

1/12/22 Wednesday

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Democratic US Senators Introduce 'Defending Ukraine' Bill That Would 'Collapse' Russian Economy

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Several Democratic lawmakers have introduced a new bill in the US Senate that would impose "crippling sanctions" on Russia's financial sector if it were to invade Ukraine. The US has postured as standing up to Moscow on Ukraine's eastern border, but Russian President Vladimir Putin's administration has made clear it has no hostile intent.

The bill, titled the "Defending Ukraine Sovereignty Act of 2022," has been brought by Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ), who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

According to [a news release](#) from Menendez's office, if Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine, the bill would trigger "crippling sanctions on the Russian banking sector and senior military and government officials." It would also authorize further sanctions targeting Russian extractive industries, which form a sizable portion of Russia's exports, as well as on international bank wire services like SWIFT. The bill would also prohibit transactions on Russia's primary and secondary sovereign debt.

In addition, a Russian invasion of Ukraine would also trigger \$500 million in "supplemental emergency security assistance" for Ukraine. It also "expands US efforts to counter Kremlin disinformation and strengthen ties with key regional partners facing Kremlin aggression."

The bellicose bill comes a day after [talks between envoys](#) from Russia and the United States in Geneva, Switzerland, aimed at defusing the crisis. [Little headway](#) has been made so far, however, as Western leaders have demanded Russia cease its deployment of troops inside its own borders and sworn off any promises not to expand NATO further eastward. In response, Moscow said it will [continue to hold drills](#) inside its own territory such as its own security interests require.

Following the Tuesday talks with NATO in Geneva, Russian envoys are meeting with NATO representatives in Brussels, Belgium, on Wednesday, and the Permanent Council of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) will hold its own discussions in Vienna, Austria, on Thursday.

"As the Biden administration seeks a diplomatic path forward this week in Europe to avoid another bloody escalation in Ukraine, I find little reason to believe that Putin is negotiating in good faith nor do I believe he has any newfound respect for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity," Menendez said in a statement. "That is precisely why we are coming together to send a clear message - Putin need not collapse his entire economy nor does he need to sacrifice the lives of his own people in a futile attempt to rewrite the map of Europe."

The White House reportedly supports the bill over [a Republican effort](#) focusing on the Nord Stream II gas pipeline that it says would be inadequate.

Russia has said that its security red lines include Ukraine joining the NATO alliance and NATO stationing offensive weapons in Ukraine. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist Warsaw Pact alliance between it and several Eastern European states, NATO has spread steadily eastward, incorporating many former Soviet allies and even former Soviet republics.

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Nigeria Lifts Monthslong Twitter Ban Following Backlash Over Buhari Tweet
By - Morgan Artyukhina

After six months of blocking access to Twitter, the government of Africa's most populous country has lifted the social media giant's suspension, Nigerian media reported Wednesday.

"The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) directs me to inform the public that President Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR, has approved the lifting of the suspension of Twitter operation in Nigeria effective from 12am tonight, 13th January 2022," said Kashifu Inuwa Abdullahi, chairman of the Technical Committee Nigeria-Twitter Engagement and director-general of the National Information Technology Development Agency, according to the [Lagos-based Daily Post](#).

"Twitter has agreed to act with a respectful acknowledgement of Nigerian laws and the national culture and history on which such legislation has been built," Abdullahi explained, adding that the San Francisco-based corporation had agreed "to develop a Code of Conduct in line with global best practices, applicable in almost all developed countries."

The social media app [was "indefinitely" suspended](#) in Nigeria in June 2021 after it deleted a tweet by Buhari that the corporation said violated its policies on abusive behavior. Abuja said the ban was for "persistent use of the platform for activities that are capable of undermining Nigeria's corporate existence."

"Many of those misbehaving today are too young to be aware of the destruction and loss of lives that occurred during the Nigerian Civil War," Buhari, who served as a general during the 1967-1970 conflict, wrote in the infracting tweet on June 2 in response to [attacks on electoral offices](#) and police stations in the country's southeast, where the war had also been fought.

"Those of us in the fields for 30 months, who went through the war, will treat them in the language they understand," he added.

Twitter also temporarily suspended Buhari's account, making him the third head of state to lose posting rights on the app in less than six months. The first was then-US President Donald Trump, who was [removed from the app](#) in the wake of the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol by his supporters, who he was perceived as encouraging. The second, just days after Trump, was Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, whose [account was suspended](#) until he deleted a tweet questioning the efficacy of Western-made COVID-19 vaccines.

In the aftermath of Nigeria's ban, Trump praised the country's decision, but the US, European Union and international civil freedoms advocacy groups condemned it.

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Watch: NYC Students Walk Out in Protest Demanding Remote Learning Amid Skyrocketing Covid Cases

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The Omicron-driven outbreak in the US has quickly become the country's worst, with 1.4 million new cases recorded on Tuesday alone, according to federal health data. Despite the surge, few public officials have endorsed proportionate changes in policy to ensure residents' safety.

As US officials continue to resist calls for better safety measures to control the spread of COVID-19, many are taking matters into their own hands, mostly recently students in New York City, where the outbreak has reached historic levels.

Hundreds of students at least 22 schools across New York City saw students walk out on Tuesday as part of a student-organized "Student Walkout for Covid Safety."

"I organized this because our school conditions are not safe right now," Felicia, a junior at Bronx High School of Science who headed the school's walkout, told the Riverdale Press, adding they were protesting because "no one is doing it for us."

"The amount of cases that we have are just - there are so many people sick, and our mayor is not doing enough to protect us, all the millions of kids in the school system," they said. The students' primary demand was to be given the option to "go remote."

"It doesn't feel safe to be in school to be honest," Danny Mui, a sophomore at the 6,000-student Brooklyn Technical High School, told the [New York Daily News](#). "In my classes, half the classes aren't there. Some have COVID, some are afraid of COVID, and the school just isn't doing anything about it."

"There's no social distancing at all, the stairways are packed. There's no point coming here if I'm going to get sick," another Brooklyn Tech student, who asked to remain anonymous, told the paper.

Students also described how many of their teachers are sick and how the quick turnover of substitute teachers means little schoolwork is actually getting done in the classroom.

New York has been the [epicenter of the Omicron](#) outbreak since the new SARS-CoV-2 variant was detected in the US last month, rising to such high levels that [in the final days](#) of 2021, an estimated 2% of all Manhattan residents had active Covid cases and one test in five was returning a positive result.

On Monday alone, 40,000 New Yorkers tested positive for Covid, including almost 13,000 students and more than 2,200 staffers, but newly sworn-in Mayor Eric Adams and schools chancellor David Banks have remained committed to keeping schools open no matter what. Following the protests, on Wednesday [Adams said it would take](#) at least six months for a remote option to become available, meaning it wouldn't exist for the rest of the 2021-2022 academic year, which ends in June.

Acknowledging the protests, Banks tweeted on Tuesday afternoon that he was "inviting student leaders to meet with me so we can work together for safe and open schools." However, NYC Student Walkout for COVID Safety, an account representing the nascent protest movement,

tweeted late on Tuesday night that “none of the 5 organizers running this account have received any messages from the Chancellor.”

“We are ready whenever you are,” they added.

Nationwide, the outbreak has set new records as local, state and federal governments make similar refusals to implement stricter safety procedures, including the [lockdowns used so effectively](#) to control outbreaks in China. On Tuesday, the US registered a new world record with [1.4 million new Covid cases](#) in a single day, and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is predicting at least 85,000 more deaths before the month is out.

The Big Apple isn't the only place where schools have become a battlefield over Covid policies: in Chicago, the militant teachers union voted for an “electronic lockout” of Chicago Public Schools after Mayor Lori [Lightfoot swore off](#) another social lockdown and the teachers judged their schools' safety measures to be inadequate.

A deal was reached, after a week and a half of online learning and tough negotiations with the city, to [return students to school](#) on Wednesday with a new set of Covid safety measures in place.

Last Winter, before COVID-19 vaccines were in widespread use, teachers across the US [struggled to win adequate](#) safety protections for them and their students as school districts rushed to resume in-person learning. In Philadelphia, Washington, DC, Chicago, and other cities, teachers joined with students and parents in protest to draw attention to the need for better ventilation, stricter quarantine requirements, and a rotating student system to minimize students in the building.

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TPLF Shell, Seize Several Towns Outside Tigray Border as Ethiopian Gov Pushes Peace Talks
By - Morgan Artyukhina

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was reported as shelling and occupying several towns near the borders of Ethiopia's northern Tigray state on Tuesday - the group's biggest offensive action in several weeks, since its last offensive was defeated.

Several towns were reportedly seized by the TPLF in recent days, including Almata, Wag, Waja, and Addi Arkay, following shelling by the TPLF, and the Afar town of Abala was also shelled, according to [local media reports](#).

According to the Awassa Guardian, “dozens of civilians” have been killed in the shelling. Several of the towns are hotly disputed between Tigray and Amhara, having been historically part of the Amhara region but were annexed into Tigray state after the TPLF seized power in 1991, when the state was almost doubled in size. More recently, the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) occupied those towns, including Almata and Waja, during its drive to push the TPLF out of Amhara and Afar last month.

The TPLF sally is its first since Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government declared the [end of combat operations](#) on December 23. Six months earlier, the TPLF had launched an invasion of Amhara and Afar and begun an all-out drive on the capital of Addis Ababa, far to the

south. Only an all-out effort by the ENDF, including Abiy going to the front to direct military operations, managed to blunt the assault, and in mid-December the TPLF's pocket of territory outside Tigray collapsed.

National Dialogue Begins

When combat operations were declared over last month, a National Dialogue Commission was formed "to bridge differences and chart an inclusive way forward for national understanding and alignment," according to Abiy's office, which was careful to distinguish between a national dialogue and negotiations with the TPLF, which was categorized as a terrorist organization by the Ethiopian parliament last May.

Abiy's government has also attempted to ease tensions in the country by [giving amnesty](#) to some jailed opposition figures, including senior leaders of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) and Balderals for Genuine Democracy.

"If there is a dialogue, of course we will be part of [it]," said Balderals for Genuine Democracy [founder Eskinder Nega](#), one of those freed on Orthodox Christmas. "The country needs a national dialogue. Whether this will bear fruit, or whether this would be a trustworthy process, is another question."

"The most important issue that we face as a nation today now is this war that's being waged against our unity by the TPLF. Since they have lost power, now their interest is not only to change the government, to come back to power, to break up the country, and we need to stop that, we need to preserve our nation," Eskinder added. The TPLF ruled Ethiopia for 27 years before Abiy was elected in 2018.

Despite maintaining a public position of neutrality and a desire for peace throughout the conflict, US and European diplomats secretly expressed their approval for the TPLF offensive in meetings [reported on by Sputnik](#). Later, the [New York Times](#) made clear that Abiy's government had fallen out of its once-favored position with Washington after making peace with Eritrea, a country designated as a pariah state by Washington for its refusal to cooperate with US foreign policy goals in the region.

[Speaking to reporters](#) ahead of a January 10 phone call between Abiy and US President Joe Biden, a "senior administration official" described Eritrea, which is allied with Abiy against the TPLF, as playing an "unhelpful role" in the conflict.

"We do not believe that they have a constructive role to be played in a conflict that is taking place on the other side of their border," the official added. Eritrea joined the conflict in November 2020, just days after the TPLF launched a surprise attack on ENDF forces stationed in Tigray. When Ethiopian forces retreated from Tigray into Eritrea and were given supplies and shelter, the TPLF fired ballistic missiles at the Eritrean capital of Asmara.

"President Biden expressed concern that the ongoing hostilities, including recent air strikes, continue to cause civilian casualties and suffering, and he reaffirmed the US commitment to work alongside the African Union and regional partners to help Ethiopians peacefully resolve the conflict," the [White House said](#) in a readout of the call.

"Both leaders underscored the importance of the US-Ethiopia relationship, the potential to strengthen cooperation on a range of issues, and the need for concrete progress to resolve the conflict," it added.

Unsolved Humanitarian Crisis Amid Stalemate

Despite the end of formal combat operations, ENDF drone strikes have reportedly continued inside Tigray, where the TPLF continues to refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of Abiy's government and insist on being treated on equal terms with the Ethiopian government, as if Tigray were a sovereign and independent country instead of a rebellious province.

Over the weekend, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said it was suspending operations in Tigray in response to several airstrikes that reportedly hit refugee centers and killed civilians. However, [Agence France-Presse](#) noted the near-impossibility of independently verifying the claims, which have relied on TPLF media organs.

[Widespread condemnation](#) for the alleged ENDF strikes followed, including by the United States and United Nations. However, no parallel outcry has accompanied the TPLF's shelling or seizure of Afar and Amhara towns, where numerous civilian casualties have also been reported. A similar situation has happened in neighboring Yemen, where the same international bodies express their disgust at attacks launched on Saudi targets by the Houthis, but [they do not condemn](#) Saudi airstrikes on targets in Yemen, even when Saudi media admits they cause large numbers of casualties.

Nonetheless, a massive humanitarian crisis exists because of the 13-month conflict. The UN estimates that [more than 4 million](#) people have been displaced, with [more than 70,000](#) crossing the border into Sudan. The UN World Food Program estimates [9.4 million Ethiopians](#) are in need of food assistance.

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GOP Leader Kevin McCarthy Rejects Info, Testimony Request From 'Illegitimate' Jan. 6 Panel
By - Evan Craighead

The House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol is requesting the voluntary cooperation of House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), making the latter the highest-ranking Republican lawmaker to be tapped with such a request. McCarthy has since rejected the offer, panning the probe as illegitimate.

