

04/09/21 Friday

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Kentucky Governor Limits No-Knock Warrants After Breonna Taylor's Death
Eduardo Munoz

Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old woman, was fatally shot in her Louisville, Kentucky, apartment on March 13, 2020, after three plainclothes officers forcibly entered her apartment as part of a suspected drug raid.

On Friday, Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear (D) partially banned no-knock warrants in the state, amid a year of demonstrations over the shooting death of Breonna Taylor.

A no-knock warrant is a search warrant that allows police officers to enter a premise without first knocking and declaring their presence. Under the warrant, officers can identify themselves after they have already entered a premise.

In the Taylor case, a no-knock warrant was issued as part of a Louisville Metro Police Department narcotics investigation.

Under the new bill signed into law, no-knock warrant can also be used if there is "clear and convincing evidence" that the crime being committed "would qualify a person, if convicted, as a violent offender," [the Associated Press reported](#).

In addition, the new law stipulates warrants can only be executed between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. An emergency medical technician (EMT) must also be on standby while the warrant is being conducted. Judges in Kentucky will also be required to sign warrants legibly when approving them.

Last year, Louisville passed "Breonna's Law," an ordinance that busses no-knock search warrants in Louisville, Kentucky.

The three officers involved in the Taylor case are Jonathan Mattingly, Brett Hankison, and Myles Cosgrove.

The only officer involved in Breonna Taylor's death who has been charged is Hankison, who faces wanton endangerment charges for firing shots into Taylor's neighbor's apartment. Myles Cosgrove, who fatally shot Taylor, and Joshua Jaynes, who sought the warrant for the drug raid, were both fired in January, [NPR reported at the time](#).

The firing of these two offices comes after Hankison was fired in September 2020 on charges of endangering Taylor's neighbors.

In March, Jefferson Circuit Judge Olu Stevens also [dropped](#) the charges against Kenneth Walker, Breonna Taylor's boyfriend, who was charged with attempted assault and murder last year, after he opened fire and wounded Louisville Metro Police Sergeant Jonathan Mattingly, after Mattingly and two other officers forced entry into Taylor's apartment.

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Japan's Vaccine Minister Fears Steep COVID-19 Surge Ahead of Summer Olympics
by [Mary F.](#)

The 2020 Summer Olympics are scheduled to be held from July 23 to August 8 this year in Tokyo, Japan. The governor of Japan's western region of Osaka canceled an upcoming torch event due to a rise in COVID-19 cases.

Taro Kano, Japan's COVID-19 Vaccine Minister, expressed concern over the rising number of COVID-19 cases in Osaka, noting that Tokyo may also experience similar case increases. "Yes, [the] situation in Osaka is especially worrying," Kono, who is also minister of regulatory reform, told [CNBC](#), noting that a new virus variant similar to the one first identified in the UK is "quickly spreading" in Osaka. "We have identified a similar mutation in Tokyo, so we are worried [that] Tokyo may follow Osaka in a couple of weeks. So we really need to be paying attention to the situation".

Kano also noted that Japan is collaborating with the International Olympic Committee for the Olympic Games. However, despite the rising number of COVID-19 in Osaka, there are no plans to postpone the games, Kano noted.

"Unless they decide otherwise, we just simply need to prepare for the Games, how to control the situation. I think it changes almost every day, so they need to be prepared for that. But I don't think they are thinking about postponing it," Kono added.

The latest data shows that there are at least [883 new cases](#) of the COVID-19 virus on Friday compared to 537 cases in Tokyo on the same day.

Tokyo has a much larger population, however, than Osaka with about 9.3 million people compared to Osaka's 2.7 million.

Although the Summer Olympics are still due to kick off in Tokyo on July 23, the Games will be curtailed compared to previous years, as international spectators will not be allowed to enter the country due to concerns over COVID-19. "Well, unfortunately, we may not have so many spectators watching the game at the stadium but most of the people are going to be watching on television anyway," Kono explained.

Japan on Monday instituted targeted lockdown measures in the western prefectures of Osaka and Hyogo, along with Miyagi in the northeast, in an attempt to control a new surge of cases. Japanese authorities on Friday also announced that they plan to place Tokyo under a month-long "quasi-emergency" state to curtail the spread of the virus, [Reuters reported](#).

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Democrats, Republicans Slam Biden's Proposed Pentagon Budget
by [Mary F.](#)

US President Joe Biden on Friday released outlines of his first budget proposal to Congress. As part of his proposal, Biden is requesting a \$753 billion defense budget, with \$715 billion of that to be allocated to the Pentagon.

Biden is receiving criticism from both Democrats and Republicans for his proposed \$715 billion defense budget released Friday, with progressives arguing that the budget is too much money for the Pentagon, and Republicans stating that the budget request is not enough to support the country's defense needs, especially against adversaries like China.

The \$715 billion for the Defense Department is 1.6% higher than the \$704 billion allocated to the Defense Department in 2021, according to the [budget plan](#).

US Representative Mark Pocan argued Friday that the increase in Pentagon spending levels is an "unacceptable increase."

"We cannot best build back better if the Pentagon's budget is larger than it was under Donald Trump," Pocan said Friday, [cited by Fox News](#).

Representative Ro Khanna also agreed, calling for Biden to return to defense spending levels under the Barack Obama administration.

Meanwhile, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders also expressed concerns about the "bloated" Pentagon request.

"At a time when the US already spends more on the military than the next 12 nations combined, it is time for us to take a serious look at the massive cost overruns, the waste and fraud that currently exists at the Pentagon," Sanders said Friday.

However, Republicans voiced different concerns, with five leading GOP senators, including US Senator Marco Rubio and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, arguing Friday that Biden's 1.6% increase in Pentagon funds simply accounts for inflation.

"President Biden's budget proposal cuts defense spending, sending a terrible signal not only to our adversaries in Beijing and Moscow, but also to our allies and partners," the [GOP senators wrote](#). "Cutting America's defense budget completely undermines Washington Democrats' tough talk on China and calls into question the administration's willingness to confront the Chinese Communist Party".

Biden's proposal also eliminates the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funds, additional funds operated by the Department of Defense and the State Department to handle conflicts with uncertain costs.

In 2021, OCO funds amounted to about \$69 billion. Under Biden's proposal, the funding for ongoing wars would be part of the overall defense base budget instead of a separate war fund.

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Human Rights Advocates Demand Morocco Release Imprisoned Saharawi Journalist on Hunger Strike

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The United Nations mission to Western Sahara, established to oversee an independence referendum that has yet to occur, is the body's only such mission without a human rights monitoring component. Saharawi activists have pressured the UN to act for years, but their efforts have languished amid Moroccan intransigence.

Human rights activists are demanding that Morocco release Saharawi journalist and political prisoner Mohamed Lamine Haddi, who has been on a hunger strike for nearly three months against harsh prison conditions. A Saharawi diplomat told Sputnik that Rabat has been emboldened by US “realpolitik” and its December recognition of Morocco’s claim to rule Western Sahara.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has urged Moroccan authorities to free the imprisoned Haddi, who has been held in the Tiflet-II Prison in the Moroccan capital of Rabat since 2010. Haddi began a hunger strike on January 13 to demand a change in the conditions he is being held, which have included years of solitary confinement, inadequate medical care, and force-feeding via a tube.

“The mistreatment of Mohamed Lamin Haddi has continued for too long,” RSF secretary-general Christophe Deloire said in an [April 2 press release](#). “It is time to end the torture and rescue this journalist from the hunger strike he has been following for more than two months and from the oblivion to which he has been consigned by a 30-year-old conflict.”

“The principle of humanity must prevail over territorial issues. Jailed ten years ago on a spurious charge, he is now in danger of dying and must be released without delay. We issue an urgent appeal to the Moroccan authorities to end his ordeal,” Deloire added.

On Wednesday, [Amnesty International issued](#) a similar request in a letter addressed to Moroccan Prime Minister Saad Eddine el Othmani, the head of government in the semi-constitutional monarchy, urging that Haddi’s treatment conform to Mandela rules for the standard minimum treatment of prisoners, including that he be moved to his home city of El-Ayoun the capital of Western Sahara.

Haddi’s 86-day-long hunger strike has brought him dangerously close to death. During one of the rarely allowed phone calls with his mother on March 23, Haddi related that he was suffering from partial paralysis, memory loss, and pain. She told Amnesty International her son sounded very weak and could barely speak and that he has been denied access to his doctor.

Science news outlet [LiveScience notes](#) that just one month without food can result in the loss of 18% of body weight and cause permanent medical complications, with breathing becoming difficult and the increasing risk of organ failure.

“Beyond 45 days, death is a very real risk, due to cardiovascular collapse or severe infection,” the site notes.

While many prisoners have died during hunger strikes against their conditions, perhaps the most famous are the 10 [Irish republican revolutionaries](#) who perished in a prolonged hunger strike against British rule in Northern Ireland in 1981, which shocked the public around the globe.

Reporter Jailed After Protest

When Haddi was arrested in November 2010, he was employed as a reporter by RASD TV, a state-owned television station operated by the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), a government Morocco doesn’t recognize as ruling the territory of Western Sahara, which Rabat has purported to annex. He is also a member of the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations Committed by the Moroccan State (ASVDH), reporting on [the use of force](#) by Moroccan authorities against Saharawi and Moroccan protesters and dissidents.

Two weeks prior to his arrest, Haddi had covered the violent dispersal of the Gdeim Izik protest camp outside Layyounne by Moroccan forces. He was charged alongside several other Saharawi

activists with “violence with intent to kill officials carrying out their duties,” for which he was sentenced to 25 years in prison in 2013. Observers at the time described it as a show trial, and Haddi and the others have claimed they signed legally invalid confessions [obtained under torture](#).

‘Victims of Realpolitik’

Omeima Abdeslam, the Polisario Front representative in Switzerland, told Sputnik on Friday the United Nations and US have allowed Morocco to treat the indigenous Saharawi people with impunity.

The Polisario Front was recognized by the United Nations as the legitimate representative of the Saharawi people in 1991, when it oversaw a ceasefire between Polisario and Morocco and promised a future independence referendum for Western Sahara that has never happened. In November 2020, Polisario cancelled the ceasefire, saying Morocco’s violent dispersal of [a protest camp](#) at a border crossing to Mauritania was a violation of their agreement.

When Spain left Western Sahara in 1975, Morocco quickly laid claim to the territory and faced a powerful insurgency [by the Polisario Front](#), which fought until the 1991 ceasefire. While the US supported the UN’s process for years, in December 2020 the administration of former US President Donald Trump suddenly recognized Morocco’s claim over Western Sahara in exchange for Morocco agreeing to normalize [relations with Israel](#), just one of several Arab nations to do so under US pressure in 2020.

Abdeslam noted that Saharawis are “the first victims of this realpolitik,” since Western Sahara is the world’s only non-self-governing territory and the UN mission, MINURSO, is the only such mission to lack a human rights monitoring component. She called the US recognition “a key issue for this mess,” noting it has encouraged Morocco to “challenge the resolutions and appeals of international law.”

“As Saharawis, we belong to non-self-governing territories under occupation and where the international law applies and these Saharawis should be protected as civilians in a zone of conflict,” Abdeslam told Sputnik, noting that the International Red Cross had been diverted by the Moroccan Red Crescent and has never visited Haddi in prison.

“The UN has failed to protect the Saharawi people and the UN has failed to give them the right and the UN has left the Saharawi people behind,” she said, noting the international body has not been able “to stop the plunder of the natural resources of Western Sahara, to protect political prisoners, to protect Haddi, to protect the Saharawis from the mines that Morocco are putting every day in our territory. It’s a big, a huge failure of the UN and the lack of political will of the states that are in the Security Council and the UN also.”

Trump’s move was extremely unpopular and was widely criticized not just by US allies like the UK, but also from some of the highest towers of US foreign policy. After US President Joe Biden took office in January, lawmakers launched a bipartisan lobbying effort for him to [reverse Trump’s deal](#), writing in a February letter that “to officially recognize the Kingdom of Morocco’s illegitimate claims of sovereignty over Western Sahara was short-sighted, undermined decades of consistent US policy, and alienated a significant number of African nations.”

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Photos: South Korea Unveils First New KF-21 'Boramae' Stealth Fighter
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A mixture of high cost and low reliability have led a number of nations to seek their own indigenous alternatives to the US' F-35 stealth fighter, including US partners like South Korea and Japan that have also agreed to buy some of the jets.

At a Friday ceremony in Sacheon, South Korea, the country's first indigenously designed stealth fighter was unveiled: the Korea Aerospace Industries KF-21, previously known as the KF-X. Attending were South Korean President Moon Jae-in and a delegation from Indonesia that [included Defense Minister](#) Prabowo Subianto. Jakarta has a 20% stake in the KF-21 program, although its commitment has been questioned in recent months amid economic troubles and a delay in payments to the program.

