

1/18/22 Tuesday

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'Matter of Time': After Nicaragua Switch, Chinese Deputy FM Warns Soon Taiwan Allies 'Will be Zero'

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The autonomous island of Taiwan is finding itself with fewer and fewer allies in recent years as nations switch their recognition of the Chinese government from Taipei to Beijing. The most recent shift, last month, was Nicaragua.

"It is a matter of time before Taiwan's diplomatic allies will be zero," Chinese vice foreign minister Le Yucheng said on Tuesday at the Macro Situation Annual Forum hosted by Renmin University in Beijing, according to the [South China Morning Post](#).

Last month, Nicaragua [switched its recognition](#) from Taipei to Beijing following US and European Union [sanctions against Nicaraguan](#) President Daniel Ortega and more than 100 members of his government for allegedly undermining democracy in the country by arresting the masterminds behind deadly riots who had registered as election candidates.

That shift dropped Taiwan's allies to just 14 - a decline of eight since 2016, when Tsai Ing-wen, a strongly separatist politician, became Taiwan's president. At the forum, Le called Managua's move part of "the general trend" and "international justice."

Others that have switched in that time include [Kiribati](#), the [Solomon Islands](#), the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Panama, Sao Tome and Principe, and Burkina Faso. A ninth could soon follow, as Honduras' President-elect, Xiomara Castro, ran on a platform that included ending relations with Taiwan. However, figures in [her transition team](#) say such a policy change isn't likely to be immediate.

That leaves Taiwan with the continued diplomatic support of Belize, Eswatini, Guatemala, [Haiti](#), the Holy See, Honduras, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Paraguay, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Tuvalu - all small states, nearly all of which are firmly under the thumb of the United States. Two of them - Palau and the Marshall Islands - are [American protectorates](#) which, along with Micronesia, are collectively known as the Freely Associated States.

The government in Taiwan calls itself the Republic of China, and is all that remains of the republican government established after Pu Yi, the last Chinese emperor, abdicated the throne in 1912. The US closely supported the RoC in its fight against Japanese occupation during the Second World War, but the RoC ultimately lost the civil war that followed victory, and the communist Red Army established control over the entire Chinese mainland and founded the People's Republic of China in Beijing in 1949. However, unable to invade Taiwan, the PRC has been forced to tolerate the RoC rump state's continued existence, regarding Taiwan as a Chinese province in rebellion.

It took until 1979 before the US switched its recognition of the Chinese government from Taipei to Beijing, following a series of agreements by which Washington recognized the PRC as the

legitimate government of all of China and pledged to end its support for the RoC. Despite this, the US continued informal support for Taiwan, selling it weapons and giving it diplomatic cover on the international stage.

At the forum, Le attacked the US hypocrisy. "The United States also keeps saying that it will adhere to the one-China [policy], but in action, it is [supporting Taiwan independence](#), constantly eroding China's sovereignty ... sending military advisers to Taiwan, and shipping advanced weapons to Taiwan," he said.

Le said Taiwan's destiny was to reunify with mainland China. He warned that the Taiwanese [independence policy](#) was "playing with fire" and called it a "fuse" that should be strongly opposed.

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Video: One Dead, Eight Injured After Bronx Gas Explosion Sparks Massive Fire, Collapses House

By - Morgan Artyukhina

According to New York officials, a massive explosion in The Bronx on Tuesday destroyed a house, killing one person and injuring eight others. Just days earlier, a fire in the same borough killed 17 and injured dozens of others.

The explosion occurred near midday in a three-story rowhouse in the Longwood neighborhood. It sparked a two-alarm blaze that destroyed the home and damaged several others surrounding it.

The explosion was reportedly caused by a gas leak.

"Our hearts go out to the family members of the loss of life," New York Mayor Eric Adams said at a Tuesday press briefing. New York Fire Department Chief of Operations John Hodgens added that the building adjacent to the collapsed building had been heavily damaged and would also have to be demolished.

More than 100 fire and EMS crewmembers responded to the blaze, according to [local media](#). Eight injuries have been reported by local officials, four of which are residents and five are New York Police officers treated for smoke inhalation. A 77-year-old woman was pronounced dead at a local hospital, and two other women, aged 82 and 68, were also being treated but were reported as stable.

The blast was about five miles from where [a January 9 fire](#) caused by a malfunctioning space heater killed 17 people, including eight children. An investigation by [BreakThrough News](#) found that many safety measures in the building were nonfunctional or not reliable, including the fire alarms and self-closing fire safety doors intended to limit the spread of a fire. On Monday, the city agreed to [pay \\$2 million](#) in restitution to the families of the victims.

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Taiwan Buys Ally Guatemala a Voice in Washington Using Trump's 'Most Powerful Lobbyist' - Report

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The Taiwanese government, which calls itself the Republic of China, is running short on allies after Nicaragua switched its recognition to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Beijing last month. Now, the autonomous island has bought an expensive new lobbyist in Washington, DC, for one of its few remaining friends: Guatemala.

According to [paperwork filed](#) with the US Department of Justice last week under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), the government of Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei has engaged Florida-based lobbying firm Ballard Partners to represent their interests in Washington for a cool \$900,000 a year, or \$75,000 per month.

In the documentation, CEO Brian Ballard says his "activities will include advising, counseling, and assisting the foreign principal [the Guatemalan Embassy in Washington] in communications with US government officials."

A close supporter of former US President Donald Trump, Ballard was described as "the most powerful lobbyist in Trump's Washington" in a [2018 article by Politico](#), which noted the firm's widespread ties to Republican establishment figures.

However, in a separate statement on Tuesday, Guatemala City made clear it was Taipei who would be footing the bill for Ballard's services.

"Guatemala thanks Taiwan for the support that will allow us to enhance the country's position in the United States," the Guatemalan government [told Reuters](#).

Taiwanese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Joanne Ou told [the Associated Press](#) that the arrangement followed the principle of "mutual assistance and mutual benefit to promote pragmatic diplomacy" and that the agreement complied with US law.

"In the future, the two countries will continue to promote various programs beneficial to their nations and peoples on the basis of the existing good cooperation," she added.

Guatemala is just one of 14 nations to have maintained relations with Taiwan through the years, with the remainder of the globe switching its diplomatic recognition to the PRC in Beijing. Since it won the civil war in 1949 and established control over all of mainland China, the PRC has claimed to be the sole legitimate government of all of China, displacing the older RoC, which only survived on Taiwan. The PRC considers Taiwan to be a part of China and the RoC to be a rebel movement kept afloat by outside support, most notably from the United States, which funnels aid to Taipei informally.

Several Central American states have switched their recognition in recent years, including Panama, El Salvador, and [most recently Nicaragua](#), which announced it was opening relations with the PRC last month following a new round of sanctions against Managua by Washington.

[Honduras also shows](#) hints of being ready to change its recognition, but a figure from President-elect Xiomara Castro's transition team recently said that while she campaigned on ending relations with Taiwan, such a policy change would not be immediate.

Since 2016, when the pro-independence government of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen took office, Taiwan's allies have shrunk by more than one-third, from 22 to just 14. Many who have switched have gone on to sign agreements under the [Belt and Road Initiative](#), an infrastructure megaproject organized by Beijing that has brought development to many Third World nations

through a system [independent of Western](#) finance capital, which is centered in major American and European financial hubs and often requires nations to [surrender their fiscal policies](#) to neoliberal dictates.

Speaking at a Tuesday forum in Beijing, Chinese vice foreign minister [Le Yucheng taunted](#) Taipei for its fleeing friends, saying, “it is a matter of time before Taiwan’s diplomatic allies will be zero,” which he called “international justice.”

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US Federal Judge Releases Puerto Rico From Bankruptcy, Slashes Municipal Debt by 80%
By - Morgan Artyukhina

A US federal judge resolved a five-year battle over Puerto Rico’s bankruptcy on Tuesday, slashing the US territory’s debt by 80% as part of a restructuring plan allowing it to pay off US creditors without hated cuts to the island’s pension plan.

Judge Laura Taylor Swain of the US District Court for the Southern District of New York approved a plan pitched by the Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico to cut the island’s public debt by 80%, from \$33 billion to just over \$7.4 billion. According to [a news release](#) by the board, the deal will save the government more than \$50 billion in debt service payments.

[According to the board](#), the deal gives San Juan the ability to pay off its debt by 2034, provided it accepts more cuts to public services and price hikes.

The control board is a group of seven unelected officials given vast power to restructure Puerto Rico’s finances by the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), a 2016 law passed by the US Congress after the territory’s government said it was unable to pay its \$70 billion public debt. However, locally the board is known simply as “the junta” for its dictatorial power.