In a January 12 memo addressed to House Minority Leader McCarthy, Select Committee Chairman Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-MS) requested that the GOP leader provide the 9-member panel with information on a range of topics, "including your conversations with President Trump before, during and after the violent January 6 attack."

Within his request, Thompson cited a January 13, 2021, House floor speech in which McCarthy declared that then-US President Donald Trump "bears responsibility" for the attack on the US Capitol and "should have immediately denounced the mob when he saw what was unfolding." At the time, the GOP leader also called on Trump to "accept his share of responsibility" in the violence and deaths.

Thompson also cited a number of instances in which McCarthy appeared on television or told members of the press about his January 6, 2021, communications with Trump, including one in which the GOP leader claimed that he had a "very heated conversation" with the former US president amid the riot.

"We also must learn about how the President's plans for January 6th came together, and all the other ways he attempted to alter the results of the election," Thompson wrote.

The panel also seeks to question McCarthy about his communications with Trump, White House staff, and others in the week following the January 6, 2021, attack, "particularly regarding President Trump's state of mind at the time."

According to Thompson's memo, questions have been raised about whether the GOP leader was coached after he met with Trump at the latter's Mar-a-Lago resort in late January 2021. "At that meeting, or at any other time, did President Trump or his representatives discuss or suggest what you should say publicly, during the impeachment trial (if called as a witness), or in any later investigation about your conversations with him on January 6th?" the Select Committee asked.

In a same-day response, McCarthy expressed that he would not be voluntarily cooperating with the 9-member panel's probe—panning the investigation as illegitimate.

"As a representative and the leader of the minority party, it is with neither regret nor satisfaction that I have concluded to not participate with this select committee's abuse of power that stains this institution today and will harm it going forward," the GOP Leader said.

[McCarthy notably opposed the formation](#) of the House Select Committee, after House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) rejected Reps. Jim Jordan (R-OH) and Jim Banks (R-ID) as two of his five proposed appointees. He then withdrew all five of his nominations.

"As you are aware, this committee has no formal representation from Republicans," he said, following Pelosi's appointment of Reps. Liz Cheney (R-WY) and Adam Kinzinger (R-IL), two anti-Trump Republicans.

McCarthy reiterated his grievances with the group in his Wednesday memo.

"This committee is not conducting a legitimate investigation as Speaker Pelosi took the unprecedented action of rejecting the Republican members I named to serve on the committee. It is not serving any legislative purpose," he said.

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FTC Antitrust Lawsuit Against Tech Conglomerate Meta May Proceed, US Judge Rules
By - Evan Craighead

In June, a US judge dismissed the Federal Trade Commission's antitrust complaint against Meta—then Facebook—arguing that the agency failed to set forth sufficient evidence to support its claim that Meta, the owner of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, has monopoly power in the social networking market.

The US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) may proceed with its antitrust lawsuit against Meta, following a Tuesday ruling by US District Judge James E. Boasberg.

The Washington DC-based judge detailed that the FTC "stumbled out of the starting blocks" with its first antitrust complaint, [which he deemed "legally insufficient."](#) particularly in regard to its claim that Meta violated Section 2 of the Sherman Act. At the time, Boasberg declared that the FTC presented only the "naked allegation" that the company maintained a dominant share (over 60%) of the 'Personal Social Networking Services' market.

The revised complaint submitted to the US District Court, however, contains facts that are "far more robust and detailed," Boasberg wrote in his [memorandum opinion](#).

The federal judge also noted that the core argument remains the same: Facebook, now Meta, is alleged to have unlawfully maintained a monopoly in its market via the acquisition of threatening competitors and the implementation and enforcement of policies that prevented interoperability between the platform and apps it "viewed as nascent threats."

"Although the agency may well face a tall task down the road in proving its allegations," Boasberg acknowledged, "the Court believes that it has now cleared the pleading bar and may proceed to discovery."

Responding to the Tuesday decision, a Meta spokesperson declared that the move "narrows the scope of the FTC's case by rejecting claims about our platform policies."

"We're confident the evidence will reveal the fundamental weakness of the claims," the company spokesperson declared. "Our investments in Instagram and WhatsApp transformed them into what they are today."

The suit is just one of several federal efforts to curtail the unique power held by various members of Big Tech.

Late last year, Google critic [Jonathan Kanter](#) was confirmed by the US Senate as Assistant Attorney General of the US Department of Justice's Antitrust Division, allowing him to inherit a Trump-era lawsuit that claims Google blocked market rivals from key distribution channels. Kanter recently came under fire from Google, who claimed that the DoJ's antitrust chief should recuse himself from matters involving the Alphabet-owned company due to his prior work with rivals such as Yelp.

In addition, members of Congress have turned to antitrust legislation in an attempt to augment the authority that can be wielded over US-based tech companies, including Apple, Amazon, Google, and Meta.

One of several proposals introduced by US lawmakers last year was the [American Innovation and Choice Online Act](#), a bipartisan bill backed by Sens. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Chuck Grassley (R-AK), and nine other senators that, in part, seeks to block platforms from requiring companies operating on their site to purchase the platform's own goods or services.

The proposal also calls for limitations on search and ranking functions.

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Ex-Girlfriend of US Rep. Matt Gaetz Testifies Before Federal Grand Jury in Sex Trafficking Probe

By - Evan Craighead

US prosecutors are probing Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL) over a slew of crimes, including sex trafficking a minor, violating the Mann Act, and obstruction of justice. Prosecutors and the lawmaker's ex girlfriend have discussed an immunity deal that requires her testimony in the sex trafficking probe against Gaetz, who denies the allegations.

On Wednesday, an ex-girlfriend of GOP Rep. Gaetz testified before a federal grand jury probing the Republican lawmaker for sex crimes and other offenses, according to [several evening reports](#).

The woman, whose name has been withheld in the press, and Timothy Jansen, her attorney, were spotted arriving at the federal courthouse in Orlando, Florida, on Wednesday. The lawyer did not provide details about the case.

"All I can say is CNN saw me and my client come in, and I am confirming I am here, but I can't make any comment," Jansen told the outlet.

The move signals that the US Department of Justice may soon indict Gaetz, according to NBC News.

The woman is reportedly a former Capitol Hill staffer whose ties with Gaetz date back to 2017, the year he began representing Florida's 1st Congressional District. Three friends of the former couple told NBC News that Gaetz and his ex-girlfriend were in an open relationship in 2017 and 2018, and the two would share details about the individuals with whom they had sex.

Several questions have been raised about the activities that occurred during their relationship, such as a 2018 trip to the Bahamas that involved the couple, Gaetz's friends, and a number of young women.

One charge prosecutors are examining is whether Gaetz obstructed justice during a phone call involving himself, his ex-girlfriend, and another woman who was already cooperating with federal prosecutors.

"We have seen no credible basis for a charge against Congressman Gaetz," Isabelle Kirshner, an attorney for the US lawmaker, [told The Hill](#). "We remain steadfast in our commitment to challenge any allegations with the facts and law."

The [federal probe into allegations of Gaetz's sex crimes](#) commenced after federal prosecutors leveled dozens of charges against former tax collector Joel Greenberg, a former friend of the US lawmaker. Greenberg ultimately agreed to work with agents and pled guilty to six of 33 charges, including sex trafficking a child.

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Trump Lashes Out at 'Gutless' Ron DeSantis, Others for Refusing to Disclose COVID Booster Status

By - Evan Craighead

Former US President Donald Trump has shocked many of his supporters in recent weeks with his sudden new public support of COVID-19 vaccines and booster jabs. While the former US president has been touting the vaccine's effectiveness as a win for his administration, other members of the GOP have been much more hesitant to publicly back vaccines.

Former US President Donald Trump, in an interview with One America News Network, laid into Florida Governor Ron DeSantis (R) and a host of other politicians for concealing their vaccination status.

Asked whether he considers his COVID-19 vaccine push a result of Americans' questions, Trump reiterated his support for COVID vaccines and booster jabs, calling on others to do the same.

"I've taken it," Trump said, referring to a COVID vaccine he received while in office. "I've had the booster."

"I watched a couple of politicians be interviewed and one of the questions was, 'did you get the booster?'" the former US president said. "The answer is yes, but they don't want to say it. Because they're gutless. You gotta say it."

Trump's comments have been widely viewed as a slight toward DeSantis, who dodged a question last month about whether he had received a booster jab.

"I've done whatever I did, the normal shot, and that, at the end of the day, is people's individual decisions about what they want to do," DeSantis told Fox News in December 2021. The Florida GOP governor received the single-jab Johnson & Johnson vaccine in April 2021, according to his office.

During his interview, Trump suggested that COVID-19 vaccines had saved "10s of millions of people throughout the world." He also proclaimed that he experienced "no side effects" from the jabs.

Trump also discouraged "young healthy people" from receiving COVID-19 vaccines, a position counter to the recommendation of the medical community.

DeSantis and other Republican lawmakers—including Rep. Paul Gosar (R-AZ)—have loudly voiced their opposition to vaccine mandates, arguing that vaccines and accompanying booster jabs should be a personal choice made after contacting a health care provider.

"This is radical government overreach," Gosar said in a November 2021 memo on a resolution opposing the [OSHA vaccine mandate](#). "As I have stated several times, there is nothing in the Constitution or the law granting the federal government the power to force anyone to inject medicine into their body as a condition of employment."

Gosar, who has reportedly received the COVID-19 vaccine, recently came under fire for encouraging [COVID vaccine skeptics to "stay the course."](#)

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Trump Abruptly Ends Contentious NPR Interview When Challenged Over Election Fraud
By - Nevin Brown

Former US President Donald Trump abruptly ended an interview with Steve Inskeep of National Public Radio's Morning Edition. The contentious pre-recorded phone interview was scheduled to last 15 minutes but was cut short when the conversation veered towards Trump's role in the events of the January 6, 2021, Capitol attack.

According to Inskeep, the interview was six years in the making. He told the former president that he had first requested an interview with him in 2015, but was rebuffed. Trump responded, "I guess I got lucky by not doing it, right?"

[The majority of the interview](#), before Trump cut it short, focused on his repeated false claims of widespread fraud in the 2020 presidential election. Inskeep asked Trump about the comments that Senator Mike Rounds (R-SD) made about the 2020 election on ABC's This Week.

"The election was fair, as fair as we have seen. We simply did not win the election, as Republicans, for the presidency. And if we simply look back and tell our people don't vote because there's cheating going on, then we're going to put ourselves in a huge disadvantage," Rounds said to ABC.

Trump responded to the audio clip, "No, I think it's an advantage, because otherwise they're going to do it again in '22 and '24, and Rounds is wrong on that. Totally wrong."

Trump then characterized Rounds as a "jerk," "weak," and "ineffective," claiming that Rounds "just went woke," and referring to him as a "RINO," a term intended to criticize Republican politicians for being too moderate, or not "true" Republicans.

Trump blasted Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) for his acknowledgement that the former lost the 2020 presidential election fair and square.

When asked why McConnell would do so, Trump said, "Because Mitch McConnell is a loser." Inskeep asked Trump about Doug Logan's comments about his findings in Arizona that, "The ballots that were provided to us to count in the Coliseum very accurately correlate with the official canvass numbers."

Logan led Cyber Ninjas' audit of the Arizona 2020 presidential election and was a staunch ally of Trump and his baseless claim that the 2020 election was rigged.

Trump dismissed the findings, adding, "frankly, a lot of people are questioning that," in reference to Logan's now confirmed findings that the Arizona election saw no fraud.

Inskeep asked Trump about his own attorney's not calling the election into question over fraud. He referenced two quotes from Kory Langhofer, who contested the Arizona results, and Rudy Giuliani, who contested the Pennsylvania results.

Langhofer, on November 12, 2020, said, "We are not alleging fraud in this lawsuit. We are not alleging anyone stealing the election."

"This is not a fraud case," said Giuliani, on November 18, 2020.

Neither lawsuit - of the almost 60 brought to US courts by Trump supporters, was successful. Trump said of the quotes, "It was too early to ask for fraud and to talk about fraud. Rudy said that, because of the fact it was very early with the — because that was obviously at a very, very — that was a long time ago. The things that have, found out have, more than bore out what people thought, and what people felt, and what people found."

Trump would add, regarding Langhofer, "When you look at Langhofer, I disagree with him as an attorney. I did not think he was a good attorney to hire. I don't know what his game is, but I will just say this: You look at the findings. You look at the number of votes. Go into Detroit and just ask yourself, is it true that there are more votes than there are voters? Look at Pennsylvania. Look at Philadelphia. Is it true that there were far more votes than there were voters?"

The topic of Trump's continued belief that there were more votes than voters in Detroit and Philadelphia was also discussed.

Inskeep responded to Trump's false claim, "It is not true that there were far more votes than voters. There was an early count. I've noticed you've talked about this in rallies and you've said, reportedly, this is true. I think even you know that that was an early report that was corrected later."

Trump did not back down, instead rebuffing Inskeep. "Well, you take a look at it. You take a look at Detroit. In fact, they even had a hard time getting people to sign off on it because it was so out of balance. They called it out of balance. So you take a look at it. You know the real truth, Steve, and this election was a rigged election," Trump again claimed.

The prerecorded interview, which had been scheduled to last 15 minutes, ended abruptly after just 9 minutes had passed with Trump hanging up as Inskeep began to broach the former US president's role in the deadly January 6, 2021, Capitol attack.

As noted by Inskeep, a judge is still weighing whether Trump will be held liable for the attack.

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Magawa the 'Hero Rat' Who Detected Over 100 Landmines Dies at 8 Years Old

By - Nevin Brown

A heroic African pouched rat passed away on Sunday at 8 years old. The rat, named Magawa, detected over 100 explosives in Cambodia over his five-year career. Upon his retirement, he became the first rat to receive the United Kingdom's PDSA Gold medal, the animal equivalent of the George Cross.

