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US Systematically Removed Trust, Transparency Safeguards Preventing Nuclear War, Ignores Remainder

By - Morgan Artyukhina

During and after the Cold War, when NATO and the Warsaw Pact armies faced each other down, backed by nuclear arsenals, the two sides reached agreements to make war much less likely. However, the US has systematically pulled them apart in its quest to maintain global dominance, making the present situation significantly more dangerous.

As the US threatens to send thousands of troops to Eastern Europe, joining an already-boosted Enhanced Forward Presence by the NATO alliance, claiming it needs to deter an imminent Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is proving inflexible toward any defense considerations of Russia, on whose border several NATO members sit.

The situation has Russian leaders, who have patiently and publicly articulated their concerns in Eastern Europe as a way to resolve the present crisis, flummoxed. The US has demanded Russia pull its troops back from parts of Russian territory near the Ukrainian border, claiming they pose an inherent threat to Ukraine. However, Moscow has denied any intent to invade, saying its troops are engaged in drills and asserting its sovereign right to send soldiers anywhere on its territory. Ironically, Ukrainian leaders have also downplayed US claims that an invasion threat exists.

The situation is so volatile because of years of building tension in the region, while at the same time, many of the safeguards intended to keep tensions and suspicions low have been removed or ignored by the United States.

1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty

The first blow was struck in 2001, when then-US President George W. Bush unilaterally pulled the US out of the ABM treaty, which limited the US and Russia - the Soviet Union when the treaty was signed - to two complexes of ballistic missile interceptors.

It had been feared in the early 1970s that recent technological developments, such as multiple independent reentry vehicles (MIRV), could provoke a dangerous arms race in which a nuclear first strike might seem like the advantageous option for a nation with such a defensive network. By limiting defensive measures to a set of interceptors around the capital city and another around a complex of intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) silos, the US and USSR believed the threat of war was diminished.

Bush claimed the treaty had left the US vulnerable to attack and created the Missile Defense Agency at the Pentagon to oversee a new generation of air defense systems, such as the Terminal High Altitude [Area Defense \(THAAD\)](#), Patriot PAC-3, and Ground-Based Midcourse Defense. However, just 18 months prior, then-US President Bill Clinton had joined Russian President Vladimir Putin in calling the ABM Treaty the [“cornerstone of strategic stability.”](#)

As predicted, the treaty's removal [sparked an arms race](#), with Moscow dusting off old plans for hypersonic weapons, which it unveiled in 2017, in order to compensate for Washington's dramatically increased protection from ballistic missile attack.

2002 Treaty of Moscow/ New START (Almost)

The Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Strategic Offensive Reductions (SORT), also called simply the Treaty of Moscow, was a simple arms limitation treaty. Russia and the United States agreed to limit their nuclear arsenals to between 1,700 and 2,200 operationally deployed warheads each.

The deal had many faults, including that no warheads were destroyed, meaning they could be put into storage and then unpacked in 2012, when the treaty expired - and expire it did, albeit also being superseded by the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in 2011. New START called for halving the number of strategic nuclear missile launchers and established a new inspection and verification regime, although it also did not get rid of the storage loophole. The administration of former US President Donald Trump fully intended for New START to die when it expired in February 2021, but after he lost the November 2020 election to US President Joe Biden, a new leader came into office just weeks before the expiration and renewed it for another five years.

1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty

Similarly to the ABM Treaty, the US unilaterally pulled out of the INF Treaty in 2019. However, instead of simply stating it wished to develop weapons beyond the treaty's limitations, the Trump administration accused Moscow of violating the treaty by lying about the range of its 9M728/9M729 missiles used by the Iskander missile system. Nonetheless, [within two weeks](#) of the US' formal departure from the treaty in August 2019, it began testing the [first of multiple missiles](#) that violated the treaty's limitations.

The origins of the INF Treaty lay in a dramatic showdown across Europe in late 1983, triggered by Washington's deployment of Pershing-II intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM) to Europe. With a 900-mile range, a flight apogee of just 60 miles, and a maneuverable, radar-guided reentry vehicle, the missile could put an 80-kiloton nuclear warhead on Moscow in between six and 11 minutes, according to [Pentagon leaders](#). Such a fast strike time gave the Soviets just minutes to identify, analyze and respond to the threat, greatly increasing the risk of them misreading a situation and launching a mistaken nuclear return volley, believing it to be their only chance.