The following year, the Puerto Rican government declared bankruptcy, beginning the process that led to Tuesday’s settlement. The PROMESA board used austerity measures to put a tight rein on the territory’s finances and ensure it could pay its [creditors on Wall Street](#), which included an attempt to slash the pension fund that had been chronically mismanaged for years. That same year, 2017, Puerto Rico suffered its worst natural disaster in recorded history: a direct strike by Hurricane Maria, a powerful Category 5 storm that annihilated the country’s electrical infrastructure and [killed 3,000 Boricuanos](#). The public utility company, Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA), was [sold to private buyers](#) in January 2018, who formed the corporation LUMA Energy. However, it still holds PREPA’s substantial debt, which was not included in the deal approved on Tuesday.

Demonstrations rocked the island in 2019 [demanding the resignation](#) of then-Governor Ricardo Rosselló, who was seen by angry Boricuanos as facilitating the control board’s fleeing of the island.

Puerto Rico was seized from Spain by the US in 1898 during the Spanish-American War, and was subsequently turned into a US territory. Nationalists and critics have accused the US of

colonialism, and multiple uprisings in the 20th century sought to shake off US rule over the island. A parallel social movement has sought Puerto Rico's [admittance](#) as a US state.

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Volcanic Ash Delays New Zealand Relief Efforts in Tonga
By - Mary Manley

The eruption of the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha'apai volcano from Saturday has caused 12 mile-high ash clouds to prevent other military flights and efforts from making their way to the island.

New Zealand's military has been attempting to send aid, while Tongans are making an effort to clear their runways at the Nuku'alofa airport so flights are able to land, following the [underwater eruption](#) of Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha'apai.

New Zealand foreign affairs minister Nanaia Mahuta told BBC News that a C-130 Hercules aircraft carrying collapsible water containers, generators, hygiene kits, and other humanitarian aid is on standby until the runways are cleared.

Water is much needed, as Tonga's main sources have been contaminated with volcanic ash. New Zealand's military also plans to send two navy ships to Tonga that will leave on Tuesday. Additionally, the nation has pledged 1 million New Zealand dollars (\$680,000) towards relief efforts.

Communications with Tonga have been nearly cut off as an undersea communications cable suffered damage as a result of the eruption. Chairperson of the board at Tonga Cable Ltd., Samiuela Fonua, [said the cable](#) appeared to have been severed only 10 to 15 minutes after the volcano's eruption, most likely having been cut by sharp coral reef. The break may take a week to repair.

Australia sent military surveillance flights to [assess the damage](#).

Around 104,000 people live in the country, which is made up of 176 islands, 36 of which are inhabited. Tongatapu, Tonga's main island, has the highest population. Two smaller islands, Mango and Fonoifua, sent out a distress beacon. The office of Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni said in a statement that every home on Mango island, where [50 people live](#), had been destroyed while only 2 houses remain on Fonoifua.

While UN officials and Tonga's government have reported significant infrastructural damage, there are still [3 confirmed deaths](#), as well as the additional death of a British woman named [Angela Glover](#), who died trying to rescue her dogs.

The rupture was so large its images were captured by [satellites](#) in space, causing tsunami waves to be registered even as far away as parts of the Pacific Northwest, including [Alaska](#). "Further volcanic activity cannot be ruled out," the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reportedly [said on Monday](#). Scientists are concerned as they currently are [struggling](#) to monitor the underwater volcano.

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Daniel Radcliffe to Star as Weird Al Yankovic in Biopic from Roku

By - Mary Manley

Producers joked that the film is set to “hold nothing back” in covering the parody musician’s rise in fame, as well as his “torrid celebrity love affairs and depraved lifestyle,” of course joking about the latter two.

Daniel Radcliffe, best known for his role as Harry Potter, will play the lead role of Grammy-winning musician ‘Weird Al’ Yankovic in the Roku original movie “Weird: The Al Yankovic Story.” Yankovic co-wrote the film with executive producer Eric Appel.

“When my last movie ‘UHF’ came out in 1989, I made a solemn vow to my fans that I would release a major motion picture every 33 years, like clockwork. I’m very happy to say we’re on schedule. And I am absolutely thrilled that Daniel Radcliffe will be portraying me in the film. I have no doubt whatsoever that this is the role future generations will remember him for,”

[Yankovic stated](#).

The statement from Yankovic is clearly meant as a joke, considering Daniel Radcliffe is an award-winning actor best known for his role as Harry Potter in the Warner Bros. film adaptations of J.K. Rowling’s novels of the same name. Since then, the actor has appeared in several other films and series, including his current comedy TV series “Miracle Workers” on TBS and the 2016 film “Swiss Army Man.” He will also star alongside Sandra Bullock and Channing Tatum in “The Lost City” this March.

It may come as a surprise to some that the “Harry Potter” star is willing to agree to certain indie and comedy films, but as Radcliffe told [Empire](#) last year, “I’ve actually found it’s an incredibly liberating thing to do the biggest thing you’re ever going to do really f---ing early. The financial success thing, that’s done. So, just do things that make you happy!”

“When Weird Al first sat me down against my will and told me his life story, I didn’t believe any of it, but I knew we had to make a movie about it,” producer Eric Appel, who works for Funny or Die, jokingly stated.

‘Weird Al’ is best known for his parody covers of pop music, and is the biggest-selling comedy recording artist of all time, having won 5 Grammys. His 2014 release of “Mandatory Fun” was the first comedy album in history to debut at #1 on Billboard’s Top 200. Yankovic rivals Madonna and Michael Jackson for landing top 40 hits in each of the last four decades.

Work for the Roku original film is scheduled to start in Los Angeles in February and will be produced by media companies Tango and Funny or Die.

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Pfizer Patients in San Francisco Area Received Wrong Amount of Vaccine Dosage - Report

By - Mary Manley

The patients are offered a new shot of the correct dose, if desired. But according to the Health Maintenance Organization, experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have informed them that the low dose should not significantly affect the immunities of recipients to the COVID-19 virus.

Healthcare company Kaiser Permanente has notified 3,900 people that they have received the wrong dose amount for their Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, CBS local [reported](#). Those who were vaccinated between October 25 and December 10 at the Walnut Creek Medical Center are believed to be given between 0.01 and 0.04 ml less than the recommended (.30 ml) dose.

Kaiser reportedly released an [apology](#): "We are continuously monitoring so this does not happen again. We sincerely apologize for any concern or inconvenience this may cause for those patients we are contacting," a statement read.

This is not the first incident of patients receiving the wrong dosage amount for their COVID-19 vaccines. Another incident [reported](#) in the Bay Area saw kids ages 5 to 11 receive twice the proper dose amount of their Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine in November. There was also another incident last March when patients in Oakland, California were reportedly given only 0.2 ml of their Pfizer vaccine as opposed to the recommended 0.3 ml dosage. The incident was quickly resolved, but not before 4,300 people were improperly vaccinated.

"Once we became aware of this issue, we immediately consulted with experts in infectious diseases and vaccine science and reviewed guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control. All experts agreed the difference between the recommended dose and the dose an individual may have received was not significant and not likely to reduce their protection against COVID-19," Kaiser said in the statement cited by the media.

Notifying patients of any dosage errors, consulting state officials, as well as filing a report to the CDC's Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System is required by [CDC](#).

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Blinken, Zelenskyy Discuss US, International Security Assistance to Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday discussed American and international security assistance to Kiev, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

"Blinken met today with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv as part of our close and continued coordination with Ukraine following the U.S.-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue in Geneva, the NATO-Russia Council meeting in Brussels, and the OSCE Permanent Council meeting in Vienna," Price said. "They discussed U.S. and international security and economic assistance to Ukraine, and the Secretary expressed appreciation for Ukraine's continued calls for a diplomatic solution, stressing the need for Ukrainian unity in the face of the Russian threat."

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US Envoy for Yemen to Visit Gulf Capitals, London This Week - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The US special envoy for Yemen will head to Gulf capitals and the United Kingdom this week to reinforce peace efforts, the State Department said on Wednesday.

"U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking will travel to Gulf capitals and London starting January 19 to reinvigorate peace efforts in coordination with the UN, senior regional government officials, and other international partners," the press release said. "The Special Envoy and his team will press the parties to de-escalate militarily and seize the new year to participate fully in an inclusive UN-led peace process."

Lenderking will also address the urgent need to mitigate both the humanitarian and economic crises in Yemen, according to the State Department.

"As the UN Acting Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator briefed the UN Security Council last week, 16 million people in Yemen desperately need aid totaling about \$3.9 billion," the release noted. "It is imperative that donors, especially regional donors, provide additional funding and that all parties to the conflict take steps to improve humanitarian access and address Yemen's fuel crisis."

Yemen's conflict between government forces and the Houthis has been going on since 2014. The situation in the country was further complicated after Saudi Arabia joined the conflict on the side of the Yemeni government in 2015, launching air, land and sea operations against the rebel Islamist movement.

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Biden Approval Rating at New Low After One Year in Office, Worse Than Trump's - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - A record 56% of Americans say they disapprove of Joe Biden's job performance as he enters his second year in office, which makes the incumbent president less popular than his predecessor four years ago, a new Morning Consult poll said on Wednesday.