Magawa, along with many brethren, was trained to sniff out buried landmines and other undetonated explosives and then alert his handlers with the Belgian APOPO charity. The charity has also trained the giant pouched rats to detect tuberculosis.

Magawa proved to be one of their most successful and productive 'hero rats.' [Across his five-year career working in Cambodia](#), he detected 78 undetonated landmines and 38 unexploded ordinances and helped clear an estimated 225,000 square feet of land.

Through a series of internal and external conflicts, landmines and other explosives dotted the Cambodian countryside from 1975 through 1998. The threat of explosives on agricultural land has injured tens of thousands in the region and limited the usable land in the country.

Magawa's ability to identify and clear explosives earned him the respect of his handlers and those that came into contact with him. He was the most prolific hero rat employed by the Cambodian government. His remarkable physical strength also allowed him to search more land every day than other hero rats performing the same function.

In a 2017 video, Magawa's handler says that "every time a rat finds a mine, it is like saving a life."

Hulk Philly, a farmer in Knab Toll village, Cambodia, whose land was cleared by deminers aided by the trained hero rats, expressed his gratitude to the animals

"Every time I step out of the house, I was scared for my life," said Philly, adding that, "Before deminers came here, we feared for our children's lives."

Philly revealed that seeing the hero rats at work led to dietary changes in the area. "In the past, we used to eat rats all the time, but ever since I saw with my own eyes how rats detect landmines, I stopped eating them," he said.

Magawa was retired from demining in June 2021. His handlers had noticed he was slowing down and after contributing so much, decided he had more than earned his retirement.

Giant African pouched rats are deemed perfect for landmine detection as, with their poor vision, they have a highly developed sense of smell and memory. They are also light enough that they do not set off landmines. The rats are trained to smell TNT and then dig to alert their handlers to explosives.

The rats can search an area the size of a tennis court in 30 minutes, an area that used to take a person with a metal detector up to four days to complete. The hero rats are not only highly effective at their job, but they're also noticeably more cost-effective. [It costs approximately \\$7,300 to train one rat](#), according to reports, compared to an estimated \$25,000 to train a dog to detect landmines.

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Oldest Fossils of a Modern Human Just Got 40,000 Years Older, Study Finds
By - Nevin Brown

A new study published in scientific journal Nature has pushed back the date of the oldest human fossils from East Africa by close to 40,000 years. The fossils, first discovered in Ethiopia at the Omo Kibish site in 1967, were determined in 2005 to be at least 195,000 years old.

The fossils, known as the Omo remains, were a combination of bone and skull fragments and had proven difficult to date. Geologists, using stratigraphic analysis, in which vertical and lateral relationships of different rock formations are analyzed, were able to determine the minimum age of the fossils. However, a more precise dating eluded the scientific community for a half-century after their discovery.

The key clue to refining the date of the Omo remains was the analysis of a fine layer of ash that was found surrounding the fossils.

Celine Vidal, [the main author of the study](#), [said of the layer of ash](#), "At the time that was nearly impossible since the ash was so fine, almost like flour."

New techniques and the use of historic volcanic events allowed the research team to link the ash to a major eruption of a volcano named Shala.

The study found the layer of ash to be some 233,000 years old, with a 20,000-year margin of error.

The new date does not make the Omo fossils the oldest human remains. Remains found in Morocco in 2017 were dated to 300,000 years old and significantly changed the chronology of humanity's migration out of Africa.

Aurelien Mounier, a co-author of the study, believes the new dating restores the conventional theory around human evolution and migration.

"Omo I is the only fossil that has all the morphological characteristics of modern man," said Mounier.

While humanity's migration out of the East African region known as the "cradle of mankind" may have been earlier than previously believed, the new dating of the Omo fossils and their modern characteristics lend credence to conventional ideas of human evolution and migration.

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China Building Materials Academy & Saudi Aramco Partner to Develop Non-Metals
Construction Material
By - Nevin Brown

Saudi Aramco and the China Building Materials Academy have announced the launch of NEXCEL, a Non-Metallic Excellence and Innovation Center, to develop alternative building materials.

The center was reportedly launched at an event in Beijing, according to the Saudi Press Agency. The aim of NEXCEL, according to Ahmad A. al-Sa'adi, a senior vice president of technical services at Aramco, is to develop petroleum-based materials in lieu of metals.

"At Aramco, we have been developing and deploying nonmetallic solutions within our own operations for more than 20 years as they offer superior lifecycle cost, efficiency, and environmental advantages over their metal alternatives," said al-Sa'adi.

"We are excited to be part of this important initiative with China Building Materials Academy, to jointly advance the use of non-metallics in building and construction in China," the company's vice president added.

Zhan Yanjing, a vice president with the China National Building Material Group (CNBM), believes the partnership is an "important measure to build green, low-carbon solutions."

State-owned Saudi Aramco is one of the largest companies in the world. It produces the most barrels of crude oil daily of any petrochemical company and, contained within the boundaries of Saudi Arabia, has the second-largest proven crude oil reserves in the world. The kingdom is estimated to be the single largest contributor of greenhouse gases since 1965.

[Construction accounted for nearly a quarter of China's GDP in 2020](#) and remains a vital sector of the nation's economy.

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Russia to Respond if West Rejects European Security Guarantees, OSCE Envoy Says

VIENNA (Sputnik) - Russia will have to take measures if the United States and NATO fail to provide a constructive response on Russian-requested security guarantees within a reasonable time, Russian Permanent Representative to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Alexander Lukashevich, said on Wednesday.

"If we do not receive a constructive response to the proposals we made within a reasonable time, and the aggressive policy towards Russia continues, [we] will have no choice but to draw our own conclusion and take all necessary measures to maintain the strategic balance of power and prevent unacceptable threats to our national security," Lukashevich told the OSCE Permanent Council.

He added that "any attempts to drag on the process of constructive negotiations on security guarantees in the framework of Russia-US and Russia-NATO dialogues or to narrow it down to the pointless exchange of positions over and over again will rife with the inevitable deterioration of the security situation for all countries with no exception".

Russia has presented draft agreements on security guarantees to [NATO and the US](#) last month. They included NATO not expanding eastwards, not deploying short- and intermediate-range missiles capable of reaching each other borders, and prevention of Ukraine and other former Soviet republics from joining the bloc

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Explosive Death of Giant Star Witnessed for First Time by Astronomers in Hawaii
By - Mary Manley

For the first time scientists have witnessed a supernova; the explosion of a red supergiant star. The red supergiant, named SN 2020tlf, was being monitored after it was first spotted in the summer of 2020.

The red supergiant is 10 times larger than the Earth's sun and was first [located](#) 120 million light-years from Earth. For perspective, one [light-year](#) is the distance light is able to travel within 365.25 days. The explosion was captured by telescopes at the W.M. Keck Observatory atop Mauna Kea in Hawaii.

Though supernovas are ordinarily only detected after they collapse, scientists [reportedly](#) had their eye on the star more than 100 days before it died and then exploded. The star was detected in the summer of 2020 during a [survey](#) conducted by the University of Hawaii's Pan-STARRS telescope, according to Jacobson-Galan, an NSF graduate research fellow at UC Berkeley.

The astronomers describe the visual of the red giant's death as great flashes of light and giant [globes](#) of gas exploding from the surface of the star. The violent show put on by the star surprised astronomers as previous observations had yet to yield such visuals.

Astrophysicist Raffaella Margutti, the senior author of a study of the supernova said in a statement, "We've never confirmed such violent activity in a dying red supergiant star where we see it produce such a luminous emission, then collapse and combust, until now."

The life cycle of most stars follows [this](#) path: protostar, main sequence star, then - depending on size - red supergiant star, and finally collapsing into a supernova, before becoming either a black hole or a neutron star.

[Jacobson-Galan](#) was ecstatic, "Direct detection of pre-supernova activity in a red supergiant star has never been observed before in an ordinary Type II supernova. For the first time, we watched a red supergiant star explode!"

According to the [Office of Science](#), the collapse of a giant star is so powerful it creates new atomic nuclei. Supernovae are one of the original sources of elements heavier than iron, and the iron in our blood can be traced to supernovae which occurred before the birth of our sun.

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Tourism And Shipping Industry Threaten Antarctica's Ecosystem as Invasive Species Are Introduced
By - Mary Manley

A report published by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) has revealed that tourism, fishing, research and supply ships connecting Antarctica to ports around the globe have introduced invasive species to a continent which is home to 70% of the globe's fresh water.

In the report, conducted by PNAS, researchers confirm that the Southern Ocean, which supports "unique biota and represents the only global marine region without any known biological invasions" is having its biological barriers profoundly altered by climate change. That, in combination with an increase in shipping activity, threatens its current ecosystem, as invasive species find a new home among its waters.

Previously, the five major ports connected to Antarctica, including Argentina, Chile, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, had been monitored for biosecurity purposes. Between 2014 and 2018, however, researchers began looking at an additional 58 ports tied to the noteworthy continent. Now, reports of [1,581](#) ports are believed to be connected either directly or indirectly to Antarctica.

Some invasive species which threaten the continent's ecosystem include the European shore crab, barnacles, mussels, and various species of algae.

For now, the tundra is protected by its extreme climate, but climate change is creating conditions in Antarctica that are increasingly livable for invasive species, according to Professor David C. Aldridge, from the Department of Zoology at the University of Cambridge.

[Researchers](#) from the University of Cambridge found evidence from port call data and satellite images that show the ships in Antarctica mostly come from South America, northern Europe, and the western Pacific.

Antarctica is an isolated ecosystem which is not familiar with outside species. "[Its] native species have been separated for the previous 15-30 million years." Aldridge said. This could result in an economic devastation for fisheries, he added.

While [scientists](#) are not requesting any specific regulations to be put in place regarding ships, additional biosecurity measures could be seen in the future at shipping ports. In addition, researchers warn tourists who wish to visit to make sure that no invasive organisms that could survive in the harsh ecosystem are transported to the continent on clothing or equipment.

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US Officials in Missions in Geneva, Paris Affected by Suspected Havana Syndrome - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Diplomats working at the US diplomatic missions in Geneva and Paris may have been affected by so-called Havana Syndrome, and at least one was evacuated for treatment, The Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday, citing people in the know.

The incidents reportedly happened in summer of 2021. In Geneva, three American officials reported symptoms similar to Havana Syndrome. At least one diplomat was evacuated to the US for treatment.

Senior embassy officials in Paris also informed diplomats by email of one more suspected case and called on the mission's staff to report unusual symptoms.

US diplomats were first diagnosed with Havana Syndrome in Cuba in 2016 and then in China in 2018. The diplomats said they experienced piercing sounds that have caused longer-term health effects. American diplomats in Russia, Tajikistan, Austria and in several African countries have also reported experiencing Havana Syndrome symptoms, including nausea and dizziness. In October 2021, President Joe Biden signed into law a measure that provides compensation to US diplomatic personnel whose health has been affected by Havana Syndrome. He added that federal employees who are struggling with brain injuries and have curtailed their careers will also get first-class medical care while the US government is investigating the cause of the alleged attacks.

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US, S. Korean, Japanese Defense Officials Discuss DPRK 'Missile Threat' in Trilateral Call

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Defense officials from the United States, South Korea and Japan discussed North Korea's recent missile tests in a trilateral call on Thursday, the Pentagon said.

North Korea said it launched a hypersonic missile on Tuesday (22:27 GMT Monday) from the inland toward the Sea of Japan. It flew 620 miles at an altitude of about 37 miles. This was the second North Korean launch this year.

The consultations involved Japanese Director General for Defense Policy Masuda Kazuo, South Korean Deputy Minister for National Defense Policy Kim Man-gi, and US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner.

"[The sides] engaged in consultations on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) nuclear and missile threat, regional security, and substantive ways to strengthen trilateral security cooperation. The representatives reaffirmed the importance of trilateral security cooperation and committed to conduct a Trilateral Defense Ministerial on a date to be mutually determined in the future," the Pentagon said.

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Sergei Tolstoy Had Difficult Life But Was 'A Lot of Fun' - Family

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - A great-grandson of famous Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, Sergei Tolstoy, who passed away several days ago in the US state of Maryland, had a difficult life but was a lot of fun, his second-cousin Maria Tolstoy Sarandinaki told Sputnik.

Sergei Tolstoy died January 4 in a hospice center in Bethesda, a Washington, DC suburb, at the age of 99.

"I was looking for him last year. I knew he was staying at St. Mary housing, and emailed them. A friend of his, Mary Kay Canarte, answered me that a couple of years ago he had fallen, they found him unconscious," said Sarandinaki, who is Leo Tolstoy's great-granddaughter.

Canarte advised her to write in big black letters, as Sergei Tolstoy was losing his vision at that time.

"Unfortunately, I never did that, and I feel very guilty now," Sarandinaki added.

She got to know Sergei in the early 2000s during the Tolstoy family reunions at his former home in Yasnaya Polyana, Russia.

"Sergei was an incredible flirt. He was always flirting with the ladies. He was mischievous. He loved to joke, he loved to flirt, he loved to have a shot of vodka. He loved the family," she said.

"He was definitely a character. He was a lot of fun. He was eccentric."

However, Tolstoy had a very difficult life, Sarandinaki added. His mother, Vera Tolstoy, left her husband, who was a Muslim, because he met a new wife.

"Actually she gave her son the name Tolstoy. Sergei knew that his mother was Tolstoy, but at the same time he knew that he was not really Tolstoy," she mentioned.