In addition, tensions in Europe had already been ramped up by years of psychological operations designed to increase Soviet anxieties, such as US bombers charging Soviet borders and turning away at the last second

That's why, when NATO began the vast, ultra-realistic "Able Archer-83" war games simulating an all-out attack on the Soviet Union in November 1983, it put Soviet fears through the roof. However, it wasn't until after the war games had concluded several days later that NATO commanders discovered key signs the Soviets had loaded [hundreds of strike aircraft](#) in East Germany and Poland with nuclear bombs and orders to strike "front-line targets" at a moment's notice.

The INF Treaty eliminated missiles like the Pershing-II, banning land-based missiles with ranges of between 500 kilometers and 5,500 kilometers. This significantly cooled tensions in Europe,

although the treaty was only between the US and Soviet Union - now Russia - which left other countries, such as China, free to develop their own intermediate-range missiles.

The INF's absence now is especially poignant considering [long-standing Russian fears](#) over a NATO Aegis Ashore missile system built on a land base in Deveselu, Romania. While the US claimed the system was purely defensive, Moscow noted that Aegis can also be used to launch offensive missiles. Among the missiles tested after the INF Treaty lapsed was a land-based Tomahawk missile with a range of 1,600 kilometers - a cruise missile US Aegis cruisers have fired at sea for years.

1992 Treaty on Open Skies

The Open Skies treaty was an attempt to increase transparency and put to rest fears of an impending attack by the other side. The deal allowed 35 partner nations to perform reconnaissance overflights over other nations using specialized aircraft with specialized equipment. However, flights could not interfere with other military activities and could be refused by the overflown nation for a variety of reasons.

The US sent signs it was interested in leaving the treaty as early as 2019, claiming it was caused by Russia refusing US Open Skies aircraft access to several areas almost a decade earlier - denials Moscow insisted were within its rights under the treaty. The US finally made the move on May 21, 2020, meaning the six-month cooldown time had the US leaving the treaty after the November 2020 elections that Trump lost.

The decision sparked outcry across Europe, with [Ukraine being one](#) of the loudest critics; that nation having long used Open Skies to perform overflights in western Russia to calm its nerves about troops and installations there. Indeed, the Open Skies Treaty was drafted precisely to avoid the type of anxious confrontation unfolding on the Russia-Ukraine border over the last two months.

The Democrats publicly attacked Trump's withdrawal as illegal at the time, although much of their criticism focused on his refusal to notify Congress before pulling out. However, in March 2021, [a leaked message sent](#) to concerned "international partners" by the Democratic Biden administration said it was afraid that doing so "would send the wrong message to Russia and undermine our position on the broader arms control agenda."

Istanbul, Astana Declarations

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has its origins in the November 1972 multilateral talks in Espoo, Finland, intended to further the peaceful cooperation of the Detente era. Today, the OSCE has 57 members and 11 observers and continues to serve as a regional forum for resolving international issues.

Two of its most important declarations of principles came at summits in [Istanbul, Turkey](#), in 1999 and in Astana (now Nur-Sultan), [Kazakhstan, in 2010](#), which, among other topics, affirmed each nation's right to its own security in the context of an international community.

"The security of each participating State is inseparably linked to that of all others. Each participating State has an equal right to security. We reaffirm the inherent right of each and every participating State to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance, as they evolve. Each State also has the right to neutrality. Each participating State will respect the rights of all others in these regards. They will not strengthen their security at the expense of the security of other States," the Astana declaration states.