"Forty percent of voters approve of Biden's job performance, while 56 percent disapprove, record lows and highs, respectively, from nearly 50 Morning Consult/Politico surveys conducted since he took office," the statement said.

The 40% approval rating is the lowest support for Biden since he became president a year ago. In January 2018, Donald Trump had a negative 45-50% approval rating. Yet Biden is performing slightly better than Trump when it comes to voters grading his handling of a range of issues during their first year.

"Among the average independent voter, Biden received better marks than Trump did four years ago on health care, climate change and foreign relations, but underperformed his predecessor on jobs and the economy," the statement added.

The poll was conducted online among 2,005 registered voters from January 15-16 and has a margin of error of 2%.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Blinken to Meet With Ukrainian, German Leadership Amid Tensions With Russia

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is set to begin a series of diplomatic meetings in Ukraine and Germany to follow up on last week's discussions of the Russian security proposals in Europe.

The top US diplomat will spend Wednesday in Kiev to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and other officials to review last week's diplomatic engagements and discuss next steps amid rising tensions with Russia.

On Thursday, Blinken will head to Berlin to take part in two meetings - with the German government and transatlantic QUAD - as part of ongoing intensive consultations Washington is conducting on joint European response to alleged Russian aggression in Eastern Europe, according to the State Department.

Last week was marked by as many as three diplomatic meetings with the participation of Russia and the United States. On January 10, Russia and the US held a strategic stability dialogue meeting in Geneva. The bilateral talks were followed by a NATO-Russia Council meeting in Brussels last Wednesday, the first since 2019, and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) talks in Vienna the next day.

Blinken's trip to Europe will take place in the environment of US' continued accusations against Russia that it is preparing a military invasion of Ukraine. Moscow has on many occasions dismissed the accusations and pointed to NATO's military activity near its borders and warned the alliance's actions are a threat to its national security.

At the same time, Russia sees the issue of Ukraine's membership in NATO as fundamental for its national security while NATO members, including the United States, continue to deny Moscow's right to disagree with the alliance's plans to station its military infrastructure near its borders in Eastern Europe.

Secretary General NATO Jens Stoltenberg said on Tuesday, the alliance will send a written response to Russia's proposals on security guarantees soon. The written response will include NATO's suggestions for arms control, greater transparency in military activities, missiles, and other issues.

Following the meetings in Kiev and Berlin, Blinken will travel to Geneva, Switzerland to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov after the two diplomats spoke over phone earlier in the day.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Russian FSB Eliminating REvil Hackers Puts Pressure on Other Known Threat Actors

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik), Ekaterina Chukaeva - The elimination by Russia of the REvil hacker group whose members are accused of large-scale cyberattacks on US companies, including the shutdown of the Colonial Pipeline in May and a cyberattack on the meat giant JBS, represents a significant shift and creates pressure on other known threat actors, experts told Sputnik.

The announcement about the arrested was made by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) last week. The agency added that people had been detained during raids after it received a request from the United States.

"FSB taking down the REvil group to accommodate the US represents a significant shift and puts pressure on other known threat actors," Christian Have, a chief technical officer (CTO) from the Danish LogPoint group that enables organizations to convert data into actionable intelligence, told Sputnik.

He noted that while it is satisfying to see the consequences for cybercriminals, cracking down on threat actors will hardly eliminate the ransomware problem.

"The amount of money out there is staggering, and organizations still pay ransoms. Instead, it's like smashing a hornets' nest, creating a more fragmented threat landscape. It has been a blessing for the cybersecurity industry that the very sophisticated groups have used the same tactics repeatedly, making detection easier," he explained.

However, in the current environment, the world is risking losing the advantage, he added.

"Maybe the level of sophistication will decrease as the ransomware economy decentralizes. Still, we will see way more innovation, which will provide a difficult challenge for cybersecurity professionals working to protect organizations," he concluded.

Sam Curry, a chief security officer at Cybereason, a Boston-based cybersecurity technology company, believes that while the organization took a blow, new actors will rise to fill the hole.

"The bottom line for those outside Russia is that a major player is taking a hit, which will mean a reduction in victims for the time being," Curry said. "As with most criminal syndicates, though, there's always another player around to fill the void."

However, until Russia actually changes domestic policy with regard to international cyber crime, Curry added, the rest of the world should not read too much into it.

Meanwhile, the US administration said that it welcomed the detentions of REvil members, adding that Russia's actions against REvil are very important and represent what the United States is looking for in the future. Washington added that the administration expects Moscow to pursue legal action within its own system against the arrested hackers.

The vulnerability of US pipelines was illustrated by a ransomware attack in May that forced the temporary closure of a Colonial Pipeline, which carries gasoline, diesel and jet fuel from the state of Texas to much of the eastern United States. The pipeline reopened when operators paid the hackers about \$4.4 million.

The attack on meat-producing giant JBS USA happened in late May and led to the temporary closure of all of its beef factories in the US. The company later said that it paid extortionists \$11 million.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Biden to Hold First 2022 News Conference Capping One Year in Office

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday will hold his first formal press conference of 2022 amid demands from media for more access.

The press conference, slated to begin at 4:00 p.m. EST (21:00 GMT), will mark only the seventh solo appearance by Biden in front of the media, in addition to three joint press events done alongside other world leaders. It will mark his first solo press conference from the White House since March and his first formal press conference since the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow in November.

Last week, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said the president looks forward to using the opportunity for "speaking directly to the American people."

Biden so far has conducted fewer press events than many of his predecessors, according to the American Presidency Project, with Donald Trump having conducted 21 press conferences by this point in his presidency, Barack Obama 16 press conferences, and George W. Bush 14 press conferences.

Complaints about Biden's lack of media access have emanated from across the political spectrum — even the White House Correspondents' Association has pressed the administration on the issue.

The presser will also come just a day before Biden marks one year since taking office.

Biden during the question and answer session with reporters is highly likely to be asked about his own party failing to unify to get voting rights and his Build Back Better legislation through Congress in addition to the global COVID-19 pandemic response, supply chain management crisis, in addition to tensions with Russia over Ukraine, among other topics.

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Grammy Awards Rescheduled for April 3 After Covid Delay - Recording Academy

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The 2022 Grammy Awards has been rescheduled for April after being postponed due to the covid crisis, Recording Academy CEO Harvey Mason said in a press release.

"I'm so pleased to let you know that the 64th annual Grammy Awards has been rescheduled and will now be broadcast live from the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas on Sunday, April 3," Mason said on Tuesday.

The 3.5-hour awards show will be broadcast live on CBS beginning at 8:00 p.m. EST (1:00 a.m. GMT) and will be hosted by The Daily Show's Trevor Noah, the release said.

The Recording Academy and CBS in early January announced that it was postponing the event, originally slated for January 31, because of public health concerns caused by the proliferation of Omicron variant cases.

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Gilead Says Filed Suit to Stop Spread of Counterfeit HIV Medication After Thousands Sold

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The US biopharmaceutical company Gilead Sciences said that a network of counterfeit drug suppliers managed to sell a fake version of its human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) medication and the company has filed a lawsuit to prevent their distribution to patients.

"After becoming aware of counterfeit Gilead HIV medication being distributed, we notified federal law enforcement authorities, including the FDA, as well as dispensing pharmacies, and then took direct and urgent legal action to halt counterfeit Gilead HIV medication from reaching patients," Gilead said on Tuesday.

The network had sold some \$250 million worth of the fake Gilead medication, with well over 60,000 bottles transported to pharmacies and then provided to patients.

"The court has ordered that all of the parties in this case responsible for distributing the counterfeits stop selling Gilead-branded medication and we are not aware of any defendant violating this order. We therefore believe that we have successfully stopped any additional counterfeits from these defendants reaching patients," Gilead said.

The company said the counterfeit bottles contained anti-psychotic drugs or over-the-counter painkillers.

Gilead said it discovered the fraud when a patient at White Cross Pharmacy in California said in August of 2020 that they received the wrong pills. The pharmacy contacted Gilead and said that it bought the drugs from the Safe Chain Solutions because it offered them at a lower price.

Following the incident, Gilead seized thousands of bottles from Safe Chain Solutions after being granted a permission to do so by the judge.

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Biden Admin. Unveils \$4.7Bln Program to Clean Up Abandoned Oil, Gas Wells - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has announced in a press release a \$4.7 billion program to be implemented via a federal inter-agency effort to direct money, resources and expertise to clean up and cap orphaned oil and gas wells.

"The Department of the Interior announced an interagency initiative today to implement a new federal program for addressing orphaned wells, a key initiative of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law," the release said on Tuesday. "The law includes \$4.7 billion for orphaned well site plugging, remediation and restoration activities."

The US Departments of the Interior, Energy, Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Interstate Oil and Gas Compact Commission have signed a memorandum of

understanding which creates an outline to build out the orphaned well program, the release said.

The signatories have committed to use and leverage their combined resources, expertise, capabilities and expertise to buttress the initiative, the release also said.