Speaking of Leo Tolstoy's legacy in the US, Sarandinaki noted that almost everybody here read his big novels, like War and Peace, or Anna Karenina, and very few people know nothing about him.

"I have a large portrait of Tolstoy. My nurse, when she saw it, said: 'O my God, I have read everything. I can not believe that you are my patient.' I was amazed that my nurse, who is Vietnamese, knew my great grandfather," she said.

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RPT - Russian Orthodox Church Abroad Publishes Book Honoring Its Centennial After COVID Delay

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCOR) is releasing a book honoring its 100-year anniversary after a delay of several months related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the book's co-compiler and protopriest Serafim Gan told Sputnik.

"We were hoping that the book, 'Grains of Wisdom and Piety,' would be released last summer.

However, as a result of the pandemic, we experienced delays, and that is why the book is coming out only now," Gan said.

The publication consists of 100 excerpts from sermons, interviews and writings by the church's archpastors, as well as historical portraits and photographs.

Gan said the new book is a great collection of spiritual and practical wisdom for Christians and includes numerous examples from the lives of the archpastors whose articles and sermons are presented in it.

"It is interesting not only from the point of view of someone looking for the spiritual and practical advice, but also from a historical standpoint. Just by looking through this book you get a good idea about the history of our church," he noted.

Readers will be able to form an idea about what kind of people the archpastors were and the depth of their spiritual lives, he continued.

"These ascetics sacrificed a lot and were very selfless in their service, which is why the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad managed to preserve this thousand-year legacy of the Russian Orthodox under circumstances in the West," Gan added.

The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad was founded in 1920-1921 by emigres who left Russia after the Russian Civil War. Since 2007, ROCOR has been united with the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and currently has more than 400 parishes and 20 monasteries in 30 countries, mostly in the United States.

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RPT - Biden Backing 'Nuclear Option' May Not Be Enough to Pass Voting Rights Bills - Activists

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's endorsement of a controversial change in Senate rules may still not be enough to get significant voting rights legislation passed because he failed to prioritize getting every member of his own party on board, activists told Sputnik.

Biden told an audience at Atlanta's Morehouse College on Tuesday that he supports eliminating the filibuster - a mechanism that allows the minority party to block action on legislation - in order to pass the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights bills. The move came after some civil rights groups boycotted Biden's speech over lack of progress on the bills.

This rare digression from Senate practice, often referred to as the "nuclear option," is widely expected to spark Republican retaliation. However, although he backs elimination of the filibuster, which requires 60 votes to pass a measure in the 100-seat Senate, Biden also said he would support a "carve out" - that is, applying the exemption to the voting rights bills alone.

"I don't particularly think that it's going to pass with this Congress," voting rights advocate and organizer Ria Thompson-Washington said when asked about the elimination of the filibuster.

"The White House needs to be whipping votes to ensure that voting rights are passed."

Moreover, she added, Biden has still left the door open for Republicans to use the mechanism on future legislation. The voting rights activist hopes Biden has more in his pocket than just speeches and "exceptions."

"The problem is a 'carve out' leaves the filibuster to remain as an obstruction to later fights," Thompson-Washington said. "The filibuster, a Jim Crow relic, should be abolished. Period."

US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican, has been able to block debate on both bills three times. Yet, even with the removal of the filibuster, Biden will still need the support

of every Democrat in the evenly-divided chamber - which is problematic because Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Senator Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona have previously refused to consider changing the rule.

This is why activists are urging Biden to use his power to persuade all Democrats to get on the same page.

New Georgia Project CEO Nse Ufot, whose organization is among those who boycotted the speech, said the Biden administration failed to make the issue a priority despite voters giving the Democrats control the White House and both chambers.

"We want you [Biden] to act like the house is on fire because it is. We gave them our votes, a governing trifecta - the White House, the Senate and the House. Forgive me for expecting them to govern," Ufot said. "What's the point of winning if you won't govern?"

In addition to boycotting the speech, Ufot and her organization joined a coalition of civil rights groups that have called on Biden to apply enough pressure to get the acts passed, both of which would blunt aggressive ways Republicans have attacked and sought to erode the voting rights of Blacks, Latinos, Asians and others.

Thompson-Washington said boycotting the Biden-Harris event was absolutely the right thing to do. She also said Biden should go to states like Arizona or West Virginia instead of Georgia, where Black women brought out the vote to win two senate races for the Democrats.

Political commentator Avis Jones-DeWeever said Biden dragged his feet as 500 bills were introduced in Republican-led state legislatures aimed at restricting voting by mail, reducing ballot locations, and the time allowed for early voting. The bills also created onerous photo ID requirements and gave Republicans the power to sidestep the work of county election officials, she added.

"Biden owns the fact that he didn't properly prioritize this issue," Jones-DeWeever said. "Finding vaccines and fighting COVID was his first priority, I understand that. But voting rights should have been next. He saw Republican voter suppression activity in state after state after state and did nothing."

TAKE ACTION OR SEE 'BLOODLETTING' IN 2022

DC-based Political analyst Jamila Bey said Biden actually has the power to take immediate action and his party will pay a price if he fails to do so.

"We know that Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act was decimated by the US Supreme Court. But you have authority, Mr. Biden, to make an executive order such that the same way the right to bear arms is protected, you can do the same thing for Black people."

Without Section 5, Bey said, there is no federal preclearance to change laws in municipalities and states where they have seen voter suppression measures.

Bey said Biden's speech in Atlanta might make for a great "photo op," but is not sure what it will mean if voters who put him in office are disenfranchised. She also warned that if Democrats fail to destroy the deadlock in the Senate, they will pay a price.

"I deeply believe that if voting rights is not delivered in the next three months there will be a bloodletting in 2022," Bey said. "We already have a fatigued voting population, already have Black folks asking 'what are you going to do?'"

Ufot and Jones-DeWeever argued that it is foolish and unwise to try to compromise with a party that no longer sees the need to govern, is openly racist and anti-Black and has adopted a strategy of waging war against voting rights.

"What we're seeing is an existential threat to our democracy and our ability to govern," Ufot said. "Because this is happening to Black people, you don't care. This country has a high tolerance for Black suffering. I'm probably not gonna get invited to anymore White House dinners but I'm good with that."

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RPT - Clergy, Pious of Russian Orthodox Church Abroad Praying for Peace in Kazakhstan - Priest

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Clergy and parishioners of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCOR) in the United States are praying for peace and stability in Kazakhstan, ROCOR Synod of Bishops chancellor and St. Serafim church dean, protopriest Serafim Gan, told Sputnik.

"Such prayers are being offered in many ROCOR churches, despite our hierarchy not issuing a special decree on that," father Serafim said.

The protopriest noted that offers of prayers are a normal reaction of those who wish to see peace in the country where many Russians have relatives and friends.

"People are praying and sympathizing without any decrees and blessing from hierarchs, and this is a normal reaction," he said.

The priest noted that many are praying for peace in Kazakhstan even though such prayers were not formally added to regular church services.

"Kazakhstan was in the prayers and thoughts of all our parishioners," he added.

Protests erupted in Kazakhstan in early January following a twofold increase in gas prices. The protests turned into riots, and the Kazakh government said they were hijacked by terrorist groups aided by foreign actors. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev declared a nationwide state of emergency until January 19 and invited Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) peacekeeping forces to help bring the situation under control. Tokayev dismissed the government and appointed a new prime minister, reshuffling the cabinet.

The situation has since been stabilized, and CSTO peacekeepers are set to begin withdrawal on January 13.

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UPDATE - US Senate to Vote on Senator Ted Cruz's Nord Stream 2 Sanctions Bill on Thursday (Updates with change in attribution in headline, lede; details in para 2)

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The US Senate will vote on Thursday to decide whether to adopt Republican Senator Ted Cruz's bill that would impose sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, according to Senate Republicans.

"Vote Scheduled: At 2:45pm, on Thursday, January 13th, the Senate will proceed to a roll call vote on passage of S.3436, Cruz Nord Stream 2 Sanctions (60-vote affirmative threshold)," Senate Republicans wrote on Twitter.

Politico reported earlier that the US State Department sent a document to lawmakers lobbying against support for the bill while the United States and European partners engage in early security talks with Russia to address issues in Eastern Europe.

The document states that the Republican bill would only serve to undermine unity and possibly lead to a split among the United States and its European allies, especially with the new German government that is a major stakeholder in the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

The State Department also argues that imposing sanctions now on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline would also hurt ongoing security talks with Russia because it would take away a tool of leverage from the negotiating table.

Moreover, the document warns that sanctions on Nord Stream 2 could lead to a spike in Russian energy prices that may impact European partners during the winter.

Cruz has long been trying to push through a bill that would force the US government to re-impose economic sanctions on the company building the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. In fall 2021, Cruz blocked the confirmation of nearly 60 ambassadors in a bid to secure a vote on his bill to sanction the pipeline. He lifted his block after Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer pledged that a vote on Cruz's bill would take place by January 14.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, completed in September, will deliver gas from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea. The process of certifying Nord Stream 2 AG as the pipeline's independent operator is currently underway to ensure the project complies with the conditions of the February 12, 2019 EU Gas Directive. German regulators are expected to decide on the certification in the second half of 2022.

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US Inflation 'Too High,' Needs to Be Decreased to 2% Per Year - Federal Reserve Vice Chair

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Inflation expanding at 7% or more per year is too high for the United States and the Federal Reserve needs to bring it back to the annual target of 2%, the US central bank's Vice Chairman Lael Brainard said.

"We are seeing the strongest rebound in growth and decline in unemployment of any recovery in the past five decades. But inflation is too high, and working people around the country are concerned about how far their paychecks will go," Brainard said in a speech prepared for the US Senate hearing to confirm her appointment as the No. 2 at the Federal Reserve on Thursday. Brainard said the US economy was making notable progress, with growth estimated at 5.5% last year and unemployment falling by 2.8%, although the effects of the coronavirus pandemic measures continued to pose challenges.

"Our priority is to protect the gains we have made and support a full recovery," Brainard said.

"Our monetary policy is focused on getting inflation back down to 2 percent while sustaining a recovery that includes everyone. This is our most important task."

Brainard's comments came after the Labor Department reported earlier on Wednesday that US consumer prices rose 7% in the year to December, indicating the fastest inflationary growth since 1982.

The data gathered from the Consumer Price Index is closely watched by the Fed to determine the timing for its first pandemic-era rate increase.

The Federal reserve has not raised rates since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March of 2020, keeping them at between zero and 0.25% over the past 20 months.

But officials of the US central bank say a series of interest rate hikes will be needed now to counter inflation as prices have soared from the lows of the pandemic due to trillions of dollars of federal spending in pandemic relief, higher wage demands and supply chain disruptions.

James Bullard, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis said on Wednesday that as many as four interest rate hikes may be needed this year to make a meaningful dent on inflation.

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US Deputy Trade Chief Raises Concerns to Canada About Digital Services Tax - USTR Office

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Trade Representative Jayme White met with his Canadian counterpart David Morrison and raised concerns over Canada's proposal to impose a digital service tax, the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) said.

Last month, the US Trade Representative said the United States will examine all possible options in case Canada adopts the digital service tax.

"Ambassador White expressed concern about Canada's proposed digital service tax," the Office of the US Trade Representative said in a press release on Wednesday.

Canada proposed imposing a 3 percent tax on revenue from big technology firms, including social media platforms, that gain profit from digital services that use data and content from Canadian users, according to media reports.

White and Morrison also discussed bilateral issues on steel trade, and White underscored the importance for Canada to fully meet its commitments under the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USCMA), especially its allocation of dairy tariff-tariff quotas, the release said.

Earlier this month, the USMCA agreed with the United States that Canada was breaching its obligations under the trade agreement by restricting the number of US dairy products allowed into the Canadian market.

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UPDATE - Sherman Meets With European Leaders About Russia-Ukraine Tensions - State Dept.

(Adds details on Sherman meeting with EC official and background in paras 5,6)

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US Deputy State Secretary Wendy Sherman met with European leaders to discuss ongoing tensions between Russia and Ukraine amid an alleged buildup of Russian forces on their western border, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

"Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman met today with French MFA Secretary General Francois Delattre, German MFA State Secretary Andreas Michaelis, Italian MFA Political Director Pasquale Ferrara, and UK Minister of State for Middle East, North Africa and North America James Cleverly, who represented their respective countries at the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council in Brussels. The group pledged to continue close U.S.-European coordination to deter further Russian aggression against Ukraine, and called for Russian de-escalation, underscoring their shared commitment to diplomacy," Price said in a readout of the meeting on Wednesday.

The leaders agreed in the meeting that any Russian advance on Ukraine would result in massive coordinated consequences, including economic measures, against Moscow, the official added.

The meeting took place following NATO-Russia talks, during which the alliance's enlargement was a central topic of discussion. The US expects further engagement with Russia in the coming days, Price noted.

Later in the day the State Department said Sherman also briefed Bjoern Seibert, Chief of Staff for European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on the NATO-Russia Council. Russia has repeatedly denied Western accusations of preparing for an invasion, saying it reserves the right to move troops within its sovereign territory as it considers NATO's military activities a threat to the national security of Russia.

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GSK Wins \$945M In US Army Contract to Provide More Sotrovimab Medications - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) has won a more than \$945 million US Army modification contract to procure an additional 340,048 doses of the therapeutic treatment Sotrovimab, the Defense Department announced in a press release.

"GlaxoSmithKline [of] Durham, North Carolina was awarded a \$945,107,496 modification ...contract to procure an additional 340,048 doses of Sotrovimab therapeutic treatment, with an option to procure an additional 715,680 doses by June 30, 2022," the release said on Wednesday.

