-Rad, deputy coordinator of the IRGC's Hazrat Nabi Akram Corps in Kermanshah

province; Hamid Zareikajosangi, a field operative of the IRGC-Quds Force's Department 840; and IRGC affiliate Mahmud Baghlani.

They also include Iranian prison officials: Ali Abdi, director-general of South Khorasan Province Prisons; Alireza Babaei Farsani, director-general of Isfahan Province Prisons; Ahmad Reza Azadeh, head of Sepidar Prison; and Gholamreza Roshan, director-general of Khuzestan Province Prisons.

Yahya Hosseini, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security deputy intelligence minister for internal security affairs and Javad Ghaffarhaddadi, the head of the IRGC-Intelligence Organization's Special Operations division, have also been sanctioned.

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US Workforce Seen 6Mln Short by 2032 Suggesting More Immigrants, AI Needed - Report

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US workforce could be short of six million people by 2032 as skills increasingly lag economic demands, and more immigrants and artificial intelligence (AI) may be needed to fill the gap, the private labor study group Lightcast said in a report on Wednesday.

"Today's labor market rests on baseline assumptions that were formed when the Baby Boomers dominated the workforce, but now, this enormous cohort of 76 million Americans is ready to retire - and the US faces a shortfall of millions of workers in the decade to come," the report said.

Baby Boomers, typically aged between 60 and 80, were no longer driving the expansion of US jobs, versus their domination in the two decades before the coronavirus pandemic, the report said.

Out of five million workers who have left the workforce since 2020, about four-fifths were above the age of 55, the report said.

According to Lightcast, the US working-age population is expected to grow by 18.7 million by 2032, but labor force participation is expected to drop from about 62.5% currently to 60.4%.

At the heart of the problem will be a mismatch between available workers and the kind of work that is in demand. Although there will be more Americans in the next eight years, there will also be nearly 6 million fewer workers with the skills necessary for labor expansion, the report said.

"The disruption ahead is like a hurricane," the report said. "Right now, we're in the calm before the storm."

The gap could push US employers to rely more on immigrant workers and AI, the report said.

Lightcast also pointed out that some industries are already struggling without foreign workers, noting that 18% of US healthcare workers come from abroad, including one in four doctors and one in five registered nurses.

But relying on AI could also be tricky as automation can only do so much to fill the practical, hands-on roles that the economy will need, according to the report.

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UPDATE- No Validity to Reports of Found Explosives in Car Near Trump Rally - Police

(Update: adds details, background in paras 3-4)

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - There is no validity to reports that police found explosives in a car near former US President Donald Trump's rally site in Long Island, a Nassau Police Department representative told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"There's no validity to that," the representative said.

Police detained a person who may have been training a bomb detection dog near the site and falsely reported finding explosives, Commissioner of Police Patrick Ryder said in a statement.

The reports of explosives near the Trump rally site come following a second apparent assassination attempt against the former president on Sunday.

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Canada Sanctions 5 Iranian Individuals Involved in 'Repressive Policies' – Ministry

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) – The Canadian Government has sanctioned five individuals involved in the design and implementation of repressive policies, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said on Wednesday.

"The sanctions apply to five Iranian political figures responsible for the design and implementation of repressive policies, including the violent repression of protesters," GAC said in a statement.

The individuals are Iran's Acting President Mohammad Mokhber, former chief of staff of the President Gholam Hossein Esmaili, former vice president and head of budget and planning organization Seyyed Masoud Mirkazemi, Deputy Secretary of the Guardian Council Siamak Rahpeik, and Chief of Law Enforcement Command Ahmad-Reza Radan.

The sanctions have been imposed in coordination with Australia and the United States, the statement said. The latest designations were also announced to mark the second anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death, it added.

As of Wednesday, Ottawa has imposed sanctions on a total of 205 Iranian individuals and 250 Iranian entities.

Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian woman, died in September 2022 after being detained by Iran's morality police for allegedly violating the country's hijab laws. Her death, which many claim was caused by police violence, sparked mass protests across Iran and internationally, leading to widespread unrest and calls for greater women's rights in the country. Iranian authorities denied wrongdoing, attributing her death to pre-existing health issues.

The Iranian government accused Western countries of supporting the protesters, claiming that Western media spread subversive messages and incited the Iranian public to revolution.

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Lebanon Pager Blasts Could Be Preemptive Strike Before Major Military Operation - UN Chief

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday that the pager detonations in Lebanon could be a preemptive action ahead of a major military operation which has to be avoided at all costs.

"Obviously, the logic of making all these devices explode is to do it as a preemptive strike before a major military operation. So as important as the event in itself is, the indication that this event confirms that there is a serious risk of a dramatic escalation in Lebanon, and everything must be done to avoid that escalation." Guterres told journalists in a press briefing.

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Johnson on Shutting Down Government: We Will Wait to See Fate of Temporary Funding Bill

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Wednesday that he will wait and see what happens to a temporary government funding bill with election integrity legislation attached in the House of Representatives before deciding whether to allow the federal government to shut down.