Environmental activists and experts and federal officials have expressed concern about the damage these orphaned oil and gas wells - abandoned by mining, oil and other extractive industries has done - causing a range of health and safety problems including contamination of water sources, hazardous waste, pollution and other issues, the release noted.

Federal officials have said that while advancing the Biden administration's environmental justice efforts, this initiative will help marginalized communities most affected by what they call "legacy pollution," the release said.

The program is also expected revitalize economies, improve communities' health and create jobs in the locales where people have been most directly affected by these uncapped oil and gas wells, the release added.

According to the Interstate Oil and Gas Compact Commission, there are about 60,000 documented orphaned wells, meaning that the federal government knows and has noted their locations. Commission staff also estimate that there may be as many as 1 million undocumented orphan oil and gas wells that were never catalogued and tracked by the US government.

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ANALYSIS - Russian FSB Eliminating REvil Hackers Puts Pressure on Other Known Threat Actors

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik), Ekaterina Chukaeva - The elimination by Russia of the REvil hacker group whose members are accused of large-scale cyberattacks on US companies, including the shutdown of the Colonial Pipeline in May and a cyberattack on the meat giant JBS, represents a significant shift and creates pressure on other known threat actors, experts told Sputnik.

The announcement about the arrested was made by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) last week. The agency added that people had been detained during raids after it received a request from the United States.

"FSB taking down the REvil group to accommodate the US represents a significant shift and puts pressure on other known threat actors," Christian Have, a chief technical officer (CTO) from the Danish LogPoint group that enables organizations to convert data into actionable intelligence, told Sputnik.

He noted that while it is satisfying to see the consequences for cybercriminals, cracking down on threat actors will hardly eliminate the ransomware problem.

"The amount of money out there is staggering, and organizations still pay ransoms. Instead, it's like smashing a hornets' nest, creating a more fragmented threat landscape. It has been a

bleeding for the cybersecurity industry that the very sophisticated groups have used the same tactics repeatedly, making detection easier," he explained.

However, in the current environment, the world is risking losing the advantage, he added.

"Maybe the level of sophistication will decrease as the ransomware economy decentralizes. Still, we will see way more innovation, which will provide a difficult challenge for cybersecurity professionals working to protect organizations," he concluded.

Sam Curry, a chief security officer at Cybereason, a Boston-based cybersecurity technology company, believes that while the organization took a blow, new actors will rise to fill the hole.

"The bottom line for those outside Russia is that a major player is taking a hit, which will mean a reduction in victims for the time being," Curry said. "As with most criminal syndicates, though, there's always another player around to fill the void."

However, until Russia actually changes domestic policy with regard to international cyber crime, Curry added, the rest of the world should not read too much into it.

Meanwhile, the US administration said that it welcomed the detentions of REvil members, adding that Russia's actions against REvil are very important and represent what the United States is looking for in the future. Washington added that the administration expects Moscow to pursue legal action within its own system against the arrested hackers.

The vulnerability of US pipelines was illustrated by a ransomware attack in May that forced the temporary closure of a Colonial Pipeline, which carries gasoline, diesel and jet fuel from the state of Texas to much of the eastern United States. The pipeline reopened when operators paid the hackers about \$4.4 million.

The attack on meat-producing giant JBS USA happened in late May and led to the temporary closure of all of its beef factories in the US. The company later said that it paid extortionists \$11 million.

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US Pharma Giant Gilead Says Counterfeiters Sold \$250M In of Its HIV Drugs

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US-based pharmaceutical corporation Gilead Sciences took legal action to halt a counterfeit network that sold more than \$250 million worth of its HIV drugs, a company representative said in a statement to Sputnik.

"We have now identified that the distributor defendants have sold 85,247 bottles labeled as Gilead-branded medication to pharmacies over the past two years, all accompanied by counterfeit supply chain documentation. This is more than \$250 million worth of product," Head of Anti-Counterfeiting and Brand Protection, Lori Mayall, said on Tuesday.

After become aware of the situation, the company took direct and urgent legal action in a US court to halt counterfeit Gilead HIV medication from reaching patients, she added.

"The court has ordered that all of the parties in this case responsible for distributing the counterfeits stop selling Gilead-branded medication and we are not aware of any defendant violating this order," Mayall added.

According to The Wall Street Journal, the scheme often included bottles of HIV drugs that contained antipsychotic drugs or over-the-counter painkillers.

It was discovered when a patient at White Cross Pharmacy in California said in August 2020 that they had the wrong pills in his HIV medication. The pharmacy contacted Gilead after the incident and said that it bought the drugs from Safe Chain Solutions which were cheaper than those of Gilead's.

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US House Select Committee Subpoenas Former Trump Lawyers Giuliani, Powell - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The US House Select Committee investigating the events at the Capitol on January 6, 2021, said that it has subpoenaed former Trump attorneys Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell.

"Chairman Bennie G. Thompson today announced that the Select Committee has issued subpoenas to four individuals who publicly promoted unsupported claims about the 2020 election and participated in attempts to disrupt or delay the certification of election results," the panel said in a press release on Tuesday. "The Committee is demanding records and testimony from Rudolph Giuliani, Jenna Ellis, Sidney Powell, and Boris Epshteyn."

Giuliani and Powell are required to provide the requested documents by February 1 and to appear for a disposition before the Select Committee on February 8, the release said.

Ellis and Epshteyn allegedly played a role in providing former President Donald Trump with options to challenge the results of the 2020 presidential election, the release added.

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

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Biden Discusses With Finnish Counterpart Russian Build-Up, NATO Partnership - White House

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden discussed the build-up of Russian military forces near Ukraine as well as the importance of defense partnerships with the United States and NATO in a call with Finnish counterpart Sauli Niinisto, the White House said in a readout of the conversation.

"The two leaders discussed their shared concern over Russia's unprovoked military build-up on Ukraine's borders. They also discussed the importance of Finland's close defense partnership with the United States and with NATO to ensure security in northern Europe," the White House said in the readout on Tuesday.

Biden emphasized right of Finland and other European countries to choose their own security arrangements such as membership in NATO and discussed the importance of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as a venue for dialogue and de-escalation of European security challenges, the White House also said.

Polling data from Finnish national newspaper Helsingin Sanomat released on Monday showed that opposition to NATO membership in Finland fell to 42% - the first time in the history of the poll that it has dropped below a 50% threshold. Another 28% said that they support accession to NATO and 30% remain undecided, according to the poll results.

On Friday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that it is up to the Finnish people to decide whether they want to join NATO and added that Russia fully respects the sovereignty of the Scandinavian countries.

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Harris to Lead US Delegation to Honduras for President Castro's Inauguration - White House

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris will visit Honduras to attend the inauguration of that nation's President Xiomara Castro schedule for January 27, White House spokesperson Sabrina Singh said.

"Vice President Kamala Harris will lead the Presidential Delegation to Honduras to attend the January 27 inauguration of President-elect Xiomara Castro," Singh said on Tuesday.

During her visit, Harris will underscore the United States commitment to deepen the bilateral partnership and work together to advance economic growth, combat corruption and address the root causes of migration, Singh added.

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US, UK Request Closed UN Security Council Meeting Thursday on N. Korea's Launches - Source

UNITED NATIONS, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States, United Kingdom, France and other Western countries at the UN Security Council requested holding a closed meeting on Thursday afternoon to discuss the recent ballistic missile launches by North Korea, a source at the United Nations told Sputnik.

" The United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Albania and France requested closed consultations for Thursday 3:00 p.m. [EDT] to address the launches by North Korea," the source said on Tuesday.

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US Sees Reduction in High-Profile Ransomware Attacks Over Past Few Months – Sullivan

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has noted a reduction in high-profile ransomware attacks against its critical infrastructure and commends Russia for arresting a number of cyber criminals who were allegedly involved in hackings in the US last year, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said.

"We believe that these past few months we have seen, from the point of view of high-profile ransomware attacks against critical infrastructure, a reduction in that activity. And just recently, in the last few days, we commend the Russian government, actually, for picking up a number of criminals associated with ransomware attacks against the United States," Foreign Policy quoted Sullivan as saying during an interview published on Tuesday.

Last week, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) said that it had eliminated the hacker group REvil whose members were engaged in theft and ransomware using malware.

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UPDATE - US Tech Stocks Down 7% for January in Worst Month Since March 2020 Pandemic (Updates with more details, comment in paras 3, 5)

NEW YORK, January 18 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's highly-priced technology stocks fell nearly 3% in Tuesday's trading, pushing to more than 7% losses for January in what is turning out to be the sector's worst month since the March 2020 outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

Fears of a series of interest rate hikes from the Federal Reserve trying to curb galloping inflation have weighed on US stock indexes since the year began. Aside from the slump in the Nasdaq index for tech stocks, the broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average has dropped almost 3% on the year, while the S&P 500 for the top 500 US stocks has fallen 4%.

For Nasdaq, the 7.3% loss thus far for January is the worst since the 10% drop at the outset of the pandemic two almost two years ago. On Tuesday alone, the technology barometer lost 2.6%.