Work on the contract will be performed in Durham, North Carolina this year, with an estimated completion date of September 30, 2022, the release said.

Sotrovimab, sold under the brand name Xevudy, is a human neutralizing monoclonal antibody. It is authorized for use under an Emergency Use Authorization for the treatment of mild-to-moderate COVID-19 in adults and pediatric patients, according to the release.

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US Monitoring China's COVID-19 Lockdown, Sees Likely Economic Impact - White House

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is monitoring the lockdowns imposed in the central Chinese city of Anyang and assesses that they are likely to have an impact isolated to the Chinese market, US National Economic Council Director Brian Deese said during a White House press briefing.

"With respect to China specifically and the current moment, we're monitoring it very closely. As we assess the issue today, the lockdowns are most likely to have an effect isolated in China, because the production facilities in those geographies are principally suppliers to the Chinese market," Deese said on Wednesday.

The Chinese government imposed lockdowns in Anyang, Henan province following the emergence of Omicron COVID-19 variants in the city, which has a population of over 5 million people.

The lockdown duration is yet to be announced and will be declared separately at a future date. Anyang is the second Chinese city to announce cases from the Omicron variant, following reported cases in Tianjin in December. Taiwan and Hong Kong have also reported Omicron cases.

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US Well-Positioned to Tackle Challenges of Rising Prices Head-On - White House

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is well-positioned to attack the increase in prices head-on, US National Economic Council Director Brian Deese said in a press briefing.

"Given the unique strength of the United States' economic recovery, overall growth, as well as the labor market, we are well-positioned to attack the challenges and prices and costs head-on," Deese said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, the US Labor Department reported that the US Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 7% in the year to December, marking the highest increase since 1982.

Deese said tackling the prices increase will require the expansion of the US productive capacity economy more cheaply across the country.

The US economy shrank by 3.5% in 2020 due to coronavirus pandemic measures. The Federal Reserve has projected a 4% growth for 2022, but the main problem it faces is rising inflation, which is running at 40-year highs amid soaring prices.

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US Navy Unveils Next-Generation Warship Plan with Hypersonic Missiles, Lasers - USNI

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has unveiled its proposed design for a next-generation destroyer-class - DDG(X) - warship deploying hypersonic missile and laser weapons, the US Naval Institute (USNI) reported.

The design is the largest and most ambitious one for any surface warship that the Navy has proposed in more than two decades, the report acknowledged, the report said. The previous Zumwalt DDG class was widely criticized and ultimately only three out of an original 32 planned were ever completed and put into service.

The new vessels will be equipped with combat systems developed from the existing Flight III Arleigh Burke-class missile destroyers that carry SPY-6 air search radar and the Baseline 10 Aegis combat system, the report said.

However, the new ships will replace the old gas-turbine propulsion systems of the Arleigh Burkes for the Integrated Power Systems on the troubled Zumwalt class of guided missile destroyers, the report added.

Ideally, they are supposed to generate up to 50 megawatts of power - to energize 600-kilowatt combat lasers and new sensors, according to the report.

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UPDATE - US Imposes North Korea-Related Sanctions on Russian Company, 6 N. Koreans - Treasury Dept.

(Updates with comment in paras 7, 8)

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed North Korea-related sanctions on a Russian company and a national as well as on six North Korea nationals, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced.

OFAC added the Russian company Parsek LLC, Russian national Roman Alar and six North Koreans to the Specially Designated Nationals sanctions list under the North Korea Sanctions Regulations for allegedly aiding the North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile program.

"Today's actions, part of the United States' ongoing efforts to counter the DPRK's [North Korea's] weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs, target its continued use of overseas representatives to illegally procure goods for weapons," Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson said in a statement on Wednesday.

North Korea's latest missile launches are further evidence that Pyongyang continues to advance prohibited programs despite clear calls by the international community for diplomacy and denuclearization, Nelson added.

The designations come following news that North Korea conducted a hypersonic missile test over the Sea of Japan on Tuesday that prompted the US aviation authorities to temporarily ground flights on the United States west coast.

The missile test was the second of its kind within a week. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida condemned the launch and said Japan will take all possible measures to prepare for contingencies.

The designations convey the United States' serious and ongoing concern about North Korea's continued proliferation activities and those who support it, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement released on Wednesday.

The United States has been coordinating and will continue to coordinate closely with allies and partners to address the threats posed by North Korea's activities and to advance the objective of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, Blinken added.

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US State Dept. Says China Makes Unlawful Claims in Most of South China Sea

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The US Department of State said in a press release that it has released a study report that alleges China has long asserted unlawful maritime claims in the South China Sea.

"Today, the Department of State released a Limits in the Seas study on the PRC's [People's Republic of China] maritime claims in the South China Sea... This most recent study, the 150th in the Limits in the Seas series, concludes that the PRC asserts unlawful maritime claims in most of the South China Sea, including an unlawful historic rights claim," the release said on Wednesday.

The State Department argues that China's claim of a wide swath of the South China Sea is not consistent with the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention.

The Limits in the Seas study, according to the State Department, is a longstanding legal and technical series that reviews maritime claims and their consistency with international law.

Beijing has been disputing for decades the status of a number of territories in the South China Sea that it lays claim to, primarily the Paracel and Spratly islands, and the Scarborough Shoal. China considers the Spratly archipelago to be its territory, despite the Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling, which said there was no legal basis for China's maritime claims. The arbitration proceeding was initiated by the Philippines in January of 2013.

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Shell Takes 870,000 Barrels From US Oil Reserve to Help Curb Price at Pump - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States has released 870,000 barrels from its Strategic Petroleum Reserve to the Shell Trading Company under a fourth sale-and-exchange deal aimed at reducing prices of fuel at the pump, the Department of Energy said in a press release.

The transaction with Shell follows two previous sale-and-exchange deals with ExxonMobil for a total of 6.8 million barrels and a separate 250,000-barrel arrangement with Marathon Petroleum. "Today, the US Department of Energy (DOE) approved a fourth exchange of 870,000 barrels of crude oil for release to Shell Trading (US) Company from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR)," the release said on Wednesday.

The Department of Energy announced earlier this month that up to 32 million barrels will be released from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve through the sale-and-exchange program. The four exchanges so far account for some 8 million barrels from that target.

"As with all exchanges, companies that receive SPR crude oil through the exchange agree to return the amount of crude oil received, as well as an additional amount, dependent upon the length of time in which they hold the oil," the release said.

Through the exchange program, the Biden administration hopes to reduce the amount of crude oil that petroleum refiners buy directly from the open market in order to cap prices for both the raw material and the fuel sold at pumps, the release added.

Prices of crude oil and fuel at US pumps hit their highest this year since 2014 as global oil exporters under the OPEC+ alliance cut output despite higher demand for energy in a world recovering from the coronavirus pandemic measures.

President Joe Biden announced in November that the United States will join other major oil consuming countries under a coordinated action to release crude from their reserves in order to tamp down inflation from soaring energy prices.

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Ex-White House Spokeswoman McEnany Met With US House Panel Probing January 6 Riot -Reports

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Former White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany on Wednesday met virtually with the US House Select Committee probing the events on January 6, 2021, CNN reported citing two sources familiar with the matter.

McEnany was subpoenaed in November to provide testimony before the Select Committee as a person who worked with the former US President Donald Trump's White House and was a spokesperson for Trump's 2020 reelection campaign, the report said on Wednesday.

To date, the Select Committee has subpoenaed more than 40 individuals who were allegedly involved in the events at the US Capitol on January 6, including Trump's close allies and advisers.

On that day, a group of Trump supporters entered the US Capitol in a bid to protest the certifying of the 2020 presidential election results from several US states that Trump claimed were fraudulent and voter fraud that robbed him of election victory. The authorities shot one

protester dead during the incident and charged more than 700 people for participating in the event.

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Biden Backing 'Nuclear Option' May Not Be Enough to Pass Voting Rights Bills - Activists

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's endorsement of a controversial change in Senate rules may still not be enough to get significant voting rights legislation passed because he failed to prioritize getting every member of his own party on board, activists told Sputnik.

Biden told an audience at Atlanta's Morehouse College on Tuesday that he supports eliminating the filibuster - a mechanism that allows the minority party to block action on legislation - in order to pass the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights bills. The move came after some civil rights groups boycotted Biden's speech over lack of progress on the bills.

This rare digression from Senate practice, often referred to as the "nuclear option," is widely expected to spark Republican retaliation. However, although he backs elimination of the filibuster, which requires 60 votes to pass a measure in the 100-seat Senate, Biden also said he would support a "carve out" - that is, applying the exemption to the voting rights bills alone.

"I don't particularly think that it's going to pass with this Congress," voting rights advocate and organizer Ria Thompson-Washington said when asked about the elimination of the filibuster.

"The White House needs to be whipping votes to ensure that voting rights are passed."

Moreover, she added, Biden has still left the door open for Republicans to use the mechanism on future legislation. The voting rights activist hopes Biden has more in his pocket than just speeches and "exceptions."

"The problem is a 'carve out' leaves the filibuster to remain as an obstruction to later fights,"

Thompson-Washington said. "The filibuster, a Jim Crow relic, should be abolished. Period."

US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican, has been able to block debate on both bills three times. Yet, even with the removal of the filibuster, Biden will still need the support of every Democrat in the evenly-divided chamber - which is problematic because Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Senator Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona have previously refused to consider changing the rule.

This is why activists are urging Biden to use his power to persuade all Democrats to get on the same page.

New Georgia Project CEO Nse Ufot, whose organization is among those who boycotted the speech, said the Biden administration failed to make the issue a priority despite voters giving the Democrats control of the White House and both chambers.

"We want you [Biden] to act like the house is on fire because it is. We gave them our votes, a governing trifecta - the White House, the Senate and the House. Forgive me for expecting them to govern," Ufot said. "What's the point of winning if you won't govern?"

In addition to boycotting the speech, Ufot and her organization joined a coalition of civil rights groups that have called on Biden to apply enough pressure to get the acts passed, both of

which would blunt aggressive ways Republicans have attacked and sought to erode the voting rights of Blacks, Latinos, Asians and others.

Thompson-Washington said boycotting the Biden-Harris event was absolutely the right thing to do. She also said Biden should go to states like Arizona or West Virginia instead of Georgia, where Black women brought out the vote to win two senate races for the Democrats.

Political commentator Avis Jones-DeWeever said Biden dragged his feet as 500 bills were introduced in Republican-led state legislatures aimed at restricting voting by mail, reducing ballot locations, and the time allowed for early voting. The bills also created onerous photo ID requirements and gave Republicans the power to sidestep the work of county election officials, she added.

"Biden owns the fact that he didn't properly prioritize this issue," Jones-DeWeever said. "Finding vaccines and fighting COVID was his first priority, I understand that. But voting rights should have been next. He saw Republican voter suppression activity in state after state after state and did nothing."

TAKE ACTION OR SEE 'BLOODLETTING' IN 2022

DC-based Political analyst Jamila Bey said Biden actually has the power to take immediate action and his party will pay a price if he fails to do so.

"We know that Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act was decimated by the US Supreme Court. But you have authority, Mr. Biden, to make an executive order such that the same way the right to bear arms is protected, you can do the same thing for Black people."

Without Section 5, Bey said, there is no federal preclearance to change laws in municipalities and states where they have seen voter suppression measures.

Bey said Biden's speech in Atlanta might make for a great "photo op," but is not sure what it will mean if voters who put him in office are disenfranchised. She also warned that if Democrats fail to destroy the deadlock in the Senate, they will pay a price.

"I deeply believe that if voting rights is not delivered in the next three months there will be a bloodletting in 2022," Bey said. "We already have a fatigued voting population, already have Black folks asking 'what are you going to do?'"

Ufot and Jones-DeWeever argued that it is foolish and unwise to try to compromise with a party that no longer sees the need to govern, is openly racist and anti-Black and has adopted a strategy of waging war against voting rights.

"What we're seeing is an existential threat to our democracy and our ability to govern," Ufot said. "Because this is happening to Black people, you don't care. This country has a high tolerance for Black suffering. I'm probably not gonna get invited to anymore White House dinners but I'm good with that."

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Biden Mulls Dismantling Some of Trump's Nuclear Weapons Programs - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is weighing in on dismantling a number of nuclear weapons programs, brought to life under former President Donald Trump, as

part of the Nuclear Posture Review nearing completion, Politico reported citing current and former US officials.

The Nuclear Posture Review is expected to be finalized next month and to introduce insignificant changes to the existing US nuclear policy, the report said on Wednesday.

The Biden administration will unlikely go as far as to introduce any major cuts to the Defense Department plans to build new intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarines with nuclear weapons and stealth bombers, the officials said.

The main considerations involve a debate among national security officials on whether the US needs a new nuclear-armed missile being developed at the moment and whether it makes sense to retire a Cold War-era thermonuclear bomb, the report said.

In parallel, the national security officials are pondering whether to halt such Trump-era "add-ons" as low-yield warheads that were deployed on submarines by the previous administration, the report added.

The Biden team is also considering changing the wording of the US nuclear weapons policy from Trump's "detering nuclear attack is not the sole purpose of nuclear weapons" to a more reserved one that states that the role of nuclear weapons is fundamentally to deter the use of other nuclear weapons, according to the report.

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US Senate to Vote on Senator Ted Cruz's Nord Stream 2 Sanctions Bill Thursday - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The US Senate will vote on Thursday to decide whether to adopt Republican Senator Ted Cruz's bill that would impose sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, Politico reported.

The report said on Wednesday that the US State Department sent a document to lawmakers lobbying against support for the bill while the United States and European partners engage in early security talks with Russia to address issues in Eastern Europe.