Photos snapped by reporters show a jet remarkably similar in appearance to the Lockheed Martin F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, albeit sporting a second engine and external hardpoints. [According to KAI](#), the KF-21 will be superior to the F-35 in some respects, such as speed, but inferior in others, including stealth capabilities. KAI will also build a two-seater version. At the ceremony, KAI revealed the jet's designation will be the KF-21 Boramae, or "Young Hawk."

"A new era of independent defense has begun," [Moon said](#). The aircraft is intended to be a cheaper version of the F-35, an advanced US-made jet that is extremely expensive, but of which Seoul has already pledged to buy at least 60.

By contrast, the KF-21 is intended to replace South Korea's aging fleet of imported US jets, including the F-4 Phantom II and F-5 Tiger fighters. Moon said the first flight would come next year, and that the country would have 40 combat-ready jets by 2028, with as many as 120 ready by 2032.

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Alabama Organizers Pledge Unfair Labor Practices Lawsuit in Wake of Failed Amazon Union Vote
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Amazon has once again dodged an attempt by its workers to unionize, but the widespread scrutiny of its methods will likely ensure the vote is recast, labor experts have said. After weeks of mail-in voting, workers at Amazon's distribution facility in Bessemer, Alabama, have voted not to join a labor union. However, union leaders are now preparing to sue the company, claiming its many interfering actions went against US labor laws and demanding the vote be voided.

The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) announced on Friday that it will be charges of unfit labor practices with the US National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), a federal agency that enforces labor laws. During a live counting of ballots at the NLRB's office in

Birmingham, Alabama, a majority of the votes cast at Amazon's Bessemer facility were against being represented by the RWDSU.

Just 55% of the 5,805 eligible workers at the Bessemer facility participated in the vote, and of those 3,215 who voted, 1,798 "no" votes were cast and 378 "yes" votes were cast. A simple majority would have passed the measure.

However, RWDSU is pushing back, claiming Amazon broke the law by interfering with the workers' decision-making process.

"We won't rest until workers' voices are heard fairly under the law--and when they are, we believe they will be victorious," RWDSU President Stuart Applebaum said in [a Friday statement](#). "We won't let Amazon's lies, deception and illegal activities go unchallenged."

Amazon's Extensive Disruption Tactics

"Amazon knew full well that unless they did everything they possibly could, even illegal activity, their workers would have continued supporting the union," Applebaum said. "We demand a comprehensive investigation over Amazon's behavior in corrupting this election. Working people deserve better than the way Amazon has conducted itself during this campaign."

Amazon's efforts to block a union victory included an extensive propaganda campaign, including anti-union [indoctrination meetings](#) workers were forced to attend and bombarding workers with calls and text messages about the purported dangers of joining a union, as well as moves such as getting the city government to [change the timers](#) on the stoplights outside the facility to give union organizers less time to distribute information.

It also includes, [as Sputnik reported](#), suddenly dropping Amazon's lowest-level employees, the ones most likely to support a union vote, from the company's internal social network. Then, they are forced to use one in which communicating with anyone except one's direct superiors is extremely difficult.

Other documents obtained by [the Intercept revealed](#) that Amazon had also hired high-octane union-busting consultants who collected a larger salary in a single day than the average Bessemer facility employee was paid in a whole month.

Labor lawyer Dan Kovalik told Sputnik that alone could be grounds for throwing out the union's losing vote. At a press conference Friday, [Applebaum similarly said](#) that a rerun election is "very likely," but couldn't give a specific timeframe.

"Big Mike" Foster, the union drive's lead organizer, congratulated the Bessemer workers on their accomplishment despite the defeat and he pledged to continue organizing.

"I need you to hear this, Jeff Bezos... just because you won this battle, this war is not over," [Foster told reporters](#) at the presser.

Amazon has denied any misconduct, saying in [a blog post Friday](#) that the company is actually a force for good in the community for bringing \$15 an hour wages.

"It's easy to predict the union will say that Amazon won this election because we intimidated employees, but that's not true," the company said. "We're not perfect, but we're proud of our team and what we offer, and will keep working to get better every day."

Amazon's stock was up by more than 2% Friday afternoon on the heels of the news.

Rising Profits, Misery Fuel Union Drive

The union was declared late last year, just months after Amazon opened the Bessemer facility amid explosive company growth caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Amazon added more than 500,000 jobs last year, as shuttered shops shifted shopping from in-person to online due.

However, amid the boom, Amazon's labor practices, already controversial for causing everything from requiring delivery workers to [pee in bottles](#) instead of stopping for bathroom breaks in order to meet their schedules, to driving workers to [commit suicide](#) while on the job, got even worse and drew the [accordingly greater scrutiny](#). As COVID-19 cases spiked in Amazon facilities, rumblings of a new attempt at forming a union grew as well. Workers pointed not only to these safety violations and miserable work environments, but also to the astounding wealth collected by Bezos, whose personal wealth [increased by \\$48 billion](#) in 2020 as the company's [profits spiked by 84%](#).

The majority-Black town of Bessemer was once a bustling industrial city making steel and railcars and sporting a powerful union movement, but by the 1980s, most of its industries had left and the city fell on hard times. However, its support for an organized workforce is strong, as an investigation [by Liberation News](#) showed widespread support among the city's population for the Bessemer workers.

"I am glad that Amazon workers are trying to get a union," one Bessemer resident told the outlet. "But there are plenty more changes we need to make. Everything goes up: food, daycare, school, but workers' [pay] is not brought up to where they can survive. [The bosses] want us where we are at. It don't make no sense."

Mysterious Ballot Mailbox Explained

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, voting took place by mail-in ballot from February 8 to March 29. On Wednesday, the labor outlet More Perfect Union reported on emails obtained by a Freedom of Information Act request revealing that Amazon put extensive pressure on the US Postal Service ahead of the start of the union vote to place an illegal ballot dropbox.

"Amazon had the ballot dropbox installed in violation of explicit guidance from the federal government. The box is installed the evening of Feb 9th, late at night, under cover of darkness," MPU wrote, noting both the USPS and NLRB advised against the move.

"The mailbox was critical for Amazon's strategy because it wanted to pressure employees to bring ballots to work that they'd received at home in the mail. By doing this, they could then pressure and monitor employees to submit 'no' votes."

The emails, they noted, "directly contradict" what [USPS has said](#) about the mailbox for months, which is that placing the mailbox there was their idea. Amazon is USPS' largest corporate client.

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Citing Electrical Issues, Boeing Advises 16 Airlines to Ground Embattled 737 MAX Jets by [Evan Craighead](#)

Last week, Boeing announced that Southwest Airlines and Alaska Airlines inked deals for dozens of new 737 MAX jets. Though airlines appear to be regaining confidence in the once-grounded 737 MAX, a new set of issues may complicate the aircraft's complete return to the skies.

Boeing announced in a Friday morning issuance that at least 16 airlines have been advised to pull their 737 MAX fleets from service and inspect them for possible electrical issues.

"The recommendation is being made to allow for verification that a sufficient ground path exists for a component of the electrical power system," the company stated, noting it was working in conjunction with the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to deal with the issue.

Boeing did not specify how many aircraft will be affected, nor how long the inspections are expected to take.

The FAA later confirmed it would "ensure the issue is addressed."

Since the announcement, Texas-based Southwest Airlines, which only flies Boeing 737s, has moved to remove at least 30 of the jets from service. The [company highlighted](#) that it has not experienced any related "operational challenges" and foresees "minimal disruption" to operations following the grounding.

American Airlines has removed at least 17 jets from service following the announcement. The commercial airline was the first to restart Boeing 737 MAX flights in December 2020, after the plane was grounded for more than a year over the twin crashes of Lion Air Flight 610 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302.

The fatal crashes that together killed 346 people have ultimately been linked to the 737 MAX's Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System, which serves as a flight control system designed to enhance the jet's pitch stability so that it feels and flies like other 737s. The Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation [has argued](#) "lapses in aviation safety oversight and failed leadership in the FAA" were also factors.

"My understanding is this is different than any of those other issues and obviously we need to make sure there's full confidence before these specific aircraft return to the air and that's what the FAA will be closely monitoring," US Secretary of Transportation Pete [Buttigieg remarked](#) on Friday.

However, the FAA has not ordered the grounding of all 737 MAX jets.

Steven Marks, an attorney representing families of victims aboard the fatal Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302, told the [Associated Press](#) that the recent announcement from Boeing proves "[w]e don't know what other issues exist."

"This grounding calls into question the safety of the Max and why Boeing's claims of a 'changed culture' continue to ring hollow," he added.

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US House Ethics Committee Probing Rep. Matt Gaetz Over Misconduct Allegations
by [Evan Craighead](#)

It was reported Thursday that Joel Greenberg, an acquaintance of Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL), may serve as a witness in the US Department of Justice's probe into federal sex trafficking claims made against the congressman. Gaetz has denied the allegations and claimed the DoJ's investigation is part of an "organized criminal extortion" plot.

Amid reports of Greenberg possibly reaching a plea deal with federal prosecutors, the US House Committee on Ethics announced on Friday that it had launched an investigation into a litany of misconduct allegations leveled against Gaetz in recent weeks.

"The Committee is aware of public allegations that Representative Matt Gaetz may have engaged in sexual misconduct and/or illicit drug use, shared inappropriate images or videos on the House floor, misused state identification records, converted campaign funds to personal use, and/or accepted a bribe, improper gratuity, or impermissible gift, in violation of House Rules, laws, or other standards of conduct," the news release detailed.

The issuance, approved by Chairman Rep. Theodore E. Deutch (D-FL), and Ranking Member Rep. Jackie Walorski (R-ID), highlighted that the public disclosure of the committee's review "does not itself indicate that any violation has occurred."

No further details were provided.

The congressional committee's announcement comes just hours before Gaetz [is scheduled](#) to take the stage as the keynote speaker for the Women for America First's "Save America Summit."

Friday night's "BBQ, Boots & Bluegrass" dinner, is being held in Florida, at Trump National Doral Miami.

Gaetz has denied all allegations, including those related to the underage sex trafficking claims raised in the ongoing DoJ probe. [He tweeted](#) late last month that he and his father, former Florida Senate President Don Gaetz, have been cooperating with federal authorities to thwart an organized criminal extortion plot "involving a former DOJ official seeking \$25 million." Former US President Donald Trump has also pushed back against reports that the 38-year-old congressman asked for a preemptive pardon.

"Congressman Matt Gaetz has never asked me for a pardon," Trump wrote in an April 7 statement. "It must also be remembered that he has totally denied the accusations against him." Furthermore, Greenberg has not officially accepted a plea deal, despite his lawyer's ominous statement following a federal court hearing in Orlando, Florida, on Thursday.

"I am sure Matt Gaetz is not feeling very comfortable today," attorney Fritz Scheller said.

Greenberg, a former tax collector, has been hit with 33 federal charges.

During Greenberg's Friday arraignment, US Magistrate Judge Leslie Hoffman entered a not guilty plea in relation to 22 of the charges leveled against the former tax collector. The charges relate to allegations of embezzlement and fraudulently obtaining hundreds of thousands of dollars in personal loans for defunct companies.

Neither Greenberg nor his attorney appeared in court that day.

The remaining 11 charges relate to allegations of sex trafficking and identity theft. Gaetz's once-public [Venmo payments](#) to Greenberg have raised questions about the congressman's possible involvement in the alleged crime.

The deadline for Greenberg's plea agreement has been set for May 15.

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White House's Southwest Border Czar to Step Down as Migrant Crisis Persists
by [Evan Craighead](#)

It was announced Friday that White House officials intend to reach out to several major US companies about possibly increasing their investments in both Mexico and Central America. According to data from US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), agency personnel encountered more than 172,000 migrants at the Southwest border in March.

US National Security Adviser Jacob Sullivan announced Friday afternoon that Roberta Jacobson, special assistant to US President Joe Biden and coordinator for the Southwest border, will retire from her duties at the end of April.

Jacobson's decision to leave is "[c]onsistent with her commitment at the outset to serve in the Administration's first 100 days."

Sullivan's release detailed that US Vice President Kamala Harris, who was recently selected as point person for the Biden administration's efforts at the US-Mexico border, will work with Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and Secretary of Health and Human Services Xavier Becerra to "rebuild" the US immigration system.

Shortly before the said announcement, Jacobson revealed to Bloomberg News that Washington will tap US companies to consider assisting in the administration's development plan. According to the outgoing official, hurricane-damaged agricultural land in Central America and Mexico will be the primary focus.

"We can expect to see progress in the president's first term," she asserted on Friday.

However, folks should not expect drastic change for some time.

"It is not going to turn around 100% in these countries in four years or even eight years,"

Jacobson said. "It has to be a longer-term effort. But I do think you can expect to see changes within four years that show us things are working and we will adjust along the way."

She went on to claim that corruption in Central American governments could impede progress and present "real challenges" for delivering aid. The outgoing official also said the administration of former US President Donald Trump allowed anti-corruption mandates to lapse in both Guatemala and Honduras.