Tuesday's selloff in US stocks came after a spike in bond yields that reflect so-called real interest rates.

"Surging yields have investors abandoning rate-sensitive sectors such as technology," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.

The yield on the ten-year Treasury note hit its highest since January 2020, when the Federal Reserve was then on a rate hike cycle. Once the pandemic broke out, however, the central bank slashed rates to almost zero and has kept them there since.

But the Federal Reserve has said it has to raise interest rates now to counter inflation as prices have soared from the lows of the pandemic and due to trillions of dollars of pandemic relief spending, higher wage payout and supply chain disruptions.

The Federal Reserve's target for inflation is 2% per year. The US Consumer Price Index grew by 7% in the year to December, expanding at its fastest rate since 1982. As a result, the Federal Reserve has indicated that there could be as many as four rate hikes over the next year, with the first beginning in March.

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US National Security Advisor Says Sees Scope for Progress With Russia Through Diplomacy

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that there is scope of "meaningful progress through diplomacy" in talks with Russia, NATO and the European Union on the critical issue of European security.

"From my perspective, there is scope for meaningful progress through diplomacy on critical issues of European security that deserve detailed treatment, and that the US and Russia and NATO and the EU and other partners in Europe can all sit down together and work through, and come to understandings on. But Moscow will have to make its own determinations in that regard," Sullivan said on Tuesday.

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One Dead, 8 Injured in Building Explosion, Collapse in New York Borough of Bronx - Mayor

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - One person has died and eight people sustained injuries as a result of the explosion and collapse of a building building in the borough of Bronx, New York City Mayor Eric Adams said.

"Right now we have eight injured, one fatality. Our hearts go out to the family members of the loss of life," Adams said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

The mayor also said that two people who sustained injuries are in a serious condition and the investigation into the reasons for the explosion is ongoing.

New York Fire Department Chief of Operations John Hodgens said during the press briefing that the buildings adjacent to the collapsed building will have to be demolished.

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US Carriers AT&T, Verizon Delay 5G Rollout Near Some Airports Over 'Frustration' With FAA (Updates with comments and more details in paras 8-13)

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US mobile carriers AT&T and Verizon said they have delayed introducing their 5G network near some airports in the United States due to airlines' concerns about flight safety and expressed frustration with aviation authorities over the matter. "At our sole discretion we have voluntarily agreed to temporarily defer turning on a limited number of towers around certain airport runways as we continue to work with the aviation industry and the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] to provide further information about our 5G deployment, since they have not utilized the two years they've had to responsibly plan for this deployment," AT&T said in a statement on Tuesday.

AT&T also criticized the FAA's processes that had contributed to the decision to delay introducing 5G technology and called for quick remedial action.

"We are frustrated by the FAA's inability to do what nearly 40 countries have done, which is to safely deploy 5G technology without disrupting aviation services, and we urge it to do so in a timely manner," the carrier said.

AT&T added that it is launching "advanced 5G services everywhere else as planned with the temporary exception of this limited number of towers."

Verizon issued a similar statement saying it had "voluntarily" limited 5G deployment near airports.

"As the nation's leading wireless provider, we have voluntarily decided to limit our 5G network around airports," Verizon said. "The Federal Aviation Administration and our nation's airlines have not been able to fully resolve navigating 5G around airports, despite it being safe and fully operational in more than 40 other countries."

The 5G C-Band service used by US carriers is close to frequencies used by key instruments of modern aircraft and the FAA had expressed concerns that it could interfere with aviation systems such as radio altimeters.

Air India, Emirates, ANA and Japan Airlines were among international carriers that canceled some flights to the United States on concerns over 5G technology. The chief executives of major US passenger and cargo carriers had also warned of an impending "catastrophic" aviation crisis from the 5G deployment in messages on social media.

US President Joe Biden expressed thanks to AT&T and Verizon for delaying the deployment of their 5G technology around key airports.

"I want to thank Verizon and AT&T for agreeing to delay 5G deployment around key airports and to continue working with the Department of Transportation on safe 5G deployment at this limited set of locations. This agreement will avoid potentially devastating disruptions to passenger travel, cargo operations, and our economic recovery, while allowing more than 90 percent of wireless tower deployment to occur as scheduled," Biden said in a statement.

The agreement protects flight safety, allows aviation operations to continue without significant disruption, and also brings more high-speed internet options to millions of Americans, Biden said. Expanding 5G access and promoting competition in internet service are critical administration priorities, Biden also said.

The White House will continue to engage with wireless carriers, airlines and aviation equipment manufacturers to chart a path forward for 5G deployment and reach a workable solution to its deployment around airports, Biden added.

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US Official Suggests Belarus Could Play Role in Russia's Alleged Plans to Invade Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - Belarus could play a role in the Russian plans to invade Ukraine amid rising tensions between Moscow and Kiev, a senior US State Department official said.

"Information we've seen indicates Belarus could play a role in Russia's plan to phase in Ukraine," the official said during a press briefing on Tuesday.

The official did not specify what kind of information the United States has on the issue of Belarus allegedly playing a role.

In recent months, Russia has been accused of building up troops near the Ukrainian border and allegedly planning an invasion - a claim dismissed by Moscow. Russia has pointed to NATO's military activity near its that it considers a threat to its national security. The United States and NATO held consultations with Russia earlier in January to discuss the Moscow-proposed agreements on mutual security guarantees in Europe.

On Monday, the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus said that it would conduct a surprise inspection of forces and the means of reaction of the Union State together with Russia. According to the Belarusian military, the first stage of the tests will last until February 9 after which the two countries will hold joint military drills that will last from February 10-20, during which the military will practice strengthening sections of the state border.

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US Claims Russian Nuclear Weapons May Be Stationed in Belarus After Constitutional Changes

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - Proposed changes to the Belarusian constitution indicate Minsk may allow Russian conventional and nuclear weapons to be stationed on its territory, a senior US State Department official said on Tuesday.

"This draft of constitutional changes may indicate Belarus' plans to allow both Russian conventional and nuclear forces to be stationed on its territory," the official told a press briefing. The official did not disclose which articles of the planned changes to the constitution of Belarus indicate that Russian weapons can be placed in the country.

The US will monitor the situation with the constitutional amendments in Belarus as regards changing its fundamental approach to housing weapons of foreign countries on its territory, the official added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) -

LAVROV-BLINKEN TALKS

- * US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov over the telephone and emphasized the need to continue diplomatic efforts to deescalate tensions following three rounds of security talks last week, the State Department said on Tuesday.
- * Lavrov urged Blinken not to replicate the speculation about the allegedly impending "Russian aggression" against Ukraine, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
- * The fact that Blinken and Lavrov agreed to meet in Geneva, Switzerland, on Friday is a sign that diplomacy is not dead as the two countries try to resolve their differences regarding Ukraine and NATO, a senior US official said.
- * Moscow and Washington are actively preparing for the next meeting between Lavrov and Blinken that will likely be held in one of the European countries, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- * It is premature to talk about a threat of sanctions against Russian banks, as media speculations are often based on rumors, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday.
- * The US administration is considering all options while weighing the possibility of cutting Russia off from the SWIFT interbank payments system, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters.

NORD STREAM 2

- * If Russia uses energy as a weapon then there will be consequences for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said on Tuesday.
- * NATO members have different assessments of the Nord Stream 2 project, it is peculiar project, Stoltenberg told BILD TV live.
- * Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that he drew the attention of German colleagues to the counterproductive nature of the attempts to politicize the Nord Stream 2 project.

RUSSIA-NATO RELATIONS

- * It is too early to say if it is possible to reach progress at security guarantees' talks between NATO and Russia, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Tuesday.
- * NATO will send a written response to Russia's proposals on security guarantees soon, Stoltenberg said.
- * NATO is ready to resume exchange on military drills and nuclear policies with Russia, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * Russia is not creating reasons for conflicts around Ukraine, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Tuesday.

* The information about the delivery of man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) to Ukraine is among Russia's concerns, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* The United States expects that the ongoing deployment of Florida National Guard soldiers to Ukraine will continue amid an increase in tensions and a buildup of Russian forces near the Ukrainian border, US Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said.

* The Biden administration is preparing to impose financial sanctions on at least four individuals from the Donbas region, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday.

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PREVIEW - Biden to Hold First 2022 News Conference Capping One Year in Office

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday will hold his first formal press conference of 2022 amid demands from media for more access.

The press conference, slated to begin at 4:00 p.m. EST (21:00 GMT), will mark only the seventh solo appearance by Biden in front of the media, in addition to three joint press events done alongside other world leaders. It will mark his first solo press conference from the White House since March and his first formal press conference since the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow in November.

Last week, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said the president looks forward to using the opportunity for "speaking directly to the American people."

Biden so far has conducted fewer press events than many of his predecessors, according to the American Presidency Project, with Donald Trump having conducted 21 press conferences by this point in his presidency, Barack Obama 16 press conferences, and George W. Bush 14 press conferences.