While the [OSCE met in Vienna](#), Austria, two weeks ago, the talks yielded no major breakthrough. Earlier this week, when the US and NATO delivered separate written responses to Russia's December security proposal, the American response was considerably more intransigent, [while NATO's](#), sent from Brussels and speaking for 30 member states, acknowledged Russian security concerns and proposed mutual briefings in the NATO-Russia Council and the reestablishment of their respective envoys in Moscow and Brussels. However, neither reply gave deference to Russia's central concern: the eastward expansion of NATO and the impact that has on Russian security, especially since now the US explicitly regards Russia as a challenger to its position as leader of the post-Cold War global order. Speaking on Thursday about the American response, in particular, Russian Foreign Minister [Sergey Lavrov said](#): "The principle that one should not strengthen one's security at the expense of the security of others is deliberately avoided. Neither the Istanbul nor the Astana declarations are mentioned by our Western partners in the discussions on European security that are currently taking place ... We cannot accept this."

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China Lays Out Plan for Moon Landings, Asteroid Defense System in New Space Program White Paper
By - Morgan Artyukhina

The China National Space Administration has published a new document outlining its plans for the next five years, including ambitious advances in the country's space program that include developing "new forms of space economy."

China's space program has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years, culminating in probes sent to Mars, unexplored parts of the Moon, and the launching of a large new modular space station. However, Beijing is dreaming much bigger in its latest white paper, titled "[China's Space Program: A 2021 Perspective](#)."

Among the CNSA's focus in the coming years will be the completion of the Tiangong space station launched last year; finishing the China High-resolution Earth Observation System for remote sensing; laying the groundwork for a Lunar research station; and beginning a near-Earth asteroid defense system CNSA Deputy Director [Wu Yanhua told reporters](#).

The document also lays out wide-ranging plans for increasing international scientific cooperation and the development of what Wu called "new forms of space economy."

"For example, China and Russia will jointly launch the international lunar scientific research station plan – which is a major long-term international scientific cooperation project. We welcome the participation of all interested countries, international organizations, and scientists and engineers," Wu said.

Another project will be space debris removal, for which [China has already launched](#) several scavenger satellites with robotic arms for grappling space debris and either collecting it or forcing it into a collision course with Earth's atmosphere that will incinerate it.

The paper also says the CNSA plans on expanding the ability of Chinese spacecraft to manage themselves - something already [tested out in the Tianzhou](#) unmanned supply craft used to send equipment and goods to Tiangong.

Exploration goals include launching the Chang'e-6 and Chang'e-7 lunar probes, which will include sample-return efforts like that [by Chang'e-5 in 2020](#); a sample-return mission from an asteroid; a comet rendezvous mission; and performing much of the preparatory work for sample-return missions to Mars and Jupiter.

CNSA also wants to have the key research done for technology needed in the Chang'e-8 mission, which is expected to launch in 2027 and to prepare for construction of a lunar research base by 2035.

Down here on Earth, CNSA plans to finish upgrading the launch sites at Jiuquan, Taiyuan and Xichang.

In 2024, CNSA is expected to launch the [Xuntian space station telescope](#), which will be broadly comparable to NASA's newly launched James Webb Space Telescope.

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Connecticut Police Open Inquiry into Lauren Smith-Fields' Mysterious Death After Weeks of Protests

By - Morgan Artyukhina

After weeks of building social and legal pressure, police in a western Connecticut town have opened a criminal investigation into the death of Lauren Smith-Fields, a 23-year-old Black woman who died last month on a date with an older white man. Her family's supporters say it's another example of "missing white woman syndrome."

In Bridgeport, Connecticut, on the night of December 11, [Smith-Fields met Matthew](#) LaFountain via the Bumble dating app and went on a date that culminated in him spending the night at her apartment. Early the following morning, LaFountain called emergency medical services to report that Smith-Fields was dead.

However, more than six weeks passed since her death before its cause was announced and before police treated LaFountain as a suspect in it.

According to [a Monday statement](#) by the city's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, Smith-Fields died of "acute intoxication due to the combined effects of fentanyl, promethazine, hydroxyzine, and alcohol" and is being ruled an accident.

The next day, [Bridgeport police said](#) that as a result of the report, its Narcotics and Vice Division had opened a criminal investigation and was cooperating with the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), adding that it "continues to treat the untimely death of Lauren Smith-Fields as an active investigation."

LaFountain's lawyer also [told The Daily Beast](#) on Thursday that his client was cooperating with the investigation, but beyond that, "he's not going to be making any statements." However, it took more than a month of struggle for police to treat him as a suspect, which is typical with the person who reports a death, discovers a body or was with the person at the time of their death.