"This is not a situation in which we write a check to governments and let them spend it as they wish," Jacobson said. "We're pretty confident that the funds will be used as intended."

Nevertheless, the US is presently confronted with an ongoing "increase in encounters and arrests" along the Southwest border, according to a Wednesday [news release](#) from CBP.

"Encounters have continued to increase since April 2020, and our past experiences have helped us be better prepared for the challenges we face this year," said a senior CBP official. "We are committed to balancing the need to maintain border security, care for those in our custody, and keep the American people and our workforce safe."

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Tiger Woods Thought He Was in Florida After February Crash, Collision Report Reveals by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Famed golfer Tiger Woods was left severely injured and taken into emergency surgery in late February after the decorated athlete lost control of his vehicle and ended up rolling his car down a hillside. Woods was the only individual who was directly injured by the mishap.

Newly surfaced details surrounding Woods' devastating February car crash in Los Angeles, California, have revealed that the "somewhat combative" champion golfer mistakenly believed that he was in Florida at the time.

Obtained by [USA Today Sports](#), the 22-page collision report details that data documented by the vehicle's black box reveals that Woods did not adjust the position of the car as the driving lane began to curve right, and that he traveled several hundred feet without hitting the brakes after striking the median.

Rather than braking, which investigators noted would have prevented the collision entirely, Woods instead hit "the gas pedal at 99% in the final seconds before hitting the raised median," according to the outlet.

Woods' failure to adjust his driving ultimately saw him jump the curb, strike a tree and roll his car down into the Rolling Hills Estates. The incident caused the athlete multiple injuries, including several fractures to his right leg and ankle.

The report details that when first responders treated Woods at the scene, he seemed "somewhat combative" and his pupils appeared to be "slightly sluggish." He was also suffering from low blood pressure. However, the conditions were subsequently written off as having been caused by the "shock" of the accident.

Later, after being transported to a local area hospital, investigators interviewed Woods while stitches were being applied to his face. There, Los Angeles Sheriff's Deputy Kyle Sullivan determined the athlete was not entirely aware of where he was.

"I then asked [Woods] if he is able to tell me about what happened regarding the traffic collision," Sullivan recalled in the report. "[Woods] told me he did not remember being involved in a traffic collision. [Woods] thought he was currently in the state of Florida."

Although officials did find an empty, unlabeled pharmaceutical bottle inside a backpack found at the crash site, another officer's account included in the collision report stated that investigators found "no reason to believe [Woods] had been operating a motor vehicle while impaired by alcohol/drugs."

The officer's account, however, was not based on in-person interviews conducted with Woods, but rather from reviewed video footage and interviews that other officials conducted with the athlete.

The report's findings came days after Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva [announced](#) that Woods was traveling at unsafe speeds between 84 mph and 87 mph in a 45-mph zone when he lost control of the SUV he was driving. Officials also determined that the vehicle reached 75 mph when it struck the tree and rolled into a ditch.

At the time, Villanueva also indicated Woods would not be issued a citation or be charged with reckless driving, explaining that a citation required witnesses and the charge required more than one infraction.

"The decision not to issue a citation would be the same thing for anyone in this room," Villanueva told reporters during the Wednesday conference. "The inference [that] he is somehow special is false."

The February crash marks the third such incident for Woods since the [2009 crash](#) that saw him charged with careless driving, after he drove his car into a fire hydrant and a tree just outside of his Florida home.

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Yippee Ki Nope - Political Cartoon

Earlier, reports surfaced that Paul Alexander, who served as a science adviser under the Trump administration, urged the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to relax social distancing efforts so that COVID-19 could spread and, ultimately, lead to the creation of “herd immunity” against the deadly SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Newly surfaced [emails](#) have revealed how Alexander ran victory laps after boasting about how he managed to get CDC officials to change the language used on their reports on two separate occasions.

In one September 2020 email between Alexander and Michael Caputo, the former public affairs chief of the Department of Health and Human Services, the adviser remarked that his efforts were a “small victory but a victory nonetheless and yippee.”

However, that’s not all, folks - far from it in fact. In another email exchange, Alexander called on then-White House adviser Scott Atlas to help him with an effort to change the language on an upcoming [CDC report](#) that would be focusing on COVID-19-related deaths among young Americans.

At the time, Alexander wanted to cook up the numbers on the report to show that suicides among the youth were increasing amid the pandemic, despite the fact that suicide rates had actually declined in 2020 by about 6%.

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Japanese Doctors Perform World’s First Living Donor Lung Transplant in COVID-19 Patient by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers have determined that the respiratory illness causes severe lung damage, with some patients even undergoing lung transplants as part of their recovery. A January study found that more than 1,700 patients from Wuhan, China, were found to have evidence of lung damage months after their infection.

Doctors in [Japan](#) have performed what they say is the world’s first lung transplant from living donors to a COVID-19 patient, Dr. Hiroshi Date, the director of the Department of Respiratory Surgery at Kyoto University Hospital, revealed at a Thursday news conference.

The Wednesday transplant operation was performed by a team of 30 doctors and took around 11 hours to perform. The unnamed patient, identified only as a woman from Japan’s Kansai region, received part of healthy lungs from her husband and son.

The woman, who was admitted to Kyoto University Hospital on Monday, had been [connected](#) to an extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) device to replace her failing lungs upon developing pneumonia after contracting the novel coronavirus.

Transplants are usually done from brain-dead donors as is commonly performed in China, US and Europe, however, it is still considered rare to do so in Japan. According to the hospital statement, the waiting period for such transplants can take as long as two and a half years in Japan, and live donors are considered a better option.

Last month, US surgeons completed a "[Covid to Covid](#)" double-lung transplant by using lungs from a donor who had recovered from COVID-19 but later died from other causes. The lungs were subsequently transplanted to a 60-year-old patient whose lungs were also damaged by the disease. Earlier, US surgeons successfully performed a [double-lung](#) transplant operation on a COVID-19 patient, which is believed to be the first of its kind in the nation.

Typically, there are restrictions on who can undergo the specified transplant, with medical professionals taking into consideration a patient's age and physical condition. The operation is usually limited to people with serious lung diseases who meet certain criteria, such as cystic and pulmonary fibrosis.

Though the unidentified Japanese patient had no pre-existing medical conditions, her respiratory function deteriorated rapidly after being infected with SARS-CoV-2, the deadly virus that causes COVID-19.

The hospital later determined that the woman had no hope of recovery, and only a lung transplant could save her life. Her husband and son both offered to donate, despite knowing the risks of decreased lung capacity for their own bodies.

In reference to future performances of procedures like this, [Date stated](#) that he believes "there is hope for this treatment in the sense that it creates a new option" for patients.

The patient remains in the intensive care unit at Kyoto University Hospital, but is expected to be discharged sometime over the next two or three months, if all goes well. As for the son and husband, both are in stable condition, and have both expressed gratitude and joy over the successful surgery, according to the hospital.

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More Than Meets the Eye: Auto-Transforming Optimus Prime Robot Available for \$700
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

In February 2020 at Toy Fair New York, Robosen Robotics (Shenzhen) Co. LTD, a leading innovator in the field of AI and robotics, showcased T9, the world's most advanced programmable robot that can convert from robot to vehicle in smooth and seamless movement. Now, taking a huge leap into what can be viewed as a major engineering achievement for millennials and a move sure to satisfy fans of all ages, Robosen Robotics - in partnership with toy maker Hasbro - have brought to life Optimus Prime, the one and only leader of the [Autobots](#).

Speaking in the voice of Peter Cullen, the original voice actor for Optimus Prime for over four decades, the costly high-grade collectible is equipped to respond with 80 sound effects, as he waits for one of over 20 voice commands with his built-in speakers and two microphones. Optimus responds to voice commands that include “roll out,” “open fire,” “attack” and “move left/right,” among many other directives. Individuals can also say “hello” or ask “who are you?” That is, if you’re not already familiar with the main protagonist of the beloved animated [“Transformers”](#) series.

More than meets the eye, Optimus can also do what we all expect from a Transformer, which is transform from his 19-inch battle ready self to his more subtle Peterbilt 279 semi-truck ready to ride remote control vehicle mode.

Optimus moves in smooth, realistic fashion, even mimicking breathing as he is built inside out with premium materials including over 5,000 components, 60 microchips and 27 servo motors, which allow for seamless and fluid movement.

Giving Optimus Prime a more personal educational tool, individuals can also use an online application to control the robot with different programming options, or “missions” and design a unique movement pattern. The feature offers a possible gateway into teaching engineering to a younger generation in the way of exposure to the world of robotics, similar to the programming [teaching skills](#) of Robosen’s K1 Interstellar Scout.

According to the announcement made by Robosen, it took 11 years of research and development to produce a robot with such a comprehensive set of functions.

Casey Collins, general manager and senior vice president at Hasbro has said, “In our continued persistence to elevate branded play, Robosen’s advanced innovation within robotics, will allow our fans to bring their favorite Transformers characters to life in a way never achieved before within collectibles.”

Major tech moves have been made in the field of robotics recently as society moves closer to building real-life Transformers, such as the 19.7-metre-tall RX-0 Unicorn moving replica of a [Gundam](#), a fictional giant robot from the popular Japanese anime franchise. The Gundam replica, which was built by the anime’s publisher, Sunrise, is located for tourist pleasure in DiverCity Tokyo Plaza, Odaiba, Japan.

Though the Optimus Prime creation isn’t Robosen’s first transforming robot, it is the first that has been designed as an official Transformer.

"We are thrilled to collaborate with Hasbro and look forward to ushering in a new standard of robotics with the most advanced Transformers robots for consumers ever created," said Robosen USA Director Sean Tang. "The team is working hard to deliver an amazing user experience for fans of this esteemed franchise and produce Transformers that will be a premium addition to their collection with its superior functionality."

The Optimus Prime Auto-Converting Programmable Advanced Robot – Collector’s Edition is available to [preorder](#) on the Hasbro Pulse site for \$699, but currently has no confirmed release date.

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YouTube Pulls COVID-19 Roundtable Video Hosted by Florida Gov DeSantis for 'Medical Misinformation'

by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Since the early start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has faced ongoing criticism about his handling of the pandemic in his state. DeSantis has often fired back criticizing the way in which the US government has handled controlling the spread of the virus. In Tallahassee, Florida, last month, DeSantis held a public health roundtable where he invited a panel of scientists and researchers to weigh in on issues surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. However, YouTube pulled the video on Wednesday for supposedly violating the social media platform's standards on misinformation.

In the video, the scientists rejected the steps taken by the US to try and control the virus, which included a discussion on the effectiveness of lockdowns and masks, contact tracing, the closing of schools and vaccine passports.

"YouTube has clear policies around COVID-19 medical misinformation to support the health and safety of our users." YouTube spokesperson Elena Hernandez said in a statement. "We removed AIER's [American Institute for Economic Research] video because it included content that contradicts the consensus of local and global health authorities regarding the efficacy of masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19."

DeSantis' press secretary, Cody McCloud, on Thursday called the move "another blatant example of Big Tech attempting to silence those who disagree with their woke corporate agenda." [According to NBC News](#), McCloud emphasized in his statement that public health policies need to include a variety of scientific and technical expertise and removal of the video represented a suppression of "productive dialogue of these complex issues."

The video, which is still available on the [AIER website](#), involved scientists, majority of whom are responsible for the Great Barrington Declaration, [a statement sponsored](#) by AIER which opposes lockdowns and argues that society would build immunity if all but those over 70 "resume life as normal."

Many other leading scientists have denounced the Great Barrington Declaration as a "[dangerous fallacy](#)" unsupported by scientific evidence, and have accused those involved of "spreading public health misinformation."

However, according to Dr. Scott Atlas, a former Trump White House coronavirus advisor who participated in the discussion, "there's no scientific rationale or logic to have children wear masks in school." Attending the meeting as well, Dr. Jay Bhattacharya of Stanford University, agreed, saying that wearing a mask is "developmentally inappropriate and it just doesn't help on the disease spread."

There are studies still being done to understand how mask mandates may affect people, especially children. Dr. Brett Enneking, a child psychologist at Riley's Children's Health, mentioned in [an interview last July](#) that while it is unsure what the effect a mask mandate has on children, we do know that "especially in early childhood" they use the entire face, including the mouth to get a "sense of what's going on around them in terms of adults and other people in their environment as far as their emotions." He goes on to say that many psychologists wonder when wearing masks "if it would affect child development."

However, those outraged over these claims appearing during the roundtable discussion argue that it goes against the recommendations of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which has advised that children “age 2 and older should wear masks in public settings and when around people who don’t live in their household.”

The Florida governor is among those who do not agree with many of the actions taken by the CDC during the pandemic. At a [news conference on Thursday](#), DeSantis announced that he was filing a lawsuit against the federal government and the CDC to allow cruise ships to resume sailing after being shut down for over a year because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The fact of the matter is there is a considerable lack of agreeability and compromise between political, scientific and federal officials when it comes to deciding what the best method is for tackling COVID-19, both nationally and globally, with fact-checking seeming to be the only option to disagree.