Complaints about Biden's lack of media access have emanated from across the political spectrum — even the White House Correspondents' Association has pressed the administration on the issue.

The presser will also come just a day before Biden marks one year since taking office.

Biden during the question and answer session with reporters is highly likely to be asked about his own party failing to unify to get voting rights and his Build Back Better legislation through Congress in addition to the global COVID-19 pandemic response, supply chain management crisis, in addition to tensions with Russia over Ukraine, among other topics.

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Atlantic Trading Takes 400,000 Barrels from US Oil Reserve to Help Curb Pump Price - DOE

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has released 400,000 barrels from its oil reserve to Atlantic Trading and Marketing Inc. under a fifth sale-and-exchange deal aimed at reducing pump prices of fuel, the Department of Energy said Tuesday.

The transaction with Atlantic follows two previous sale-and-exchange deals with ExxonMobil for 6.8 million barrels; Shell Trading Company (870,000 barrels) and Marathon Petroleum (250,000 barrels).

"Today, the US Department of Energy (DOE) approved a fifth exchange of 400,000 barrels of crude oil for release to Atlantic Trading and Marketing, Inc. from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR)," the agency said in a notice.

The DOE has said that up to 32 million barrels will be released from the SPR through the sale-and-exchange program. The five 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 news 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.

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Pfizer Says Oral Treatment Paxlovid Effective Against Omicron Variant

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US pharmaceutical company Pfizer said on Tuesday that its oral treatment Paxlovid has shown efficacy against the Omicron variant of the coronavirus during laboratory tests.

"Pfizer today shared results from multiple studies demonstrating that the in vitro efficacy of nirmatrelvir, the active main protease inhibitor of PAXLOVID, is maintained against the SARS-CoV-2 variant Omicron," the company said in a press release. "Taken together, these in vitro studies suggest that PAXLOVID has the potential to maintain plasma concentrations many-fold times higher than the amount required to prevent Omicron from replicating in cells." Pfizer's chief scientific officer Mikael Dolsten said in the release that Paxlovid was specifically designed to retain its efficiency against different variants of the novel coronavirus.

Paxlovid is currently only available for emergency or conditional use in several countries around the world, release said.

Pfizer's Paxlovid is a pill treatment of mild-to-moderate COVID-19 cases for people 12 years of age and older weighing at least 88 pounds with positive results of direct SARS-CoV-2 testing, and who are at high risk for progression to severe COVID-19, including hospitalization or death, according to the US Food and Drug Association. The treatment is believed to reduce the risk of hospitalization or death among patients at high risk of severe illness by 88%.

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US Adds 22 Countries to 'Avoid Travel' List Due to COVID-19 Risk - CDC

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Tuesday added 22 more countries, including Egypt, Israel, Australia, and Argentina, to its "Avoid Travel" list due to high COVID-19 risk there.

"Avoid travel to these destinations. If you must travel to these destinations, make sure you are fully vaccinated before travel," the CDC said in an advisory.

Starting Tuesday, the CDC also recommends to avoid travel to Bahrain, Bermuda, Bolivia, Cape Verde, Albania, Grenada, Guyana, Panama, Qatar, Suriname, the Bahamas, Uruguay, and others.

There are a total of 101 countries in the highest Level 4 category of COVID-19 risk amid a surge in the number of the coronavirus Omicron variant related cases.

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Stolen Car Chased Near US Capitol, 2 People in Custody - Police

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – US Capitol Police (USCP) said they pursued a stolen car in the area of the Capitol on Tuesday afternoon and arrested two individuals.

"USCP Officers just followed a stolen vehicle, which crashed into a construction barrier near Second Street and East Capitol Street. Two people bailed from vehicle and they are now both in custody. We are gathering more information and will provide more this afternoon," a USCP Twitter statement read.

USCP said the police investigation led to road closures at Second Street between Independence Avenue, SE and Constitution Avenue, NE; and at East Capitol Street between First and Third Streets.

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US Carriers AT&T, Verizon Delay 5G Rollout Near Some Airports Over 'Frustration' With FAA

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US mobile carriers AT&T and Verizon said they have delayed introduction of their 5G network near some airports due to airlines' concerns about flight safety from the deployment of the technology, and expressed frustration with aviation authorities over the matter.

"At our sole discretion we have voluntarily agreed to temporarily defer turning on a limited number of towers around certain airport runways as we continue to work with the aviation industry and the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] to provide further information about our 5G deployment, since they have not utilized the two years they've had to responsibly plan for this deployment," AT&T said in a statement.

AT&T also criticized the FAA's processes that had contributed to the decision and called for quick remedial action.

"We are frustrated by the FAA's inability to do what nearly 40 countries have done, which is to safely deploy 5G technology without disrupting aviation services, and we urge it to do so in a timely manner," the carrier said. It added that it is launching "advanced 5G services everywhere else as planned with the temporary exception of this limited number of towers."

Verizon issued a similar statement that it had "voluntarily" limited 5G deployment near airports. "As the nation's leading wireless provider, we have voluntarily decided to limit our 5G network around airports," the carrier said. "The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and our nation's airlines have not been able to fully resolve navigating 5G around airports, despite it being safe and fully operational in more than 40 other countries."

The 5G C-Band service used by US carriers is close to frequencies used by key instruments of modern aircraft and the FAA had expressed concerns that it could interfere with aviation systems such as radio altimeters.

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Biden Thanks Telecom Companies for Delaying 5G Deployment Around US Airports - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden in a statement published Tuesday thanked telecom companies for delaying the deployment of 5G technology around key airports in order to avoid disruptions.

"I want to thank Verizon and AT&T for agreeing to delay 5G deployment around key airports and to continue working with the Department of Transportation on safe 5G deployment at this limited set of locations. This agreement will avoid potentially devastating disruptions to passenger travel, cargo operations, and our economic recovery, while allowing more than 90 percent of wireless tower deployment to occur as scheduled," Biden said.

The agreement protects flight safety, allows aviation operations to continue without significant disruption, and also brings more high-speed internet options to millions of Americans, Biden said. Expanding 5G access and promoting competition in internet service are critical administration priorities, Biden added.

The White House will continue to engage with wireless carriers, airlines and aviation equipment manufacturers to chart a path forward for 5G deployment and reach a workable solution to its deployment around airports, Biden also said.

The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in November issued a special airworthiness information bulletin with recommended steps for pilots and manufacturers to take prior to the

deployment of 5G networks. The FAA told operators to ensure their pilots are aware of the potential degradation of radio altimeter capabilities and any means to compensate for in-flight radio altimeter anomalies, including erroneous altimeter readings and loss of altimeter function.

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White House Seeks Solution on Deploying 5G While Ensuring Maximum Air Travel Safety-
Psaki

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is seeking to reach a solution on the deployment of 5G technology that will maintain the highest level of safety for air travel with a minimum disruption, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"We have the safest airspace in the world. We are committed to reaching a solution around 5G deployment that maintains the highest level of aviation safety while minimizing disruptions to passenger travel, cargo operations and our economic recovery," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Psaki noted that discussions are ongoing on the matter at present, but added that she did not have information for an update.

"We are actively engaged with FAA [Federal Aviation Administration], FCC [Federal Communications Commission], wireless carriers, airlines and aviation equipment manufacturers to reach a solution and we believe that with continued cooperation we can chart a path forward," she said.

Earlier in January, telecommunication giants Verizon and AT&T said they would delay by two weeks the scheduled deployment of their C-Band wireless spectrum amid concerns that the move could undermine aviation safety standards.

The telecommunications companies faced pressure earlier from the White House, airlines and aviation unions about the potential interference from their 5G networks to sensitive aircraft electronics like radio altimeters that could disrupt flights.

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US Preparing Financial Sanctions Against at Least 4 People From Donbas - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is preparing to impose financial sanctions on at least four individuals from the Donbas region, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday.

The report said the sanctions are expected to be announced by Thursday.

The US State Department declined to comment on the matter while the Treasury Department did not respond to a request for comment, the report said.

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US Not Planning Changes to Current National Guard Deployment in Ukraine - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States expects that the ongoing deployment of Florida National Guard soldiers to Ukraine will continue amid an increase in tensions and a buildup of Russian forces near the Ukrainian border, US Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"The Florida National Guard has members currently deployed to Ukraine in this rotating advise and assist capacity, and they remain at work alongside their Ukrainian counterparts, again, advising and assisting and helping train, and we expect that that mission will continue," Kirby said during a press briefing.

The United States will continue to watch the situation and the ground to make decisions for force-protection purposes if need be, but there are no planned additional rotational troops to Ukraine or changes to the mission on the ground, Kirby added.