The US Congress must pass appropriations bills or a temporary government funding measure before the end of the month to avoid a shutdown. Johnson is pushing a six-month continuing resolution (CR) with the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility (SAVE) Act attached, which requires people to present proof of US citizenship to register to vote in federal elections.

"We'll see what happens with the bill," Johnson said during a press briefing, when asked whether he would allow the government to shut down if Democrats reject the continuing resolution and the SAVE Act.

Republicans should decline to fund the government through a CR if they do not get "absolute assurances" on election security from Democrats, former US President Donald Trump said last week.

However, US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Tuesday that shutting down the government before the election would be "politically beyond stupid" for Republicans.

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UN Chief Says Detonations in Lebanon Could Be Preemptive Strike Before Major Military Operation

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

UN Chief Says Civilian Objects Should Not Be Weaponized as in Lebanon Pager Attack

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday that civilian objects should not be weaponized as was the case yesterday with thousands of pagers exploding in Lebanon.

"I think it's very important that there is an effective control of civilian objects, not to weaponize civilian objects," Guterres said. "That should be a rule everywhere in the world that governments should be able to implement."

On Tuesday, several thousand pagers detonated in different parts of Lebanon. The pagers were used by members of the Hezbollah movement but also by others and their weaponization into explosive devices has been attributed to Israel, according to media reports.

The Lebanese authorities said 11 people have died and some 2,800 have been injured by the detonation of the pagers.

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No Validity to Reports of Found Explosives in Car Near Trump Rally - Police to Sputnik

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - There is no validity to reports that police found explosives in a car near former President Donald Trump's rally site in Long Island, a Nassau Police Department representative told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"There's no validity to that," the representative said.

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US House Speaker Johnson Says Demanded Biden Give Trump Bolstered Security Detail

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Wednesday that he demanded that President Joe Biden provide former President Donald Trump with the same security detail as an active president, following a second apparent assassination attempt against the 2024 Republican presidential candidate.

"I called the White House yesterday. I made a demand to the White House, to President Biden: supply for President Trump the same degree of protection that a sitting president has," Johnson said during a press briefing.

The US House of Representatives will expand the scope of a special task force responsible for investigating the first assassination attempt against Trump to include the second apparent attempt, Johnson also said.

Trump is under the greatest threat to any candidate in modern US political history, Johnson

added.

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no validity to reports that explosives were found in car near trump rally on long island - police to sputnik

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guterres in comments on pager blasts in lebanon says it is very important not to weaponize civilian objects

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US Sanctions 12 Iranian Nationals Linked to IRGC, Security Ministry - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department on Wednesday sanctioned 12 Iranian nationals, according to a registry notice.

Seven of the individuals are linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and one is linked to the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security.

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UN Secretary-General Appeals to Member States to Maintain 'Spirit of Compromise'

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Wednesday appealed to the member states of the United Nations to work with one another and maintain a "spirit of compromise."

"I will not go into the details, but I have one overriding message today: an appeal to member states for a spirit of compromise," Guterres said during a press briefing. "Show the world what we can do, when we work together."

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IMF Tells Sputnik Article IV Consultations With Russia Have Been Postponed

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) told Sputnik on Wednesday that Article IV consultations with Russia have been postponed while the IMF

gathers the necessary data and conducts analysis to enable a rigorous consultation.

"Article IV consultations with Russia have been postponed while we gather all the necessary data and analysis for a rigorous consultation," an IMF spokesperson said.

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us imposes new iran-related sanctions - treasury department

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UN Chief Says Global Institutions 'Inadequate' to Deal With Complex Challenges

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday that global institutions are inadequate to deal with the current issues the world is facing.

"Global institutions and frameworks are totally inadequate to deal with these complex and even existential challenges. And it's no great surprise. Those institutions were born in a bygone era for a bygone world," Guterres told journalists at a press briefing.

So many of those challenges were not present 80 years ago when these institutions were formed, he added.

The United Nations was formed following the Second World War by the winners of the conflict. Ever since, however, the world has transformed and once leading states have lost their world's share.

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Guterres Ahead of Opening of General Assembly Session Appeals to Member States for Spirit of Compromise

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US Expects 5Mln Citizens Per Year to Renew Passports Via New Online System – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) – The US government expects that up to 5 million Americans per year will be able to renew their passports for foreign travels by using a newly launched online system, Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Rena Bitter said on Wednesday.

"We estimate that up to 5 million Americans a year will be able to use this service," Bitter told reporters.

She explained that the system will allow people to pay, upload a photo, and apply completely

online with no need to appear in person or to send documents through the mail.

“It is available to those who are seeking to renew an adult 10-year passport that has expired in the last five years or will expire in this coming year,” she added.

When asked whether Americans living abroad can apply for passports online, Bitter emphasized that it is necessary to have a US address to use the system.

The US government expects that the processing time for obtaining passports online would be six to eight weeks, which is the same as for those applying by mail, she added.