The document states that the Republican bill would only serve to undermine unity and possibly lead to a split among the United States and its European allies, especially with the new German government that is a major stakeholder in the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

The State Department also argues that imposing sanctions now on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline would also hurt ongoing security talks with Russia because it would take away a tool of leverage from the negotiating table.

Moreover, the document warns that sanctions on Nord Stream 2 could lead to a spike in Russian energy prices that may impact European partners during the winter.

Cruz has long been trying to push through a bill that would force the US government to re-impose economic sanctions on the company building the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. In fall 2021, Cruz blocked the confirmation of nearly 60 ambassadors in a bid to secure a vote on his bill to sanction the pipeline. He lifted his block after Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer pledged that a vote on Cruz's bill would take place by January 14.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, completed in September, will deliver gas from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea. The process of certifying Nord Stream 2 AG as the pipeline's independent operator is currently underway to ensure the project complies with the conditions of the February 12, 2019 EU Gas Directive. German regulators are expected to decide on the certification in the second half of 2022.

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US May Need 4 Interest Rate Hikes in 2022 to Tackle Inflation - Federal Reserve Official

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve may need to execute as many as four interest rate hikes this year to make a meaningful impact on US inflation, which is growing at its fastest pace in 40 years, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis President James Bullard said. "I actually now think we should maybe go to four hikes in 2022," Bullard told the Wall Street Journal on Wednesday. "If we get a couple of rate-hike moves under our belt during the first part of this year then we'll be in better shape."

Earlier on Wednesday, the US Labor Department reported the US consumer prices were up 7% in the year to December, indicating the fastest inflationary growth since 1982.

The data gathered from the Consumer Price Index is closely watched by the Federal Reserve to determine the timing for its first pandemic-era interest rate increase.

The Federal Reserve has not raised rates since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, keeping them at between zero and 0.25% over the past 20 months.

Asked about the potential timing for this year's first interest rate hike, Bullard reiterated his earlier opinion that it should be done in March.

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US House Panel Seeks Republican Leader McCarthy's Testimony in January 6 Riot Probe (Updates with details, background in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The US House Select Committee investigating the January 6 Capitol riot sent a letter to Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy asking him to voluntarily appear before the panel for a disposition about his communication with former President Donald Trump on the day of the event.

"We write to request your voluntary cooperation with our investigation on a range of critical topics, including your conversations with President Trump before, during and after the violent January 6th attack," the Committee said in the letter on Wednesday. "You have acknowledged speaking directly with the former President while the violence was underway on January 6th." The Select Committee is requesting to meet with McCarthy on February 3, 4 or 7, the letter said. The letter details multiple instances of McCarthy stating to the press his communication with Trump the day of the attack.

A group of Trump supporters entered the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, in a bid to protest the certifying of the 2020 presidential election results from several US states which Trump claimed were fraudulent. The authorities shot an unarmed protester dead and charged more than 700 people for participating in the event.

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US Calls China Halting Flights Over COVID-19 Cases 'Inconsistent' With Bilateral Accord

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States considers China's decision to halt some US flights over novel coronavirus concerns to be inconsistent with the obligations of the bilateral transportation agreement, but Washington may take regulatory action in response, a US Transportation Department spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik.

"China's actions are inconsistent with its obligations under the US-China Air Transport Agreement," the spokesperson said on Wednesday. "We are engaging with the PRC [People's Republic of China] on this and we retain the right to take regulatory measures as appropriate." The Chinese government recently canceled six US flights bound to China due to a surge of passengers testing positive for the novel coronavirus, according to US media.

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US House Panel Seeks Republican Leader McCarthy's Testimony in Probe of January 6 Riot

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) -

NATO-RUSSIA SECURITY TALKS

* The United States supports NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg in expressing interest in re-establishing offices in Moscow and in Brussels, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

* The United States hopes Russian President Vladimir Putin will choose peace and security while working to address issues with NATO in Eastern Europe, Price said.

* Russia will take measures to fend off the threat to its security by military means, if this cannot be done by political means, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko said.

* Russia expects NATO to present its ideas regarding Moscow's security proposals or provide an explanation for their rejection, Grushko said.

* NATO's further enlargement carries risks that will outweigh any perceived benefits and solves no security problems, Grushko said.

US SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* US Democratic senators on Wednesday unveiled a new bill seeking mandatory sanctions on Russian financial institutions, including Sberbank, VTB, Gazprombank and the Russian Direct Investment Fund in case Moscow starts hostilities against Ukraine.

EUROPEAN ENERGY MARKETS

* It is very difficult to imagine the Nord Stream 2 pipeline becoming operational if Russia advances on Ukraine, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman told journalists on Wednesday.

* The Commission for Emergency Situations of Moldova decided that Moldovagaz would ask Russia's Gazprom to defer payment for gas supplies until the end of January, the Moldovan cabinet said.

NORTH KOREA

* The United States has imposed North Korea-related sanctions on a Russian business and national alongside six North Koreans, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced on Wednesday.

* The situation around North Korea increasing its nuclear program is an unsolved problem that has the potential to get worse, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN CONFLICT

* Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, speaking about yesterday's incident on the border with Armenia, said that after Yerevan's requests, he had ordered the Defense Ministry to cease fire.

KAZAKHSTAN DEVELOPMENTS

* The state of emergency will be lifted in several regions of Kazakhstan on Thursday, according to a decree signed by President Kassym Tokayev.

* The withdrawal of the CSTO peacekeeping contingent from Kazakhstan will begin on January 13 and will be completed within ten days, the organization said.

* Tokayev met with CSTO Secretary-General Stanislav Zas and expressed gratitude to the CSTO allies for their support and timely assistance to Kazakhstan under conditions of the terrorist attack, the Office of the President said.

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Biden Approval Rating Declines to 33%, Disapproval Rate at 53% - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - More than half of Americans think President Joe Biden is doing a poor job and his disapproval rating outstrips his approval one by 20%, a new Quinnipiac University poll said on Wednesday.

"Americans give President Joe Biden a negative 33 - 53 percent job approval rating, while 13 percent did not offer an opinion. In November 2021, Americans gave Biden a negative 36 - 53 percent job approval rating with 10 percent not offering an opinion," Quinnipiac said.

Among registered voters, Biden receives a negative 35 - 54 percent job approval rating with 11% being unable to give a definitive reply. In November, registered voters gave him a negative 38 - 53 percent job approval rating with 9% providing no definitive answer.

"Among adults, Americans give negative scores on the following three issues when asked about Biden's handling of ... the economy: 34% approve, while 57% disapprove; foreign policy: 35% approve, while 54% disapprove; the response to the coronavirus: 39% approve, while 55% disapprove," Quinnipiac said.

A plurality - 49% - say Biden is doing more to divide the country while 42% say he is doing more to unite the country, according to the poll.

The telephone survey was conducted from January 7-10 among 1,313 US adults with a margin of sampling error of +/- 2.7 percentage points. The poll included 1,178 self-identified registered voters.

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UN Mission in Yemen Says Spoke to UAE-Flagged Vessel Crew Seized by Houthis

UNITED NATIONS, January 12 (Sputnik) - The UN Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA) in Yemen said in a statement on Wednesday that its team spoke to the crew members of the United Arab Emirates-flagged ship seized by the Houthi rebels on January 3.

"As part of its routine weekly patrol, UNMHA visited As-Salif port and neighboring areas this afternoon. The patrol team saw the RWABEE vessel from a distance and spoke to its crew members," the UN mission said via Twitter.

On January 3, the Arab coalition announced that the rebels had hijacked a ship sailing under the flag of the United Arab Emirates, Rwabee, off the Yemeni coast in the southern Red Sea. The vessel was said to be carrying medical equipment.

The Houthis said the captured ship was transporting military equipment and entered Yemen's waters without a license, threatening the security of the Yemeni people.

UNMHA said in the statement the patrol team also visited a fish market and a local school in As-Salif to interact with the local population and did not observe any militarization of the areas patrolled.

On Tuesday, UNMHA expressed concern over the alleged use of Hudaydah ports, including As-Salif, for military purposes and requested an inspection.

Yemen has been engulfed in an armed conflict between the government forces, led by President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, and the Houthi rebels. Since March 2015, the Saudi-led Arab alliance, working in cooperation with Hadi's forces, has been conducting air, land and sea operations against the Houthis. The conflict has escalated into one of the worst

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Sherman Meets With European Leaders About Russia-Ukraine Tensions - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US Deputy State Secretary Wendy Sherman met with European leaders on Wednesday to discuss ongoing tensions between Russia and Ukraine amid an alleged buildup of Russian forces on their western border, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

"Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman met today with French MFA Secretary General Francois Delattre, German MFA State Secretary Andreas Michaelis, Italian MFA Political Director Pasquale Ferrara, and UK Minister of State for Middle East, North Africa and North America James Cleverly, who represented their respective countries at the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council in Brussels. The group pledged to continue close U.S.-European coordination to deter further Russian aggression against Ukraine, and called for Russian de-escalation, underscoring their shared commitment to diplomacy," Price said in a readout of the meeting.

The leaders agreed in the meeting that any Russian advance on Ukraine would result in massive coordinated consequences, including economic measures, against Moscow, the official added.

The meeting took place following NATO-Russia talks, during which the alliance's enlargement was a central topic of discussion. The US expects further engagement with Russia in the coming days, Price noted.

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US Approves Combat Aircraft Engine Maintenance Deal With Greece - Defense Security Agency

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The US government has approved a \$233 million agreement with Greece to maintain Pratt & Whitney F-100 engines used to power F-15 Eagle and F-16 Fighting Falcon combat aircraft, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) announced on Wednesday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Greece of Follow-on Support for F100-PW-229 Engine Maintenance and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$233 million," the DSCA said in a press release.

The DSCA delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale on Wednesday.

"The government of Greece has requested to buy parts and services to support follow-on depot level maintenance and sustainment of F100-PW-229 engines to include spare, repair parts, and accessories; repair and return services; publications and technical documentation," the release added.

The deal will also include the provision of US government and contractor engineering, technical, and logistical services; and other related elements of logistical and program support, according to the release.

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US Confirms Death of American in Ramallah, Seeks Details From Israel - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States confirms the death of a US citizen near Ramallah and is seeking clarification about this incident from the Israeli government, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"We can confirm the death of US citizen Omar Assad in a city near Ramallah. We have been in touch with Mr. Assad's family to express our condolences about this tragedy. We're providing all appropriate consular assistance to the family at this time. We've also been in touch with the government of Israel to seek clarification about this incident," Price said during a press briefing. The Israeli Defense Forces said there is an ongoing investigation into the incident and the United States supports thorough probe into the circumstances of it, Price added.

Early on Wednesday, Omar Asad was found dead in the West Bank village of Jiljiliya near Rammalah, according to a media reports. Asad was an 80-year-old Palestinian returning with his family after visiting relatives when they were stopped by Israeli soldiers who were taking part in an operation in the village.

The mayor of Ramallah, Fuad Moutee, said Asad died of a heart attack while he was still handcuffed, according to the reports.

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US Expects Additional Engagement With Russia in Coming Days - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States expects to continue security talks with Russia in the coming days after both sides return home from consultations, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"We do expect there will be additional engagement with the Russian Federation in the coming days," Price said. "It's no secret that it will require intensive consultations on the part of the Russia delegation with senior Russian officials up to and including President [Vladimir] Putin ... on our part we're consulting here at home within the Executive Branch, of course we're briefing

Congress as well but just as importantly we are working in close consultation with our allies and partners."

Price declined to comment on whether NATO would provide a written response to Russia's security proposals.

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US Cyber Command Says Identified Multiple Tools Used by Iranian Intelligence Actors

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Multiple open-source tools used by Iranian intelligence actors have been identified and disclosed in order to bolster the United States' cyber defenses, the US Cyber Command said on Wednesday.

"To better enable defense against malicious cyber actors, U.S. Cyber Command's Cyber National Mission Force has identified and disclosed multiple open-source tools that Iranian intelligence actors are using in networks around the world," the US Cyber Command said. The Iranian intelligence actors, known as MuddyWater, are an online threat group that has targeted networks in the Middle East, Europe and North America. The group is a subordinate element within Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security that surveils anti-regime activists abroad, the US Cyber Command said.

Should a network operator identify multiple of the disclosed tools on the same network, it may indicate the presence of malicious Iranian cyber activity, the command added.

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Clergy, Pious of Russian Orthodox Church Abroad Praying for Peace in Kazakhstan - Priest

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - Clergy and parishioners of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCOR) in the United States are praying for peace and stability in Kazakhstan, ROCOR Synod of Bishops chancellor and St. Serafim church dean, protopriest Serafim Gan, told Sputnik.

"Such prayers are being offered in many ROCOR churches, despite our hierarchy not issuing a special decree on that," father Serafim said.

The protopriest noted that offers of prayers are a normal reaction of those who wish to see peace in the country where many Russians have relatives and friends.

"People are praying and sympathizing without any decrees and blessing from hierarchs, and this is a normal reaction," he said.

The priest noted that many are praying for peace in Kazakhstan even though such prayers were not formally added to regular church services.

"Kazakhstan was in the prayers and thoughts of all our parishioners," he added.

Protests erupted in Kazakhstan in early January following a twofold increase in gas prices. The protests turned into riots, and the Kazakh government said they were hijacked by terrorist groups aided by foreign actors. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev declared a nationwide state of emergency until January 19 and invited Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) peacekeeping forces to help bring the situation under control. Tokayev dismissed the government and appointed a new prime minister, reshuffling the cabinet.

The situation has since been stabilized, and CSTO peacekeepers are set to begin withdrawal on January 13.