Big Tech has already faced [a lot of backlash](#) over the issues of the spread of misinformation and disinformation on their platforms, with many CEOs being subjected to a line of questioning from lawmakers of Congress last month. This move by YouTube is only sure to [once again bring](#) into question the amount of power and control these companies are allowed to have over speech.

Who are the scientists involved in DeSantis’ Roundtable Panel?

Dr. Scott Atlas, radiologist, political commentator, health care public advisor and former adviser on the Donald Trump administration’s White House Coronavirus Task Force. Known for his “herd immunity” theory and the belief that children do not transmit the COVID-19 virus, Atlas posted a letter in November 2020 announcing his resignation from his position at the White House. In his letter, he claimed that his “advice was always focused on minimizing all the harms from both the pandemic and the structural policies themselves, especially to the working class and the poor.”

Professor Sunetra Gupta, British-Indian infectious disease epidemiologist and professor of theoretical epidemiology at the Department of Zoology, University of Oxford is one of the primary authors of The Great Barrington Declaration. She is a large critic of the lockdown approach believing that “we in the UK cannot afford lockdowns, nor indeed as indeed is the case most of the world.”

Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, professor of medicine at Stanford University and research associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research with a focus on the epidemiology of COVID-19, co-authored the Great Barrington Declaration. His hope is that the declaration prompts a dialogue about the benefits and harms of public health interventions. He met with former President Trump’s health officials back in May 2020 to discuss the lockdown policy and propose a “focused protection” of people. He has written a paper on “The Futility of Contact Tracing,” calling the policy punitive.

Dr. Martin Kulldorff, professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, biostatistician and epidemiologist at the Brigham and Women’s Hospital who also co-authored the Great Barrington Declaration, has referred to the public health damage from the lockdown as the “biggest public health mistake or the biggest public health fiasco in history, unfortunately.”

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RPT: FEATURE - US-Bound Migrants Find Themselves Displaced by Climate Change, Biden Policy

REYNOSA, Mexico/DONNA, Texas, April 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's lax stance on immigration has given false hope to hundreds of thousands of asylum-seeking migrants from Central America and Mexico who find themselves turned away at the border, some very desperate after being displaced by natural disasters in their home countries.

A Sputnik correspondent in the Mexican border town of Reynosa witnessed close to a hundred asylum-seeking migrants sheltering at the Las Americas Plaza, a park located walking distance from the US port of entry in Hidalgo, Texas. Many of the migrants gathered at this park had been turned away at the US port of entry after presenting themselves to immigration officials wanting to make a claim for asylum.

The town of Reynosa is in the dangerous Mexican state of Tamaulipas. The US State Department advises people not to travel to the area because of crime, kidnapping and heavily armed cartel members that operate with impunity in the border region.

"We've heard that he [Biden], was supporting the people [migrants], that's why I took the risk," Marina Isabel Fuentes, 43, of El Salvador, told Sputnik.

Biden has said he reversed the Trump's immigration policies because they were unwarranted, inhumane and inconsistent with America's values. However, the Biden administration has tried to discourage migrants from coming to the United States by placing more than 17,000 radio advertisements in Central and South America since January 21 in Spanish, Portuguese, and six indigenous languages, reaching an estimated 15 million individuals.

"My plan is to go back [to US], I feel that being on the other side, I'm not going to be in danger anymore. My goal is to cross back, I'm going to cross the river. I'm going to pay someone to help me cross the river," Fuentes said. "I thought they'd let us pass so we could come out of this hell, but it turned out they turned me away and they don't let me give them an explanation."

Around 570,000 migrants have been turned away at the US-Mexico border since October, according to US government data.

US Custom and Border Protection (CBP) saw a 70 percent jump in apprehensions on the southern border in March. The 172,331 migrant encounters recorded represents the highest monthly total in more than two decades, with the Biden administration on pace to top the previous annual record set in 2019 of over 977,000 apprehensions.

CLIMATE CHANGES PLAYS ROLE IN MIGRATION SURGE

Juan Ortiz Cardenas, 48, of Honduras, and his 11-year-old son fled Honduras due to poverty that was exacerbated by recent hurricanes that ravaged the local economy. Two category four hurricanes - Eta and Iota - hit Central America last November, leading to severe flooding and landslides that displaced more than 150,000 Hondurans.

"The situation is hard in Honduras, my son and I came over here to see if they would give him an opportunity because his brothers are in the United States," Ortiz told Sputnik. "My son is 11 years old and when I presented myself to US immigration, I thought that they were going to let me pass, but they didn't tell us anything, they just took our fingerprints and dropped us off at the bridge."

Ortiz and his son traveled for 25 days to reach the border in Reynosa, unaware that asylum-seeking migrant families would be turned away at this time under the Biden administration.

"I didn't know that," Ortiz said. "Imagine what would have happened if I sent my son [to border alone] and I would've been left hoping he crossed but what if they turned him away and he was alone here [in Reynosa]."

Several migrants were able to afford flights back to their countries of origin, but others are stuck in Reynosa unsure of what to do next, Ortiz said.

Sarai Velasquez, 35, of Honduras, also made the decision to migrate to the United States as a result of the hurricane that hit last fall.

"We came because of the catastrophe in Honduras, we lost everything, we were left without a house," Velasquez told Sputnik. "We lost everything except important documents. That's why we migrated to this country [United States] but they didn't give us an opportunity to be there."

Pablo Escribano, the Regional Thematic Specialist in Migration, Environment and Climate Change in the Regional Office for Central America, North America and the Caribbean of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), told Sputnik that the impact of climate change on Central American livelihoods is projected to worsen.

"On these movements from Honduras, Guatemala, I would say that [climate change] is an important part of the migration movement," Escribano said. "I think we're also going to see more and more in the future - livelihoods get degraded and people cannot feed themselves."

Climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction are key programs in the climate change strategy, he added.

"What we're seeing is an increase in the drought scenarios. The area that we often call the dry corridor which spans around El Salvador, Honduras, and parts of Guatemala, we're seeing increased episodes of drought," Escribano said. "We should also see in some places an increased frequency of... hurricanes and tropical storms. Last hurricane season was a very active one."

IMMIGRATION ACTIVIST SAYS MIGRANTS BETTER OFF IN US CUSTODY

Raquel Martinez, 64, stood near a narrow rural road on a small hill overlooking a massive tent camp facility holding up to 4,100 migrants, mostly children, in the Texas border town of Donna.

"I feel like they're safer here [US side in migrant holding facilities] than they are in Mexico, I'm sorry, but that's the reality," Martinez, a local resident who volunteers helping migrants in the United States, told Sputnik.

A Sputnik correspondent witnessed an unmarked white bus full of migrant children enter the gated facility, which appeared to have more large tent structures under construction in order to expand capacity.

About 48,500 migrant children have illegally crossed into the United States alone, without a parent, since October, according to the data. In March, a total of 18,890 migrant children were apprehended, marking a 100 percent increase compared to February.

"As a local... I'm grateful they're here and I would do anything to help them come out and go on their way to their families, which is what they're all doing, nobody stays here," Martinez said. "In the last couple of years I have never seen a family stay in the [Rio Grande] Valley, never, they all go up. That's the ultimate goal, it's to get them reunited with their families."

According to data released by CPB on Wednesday, the United States has more than 20,000 unaccompanied migrant children in federal custody, an increase of over 2,000 from the previous week.

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RPT - US Defense Official Wearing Ukraine Insignia 'Totally Inappropriate' - Ex-Army Officers

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - US defense attache Colonel Brittany Stewart's decision to wear Ukraine military insignia during a visit to the Donbas region was an unprecedented and inappropriate political statement, two former American Army officers told Sputnik.

On Friday, Ukraine's Joint Forces Operation command said Stewart had traveled to Donbas to assess the situation on the ground. In photos from the visit, Stewart is seen wearing on her shoulder sleeve a "Ukraine or death" skull insignia, which is the patch of the 72nd Mechanized Infantry Brigade.

"It is totally inappropriate and I am surprised it is being tolerated. The 'uniform' means uniform and I have never heard of a soldier taking liberties with what they wear with it," former US Army Military Intelligence officer Phillip Giraldi said. "It is definitely a political statement in this case, showing solidarity with the Ukrainian defense against the 'Russian threat.'"

Stewart's move comes amid an escalation in tensions in Donbas and between Ukraine and Russia. On Wednesday, the head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, Denis Pushilin, said the situation at the contact line was deteriorating.

Retired US Army Colonel Doug Macgregor, a senior Pentagon adviser during the Trump administration, said Stewart's action was virtually without precedent in the history of the US Army and armed forces. Normally, foreign decorations, qualification badges and related material must be approved for wear by the Pentagon or the US Department of the Army, Macgregor said. The Kremlin this week described the situation on the border with Ukraine as "frightening" and vowed to bolster security in response to an increased NATO presence. Meanwhile, the United States and its allies have said they are concerned by Russian troop movements. On Friday, the Pentagon refused to comment on reports from Turkey's Foreign Ministry that the US was deploying two warships to the Black Sea.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Pentagon Chief to Visit Middle East, Europe to Discuss Russia, China

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin on Saturday is embarking on a trip to the Middle East and Europe to discuss military ties with regional allies and common challenges, including what Pentagon describes as Russia's "destabilizing" behavior and a "rising" China.

Austin will meet with government and military leaders in Israel, Germany and the United Kingdom as well as at the NATO headquarters in Belgium.

The visit comes amid heightened tensions in Eastern Ukraine and the South China Sea and attempts to revive the Iran nuclear agreement, continued deliberations over US global military posture and, more specifically, the terms and timing of Washington's intended withdrawal from Afghanistan.

This is Austin's second foreign trip since coming into office. Last month, the Defense Secretary toured Japan, South Korea and India with a focus on strengthening alliances in the Indo-Pacific region.

Austin plans to reaffirm US commitment to the strategic partnership with Israel and its qualitative military edge during talks with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benjamin Gantz, according to the Defense Department.

In Germany, Austin will meet with Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and Chancellery Foreign and Security Policy Adviser Jan Hecker to discuss the bilateral defense relationship, the combatting of malign influence of shared strategic rivals and US force posture in the country and elsewhere. Austin will also visit the US European and African command headquarters in Germany to meet with troops and highlight his vision for security interests in the region.

Austin will next travel to Belgium to meet with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. They plan to discuss "how the alliance is tackling destabilizing behavior by Russia, a rising China, terrorism, and global challenges such as COVID-19 and climate change."

The trip will conclude with travel to the United Kingdom for a meeting with Secretary of State for Defense Ben Wallace. Austin will reaffirm the importance of the two countries' defense cooperation to meet global security challenges, according to the Defense Department.

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Gunman in Central Texas Shooting Faces Murder, Aggravated Assault Charges - Police

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - A gunman who shot six people, killing one, at a local business in central Texas this week has been charged with murder and five counts of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, the Bryan Police Department said in a press release. "In addition to the murder charge, Larry Bollin, 27-year-old, of Grimes County, was served with five counts of Aggravated Assault with a Deadly Weapon. The warrants were served on Bollin at the Brazos County Sheriff's Office," the release said on Friday.

Bollin had also shot a Texas state trooper during the pursuit.

The deceased victim has been identified as 40-year-old Timothy Smith, the release said.

Law enforcement officers have not made a final determination about the motive of the shooting.

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FEATURE - US-Bound Migrants Find Themselves Displaced by Climate Change, Biden Policy

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"What we're seeing is an increase in the drought scenarios. The area that we often call the dry corridor which spans around El Salvador, Honduras, and parts of Guatemala, we're seeing increased episodes of drought," Escribano said. "We should also see in some places an increased frequency of... hurricanes and tropical storms. Last hurricane season was a very active one."

IMMIGRATION ACTIVIST SAYS MIGRANTS BETTER OFF IN US CUSTODY

Raquel Martinez, 64, stood near a narrow rural road on a small hill overlooking a massive tent camp facility holding up to 4,100 migrants, mostly children, in the Texas border town of Donna. "I feel like they're safer here [US side in migrant holding facilities] than they are in Mexico, I'm sorry, but that's the reality," Martinez, a local resident who volunteers helping migrants in the United States, told Sputnik.

A Sputnik correspondent witnessed an unmarked white bus full of migrant children enter the gated facility, which appeared to have more large tent structures under construction in order to expand capacity.

About 48,500 migrant children have illegally crossed into the United States alone, without a parent, since October, according to the data. In March, a total of 18,890 migrant children were apprehended, marking a 100 percent increase compared to February.

"As a local... I'm grateful they're here and I would do anything to help them come out and go on their way to their families, which is what they're all doing, nobody stays here," Martinez said. "In the last couple of years I have never seen a family stay in the [Rio Grande] Valley, never, they all go up. That's the ultimate goal, it's to get them reunited with their families."

According to data released by CPB on Wednesday, the United States has more than 20,000 unaccompanied migrant children in federal custody, an increase of over 2,000 from the previous week.