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US Tech Stocks Down 7% for January in Worst Month Since March 2020 Pandemic

NEW YORK, January 18 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's highly-priced technology stocks fell 2% in Tuesday's trading, pushing to nearly 7% losses for January in what is turning out to be the sector's worst month since the March 2020 outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

Fears of a series of interest rate hikes from the Federal Reserve trying to curb galloping inflation have weighed on US stock indexes since the year began. Aside from the slump in the Nasdaq index for tech stocks, the broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average has dropped almost 3% on the year, while the S&P500 for the top 500 US stocks has fallen 4%.

For Nasdaq, the 7% loss thus far for January is the worst since the 10% drop at the outset of the pandemic two almost two years ago.

Tuesday's selloff in US stocks came after a spike in bond yields that reflect so-called real interest rates. The yield on the 10-year Treasury note hit its highest since January 2020, when the Federal Reserve was then on a rate hike cycle. Once the pandemic broke out, however, the central bank slashed rates to almost zero and has kept them there since.

But now the Federal Reserve has said it has to raise interest rates now to counter inflation as prices have soared from the lows of the pandemic and due to trillions of dollars of pandemic relief spending, higher wage payout and supply chain disruptions.

The Federal Reserve's target for inflation is 2% per year. The US Consumer Price Index grew by 7% in the year to December, expanding at its fastest rate since 1982. As a result, the Federal Reserve has indicated that there could be as many as four rate hikes over the next year, with the first beginning in March.

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US Committed to UAE Security, Stand United With Emiratis After Abu Dhabi Attack- Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is committed to the security of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and stands united with the country after the recent attack in Abu Dhabi, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Tuesday.

"The Department of Defense joins me in strongly condemning yesterday's terrorist attack in Abu Dhabi that killed three innocent civilians and targeted civilian infrastructure," Austin said in a statement. "We remain committed to the UAE's security and ability to defend itself, and stand united with our Emirati partners in defending against all threats to their territory."

On Monday, Abu Dhabi was hit by missiles from a drone that targeted three oil trucks at a refinery near the city's airport. Yemen's Houthi rebels claimed responsibility for the attack.

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ExxonMobil Announces Plan to Reach Net-Zero Emissions by 2050

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - ExxonMobil released a roadmap Tuesday that shows detailed plans to invest \$15 billion to help the oil company achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

"ExxonMobil aims to achieve net-zero emissions from its operated assets by 2050 and is taking a comprehensive approach centered on developing detailed emission-reduction roadmaps for major operated assets," the report said. "The move to a lower-emission future requires multiple solutions that can be implemented at scale to address some of the highest-emitting sectors of the economy. This is where we are focused, leveraging our experience and long history of meeting vast complex challenges."

According to the report, ExxonMobil is leveraging its "core capabilities to meet society's needs for products essential for modern life, while addressing the challenge of climate change."

The oil company said a successful move to the future it envisions will require devising a range of solutions designed to reduce emissions in areas of the company where those emissions are high.

There are more than half a dozen spheres that the oil giant will focus on to achieve its zero-emissions goal. They include: locking in safety and reliability measures to lowering the intensity of greenhouse gas emissions; using aggressive management of costs and "capital efficiency" to develop and sustain lowest supply costs; championing cost-effective, market-based policies to fuel innovation and investment into measures that will result in the reduction of emission reductions; being agile and flexible enough to quickly respond to new

technologies, policies and the evolution of markets and adjust investments and product offerings.

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FedEx Plans to Install Laser-Based Missile-Defense on Airplanes Put on Hold - FAA

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US courier company FedEx's plans to install laser-based missile-defense on its Airbus A321-200 airplanes has been put on hold pending further review, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said in a notice issued on Tuesday.

"The FAA has determined that further internal study is necessary with respect to the proposed conditions referenced above," the notice said. "Therefore, to avoid confusion to the public and a comment period on a proposal that the agency is not moving forward at this time, the FAA is withdrawing the notice."

According to media reports, FedEx forwarded on January 14 the request to install the missile defense system in order to shield its cargo jets from threats posed by missiles.

In its proposal to the FAA, FedEx cited incidents of civilian aircraft fired upon by man-portable air-defense systems in recent years, and how this had led several firms to design and adapt laser-based missile-defense systems to protect their airplanes from heat-seeking missiles.

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White House Says 'No Option Off Table' With Regard to Cutting Russia Off From SWIFT

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – The US administration is considering all options while weighing the possibility of cutting Russia off from the SWIFT interbank payments system, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Tuesday.

"No option is off the table in our view," Psaki said. "We continue consulting closely with our European counterparts on severe consequences for Russia."

German newspaper Handelsblatt reported on Monday, citing government sources, that the US and the EU ruled out the disconnection of Russian banks from the SWIFT system as an option for possible sanctions but were considering targeted economic sanctions against the largest Russian banks instead.

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UN Chief Urges Restraint After Saudi-Led Strikes Result in Civilian Casualties in Yemen

UNITED NATIONS, January 18 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres is urging all parties in the Yemen conflict to show restraint after the Saudi-led Coalition's airstrikes against Houthi rebels caused numerous civilian casualties, a United Nations spokesperson said on Tuesday.

"The Secretary-General expresses his concern and deplores the recent Saudi-led Coalition's airstrikes in Sana'a that resulted in numerous civilian casualties," the spokesperson said in a statement. "He reminds all parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect civilians, adhering to the principles of proportionality, distinction and precaution."

The United Nations spokesperson also said Guterres is urging the warring parties to enter negotiations without preconditions to end the conflict in Yemen.

On Monday evening, the Saudi-led coalition announced it would conduct a military campaign in Sanaa in response to Houthi strikes against the United Arab Emirates.

Media reported that five residential buildings were damaged in the Coalition strikes in which 23 people were killed, and another ten buildings were damaged.

The conflict between Yemen government forces and the Houthi rebels started in 2014. The situation was further aggravated after the military coalition led by Saudi Arabia joined the conflict in 2015 on the side of the Yemen government and began conducting air, land and sea operations against the Houthis.

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Blinken in Talks With Lavrov Will Urge Russia to De-Escalate - White House

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during his upcoming meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Geneva is going to urge Moscow to de-escalate tensions on the border with Ukraine, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

The two top diplomats are expected to meet in Geneva on Friday.

"At that meeting, Secretary Blinken will urge Russia to take immediate steps to de-escalate," Psaki told a press briefing.

Blinken is going to highlight very clearly that there is a diplomatic path forward, she added.

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UN Hopes Lavrov-Blinken Meeting Will Help Lessen Tensions Around Ukraine - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 18 (Sputnik) - UN chief Antonio Guterres welcomes the upcoming meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and hopes it will lower tensions around Ukraine, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, a senior State Department official said that the two diplomats had agreed to meet in Geneva on January 21.

"We are always very supportive of this type of dialogue, especially in a time of heightened tensions in the region, and we hope that the outcome of the meeting will be a lessening of those tensions," Dujarric said.

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UK Intelligence Knew About US Synagogue Attacker Malik Akram - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - British intelligence had information about Malik Faisal Akram, the United Kingdom citizen who took four hostages during an attack on a synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, over the weekend, the BBC reported on Tuesday.

On Saturday, Akram took four people hostage in the Congregation Beth Israel synagogue in Colleyville during Sabbath services and was killed by police. US media reported that Akram claimed to be the brother of convicted terrorist Aafia Siddiqui - a Pakistani woman with ties to the al-Qaeda terror group (banned in Russia).

Akram reportedly demanded that his sister be freed from US federal prison, where she is serving an 86 year sentence for trying to kill American officers in Afghanistan.

British intelligence had placed Akram on a security watchlist as a subject of investigation in late 2020. However, intelligence officials decided that Akram did not present a threat at that time, the report read.

Akram arrived in the United States via New York City's JFK International Airport two weeks ago and bought weapons once he entered the country, the report added.

Two teenagers had been arrested in Manchester in relation to the Texas synagogue attack, according to the report.

Both, London and Washington said they consider the attack on the synagogue to be an act of terrorism.

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State Dept. Declines to Say If US Will Respond in Writing to Russia's Security Proposals

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - A senior State Department official on Tuesday declined to provide an update on whether the United States will provide written responses to Russia's security proposals as requested by Moscow.

"What I would share with you is to reiterate what Deputy Secretary [Wendy] Sherman said in Brussels which is we are prepared to continue to engage with Russia on security issues in a meaningful, reciprocal dialogue," the US official told a telephone briefing when asked if the US will provide written responses to Russia's proposals. "We will see this Friday if Russia is

prepared to do the same. So really the focus right now, the next engagement with the Russians will be this in-person meeting between Secretary [Antony] Blinken and Foreign Minister [Sergey] Lavrov on Friday."

Lavrov said last week that the US and NATO are expected to give written responses to Russia's security proposals sometime this week.

Russia will decide on whether additional security talks with the US and NATO are necessary after reviewing the written responses, Lavrov said.

The US has accused Russia of troop build-up near the country's border with Ukraine and allegedly planning an invasion. Russia has dismissed the accusations and pointed to NATO's military activity near its borders and warned the alliance's actions are a threat to its national security.

The US and NATO held consultations with Russia earlier in January to discuss the Moscow-proposed mutual security guarantees in Europe.