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Russian Orthodox Church Abroad Publishes Book Honoring Its Centennial After COVID Delay

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCOR) is releasing a book honoring its 100-year anniversary after a delay of several months related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the book's co-compiler and protopriest Serafim Gan told Sputnik.

"We were hoping that the book, 'Grains of Wisdom and Piety,' would be released last summer. However, as a result of the pandemic, we experienced delays, and that is why the book is coming out only now," Gan said.

The publication consists of 100 excerpts from sermons, interviews and writings by the church's archpastors, as well as historical portraits and photographs.

Gan said the new book is a great collection of spiritual and practical wisdom for Christians and includes numerous examples from the lives of the archpastors whose articles and sermons are presented in it.

"It is interesting not only from the point of view of someone looking for the spiritual and practical advice, but also from a historical standpoint. Just by looking through this book you get a good idea about the history of our church," he noted.

Readers will be able to form an idea about what kind of people the archpastors were and the depth of their spiritual lives, he continued.

"These ascetics sacrificed a lot and were very selfless in their service, which is why the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad managed to preserve this thousand-year legacy of the Russian Orthodox under circumstances in the West," Gan added.

The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad was founded in 1920-1921 by emigres who left Russia after the Russian Civil War. Since 2007, ROCOR has been united with the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and currently has more than 400 parishes and 20 monasteries in 30 countries, mostly in the United States.

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US Backs NATO's Interest in Re-Establishing Offices in Moscow, Brussels - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States supports NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg in expressing interest in re-establishing offices in Moscow and Brussels, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"We support the Secretary-General's statement that NATO allies are interested in looking at the possibility of res-establishing respective offices in Moscow and Brussels," Price told press briefing, following a Russia-NATO Council meeting.

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US Hopes Putin Will Choose Peace and Security After Talks With West - State Department

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes Russian President Vladimir Putin will choose peace and security while working to address issues with NATO in Eastern Europe, Department of State spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"We expect the Russian delegations at the SSD [Strategic Stability Dialogue], at the NATO-Russia Council and tomorrow at the OSCE will have to report back to President Putin who we all hope will choose peace and security," Price said during a press briefing.

Russia proposed draft agreements on security guarantees for NATO and the United States in late 2021. Moscow requested guarantees that NATO would not expand eastward and will not incorporate Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries as it considers such moves a threat to its national security.

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US Court Resets Igor Danchenko's Jury Trial for October 11 – Filing

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The US District court for the Eastern District of Virginia has rescheduled a jury trial for Russian citizen Igor Danchenko for October 11, a court filing revealed on Wednesday.

"Jury Trial reset for 10/11/2022 at 10:00 AM in Alexandria ... before District Judge Anthony J. Trenga," the filing read.

A status conference will be held on the same day at 9:00 a.m., while motions should be submitted before September 2, it added.

In November, the political analyst pleaded not guilty in a US court on all five counts of making false statements to the FBI about alleged collusion between former President Donald Trump and the Kremlin.

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UPDATE - US Democratic Senators Unveil New Russia Sanctions Bill

(Updates with more details in paras 4, 6-7)

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US Democratic senators on Wednesday presented a new Russia sanctions bill that would bring "severe costs" to the Russian economy in the event of an invasion of Ukraine, in an effort backed by the White House.

"To counter the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and Eastern European allies, to expedite security assistance to Ukraine to bolster Ukraine's defense capabilities, and to impose sanctions relating to the actions of the Russian Federation with respect to Ukraine, and for other purposes," the bill, introduced by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez, said.

The measure comes as the Biden administration tries to prevent Democrat defection in support of a Republican-led bill targeting Russia's Nord Stream 2, a move the White House says may undermine its reengagement with Europe.

The bill almost completely mirrors another measure proposed by Menendez in November as an amendment to the US Defense Budget for 2022 but did not get enough votes to pass the Senate.

Menendez's bill would entail sanctions on Russian government officials and key financial institutions, as well as "public disclosure of assets" of President Vladimir Putin and his "inner circle." The sanctions would also hit companies in Russia that offer secure messaging systems such as SWIFT.

The sanctions against 12 key Russian government officials, including the President, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, the Minister of Defense, and Russian Army military commanders, will entail property blocking and prohibiting entry to the United States, the bill reads.

As regards financial institutions, the bill targets 12 major banks in Russia, including Sberbank, Gazprombank, VTB, the Russia Direct Investment Fund, Alfa Bank, and Rosselkhozbank, and requires US President to impose sanctions on at least three banks from this list.

In addition, the legislation seeks to authorize programs to counter Russia's alleged disinformation activities and expand support for Radio Free Europe/Radio (labeled as a foreign agent in Russia).

Pledging more security assistance to Ukraine, the bill calls on the United States to consider all available and appropriate measures to ensure Nord Stream 2 is not put into operation.

The White House supports the bill, a spokesperson for the National Security Council told The Washington Post, noting that other measures, such as the one being pushed by Sen. Ted Cruz, will "not counter further Russian aggression or protect Ukraine."

"Instead, it will undermine our efforts to deter Russia and remove leverage the United States and our allies and partners possess in this moment all to score political points at home," the spokesperson said on the condition of anonymity. "And it would come at a moment where we need to be closely united with our European partners, including Germany. It makes no sense." Cruz has long been trying to push through a bill that would force the US government to re-impose economic sanctions on the company building the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. In fall 2021, Cruz blocked the confirmation of nearly 60 ambassadors in a bid to secure a vote on his bill to sanction the pipeline. He lifted his block after Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer pledged that a vote on Cruz's bill would take place by January 14.

The White House is concerned that new sanctions on the Russian pipeline would undermine US relations with European partners, at a critical time when Washington is trying to de-escalate tensions in the region.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, completed in September, will deliver gas from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea. The process of certifying Nord Stream 2 AG as the pipeline's independent operator is currently underway to ensure the project complies with the conditions of the February 12, 2019 EU Gas Directive. German regulators are expected to decide on the certification in the second half of 2022.

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US Gasoline Stocks Pile Up as Omicron Slows Activity - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US gasoline stockpiles increased by almost 8 million barrels last week after the previous week's 10-million barrel climb, data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed Wednesday as the Omicron variant slowed mobility in the United States.

Automobile fuel gasoline is the United States' most-consumed oil product. Stockpiles of that have grown by almost 30 million barrels over the past six weeks, EIA data showed.

US inventories of oil distillates, which are refined into diesel for trucks, buses, trains and ships as well as fuel for jets, meanwhile rose by 2.54 million barrels last week after an increase of 1.76 million barrels the previous week.

Analysts said the data suggested that US refiners were turning a surfeit of crude into fuel products while the Omicron variant was clearly reducing driving, work-commuting and other activities that required fuels.

"It's quite perplexing to see these sorts of fuel stockpiles, which we haven't had for nearly two years since the worst of the coronavirus pandemic," John Kilduff, founding partner at New York-based energy hedge fund Again Capital, said. "It shows that refiners are still turning out gasoline like anything although it's already winter, with fewer people driving, especially with Omicron cases on the rise."

US crude oil itself saw a stockpile drop of 4.6 million barrels last week, on top of the previous week's drop of 2.1 million. Crude stockpiles fell by more than 16 million barrels for all of December and are down almost 7 million more since this year began, explaining the current balance of gasoline and distillates in the market.

US hospitalizations due to coronavirus infections have reached a new record high, data showed on Wednesday, although the Omicron variant itself remains significantly less lethal compared to the original coronavirus strain and the subsequent Delta variant. Omicron has also put on hold employers' plans of bringing workers back to office, impacting driving, commuting and other mobility that contributes to daily fuel usage.

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UN Strongly Condemns Suicide Bombing Outside Mogadishu Airport - Spokesman
UNITED NATIONS, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United Nations strongly condemns the deadly terrorist attack near the airport in the Somali capital city of Mogadishu, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.
At least eight people died following a suicide car explosion that targeted an official convoy, media reported on Wednesday. The Islamist terror group Al-Shabaab took responsibility for the attack.
"We strongly back the call by our colleagues in Somalia that condemned the suicide attack," Dujarric said. "We express our condolences to the families of the victims and wish a speedy recovery to all those injured."
Dujarric also confirmed that contrary to initial media reports saying a passing UN convoy appeared to be the target in the attack, there were no UN personnel or contractors in the convoy.
Al-Shabaab is a terror group waging an insurgency against the Somali government and obstructing UN humanitarian activities. The United States carries out regular strikes on Al-Shabab positions.

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UN Envoy De Mistura Begins First Trip to Western Sahara - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 12 (Sputnik) - UN Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General for Western Sahara Staffan de Mistura arrived in Morocco's capital Rabat during his first trip to the region to hold meetings with government officials and representatives of the Polisario Front, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.
"The Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General for Western Sahara, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, will begin his first visit to the region and landed in Rabat today. He will initially meet Moroccan officials in Rabat and then Frente POLISARIO officials in Tindouf/Rabouni," Dujarric said in a statement.
De Mistura also intends to visit Algiers and Nouakchott during the trip, Dujarric said.
"The Personal Envoy looks forward to hearing the views of all concerned on how to make progress towards a constructive resumption of the political process on Western Sahara," he said.
De Mistura assumed the UN Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Western Sahara post in October last year.

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US Judge Rejects Prince Andrew's Bid to Dismiss Civil Sex Abuse Lawsuit - Court Document (Updates with more details, background in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - A US judge has rejected the bid by the United Kingdom's Prince Andrew to dismiss trial in a civil sex abuse case, court documents show. "For the foregoing reasons, [the] defendant's motion to dismiss the complaint or for a more definite statement is denied in all respects," US District Judge Lewis Kaplan wrote in a 46-page opinion outlining the case brought against the royal by Virginia Giuffre.

The 61-year old prince is being sued by the 38-year-old over rape and sexual abuse that Giuffre says was subjected to when she was 17. Prince Andrew denies all allegations against him.

Giuffre has long claimed that Jeffrey Epstein, the millionaire US financier who died in custody while awaiting trial on sex charges, forced her to be abused by Prince Andrew when she was 17. She has also accused Epstein's then girlfriend Ghislaine Maxwell, who is also in custody, of complicity in the matter.

Giuffre filed a civil suit against Prince Andrew in August, using a New York state law that allows survivors of childhood sexual abuse to sue, even if the crimes allegedly took place at times that fall outside of the statute of limitations.

Prince Andrew's lawyers have unsuccessfully tried to get Giuffre's lawsuit dismissed on various grounds, citing her \$500,000 settlement with Epstein in 2009 as well as the argument that her claims were too vague.

Legal experts have said Prince Andrew could file for a motion of reconsideration or take his appeal straight to the US Second Circuit Court of Appeals, where a panel of judges would hear the case.

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Biden Administration Announces Steps to Bolster Clean Energy - White House

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration announced new steps to bolster clean energy on Wednesday, including a "record-breaking" offshore wind lease sale off the coasts of New York and New Jersey, with a view to creating high-quality jobs and lowering costs

"Today, the Biden-Harris Administration is making major leaps forward on wind, solar, transmission, and other clean energy projects to create high-quality jobs and deliver affordable, carbon pollution-free electricity across the country," the White House said in a fact sheet.

"Seven federal agencies are announcing clean energy projects and plans that demonstrate the Administration's unwavering commitment to creating cleaner and cheaper energy."

The Biden administration said these actions showcase the president's "unprecedented coordination activating the entire government to fight climate change, produce good-paying, union jobs, and accelerate America's clean energy economy."

Several agencies are working in concert to ramp up the development of the offshore wind industry, the administration said. This new American clean energy industry could create as many as 80,000 good-paying union jobs by 2030. One example of the coordination comes from the Department of Transportation which recently announced investments in America's ports to spur the development, building and staging of offshore wind turbine components. Meanwhile, the departments of commerce, the interior, and energy have together begun promoting biodiversity, cooperative ocean use and supporting innovation across the country's supply chain. Further, the Environmental Protection Agency and the departments of the interior, agriculture, defense and energy are solidifying a new partnership designed to advance the efficiency and effectiveness of reviews of clean energy projects on public lands. This will help the agencies expand onshore wind, solar and geothermal energy, which with the Department of the Interior's approval of 18 onshore projects in the last year, is expected to deliver 4.175 gigawatts of clean energy.

Lastly, with the Department of Energy introducing a new "Building a Better Grid" project, the US will accelerate the positioning of new transmission lines which will link a greater number of Americans to cleaner, cheaper energy on a more reliable, robust grid. Biden has established a goal of 100% carbon pollution-free electricity by 2035.

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New US Sanctions Bill Seeks Mandatory Sanctions on Russian Financial Institutions

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US Democratic senators on Wednesday unveiled a new bill seeking mandatory sanctions on Russian financial institutions, including Sberbank, VTB, Gazprombank and the Russian Direct Investment Fund in case Moscow starts hostilities against Ukraine.

"Mandatory Sanctions on Financial Institutions: Requires the President to impose sanctions on three or more financial institutions from the following: Sberbank, VTB, Gazprombank, VEB.RF, The Russian Direct Investment Fund, Credit Bank of Moscow, Alfa Bank, Rosselkhozbank, FC Bank Otkritie, Promsvyazbank, Sovcombank, and Transkaptalbank," the statement said.

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US Consumer Prices Show More Work Remains to Be Done Regarding Inflation - White House

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has managed to cap US inflation from worsening in recent months but work is needed to reduce price pressures that are at 40-year highs and are squeezing family budgets, the White House said on Wednesday. The US Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 7% in the year to December, marking the highest increase since 1982, the Labor Department reported on Wednesday.