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Pfizer-BioNTech Apply For US Authorization to Use Its Vaccine in Adolescents - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - Pfizer and BioNTech said in a statement that they have applied to expand emergency use authorization of their vaccine for usage in adolescents between 12 and 15 years old.

"Pfizer Inc. and BioNTech SE today requested amendments to the US Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) of the Pfizer-BioNTech Vaccine (BNT162b2) to expand the use in adolescents 12 to 15 years of age," the statement said on Friday.

The EUA requests are based on the recent results of the concluded Phase 3 trial in adolescents 12 to 15 years of age with or without prior evidence of the novel coronavirus that demonstrated

100 percent efficacy and strong antibody response after vaccination with the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

In the coming days, the companies plan to request similar authorization by the regulatory authorities in other countries worldwide, the statement added.

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US Sees Vienna Meetings as Sign Tehran Wants to Return to JCPOA Compliance - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The United States sees the Vienna meetings as a sign that Iran may be serious about returning into compliance of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a senior US State Department official said during a telephone briefing.

"The atmosphere... it was business-like, they took the matter seriously," the official said on Friday. "We read that as a sign that perhaps they mean what they say when they claim they want to find a way back to the JCPOA if the United States is back in compliance."

The United States, through indirect talks, notified Iran that it would be prepared to lift sanctions if it abides to obligations in the nuclear agreement, but some "legitimate" sanctions would remain, the official said. Moreover, the official said United States would like to build on the nuclear deal after it was neglected for three years by the previous US administration.

The United States and Iran may come across an impasse if Tehran demands lifting of all sanctions imposed since 2017, the official said.

The official said the US administration will be monitoring Iran's announcements during the country's National Nuclear Day for insight into Tehran's ambitions concerning the Iran nuclear deal.

The meetings in Vienna were productive and constructive, and more meetings will resume next week, the official said.

The first in-person meeting took place in Vienna on Tuesday, with the participants noting progress. Moscow called the first meeting on Tuesday successful, while Washington considered it a welcome and constructive step towards restoring mutual compliance with the nuclear deal. Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, said in earlier remarks that there is an opportunity for the participants of Vienna-hosted nuclear talks to reach an agreement on the JCPOA by mid-May, but this does not mean a return to full implementation of the nuclear deal.

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US, Iran Headed for Impasse if Tehran Demands Lifting of All Trump Sanctions - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The United States and Iran will reach an impasse in talks about reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) if Tehran remains adamant

about stopping all sanctions imposed by the former Trump administration, a senior US State Department official said.

"If Iran sticks to the position that every sanction that has been imposed since 2017 has to be lifted or there will be no, then we're headed towards an impasse," the official told reporters on Friday.

The official emphasized that some of the sanctions imposed by the previous Trump administration are legitimate, adding the United States has informed Iran of which sanctions would be lifted and which would remain if Tehran returns to compliance.

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Biden Admin. on 'Wrong Path' After Decision to Keep Dakota Access Pipeline Open - Tribe

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is on the wrong path after refusing to shutdown the \$3.7 billion Dakota Access pipeline amid an ongoing legal battle with Native American tribes that oppose it due to environmental concerns, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Chairman Mike Faith said in a statement.

"In a meeting with Biden's staff earlier this year, we were told that this new administration wanted to 'get this right.' Unfortunately, today's update from the US Army Corps shows it has chosen to ignore our pleas and stick to the wrong path," Faith said on Friday.

Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Vice Chair Ira Taken Alive added that the tribe will continue to fight. Earlier on Friday, US Judge James Boasberg during a court hearing delayed a decision about whether to allow the Dakota Access pipeline to continue operating in order to give the project's developer Energy Transfer LP ten days to update the information provided to the court about the potential economic consequences associated with shutting down the pipeline.

An attorney representing the US administration's Army Corps of Engineers said they did not plan to shut down operations amid the pending litigation.

A groups of attorneys representing the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, and others expressed disappointment during the court hearing that the Biden administration decided to keep Dakota Access pipeline operations alive without the proper authorization.

The tribes have been in a three-year legal battle with the Trump administration and the pipeline's parent company, Energy Transfer Partners, to prevent the Dakota Access Pipeline from passing through their sacred land, which they also say threatens vital water resources.

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US Waiting on Iran's Nuclear Day Declarations for Clues on JCPOA Plans - Official

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The United States is waiting for Iran's announcements during the country's National Nuclear Day for insight into Tehran's ambitions concerning the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a senior US State Department official said.

"Tomorrow is [National] Nuclear Day [in Iran]. Traditionally that's a day when Iran has made nuclear announcements, so we expect something... depending on their announcements it also could be a sign that they are approaching these talks in a constructive spirit... or whether they are going to take a different track, which would raise questions about their intentions," the official told reporters on Friday.

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US Sees Vienna Meetings as Sign Tehran Wants to Return to JCPOA Compliance - State Dept.

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White House Border Coordinator to Leave Post at End of Month - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - White House Coordinator for the Southwest Border Roberta Jacobson will retire from her post at the end of this month, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said.

"Consistent with her commitment at the outset to serve in the Administration's first 100 days, Ambassador Jacobson will retire from her role as Coordinator at the end of this month," Sullivan said in a statement on Friday.

Jacobson was assigned to launch renewed efforts with Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, to address the mass surge of migrants making their way to the US southern border. Vice President Kamala Harris will now lead the Biden administration's efforts to work on improving the US immigration system and addressing the root causes of illegal migration to the United States.

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Dow, S&P 500 Hit Record Highs in 3rd Straight Week of Gains for US Stocks

NEW YORK, April 9 (Sputnik) - US stocks rallied for a third straight week, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average and S&P 500 hitting record highs on Friday, amid optimism that economic recovery could be greater than has been anticipated by the authorities.

The Dow, Wall Street's broadest stock indicator comprising mostly industrial stocks, closed up 297 points, or 0.9 percent, at 33,801, after hitting an all-time high at 33,807. It also rose 0.9 percent on the week, extending the cumulative gain of 0.3 percent in two prior weeks.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, settled up 30 points, or 0.7 percent, at 4,127, after a record high of 4,129. It rallied 2.7 percent on the week, similar to the cumulative gain in two prior weeks.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite Index finished up 71 points, or 0.5 percent, at 13,900. Nasdaq, which groups high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, rose 3.1 percent after a 2.6 percent gain in the previous week.

Stocks have resumed their uptrend in recent weeks, responding to the Biden administration's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package and proposed \$2.3 trillion infrastructure development program, which analysts said could lift the US economy faster-than-expected from the pandemic.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik)

PRINCE PHILIP DIES AT AGE 99

* Prince Philip, husband of British monarch Queen Elizabeth II, died at the age of 99 on Friday, the Buckingham Palace announced.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday sent a letter to UK Queen Elizabeth II, in which he expressed his condolences of the death of Prince Philip, the Kremlin said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Friday enacted the decision of the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) of Ukraine to impose sanctions on Hong Kong-registered shareholders of Donetsk Region's gas distributor Donetskoblgaz.

* French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian urged Russia to explain motives for the movement of Russian troops to the eastern border of Ukraine and in Crimea.

* Zelenskyy enacted the decision of the NSDC of Ukraine on sanctions against former President Viktor Yanukovych, former Prime Minister Mykola Azarov and a number of other

ex-officials of the country, the corresponding decree was published on the website of Zelenskyy's office.

- * Ukrainian Armed Forces Commander-in-Chief Ruslan Khomchak said that a "liberation" of Donbas by force will lead to mass deaths among the civilian population and it is unacceptable to Kiev.

NATO ACTIVITY IN BLACK SEA

- * The increased activity of NATO in the Black Sea complicates the security situation in the region, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko told Sputnik, commenting on the passage of US warships through the Bosphorus.

- * Two US warships, destroyers Roosevelt and Donald Cook, will pass through the Bosphorus into the Black Sea on April 14-15 amid the escalation of tensions between Russia and Ukraine, Turkish broadcaster NTV reported.

- * Two US warships will pass through the Bosphorus to the Black Sea on April 14-15, a source from the Turkish Foreign Ministry told Sputnik on Friday.

JCPOA TALKS

- * The United States is anticipating the working group consultations on the Iran nuclear agreement to resume next week, the US State Department spokesperson Jalina Porter said during a briefing on Friday.

- * There were no face-to-face contacts between the United States and Iran in Vienna, and there are no signs that the Iranians may change their stance on this issue, Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, said.

- * Members of the Joint Commission of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) emphasized their resolve to further pursue the ongoing diplomatic effort to save the nuclear deal, and EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell will continue separate contacts with JCPOA participants, the European External Action Service (EEAS) said.

- * The next meeting of the Joint Commission of the (JCPOA will be held on April 14 in Vienna, the Iranian Foreign Ministry said following the latest round of negotiations.

SITUATION IN MYANMAR

- * The Myanmar military authorities declined the request for a visit by UN Special Envoy Christine Schraner Burgener who arrived in Thailand earlier on Friday as part of her efforts to calm the situation, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said.

- * Myanmar Ambassador to the United Nations U Kyaw Moe Tun called for establishing of a no-fly zone over "living areas" in his country to prevent the military from conducting airstrikes to kill civilians.

PUTIN-ERDOGAN TALKS

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday discussed with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan the importance of preserving the regime of the Black Sea Straits under the Montreux Convention, the Kremlin said.

- * Putin and Erdogan discussed the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement, the Kremlin said.

- * Putin outlined Moscow's stance on the internal Ukrainian crisis to Erdogan, the Kremlin said.

* Putin and Erdogan discussed COVID-19 and possible production of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine during a phone conversation, the Kremlin said.

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PREVIEW - Pentagon Chief to Visit Middle East, Europe to Discuss Russia, China

WASHINGTON, April 0 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin on Saturday is embarking on a trip to the Middle East and Europe to discuss military ties with regional allies and common challenges, including what Pentagon describes as Russia's "destabilizing" behavior and a "rising" China.

Austin will meet with government and military leaders in Israel, Germany and the United Kingdom as well as at the NATO headquarters in Belgium.

The visit comes amid heightened tensions in Eastern Ukraine and the South China Sea and attempts to revive the Iran nuclear agreement, continued deliberations over US global military posture and, more specifically, the terms and timing of Washington's intended withdrawal from Afghanistan.

This is Austin's second foreign trip since coming into office. Last month, the Defense Secretary toured Japan, South Korea and India with a focus on strengthening alliances in the Indo-Pacific region.

Austin plans to reaffirm US commitment to the strategic partnership with Israel and its qualitative military edge during talks with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benjamin Gantz, according to the Defense Department.

In Germany, Austin will meet with Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and Chancellery Foreign and Security Policy Adviser Jan Hecker to discuss the bilateral defense relationship, the combatting of malign influence of shared strategic rivals and US force posture in the country and elsewhere. Austin will also visit the US European and African command headquarters in Germany to meet with troops and highlight his vision for security interests in the region.

Austin will next travel to Belgium to meet with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. They plan to discuss "how the alliance is tackling destabilizing behavior by Russia, a rising China, terrorism, and global challenges such as COVID-19 and climate change."

The trip will conclude with travel to the United Kingdom for a meeting with Secretary of State for Defense Ben Wallace. Austin will reaffirm the importance of the two countries' defense cooperation to meet global security challenges, according to the Defense Department.

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Pentagon Announces Plan to Counter Extremism in US Military - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has announced the immediate actions to counter extremism in the department and established a special working group, the Defense Department said in a statement.

"[The group named Countering Extremism Working Group (CEWG)] will oversee the implementation of immediate actions as well as the development of mid-term and long-term recommendations for the continued engagement of this issue," the statement said.

The plan includes reviewing and updating certain Defense Department rules focused on confronting extremism, the statement also said.

"The military departments will add provisions to their service member transition checklists that include training on potential targeting of service members by extremist groups and work with other federal departments agencies to create a mechanism by which veterans have the opportunity to report any potential contact with an extremist group should they chose to do so," the statement added.

Initial lines of efforts will include such areas like military justice and policy, screening capabilities, education and training opportunities, as well as support special Insider Threat Program, according to the statement.

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White House Border Coordinator to Leave Post at End of Month - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - White House Coordinator for the Southwest Border Roberta Jacobson will retire from her post at the end of this month, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"Consistent with her commitment at the outset to serve in the Administration's first 100 days, Ambassador Jacobson will retire from her role as Coordinator at the end of this month," Sullivan said in a statement.

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US Issues New Guidelines for Government Interaction With Taiwan Counterparts - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The United States has issued new guidance that liberalizes the rules regarding exchanges with Taiwanese counterparts, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"These new guidelines liberalize guidance on contacts with Taiwan, consistent with our unofficial relations, and provide clarity throughout the Executive Branch on effective implementation of our 'one China' policy, which is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act, the three Joint Communiques, and the Six Assurances," Price said in a statement.