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US Preparing Action at UN Security Council in Case Russia Invades Ukraine - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is preparing action at the UN Security Council to respond to Russia if the latter decides to invade Ukraine, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Tuesday.

"We're prepared... to take the necessary actions to respond to Russian aggression, including in New York, at the Security Council, where I will be leading efforts to bring this before the Council," Thomas-Greenfield said.

The US Ambassador pointed out that Russia's potential incursion in Ukraine would "attack" the entire UN Charter, and the United States has already discussed with partners at the UN Security Council its plans in case of such a military invasion.

"Should Russia make this move... we will come to the Council, and we will come quickly to the Council," Thomas-Greenfield said.

Specifically, the United States plans to bring a resolution before the UN Security Council if Russia attacks Ukraine, she said.

Even with Russia most likely vetoing a potential draft resolution, the action will push the country into isolation and "on the defensive" at the UN Security Council.

The United States has accused Russia of troop build-up near the country's border with Ukraine and allegedly planning an invasion. Russia has dismissed the accusations and pointed to NATO's military activity near its borders and warned the alliance's actions are a threat to its national security.

The United States and NATO held consultations with Russia earlier in January to discuss the Russian-proposed mutual security guarantees in Europe.

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US to Provide Additional Defensive Aid to Ukraine Should Situation Escalate - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide Ukraine with additional defensive aid on top of what is already in the process of being sent there should tensions with Russia escalate, a senior State Department official said on Tuesday.

"As you know, we've given more security assistance to Ukraine in the last year than at any point since 2014, and I can assure you those deliveries are ongoing and more are scheduled in the coming weeks. Should Russia further invade Ukraine, we will provide additional defensive material to the Ukrainians above and beyond that which we are already in the process of providing," the senior official said.

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Blinken, Lavrov Agreeing to Meet in Geneva Sign Diplomacy Not Dead - US Official

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The fact that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov agreed to meet in Geneva, Switzerland, on Friday is a sign that diplomacy is not dead as the two countries try to resolve their differences regarding Ukraine and NATO, a senior US official said on Tuesday.

"[T]he fact that Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Lavrov agreed to meet on Friday in Geneva suggests that perhaps diplomacy is not dead," the US official said during a press briefing.

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Russia Moving Troops in Belarus Show of Force, Extremely Dangerous - US Official

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The recent Russian movement of its troops to Belarus and near the border with Ukraine is an "extremely dangerous" show of force and cannot be considered a normal military exercise, a senior US official said on Tuesday.

"President [Vladimir] Putin created this crisis by amassing 100,000 Russian troops along Ukraine's borders. This includes moving Russian forces into Belarus over the weekend. This is neither an exercise nor normal troop movement. It is a show of strains designed to cause or give false pretext for a crisis as Russia plans for a possible invasion. And let's be clear, this is extremely dangerous," the official said during a press briefing.

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Afghan Ambassadors Skip Video Call With Taliban-Appointed Foreign Minister - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - Afghan ambassadors appointed by former President Ashraf Ghani in September defied an offer from the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) to hold a videoconference with the new acting foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, The Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday, citing the diplomats who were invited to participate.

"We have nothing against beards and turbans. But governing a country in the 21st century has certain requirements. If you can comply with them, go ahead. If not, don't think we'll jump on your train to hell," Nasir Andisha, the Afghan ambassador to Switzerland, told the newspaper. Andisha and other diplomats say they do not represent exiled Ghani, and that the aim of their mission is to continue to represent the interests of the Afghan people.

The Taliban meanwhile are trying to intensify efforts to take control of Afghanistan's overseas embassies, according to the report.

In August, the Taliban took over Afghanistan as the United States was withdrawing troops, marking the end of their twenty-year presence in the country. Ghani resigned and fled. In September, the Taliban established an interim government.

Even though a number of countries and organizations have expressed readiness to continue providing humanitarian assistance to the nation, no foreign state has formally recognized the Taliban as the legitimate authority.

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UN Security Council Likely to Have Another Meeting on North Korea This Week - US Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, January 18 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will likely meet again this week to address the latest ballistic missile tests by North Korea, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Tuesday.

"We will continue to ramp up the pressure on the North Koreans. Their attacks are a violation of Security Council resolutions," Thomas-Greenfield said. "We have an intense discussion about this in the Security Council. And we're likely to have another such discussion over the course of this week."

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US Imposes Hezbollah-Related Sanctions on 3 Individuals, 1 Entity - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The US government has imposed Hezbollah-related sanctions on three individuals and one entity, the Treasury Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated Adel Diab, Ali Mohamad Daoun, Jihad Salem Alame and their company [Lebanon-based travel] company, Dar Al Salam for Travel and Tourism," the statement said.

The US government accused Hezbollah, which is a part of Lebanese government, of blocking economic reforms in Lebanon, inhibiting much needed change and creating conditions for crisis Lebanese economy faced, the statement said.

"Hezbollah claims it supports the Lebanese people, but just like other corrupt actors in Lebanon that Treasury has designated, Hezbollah continues to profit from insulated business ventures and backdoor political deals, amassing wealth that the Lebanese people never see," Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson said in the release.

US law requires blocking of all properties and interests in property of designated persons and entities, which remain under US control. The sanctions regime also prohibits Americans citizens from having transactions with them, according to the release.

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Merck Reaches Deal to Supply UNICEF With 3Mln Molnupiravir Doses in First Half of 2022

UNITED NATIONS, January 18 (Sputnik) - The pharmaceutical company Merck on Monday announced in a press release that it has reached a deal with the United Nations Children's Fund to supply up to 3 million doses of the COVID-19 treatment molnupiravir to low and middle-income countries in the first half of 2022.

"Merck... and Ridgeback Biotherapeutics today announced the signing of a long-term supply agreement with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to facilitate broad global access for molnupiravir, an investigational oral antiviral COVID-19 medicine. Under the agreement, Merck will allocate up to 3 million courses of molnupiravir to UNICEF throughout the first half of 2022 for distribution in more than 100 low- and middle-income countries following regulatory authorizations," the release said.

Millions of patients in more than 100 low and middle-income countries will gain access to molnupiravir through the UNICEF deal and Accelerator Therapeutics (ACT) Partnership in the first half of 2022, Merck President and CEO Robert Davis said in the release.

Molnupiravir is currently authorized for use in ten countries, including the United States, United Kingdom and Japan, the release said.

Attaining global access has been a priority for Merck and partner Ridgeback Biotherapeutics since the inception of their molnupiravir collaboration due to their shared commitment to providing timely and affordable access to the COVID-19 treatment worldwide, the release added.

In December, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) granted molnupiravir emergency use authorization in the treatment of COVID-19 in adults. The oral antiviral should be initiated as

soon as possible after a COVID-19 diagnosis and within five days of symptom onset, according to the FDA.

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Former New York Mayor de Blasio Says Will Not Run for Governor

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – Former New York City mayor Bill de Blasio said on Tuesday he will not run for governor of the state of New York.

"No, I am not going to be running for governor in New York State. But I am going to devote every fiber of my being to fight inequality in the state of New York," de Blasio said on Twitter. "I'm going to share some more news with you in the days ahead."

De Blasio was the mayor of the largest metropolitan area in the US for nine years and was succeeded by another Democrat, Eric Adams, who was sworn in as the new mayor of New York City on January 1.

The next gubernatorial election in the state of New York will take place on November 8. Incumbent governor Kathy Hochul is going to seek election for the full term. In August, she was named New York State Governor after Andrew Cuomo resigned, when a months-long investigation by state Attorney General Letitia James found that he had sexually harassed nearly a dozen staffers. Cuomo has denied any wrongdoing.

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Microsoft to Buy Activision Blizzard, Creating World's No.3 Gaming Company - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The boards of Microsoft and Activision Blizzard have agreed to the software giant purchasing the major computer games company, a deal that would create the third largest gaming conglomerate by revenue in the world, Microsoft said on Tuesday.

"Today, Microsoft Corporation announced plans to acquire Activision Blizzard, a leader in game development and interactive entertainment content publisher," the press release said. "When the transaction closes, Microsoft will become the world's third-largest gaming company by revenue, behind Tencent and Sony."

Microsoft will acquire Activision Blizzard for \$95 per share, in an all-cash transaction valued at \$68.7 billion, including Activision Blizzard's net cash.

"The planned acquisition includes iconic franchises from the Activision, Blizzard and King studios like 'Warcraft,' 'Diablo,' 'Overwatch,' 'Call of Duty' and 'Candy Crush,' in addition to global eSports activities through Major League Gaming. The company has studios around the world with nearly 10,000 employees," the release said.

Bobby Kotick will continue to serve as CEO of Activision Blizzard and will report to Phil Spencer, CEO, Microsoft Gaming. Activision Blizzard has nearly 400 million monthly active players in 190 countries and franchises worth nearly \$3 billion. The deal is expected to close in fiscal year 2023, according to the release.