"Today's report - which shows a meaningful reduction in headline inflation over last month, with gas prices and food prices falling - demonstrates that we are making progress in slowing the rate of price increases," the White House said in a statement.

However, the White House also said the current rate of inflation "underscores that we still have more work to do, with price increases still too high and squeezing family budgets."

The CPI Index is closely watched by the Federal Reserve to determine the timing for the first pandemic-era interest rate hike.

The Federal Reserve dropped interest rates after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, keeping them at between zero and 0.25% over the past 20 months. The US central bank has signaled that it will raise interest rates as many as three times this year, with the first hike likely coming between March and April.

The US economy shrank by 3.5% in 2020 due to pandemic measures. The Federal Reserve has projected a 4% growth for 2022, but the main problem it faces is inflation, which is running at four-decade highs as prices have soared due to higher wage demands and supply chain disruptions.

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US Senators Seek Mandatory Sanctions on Putin in Event of Ukraine Escalation - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US Democratic senators introduced a new Russia sanctions bill on Wednesday, which entails "crippling" sanctions on the Russian banking sector and officials, including President Vladimir Putin, the prime minister, ministers of foreign affairs and defense, as well as top military brass, in the event of escalation in Ukraine.

"Mandatory Sanctions on Officials: Requires sanctions on list of officials including President Putin, the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Minister of Defense, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, and commanders of various branches of the armed forces, including the airborne and naval forces," the senators said in a press release.

The initiative comes against the backdrop of Russian-NATO talks on security guarantees in Europe as tensions flare around Ukraine.

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UN Says Situation Around North Korea's Nuclear Program Could Possibly Get Worse

UNITED NATIONS, January 12 (Sputnik) - The situation around North Korea increasing its nuclear program is an unsolved problem that has the potential to get worse, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, North Korea said it successfully tested a hypersonic missile, which if confirmed will become the third launch Pyongyang conducted this year.

"Every report of yet a new launch of a missile or projectile by the DPRK [North Korea] is extremely concerning and only reinforces the Secretary's [UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres] position, which is a call for an immediate resumption of dialogue between all the parties concerned for a verifiable and complete denuclearization of the [Korean] Peninsula," Dujarric said. "This remains very much an unsolved problem. It remains a situation that has the potential of getting worse."

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Patients Infected With Omicron Have 'Substantially Reduced' Risk of Severe Outcomes - CDC

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - People infected with the coronavirus Omicron variant have a substantially reduced risk of severe medical outcomes compared to those infected with the Delta variant, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Wednesday, citing a new study by the managed care consortium Kaiser Permanente.

"Just yesterday, a preprint study of data from Kaiser Permanente Southern California - analyzed by academic partners with CDC collaboration and funding - provided key insight into clinical outcomes among patients infected with the Omicron variant. This study used mathematical modeling to estimate risk of hospitalization and severe disease... and noted substantially reduced risk of severe clinical outcomes in patients who are infected with the Omicron variant compared to Delta," Walensky said.

The individuals infected with the Omicron variant experienced a 53% reduction in risk of symptomatic hospitalization, 74% reduction in risk of intensive care admission and a 91% reduction in risk of mortality when compared to those infected with Delta, the study found. Walensky pointed out that the study only compared Omicron to the Delta variant and not other respiratory viruses like influenza. However, the US authorities are looking at what an endemic COVID-19 would look like while in this Omicron surge, she added.

White House chief medical advisor Anthony Fauci said eradicating the novel coronavirus is not possible like it was with smallpox but it is possible to control it, keep it at a low level in order to live with it.

Everyone is likely to get exposed and infected with the coronavirus even if vaccinated and boosted, although they may not get very sick, Fauci added.

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Sherman Says Useful Russia Came to Talks, But Put Forward Proposals NATO Cannot Agree to

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Wednesday that Russia's presence at this week's security meetings to address concerns in Eastern Europe has been useful but the United States and NATO allies cannot agree to some of Moscow's proposals including those concerning NATO's expansion.

"We have put forward an ability to dialogue and to negotiate to solve problems, so far Russia's put forth, they have come to these meetings, that's useful, but they have also put ... things that they know we cannot agree to; we will not allow a country to have a veto about who joins NATO," Sherman told MSNBC in an interview.

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Quite Possible Putin Will Make Choice Not to Engage in Diplomacy - Sherman

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - There is a chance that Russian President Vladimir Putin will decide not to engage in diplomacy to resolve the disagreements over NATO military posture near the Russian borders, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Wednesday.

"I think it is quite possible that President Putin will make a choice not to engage in diplomacy. But I also heard the spokesman say that there would be rounds of discussion. So, I'm not sure that choice has been made yet," Sherman said in an interview with MSNBC.

Sherman's comment came after the NATO-Russia Council meeting on the security guarantees in Europe proposed by Moscow took place in Brussels. One of the main proposals is that a legally-binding agreement is concluded for NATO not to expand further eastward, among other issues of concern to Moscow.

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US Daily COVID-19 Deaths Up About 40% Likely Due to Lagging Delta Cases - CDC Director

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The average number of daily deaths from COVID-19 in the United States is up about 40% from the prior week due to what are likely lagging Delta variant cases from the previous wave, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Wednesday.

"The seven-day average of daily deaths is about 1,600 per day, which is an increase of about 40% over the previous week," Walensky said during a White House COVID-19 Response Team press briefing.

However, the deaths are likely lagging cases from the Delta variant wave and not new Omicron ones, Walensky said.

Data released yesterday from a CDC-funded study on the relative severity of the Omicron variant found substantially reduced risk of severe clinical outcomes in patients infected with Omicron compared to Delta.

The current seven-day daily average of cases is about 751,000 cases a day, up about 47% from the previous week, and hospitalizations are at 19,800 a day, an increase of 33%, Walensky also said.

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Dialogue at NATO-Russia Council 'Clearly Began' on Wednesday - Sherman

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The dialogue of the NATO-Russia Council began on Wednesday and Russia had the opportunity to hear what the alliance's members other than the United States have to say, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman told journalists.

"Clearly, we began the dialogue today," Sherman said during a press briefing.

Sherman said it is important that at the end of today's meeting Russia did not reject the idea of having more discussions with NATO.

"I am glad Russia was at the NATO summit and heard what other 30 states had to say," she added.

NATO enlargement was the main topic on the agenda amid Russia's grave concerns over the emergence of military infrastructure in close proximity to its borders if Ukraine or any other country on the post-Soviet space became a member of the alliance.

Sherman said she sees the main outcome of the NATO-Russia Council meeting as a challenge to Moscow to take meaningful steps to de-escalate tensions in its relations with the alliance, including easing tensions on the border with Ukraine.

"It [the meeting] ended with a sober challenge from the NATO allies to Russia. That challenge is to respond to the offers extended by the Secretary General of NATO, by the Polish chairman and office of the OSCE, by the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union and by the President of the United States, to deescalate tensions, choose the path of diplomacy," Sherman said.

The US diplomat noted that the talks lasted more than four hours and demonstrated the unity of the NATO members' position regarding the admission of new states to the alliance. The allies unanimously rejected Russia's demands to return the alliance to the 1997 borders, Sherman said.

"The United States and our NATO allies were united in our responses to Deputy Foreign Minister [Alexander] Grushko and Deputy Minister of Defense [Alexander] Fomin in their comments, including when it comes to certain core Russian proposals, that are simply nonstarters," Sherman said.

During the meeting, the NATO allies offered their views on the areas where the alliance and Russia could make progress, including undertaking reciprocal actions focused on risk reduction and transparency, communication and arms control, Sherman said.

The United States and NATO again called on Russia to choose a diplomatic path to resolve the disagreements over security arrangements in Europe, noting that choosing a different path would be fraught with far-reaching negative consequences for Moscow and NATO is ready for any developments, she said.

"If Russia walks away, however, it will be quite apparent they were never serious about pursuing diplomacy at all. That is why collectively we are preparing for every eventuality," Sherman said. The US diplomat also noted that the United States and its NATO allies are hopeful the results of the talks will be conveyed to Russian President Vladimir Putin, who, it is hoped, will agree and decide to choose diplomacy over military confrontation.

"Russia has a choice to make, I hope that both Deputy Foreign Minister [Alexander] Grushko and Deputy Minister of Defense [Alexander] Fomin will brief Putin and he will understand and will agree that diplomacy is the right path," Sherman said.

Following the conclusion of the talks, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg expressed hope that more detailed talks between Russia and NATO will take place again soon to discuss areas where progress is possible, Sherman added.

Russia and the United States held consultations on Moscow-proposed security guarantees in Geneva proposed from Sunday to Monday. The meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council will be held in Vienna on Thursday.

Russia proposed draft agreements on security guarantees for NATO and the United States in late 2021. Moscow requested guarantees that NATO would not expand eastward and will not incorporate Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries as it considers such moves as a threat to its national security.

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US Charges Texas Therapist With Distributing Doping Drugs to 2020 Olympics Athletes
(Adds details in paras 3-5, background in para 6)

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US federal authorities have charged a naturopath and physical therapist in El Paso, Texas with distributing multiple performance drugs to athletes seeking to compete in the Tokyo Olympic Games that were held last year, the Department of Justice said on Wednesday.

"The complaint ... alleges that Eric Lira, a 'naturopathic' therapist operating principally in the area of El Paso, Texas, obtained various performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) and distributed those PEDs to certain athletes in advance of, and for the purpose of cheating at, the 2020 Olympic Games held in Tokyo in the summer of 2021," the press release said.

The complaint was the first criminal charge under the Rodchenkov Anti-Doping Act, signed into law on December 4, 2020, which proscribes doping schemes at international sports competitions, including the Olympic Games, the Justice Department said.

Lira was involved in "a scheme to provide Olympic athletes with PEDs, including drugs widely banned throughout competitive sports such as human growth hormone and the 'blood building' drug erythropoietin, in advance of and for the purpose of corrupting the ... Olympic Games, which convened in Tokyo in the summer of 2021," the release read.

Lira obtained misbranded versions of those and other prescription drugs from sources in Central and South America, before bringing those drugs into the United States and distributing them. He has been taken into federal custody today and is expected to be presented in the Western District of Texas, the Justice Department said.

Postponed for a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Tokyo Olympics ran from July 23-August 8, 2021.

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US Imposes North Korea-Related Sanctions on Russian Company, 6 N. Koreans - Treasury Dept.

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed North Korea-related sanctions on a Russian company and a national as well as on six North Korea nationals, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced on Wednesday. OFAC added the Russian company Parsek LLC, Russian national Roman Alar and six North Koreans to the Specially Designated Nationals sanctions list under the North Korea Sanctions Regulations for allegedly aiding the North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile program.

"Today's actions, part of the United States' ongoing efforts to counter the DPRK's [North Korea's] weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs, target its continued use of overseas representatives to illegally procure goods for weapons," Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson said in a statement.

North Korea's latest missile launches are further evidence that Pyongyang continues to advance prohibited programs despite clear calls by the international community for diplomacy and denuclearization, Nelson added.

The designations come following news that North Korea conducted a hypersonic missile test over the Sea of Japan on Tuesday that prompted the US aviation authorities to temporarily ground flights on the United States west coast.

The missile test was the second of its kind within a week. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida condemned the launch and said Japan will take all possible measures to prepare for contingencies.

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UPDATE - US Democratic Senators Unveil New Russia Sanctions Bill

(Changes attribution, adds details throughout the text)

WASHINGTON, January 12 (Sputnik) - US Democratic senators on Wednesday presented a new Russia sanctions bill that would bring "severe costs" to the Russian economy in the event of an invasion of Ukraine, in an effort backed by the White House.

"To counter the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and Eastern European allies, to expedite security assistance to Ukraine to bolster Ukraine's defense capabilities, and to impose sanctions relating to the actions of the Russian Federation with respect to Ukraine, and for other purposes," the bill, introduced by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez, said.

The measure comes as the Biden administration tries to prevent Democrat defection in support of a Republican-led bill targeting Russia's Nord Stream 2, a move the White House says may undermine its reengagement with Europe.

Menendez's bill would entail sanctions on Russian government officials and key financial institutions, as well as "public disclosure of assets" of President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle. It would also hit companies in Russia that offer secure messaging systems such as SWIFT.

In addition, the legislation seeks to authorize programs to counter Russia's "disinformation activities" and expand support for Radio Free Europe/Radio (labeled as a foreign agent in Russia).

Pledging more security assistance to Ukraine, the bill calls on the United States to consider all available and appropriate measures to ensure Nord Stream 2 is not put into operation.

The White House supports the bill, a spokesperson for the National Security Council told The Washington Post, noting that other measures, such as the one being pushed by Sen. Ted Cruz, will "not counter further Russian aggression or protect Ukraine."

"Instead, it will undermine our efforts to deter Russia and remove leverage the United States and our allies and partners possess in this moment all to score political points at home," the spokesperson said on the condition of anonymity. "And it would come at a moment where we need to be closely united with our European partners, including Germany. It makes no sense." Cruz has long been trying to push through a bill that would force the US government to re-impose economic sanctions on the company building the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. In fall 2021, Cruz blocked the confirmation of nearly 60 ambassadors in a bid to secure a vote on his bill to sanction the pipeline. He lifted his block after Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer pledged that a vote on Cruz's bill would take place by January 14.

The White House is concerned that new sanctions on the Russian pipeline would undermine US relations with European partners, at a critical time when Washington is trying to de-escalate tensions in the region.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, completed in September, will deliver gas from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea. The process of certifying Nord Stream 2 AG as the pipeline's independent operator is currently underway to ensure the project complies with the conditions of the February 12, 2019 EU Gas Directive. German regulators are expected to decide on the certification in the second half of 2022.

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