The updated guidance follows a review, as part of the Taiwan Assurance Act, which defines the non-diplomatic relations between the United States and Taiwan, the statement said.

The move comes amid rising tension between the United States and China over Taiwan. White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki earlier on Friday said the United States watches closely China's aggressive actions against Taiwan and has growing concerns about it.

"We have been clearly publicly and privately expressing our concern, our growing concerns about China's aggression towards Taiwan. China is taking increasingly coercive action to undercut democracy in Taiwan. We have seen a concerning increase in PRC's [China's] military activity in the Taiwan Strait, which we believe is potentially destabilizing. So, we are watching that closely," Psaki said during a daily briefing.

Psaki emphasized that the United States seeks no confrontation with China, but considers the bilateral relationship as one based on "steep competition."

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US Indicts 2 Americans, 1 Dutch National for \$30M In Foreign Exchange Fraud - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - Two US citizens and a Dutch national have been indicted for conducting a \$30 million foreign exchange investment fraud scheme and face up to 65 years in prison, the US Justice Department said in a release on Friday.

"A federal grand jury in the Southern District of Florida returned an indictment Thursday charging two US citizens and a Dutch national with conducting a foreign exchange trading scheme to steal \$30 million from their investor victims," the release said.

The Justice Department said Patrick Gallagher, Michael Dion and Emade Echadi devised a scheme to solicit investments in their foreign exchange company, Global Forex Management, and as a result stole \$30 million from their victims by intentionally creating losing trades for the investors.

The three are charged with conspiracy to commit securities fraud, conspiracy to commit wire fraud and conspiracy to commit money laundering, the release said.

If convicted, the defendants face a maximum penalty of five years in prison for the conspiracy to commit securities fraud charge and 20 years in prison for each of the other charges, the release added.

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US Navy Operates in S. China Sea Amid Concerns Over China-Philippines Tensions - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The United States is deploying an aircraft carrier with supporting warships in the South China Sea to demonstrate its commitment to freedom of

navigation amid concerns over a massive presence of Chinese vessels in the area, US Department of Defense spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Friday.

"We remain concerned by amassing of Chinese maritime militia vessels in the Union Bank area of the South China Sea and China's efforts to impede the lawful rights of our treaty ally the Philippines," Kirby said during a briefing.

Kirby pointed out that the Theodore Roosevelt carrier strike group and the USS Makin Island Amphibious Readiness Group are undertaking training and operations in the South China Sea in support of "our long-standing commitment to freedom of the seas and to regional security as well."

According to media reports, hundreds of Chinese boats are currently present inside the Philippines' 200-mile exclusive economic zone at Whitsun Reef in the South China Sea. China claims that vessels are sheltering from bad weather and carry no militia aboard, the reports said. Kirby said that the United States takes seriously its obligations under the 1951 US-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty.

"And certainly any attack on the Philippines would warrant us acting on those commitments. But we are just not there yet. Of course, no one wants to see this come to blows or to result in any conflict," he said.

China's territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea region overlap with those of several other nations. The United States has repeatedly voiced concern over the Chinese activities in the region and has sent military ships there to ensure freedom of navigation.

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Mars Copter Engineers Confident Before First Flight, But Warn of High Winds - NASA

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - Engineers preparing for the first flight of the Mars Ingenuity helicopter on Sunday are confident in their preparations and equipment but caution that wind speeds could be double those they were able to test against in Earth trials, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) officials said on Friday.

"Confidence is high. The only uncertainty remains the winds," Ingenuity project manager MiMi Aung at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California told a press conference. "The flight system is resilient to a range of winds (however) it is possible we could encounter stronger winds than we were able to test against on Earth."

Ingenuity and its rotor blades had been successfully tested before launch against wind speeds up to six meters per second (13.4 miles per hour), but wind speeds of 12 meters per second (26.9 miles per hour) were possible in the Martian atmosphere, Aung acknowledged.

"This [mission] is definitely high risk, high reward. ... There are four possible outcomes: full success, partial success, data not coming back and full failure," she said.

Ingenuity planned flight on Sunday will be the first ever attempt at powered, controlled flight of an aircraft on another planet. The 4-pound (1.8-kg) rotorcraft is expected to take off from Mars' Jezero Crater at 12:30 pm local Mars solar time (10:54 p.m. EDT), hovering 10 feet (3 meters) above the surface for up to 30 seconds, NASA said.

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Historical Programs Should Remind People That US, Russia Were Allies on WWII - US Veteran

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The United States and Russia should maintain those historical programs that educate and remind the young generations that both countries were allies during the World War II, US military veteran Frank Cohn told Sputnik on Friday.

"I think it is a good idea to continue to have programs reminding people that we were allies before we were estranged as well as that what passes in the present may not last and good will between the nations can again be re-established," Cohn said.

The veteran expressed regrets that many Americans, particularly young people, do not know the truth about World War II and the fact that the United States and Russia were partners at then.

"History has not taught very well," Cohn said.

However, Cohn pointed out that there are some exceptions, bright lights on the horizon.

"I visit a middle school yearly, where the history teacher celebrates World War II Day and invites veterans to tell their stories. However, there are so few veterans left that it has become diluted with stories about subsequent wars and veterans from those wars," Cohn, who is 95, said.

The retired colonel said he usually tells students about participating in the historic meeting of the US and Soviet troops at the Elbe River in Germany in April of 1945.

"When I tell my story, there is always a great interest and there are questions how we lost that alliance and then the Cold War gets into the discussion. But there is recognition that politics change and friends can become friends again," he said.

Cohn expressed his desire to continue participating in the ceremony at the Spirit of the Elbe memorial at the Arlington National Cemetery near Washington, DC, but he does not know whether the Russian embassy will be able to hold it this time because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Cohn recalled that in 1945, he did not understand why the Soviet soldiers greeted US troops with such joy.

"It took me time before realizing that the Russian side was celebrating their survival when they realized that no more Germans were in front of them and we were just the emissaries of the fact," he said. "Nevertheless, it was a wonderful reception, one that can't ever be forgotten."

Cohn became the first US soldier to participate in the Spirit of the Elbe memorial at the Arlington National Cemetery, held by the Russian Embassy since 1995. He wrote a letter to then Senator John Warner who helped form the US delegation for the event. Cohn was frequently invited to celebrate Victory Day in Moscow and in 2015 he attended the Red Square parade.

On April 25, 1945, Soviet and US troops met at the Elbe River near the town of Torgau in Germany. The meeting was a key milestone in the process of ending World War II and came about as US troops advanced from the west and Soviet troops advanced from the east, thus splitting Nazi Germany in two.

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US Issues New Guidelines for Government Interaction With Taiwan Counterparts - State Dept. WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The United States has issued new guidance that liberalizes the rules regarding exchanges with Taiwanese counterparts, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

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US Judge Delays Decision on Fate of Dakota Access Pipeline

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - US Judge James Boasberg during a court hearing on Friday delayed a decision about whether to allow the \$3.7 Dakota Access pipeline to continue operating.

Boasberg said he will give the project's developer Energy Transfer LP ten days to update the information provided to the court about the potential economic consequences associated with shutting down the pipeline.

A company attorney said their assessment of the potential economic fallout from shutting down the pipeline needs to reflect the current status of the US economy damaged by the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Another attorney representing the Army Corps of Engineers said they did not plan to shut down operations regardless of the pending litigation.

A groups of attorneys representing the Stand Rock Sioux Tribe, the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, and others expressed disappointment that the Dakota Access pipeline is allowed to operate without the proper authorization, especially because they thought there would be changes under the Biden administration.

The tribes have been in a three-year legal battle with the Trump administration and the pipeline's parent company, Energy Transfer Partners, to prevent the Dakota Access Pipeline from passing through their sacred land, which they also say threatens vital water resources.

On August 5, a US federal appeals court blocked a lower court's decision to temporarily shut down the Dakota Access Pipeline pending additional environmental review.

Between 2016 to 2017, protesters participated in mass demonstrations against the pipeline, which resulted in law enforcement using force against protesters in order to allow the construction of the pipeline to be completed.

The Dakota Access Pipeline is used to move some 570,000 barrels of oil per day from North Dakota through South Dakota, Iowa and Illinois.

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US Anticipates Resumption of Group Consultations on JCPOA Next Week - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The United States is anticipating the working group consultations on the Iran nuclear agreement to resume next week, US State Department spokesperson Jalina Porter said during a briefing on Friday.

"At the time the delegations are actually returning to their respective capitals for consultations but we do anticipate the resumption of working groups will happen next week," Porter said.

The United States is prepared to comply with the Iranian nuclear agreement including lifting sanctions which are inconsistent with it, Porter added.

Porter has also confirmed that the Special Envoy Robert Malley is returning back to Washington today.

In 2015, Iran signed the JCPOA with the P5+1 group of countries. The agreement required Iran to scale back its nuclear program and downgrade its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief. In 2018, the US withdrew from the JCPOA and began imposing sanctions on Iran in violation of the nuclear agreement.

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Pentagon Will Not Confirm Reports of US Navy Deployment to Black Sea Next Week - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department declined to comment on the reported US navy deployment to the Black Sea next week, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said in a press briefing on Friday.

Earlier in the day, a Turkish Foreign Ministry source told Sputnik two warships would pass through the Bosphorus to the Black Sea on April 14-15 and return on May 4 and 5.

"We routinely operate and conduct our operations in the Black Sea and throughout the European Command AOR, and as you also know, I am not going to forecast or speak about hypotheticals or about future operations. This is a normal evolution for the United States military and we obviously coordinate the entry into the Black Sea through the Montreux Convention with Turkey " Kirby said. "I won't speak to the press report that you are referring to specifically... I am not going to confirm the Turkey press reports that you are referring to."

Two US warships, destroyers Roosevelt and Donald Cook, will pass through the Bosphorus into the Black Sea on April 14-15 amid the escalation of tensions between Russia and Ukraine, Turkish broadcaster NTV reported on Friday.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko told Sputnik the increased activity of NATO in the Black Sea complicates the security situation in the region. Answering about contacts between Moscow and Ankara in connection with the passage of US ships into the Black Sea, the diplomat noted that "there are relevant mechanisms for notification."

The United States is obligated to notify Turkey about the passage of its warships through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, in accordance with the Montreux Convention.

The Montreux Convention, adopted in 1936, preserves the freedom of passage through the straits for merchant ships of all countries, both in peacetime and in wartime. However, the regime of passage of warships is different in relation to the Black Sea and non-Black Sea states. Warships of countries that do not have access to the Black Sea can stay in its water area for no more than 21 days, and significant restrictions on the class and tonnage of the vessels are in force.

The total tonnage of warships and vessels of non-Black Sea states simultaneously staying in the Black Sea should not exceed 45,000 tonnes, and there is a 30,000-tonne limit for any one non-Black Sea country. USS Roosevelt has a displacement of 6,950 tonnes (normal) and 9,648 tonnes (full), USS Donald Cook — 6,783 and 8,915 tonnes, respectively.

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Pentagon Will Not Confirm Reports of US Navy Deployment to Black Sea Next Week - Spokesman

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US Anticipates Resumption of Group Consultations on JCPOA Next Week - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The United States is anticipating the working group consultations on the Iran nuclear agreement to resume next week, the US State Department spokesperson Jalina Porter said during a briefing on Friday.

"At the time the delegations are actually returning to their respective capitals for consultations but we do anticipate the resumption of working groups will happen next week," Porter said.

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US in Contact With Russia, Allies on Situation in Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The United States remains in contact with Russia, Ukraine as well as with its European allies on the current situation in eastern Ukraine, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Friday.

"I can assure you there is ongoing diplomatic engagement between us and a number of countries in the region including Russia, including Ukraine, including our European partners and allies who share our concerns about the aggression of Russian movements on the border," Psaki said.

Donbas has seen an escalation in the situation over the past several weeks. On Wednesday, the head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, Denis Pushilin, said the situation at the contact line was deteriorating. Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov has described the situation on the border as "frightening." He said Russia was taking steps to bolster the security of its western frontier in response to increased NATO presence. The United States and Ukraine, in turn, accuse Moscow of a troop buildup at the border.

On Thursday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited military positions in Donbas and spoke with soldiers deployed there. On the same day, Russia's deputy chief of the presidential executive office, Dmitry Kozak, said there was no link between Zelensky's visit and the deterioration of the situation in the region. Kozak said Ukraine does not want to start a full-scale war in Donbas, but pursues instead public relations stunts accompanied by the imitation of a military threat.

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Blinken Consults With German, French Allies on Russian Troops Near Ukraine - State Dept. WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed with his German and French counterparts Heiko Maas and Jean-Yves Le Drian Russia's military activities along the border with Ukraine, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in readout of the conversation n Friday.

"Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Maas emphasized the importance of supporting Ukraine against unilateral Russian provocations along the Line of Contact in eastern Ukraine, in occupied Crimea, and along Ukraine's borders as well as the need for Russia to immediately cease its military buildup and inflammatory rhetoric," Price said. "Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Le Drian confirmed their unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Price said Blinken and Maas also spoke about relations China and the situation in Afghanistan. During the telephone conversation with Le Drian, the two officials also discussed their countries' "shared desire to see Lebanese leaders implement critical reforms for the common good of their people."

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Canada Reports Almost 25,000 Variant COVID-19 Cases, 90% Being UK Variant - Official

TORONTO, April 9 (Sputnik) - Canadian health officials have detected more than cases 450 of the novel coronavirus variants, the country's Chief Public Health Officer Theresa Tam said during a briefing on Friday.

"To date almost 25,000 variants of concern cases have been reported across Canada, with B.1.1.7. variant [first identified in the United Kingdom] continuing to account for more than 90 percent," Tam told reporters.

Tam added that the number of identified cases has doubled in the past week alone, noting that case counts plotting along the strongest resurgence trajectory that was presented during last week's latest modeling update.

The surge of new variant cases is most pronounced in the provinces British Columbia and Ontario, the latter of which declared a state of emergency and introduced a stay-at-home order for the next four weeks.

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World Bank to Commit \$2Bln for COVID-19 Vaccinations by May - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The World Bank will have committed \$2 billion to funding COVID-19 vaccinations in over 40 countries by the end of this month, its Managing Director of Operations Axel van Trotsenburg said on Friday.

"The World Bank Group will have committed \$2 billion in financing by the end of April for vaccine purchases, development and manufacturing and is working with more than 40 countries on this effort," Trotsenburg said during a discussion on vaccines at the annual World Bank-IMF Spring Meetings.

The World Bank's COVID-19 vaccine program, called COVAX, aims to distribute a total of 2 billion doses this year to countries in need and has already delivered enough first round doses to 70 nations.

But a lack of funding has also hampered the program, with wealthy nations only subsidizing costs for slightly more than 1 billion doses, COVAX Managing Director Aurelia Nguyen said earlier this week.

World Health Organization director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told Friday's discussion that there had to be better political will to ensure equitable distribution of vaccines and expand global immunity against the novel coronavirus.

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US Watching Closely China's 'Aggression' Toward Taiwan - White House

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The United States watches closely China's aggressive actions against Taiwan and has growing concerns about it, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday.

"We have been clearly publicly and privately expressing our concern, our growing concerns about China's aggression towards Taiwan. China is taking increasingly coercive action to undercut democracy in Taiwan. We have seen a concerning increase in PRC's military activity in the Taiwan Strait, which we believe is potentially destabilizing. So we are watching that closely," Psaki said during a daily briefing.

Psaki emphasized that the United States seeks no confrontation with China, but considers the bilateral relationship as one based on "steep competition."

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Canadian Economy Adds Over 300,000 Jobs in March - Statistics Agency

TORONTO, April 9 (Sputnik) - The Canadian economy added 303,000 jobs in March, reducing the country's unemployment rate to its lowest level since February 2020, the state statistics agency said on Friday.

"Employment rose by 303,000 (+1.6 percent) in March. Combined with an increase of 259,000 (+1.4 percent) in February, this brought employment to within 1.5 percent (-296,000) of its February 2020 level. The unemployment rate fell 0.7 percentage points to 7.5 percent, the lowest level since February 2020," Statistics Canada said in its Labor Force Survey for March. Most of the job gains were in the private sector as many businesses continued to reopen following government-mandated lockdowns in December and January due to the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic.

The agency noted that while most demographic groups continue to bounce back from the economic effects of the pandemic, young women continue to face difficulties in the job market, with employment levels among women aged 15 to 24 remains 6.5 percent higher than male counterparts.

Statistics Canada also warned of trouble ahead as several provinces reintroduce restrictions to combat the so-called "third wave" of the coronavirus pandemic in the country.

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Johnson & Johnson to Deliver 8Mln Doses Weekly Once Maryland Plant Authorized- White House

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - Johnson & Johnson will deliver about 8 million of its single-dose coronavirus vaccine once the East Baltimore plant is authorized by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to produce them, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said during a briefing on Friday.

"Johnson & Johnson expects a relatively low level of weekly dose delivery until the company secures the FDA authorization. With FDA authorization, the company also expects a cadence of up to 8 million weekly doses in total across state and federal channels later in April," Zients said. Although it remains unknown when the FDA will grant the authorization, Zients said that once it is issued, the company will have full responsibility for the operation of the Baltimore plant where only vaccines will be manufactured.

At present, the company is in the middle of installing a new senior leadership team at the Baltimore plant to oversee all aspects of vaccine manufacturing, Zients added. Earlier on Friday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's data showed that Johnson & Johnson will deliver about 700,000 vaccines next week, 86 percent drop from this week when nearly 5 million doses were delivered.

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UN Moving Closer to Sending Repair Mission to Decaying Tanker in Yemen - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 9 (Sputnik) - The United Nations believes it is moving closer to deploying a technical mission to the decaying Safer oil tanker moored off the Yemen coast, following the recent discussions with the Houthi authorities who are to give the green light to access the vessel, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Friday.

"We're making every effort to resolve all pending logistical issues and security arrangements," Haq said. "We've had some constructive discussions with the de-facto authorities in Sanaa this week, and are cautiously optimistic that we're moving closer to a solution."

Haq explained that once the United Nations resolves all logistical arrangements, it will need some time to book vessels for the repair mission, confirm personnel and deploy equipment.

"The sooner we get everything agreed, the sooner this work can start," he said.

The United Nations has been trying to get on board the tanker to make initial repairs and conduct an overall assessment since late January. However, due to numerous bureaucratic and logistical impediments, the deployment on the vessel loaded with over one million barrels of oil was postponed several times.

Safer has been anchored off Yemen's Red Sea coast since 2015. In addition to nearing a collapse of its structure and causing a major humanitarian catastrophe around the port city of Al-Hudaydah, it is also vulnerable to being hit by firearms and exploding.

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Biden Seeks \$715Bln Pentagon Budget to 'Deter' China, Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has asked Congress to provide the Department of Defense (DOD) with a \$715 billion budget to deter Russia and China, the White House said in its initial budget request for discretionary spending on Friday.

"The President's 2022 discretionary request includes \$715 billion for DOD," the document said.

"It Deters China. The discretionary request prioritizes the need to counter the threat from China as the Department's top challenge. The Department would also seek to deter destabilizing behavior by Russia. Leveraging the Pacific Deterrence Initiative and working together with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, DOD would

ensure that the United States builds the concepts, capabilities, and posture necessary to meet these challenges.”

In addition, the discretionary request, according to the White House document, eliminates the budget for Overseas Contingency Operations as a separate funding category, instead directly funding war costs through the Defense Department's base budget.

In his first major foreign policy speech, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken characterized the United States' relationship with China as the biggest geopolitical test for the United States in the 21st century and one that needs to be addressed from a position of strength.

Blinken called for revitalizing US alliances and reengaging international institutions to deal with China, which he described as the only nation with capabilities to "seriously challenge" the global order.

Blinken also said that several countries present Washington with serious challenges, including Russia, Iran and North Korea.

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Biden Budget Request Includes \$101Mln in Additional Funding to Combat Domestic Terrorism

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden asks Congress to allocate additional \$101 million to combat domestic terrorism in 2022, according to the budgetary request released on Friday.

“The discretionary request provides an additional \$101 million to address the rising threat of domestic terrorism while respecting civil rights and civil liberties,” the document said.

The increase includes \$45 million for the Federal Bureau of Investigation for domestic terrorism investigations, \$40 million for the US Attorneys to manage increasing domestic terrorism caseloads, \$12 million for additional response capabilities at the United States Marshals Service, and \$4 million to the National Institute of Justice to support research on domestic terrorism threats.

These investments complement funding provided for the Department of Homeland Security which is expected to receive \$131 million “to support diverse, innovative, and community-driven methods to prevent domestic terrorism while respecting civil rights and liberties.”

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Biden Budget Request Includes \$132Bln for Health Programs, 23.5% Up From 2021

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is asking Congress to increase the funding for healthcare programs by 23.5 percent to \$131.7 billion in 2022, according to the budget request released on Friday.

"The President's 2022 discretionary request includes \$131.7 billion for HHS [The Department of Health and Human Services] a \$25 billion or 23.5-percent increase from the 2021 enacted level," the document said.

The request prioritizes investments to prepare for future public health emergencies and advance global health security, addresses the opioid crisis, expands biomedical capabilities, promotes health and social service equity. The White House also seeks to expand access to child care and early learning programs, strengthens social services, support survivors of domestic violence and invest in civil rights enforcement.

The budget request includes \$8.7 billion for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - the largest budget authority increase in nearly two decades.

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Biden Administration Needs Over \$200M In Warchest to Fight Tax Evasion in 2022 - Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration needs more than \$200 million next year to create a database to better track corporate earnings and fund the Internal Revenue Service in going after tax evaders, the US Treasury Department said in a request to Congress published on Friday.

Under the 2022 discretionary spending request, some \$191 million will go the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network to create the database while \$13.2 billion will be allocated to the IRS to improve its oversight of taxable individuals "to ensure that all Americans are treated fairly by our tax system", Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a statement.

The request for discretionary spending comes as the Biden administration proposes to increase the annual US corporate tax to 28 percent from 21 percent, and improve revenue collection in the current fiscal year to foot a \$2.2 trillion infrastructure development bill.

Yellen explained that the \$191 million proposed for the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network will be \$64 million above the 2021 enacted level.

The database created by the network will help track the ownership and control of certain companies and organizations and combat the use of complex corporate structures to shield illegal activity, Yellen said.

"Loopholes in financial reporting requirements undermine corporate accountability and allow illicit actors to evade scrutiny and mask their dealings," she said.

The \$13.2 billion requested for the IRS will be \$1.2 billion above the 2021 enacted level, Yellen said. "With this funding, the IRS will increase oversight of high-income and corporate tax returns to ensure compliance."

The discretionary investments reflect "only one element of the President's broader agenda" and that in the coming months, the administration will release its first budget "to address the overlapping crises we face in a fiscally and economically responsible way," Yellen added.

On Thursday, Biden said US firms need to fund the country's infrastructure needs and large corporations have long employed complicated maneuvers to reduce or eliminate their tax bills

by shifting income on paper between countries, using especially tax havens like the Bermuda and Cayman Islands.

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Biden Seeks Funds to Invest in Development, Testing of Hypersonic Weapons - Document

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The White House's initial budget request for discretionary spending seeks investment in the development and testing of US hypersonic strike capabilities, according to the budget request document on Friday.

"The safety and security of the nation requires a strong, sustainable and responsive mix of long-range strike capabilities," the document said on Friday. "The discretionary request invests in the development and testing of hypersonic strike capabilities while enhancing existing long-range strike capabilities to bolster deterrence and improve survivability and response timelines."

The White House also seeks to modernize the nuclear deterrent, and the discretionary request maintains a strong, credible nuclear deterrent for the United States and its allies' security, the document said.

"While the administration is reviewing the US nuclear posture, the discretionary request supports ongoing nuclear modernization programs while ensuring that these efforts are sustainable," the document added.

On Tuesday, the US Air Force said a hypersonic weapon failed to launch due to an issue that occurred during its first booster vehicle flight test on April 5.

Last year, the United States launched an accelerated push to develop hypersonic missiles that fly between five and 20 times the speed of sound in response to successful demonstrations of the technology by China and Russia.

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Biden Budget Seeks \$1Bln to Boost Border Security, None for Border Wall - White House

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's is asking Congress to approve \$1 billion to improve border security infrastructure but it does not include additional funding for more border wall, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) said on Friday.

"The discretionary request provides over \$1 billion for border infrastructure, which includes modernization of land ports of entry and investments in modern border security technology and assets," the OMB said in a press release.

The Biden administration seeks to better defend against illegal immigration and drug trafficking, the release said. However, the release notes that there is no funding for new border wall construction on the US southern border with Mexico.

On Thursday, US Custom and Border Protection data revealed that US border apprehensions soared by more than 70 percent in March. The 172,331 migrant encounters recorded represents the highest monthly total in more than two decades, with the Biden administration on pace to top the previous annual record set in 2019 of over 977,000 apprehensions.

There are several areas along the US-Mexico border that have wide gaps of no border fencing to deter migrants from illegally crossing into the United States.

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Biden Seeks \$2.1Bln for Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency - White House

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is seeking \$2.1 billion to be invested in the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and \$20 million for a new Cyber Response and Recovery Fund, the White House said in its initial budget request for discretionary spending on Friday.

"The discretionary request responds, in a variety of ways, to funding challenges precipitated by recent cybersecurity incidents," the document said. "The discretionary request provides \$2.1 billion, a \$110 million increase from the 2021 enacted level, for the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), which builds on the \$650 million provided for CISA in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021."

The document explained that the funding would allow CISA to boost its cybersecurity tools, hire highly qualified experts, as well as get support services to protect and defend Federal information technology systems.

"The discretionary request also provides \$20 million for a new Cyber Response and Recovery Fund," the document added.

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Myanmar Envoy to UN Calls for No-fly Zone Over Living Areas to Avoid 'Bloodshed'

UNITED NATIONS, April 9 (Sputnik) - Myanmar Ambassador to the United Nations U Kyaw Moe Tun on Friday called for establishing of a no-fly zone over "living areas" in his country to prevent the military from conducting airstrikes to kill civilians.

"A no-fly zone should be declared in the living areas in Myanmar to avoid further bloodshed caused by the military airstrikes on civilian areas," Kyaw Moe Tun said in an informal meeting of the UN Security Council.

The diplomat, who was fired by the military following his statement at the United Nations in opposition of the coup in February, also called for imposing an arms embargo against the Myanmar military, strict sanctions against businesses associated with the army and the cutting off of financial inflows.

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Biden to Issue Order for Presidential Commission on US Supreme Court Reform - White House

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will issue an executive order to create a bipartisan presidential commission to study whether the US Supreme Court needs to be expanded with an additional number of justices or otherwise reformed, the White House said in a press release on Friday,

"President Biden will today issue an executive order forming the Presidential Commission on the Supreme Court of the United States comprised of a bipartisan group of experts on the Court and the Court reform debate," the release said.

In addition to legal and other scholars, the Presidential Commission will include former federal judges and lawyers who have appeared before the US Supreme Court, as well as advocates for the reform of democratic institutions and of the administration of justice, the release said. The Presidential commission will also have specialists on constitutional law, history and political science, it also said.

The Presidential Commission will examine "the genesis of the reform debate; the Court's role in the Constitutional system; the length of service and turnover of justices on the Court; the membership and size of the Court; and the Court's case selection, rules, and practices," the release added.

The Presidential Commission's purpose is to provide an analysis of the principal arguments in the contemporary public debate for and against US Supreme Court reform, including an appraisal of the merits and legality of particular reform proposals and will have to complete its report within 180 days of its first public meeting, according to the release.

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New Biden Budget Asks Congress to Approve \$2.2Bln for Indian Health Services - White House

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's budget proposal for 2022 requests \$2.2 billion to fund health services for Native American tribes, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) said on Friday.

"To begin redressing long-standing, stark inequities experienced by American Indians and Alaska Natives, the discretionary request proposes to dramatically increase funding for the Indian Health Service (IHS) by \$2.2 billion," the OMB said in a press release.

Biden's budget seeks an additional \$450 million to facilitate climate change programs on Native American reservations, the release said.

The budget proposal also includes \$900 million to help tribe's provide affordable housing, improve housing infrastructure, and increase economic opportunities for low-income families, the release said.

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Biden 2022 Budget Requests \$2Bln to Address Root Cause of Migration, Asylum Backlogs

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's 2022 budget proposal is asking Congress to approve an estimated \$2 billion to address the root cause of mass US-bound migration from Central America and asylum claim backlogs, the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) said on Friday.

"Address the Root Causes of Migration from Central America and Reduce Asylum Backlogs. The request proposes \$861 million as a first step towards a four-year commitment to invest in Central America as part of a comprehensive strategy to address the root causes of irregular migration," the OMB said in a press release.

The budget proposal also includes a 21 percent increase to the budget of the Executive Officer for Immigration Review, providing \$891 million to reduce court backlogs by employing 100 new immigration judges and support teams, the release said.

In addition, US president seeks \$345 million for US Citizenship and Immigration Services to resolve naturalization and asylum cases of individuals that have been pending for years, the release said.

On Thursday, US Custom and Border Protection data revealed that US border apprehensions soared by more than 70 percent in March. The 172,331 migrant encounters recorded represents the highest monthly total in more than two decades, with the Biden administration on pace to top the previous annual record set in 2019 of over 977,000 apprehensions.

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ASEAN Emergency Summit on Myanmar Scheduled for April 20 - French Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, April 9 (Sputnik) - An emergency summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on the situation in Myanmar will be held on April 20, French Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Nathalie Broadhurst said during an informal meeting of the UN Security Council on Friday.

"We also welcome ASEAN's efforts and encourage them to increase their engagement to find ways to support Myanmar in this dire situation and work towards an inclusive political solution with all parties," Broadhurst said. "We look forward to hearing the conclusions from the emergency summit that was announced for April 20."

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US March Producer Prices Up Most Since 2011 as Commodities Rally - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The US Producer Price Index (PPI) rose 4.2 percent year-on-year in March for its biggest expansion in nearly a decade as costs for petroleum, cooking oil and other commodities increased from the lows of the coronavirus crisis, the Labor Department said on Friday.

"On an unadjusted basis, the final demand index moved up 4.2 percent for the 12 months ended in March, the largest advance since rising 4.5 percent for the 12 months ended September 2011," the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a unit of the Labor Department, said, referring to the PPI. Economists polled by US media had forecast a PPI growth of 3.8 percent for the 12 months to March.

The PPI is a measure of inflation from the perspective of producers and indicates that those higher costs will likely be passed on to consumers. The CPI, or Consumer Price Index, which measures the total cost of goods and services purchased by consumers, rose 1.7 percent in the year to February. The March reading for CPI is due on April 13.

Commodity prices have surged in recent months from their lows of the coronavirus crisis, with US crude oil nearly doubling in value from a little under \$36 per barrel on October 30 to just below \$68 by March 8.

All components of energy - from distillates and diesel fuel to gasoline, home heating oil, liquefied petroleum gas, residential natural gas and residential electric power - saw price increases over the 12 months to March, the PPI published on Friday showed.

While price pressures have been steadily growing of late due to the reopening of the US economy from the coronavirus-imposed lockdowns, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Thursday the central bank was not unduly perturbed by the trend.

"There's a difference between what is essentially a one-time increase in prices and persistent inflation," Powell told a discussion hosted by the International Monetary Fund. "Inflation dynamics in the economy differ from things like bottlenecks and oversupply in the supply chains that cause the transitory price pressures that we are having now."

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Police in US State of Maryland Arrest Pentagon Officer in Connection With Fatal Shooting

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - Takoma Park, Maryland, police said in a statement on Friday that they have arrested a US Defense Department officer in connection with a fatal shooting.

"On Thursday, April 8, 2021, the Takoma Park Police Department obtained an arrest warrant charging David Hall Dixon... with two counts of Second Degree Murder, two counts of use of a Handgun in Commission of a Felony and Reckless Endangerment in the murder," the statement said.

Dixon has also been charged with attempted second degree murder in the assault against another man, the statement said.

"Mr. Dixon was taken into custody this morning without incident. He is currently being processed," the statement added.

The incident occurred Wednesday morning not far from Washington, DC, according to the statement.

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Biden Seeks \$715Bln Pentagon Budget to 'Deter' China, Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has asked Congress to provide the Pentagon with a \$715 billion budget to "deter" Russia and China, the White House said in its initial budget request for discretionary spending on Friday.

"The President's 2022 discretionary request includes \$715 billion for DOD," the document said.

"It: Deters China. The discretionary request prioritizes the need to counter the threat from China as the Department's top challenge. The Department would also seek to deter destabilizing behavior by Russia. Leveraging the Pacific Deterrence Initiative and working together with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, DOD would ensure that the United States builds the concepts, capabilities, and posture necessary to meet these challenges."

Moreover, the discretionary request, according to the White House document, eliminates the budget for Overseas Contingency Operations as a separate funding category, instead directly funding war costs through the Pentagon's base budget.

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Biden, First Lady Express Condolences to UK Royal Family Over Prince Philip's Death

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden on Friday expressed their condolences to the United Kingdom's Royal Family over the passing of Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh.

"On behalf of all the people of the United States, we send our deepest condolences to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, the entire Royal Family, and all the people of the United Kingdom on the death of His Royal Highness Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh," the Bidens said in a statement.

The President and the First Lady praised Prince Philip's service in World War II and his support for what they said were "worthy causes" in the United Kingdom.

Earlier on Friday, the Buckingham Palace announced that Prince Philip, the husband of Queen Elizabeth II, died at the age of 99.

Prince Philip was released from King Edward VII Hospital in London three weeks ago following a successful procedure for a heart condition and a treatment for an infection.

Prince Philip leaves behind four children, eight grandchildren and ten great-grandchildren.

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Myanmar Military Turns Down UN Special Envoy's Visit - US Ambassador

UNITED NATIONS, April 9 (Sputnik) - The Myanmar military authorities declined the request for a visit by UN Special Envoy Christine Schraner Burgener who arrived in Thailand earlier on Friday as part of her efforts to calm the situation, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said.

"We must insist that military authorities allow the UN Special Envoy to visit Burma [Myanmar] without preconditions," Thomas-Greenfield said. "We heard from her today that they have turned down her visit. She needs unimpeded access to civil society activists and pro-democracy leaders, including State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as President U Win Myint."

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Trump Administration COVID-19 Advisers Opposed CDC Lockdown Guidelines - US House Panel

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - Trump administration officials opposed Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for containing the coronavirus pandemic and instead pushed for a "dangerous" herd immunity strategy, the US House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis (HSSCC) said in a press release on Friday.

"Documents previously obtained by the Select Subcommittee indicated Dr. [Scott] Atlas and Dr. [Paul] Alexander played key roles in the promotion of a dangerous herd immunity strategy at the White House," the release said.

Also on Friday, HSSCC Chairman James Clyburn sent letters to doctors Atlas, Alexander and Steven Hatfill who all served as COVID-19 advisers to the Trump administration seeking documents and transcribed interviews regarding their roles in its pandemic response.

Clyburn wrote to Alexander, "In emails to other political appointees, you bragged that CDC reports showed more 'good news' about the pandemic following your intervention, stating, 'small victory but a victory nonetheless and yippee!'"

An opinion-editorial published in the New York Post under Atlas's name on September 15, 2020 acknowledged that if universities stayed open during the pandemic, cases would increase among young people, "but that shouldn't be a cause for panic," it said.

On September 3, 2020, Alexander had asked Atlas to draft an op-ed to oppose getting children to wear face masks and closing schools during the pandemic, the release said.

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UN Chief 'Saddened' at Passing of Prince Philip, Extends Condolences - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 9 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was saddened to learn of the passing of Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, and extended condolences to his wife, Queen Elizabeth II, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement on Friday.

"The Secretary-General is saddened at the passing of His Royal Highness Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, the husband of Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland," Dujarric said. "He extends condolences to Her Royal Highness, the Queen, and to the people of the United Kingdom."

Guterres also paid tribute to Prince Philip for his active work for "the betterment of humankind" as the Duke of Edinburgh was a patron of some 800 charitable organizations.

Prince Philip passed away at the age of 99 on Friday morning at Windsor Castle, according to Buckingham Palace's statement.

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RPT - US Johnson & Johnson Vaccine Deliveries to Drop 86% Next Week - CDC

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) – Johnson & Johnson's deliveries of its COVID-19 vaccine in the United States will drop by about 86 percent next week, compared with the nearly 5 million doses it allocated this week, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) showed on Friday.

The sharp decrease comes after a recent human error at a contractor's plant in Baltimore ruined 15 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

The company will deliver only 700,000 doses in the coming week, versus 4,947,500 doses in the week of April 5, and 1,911,200 in the week of March 29, according to the CDC data.

Johnson & Johnson began deliveries of its single-dose vaccine in the beginning of March, sending the first batch with 2,833,400 in the week of March 1.

On April 5, Johnson & Johnson admitted to having produced a faulty batch of coronavirus vaccines at the East Baltimore facility owned by Emergent BioSolutions reportedly due to a mix-up of two ingredients that led to the ruining of about 15 million doses.

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Boeing Asks 16 Customers to Halt 737 MAX Flights to Fix 'Electrical Issue' - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - Boeing has advised over a dozen of its customers to temporarily halt flights of 737 MAX to fix an electrical problem, the company said on Friday.

"Boeing has recommended to 16 customers that they address a potential electrical issue in a specific group of 737 MAX airplanes prior to further operations," Boeing said in a press release.

"The recommendation is being made to allow for verification that a sufficient ground path exists for a component of the electrical power system."

Boeing said it was working closely with the US Federal Aviation Administration on the production issue.

"We are also informing our customers of specific tail numbers affected and we will provide direction on appropriate corrective actions," Boeing said.

The Boeing 737 MAX, a new generation aircraft, was grounded worldwide between March 2019 and December 2020 due to the deadly crashes in Indonesia and Ethiopia in 2018 and 2019, respectively. According to investigations, the reason for both incidents was an error in the aircraft's flight control software (MCAS).

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Pentagon Says 'Has Nothing to Offer' Regarding Reports of Sending Warships to Black Sea

WASHINGTON, April 9 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon when contacted by Sputnik on Friday could not confirm reports that the United States has notified Ankara that it will send two military vessels through the Bosphorous on their way to the Black Sea next week.

"We have nothing to offer about that reporting right now," a Pentagon spokesperson said when asked about the reports, which said the warships would remain in the Black Sea until May 4.