Smith-Fields' family didn't learn of Lauren's death for two days, with her mother, Shantell Fields, only finding out after going to her daughter's apartment on December 13 and finding a note saying, "If you're looking for Lauren, call this number."

According to Fields, the number was for a police detective named Kevin Cronin, who told her son the basic facts surrounding Lauren's death.

"My son talked to him and he was asking him what happened," Fields told the [New York Times](#). "Cronin said that she met a white guy on Bumble, 'but don't worry about that, he's a really nice guy.'"

According to [Rolling Stone](#), which viewed the incident report on file, LaFountain told Cronin he and Smith-Fields had chatted for a few days on the phone, and on the night of December 11, they ate food, drank tequila with mixers, played games and watched a movie at her apartment. He said at one point she met with her brother outside, then went to the bathroom for 10 to 15 minutes before they resumed watching the movie. LaFountain told police Smith-Fields fell asleep on the couch and he carried her to bed and fell asleep beside her. He said she was breathing through the night, but when he awoke at 6:30 am, he found her no longer breathing and with blood coming out of her right nostril, and called 911, the emergency number in the United States.

Fields told the Times that when Cronin failed to show up to Lauren's apartment, they went inside anyway, finding a bloody bed, a used condom, and a pill bottle.

Family's Fight for Justice

Because of the department's handling of Smith-Fields' case, her family has mounted an effort to get her justice. Last week, Fields filed a notice of intention to sue Ganim, Bridgeport Chief of Police Rebeca Garcia, and several detectives. Then on January 23, which would have been Lauren's 24th birthday, dozens marched through Bridgeport streets to the offices of Mayor Joseph Ganim, demanding action on the case.

The next day, Ganim made his first comments about her death, confirming that its handling thus far was being investigated by the Office of Internal Affairs and that Cronin had been removed from the case. That was also the day the Medical Examiner's office released details about the cause of her death.

"It's happening all too often with Black girls missing across this world, across this country, and no one says anything," Darnell Crosland, the family's attorney, told Rolling Stone. "When a white woman goes missing, the whole world drops everything. We are done with this valuation."

"We're suing the city of Bridgeport for failure to prosecute and failure to protect this family under the 14th Amendment," he added.

"We thought from the beginning that there was foul play here," Crosland later told the Times.

"When you launch an investigation, that investigation must start with and include the last living person that reported the death of the other person."

He urged that the toxicology report by the medical examiner makes Smith-Fields' death look even "more like a murder," [noting that he's](#) "never seen a medical examiner conclude a mix of drugs was an accident without knowing who provided the drugs, or how it was ingested."

The situation has renewed discussion around the concept of "missing white woman syndrome." PBS anchor Gwen Ifill [coined the term](#) in 2004 to describe the media's fascination with such stories when they concern white women, while at the same time ignoring or giving considerably less coverage to similar stories about missing Black women.

The term was used prominently last year when in early September, 22-year-old [Gabby Petito went missing](#) and was later found dead in Wyoming's Bridger-Teton National Forest, the cause of death being ruled as strangulation. In that case, like Smith-Fields', Petito's boyfriend, Brian Laundrie, was initially also given a pass by police, who refused to file a domestic violence incident report about a fight between Petito and Laundrie weeks before her death. However, Laundrie [was never charged](#) with any crime connected to Petito's death before being [found dead himself](#) in a Florida swamp several weeks later.

Corporate media gave the story nonstop coverage until Laundrie's remains were discovered on October 20.

Similarly to Smith-Fields, the March 13, 2020, death of 26-year-old Black woman Breonna Taylor at the hands of police in Louisville, Kentucky, [took weeks to get](#) any kind of coverage in the media [beyond vague reports](#) that did not mention her name or look beyond the version of events presented by police. Only a nationwide uprising protesting police violence that erupted in late May of that year, following the police murder of George Floyd, in which Taylor's name was invoked alongside Floyd's and that of Amaud Arbery, another murdered Black man murdered by white vigilantes, was her death subjected to media scrutiny.

Jury selection for the trial of Brett Hankison, the Louisville Police officer who fired the shots that killed Taylor, [began on Friday](#). He is facing three lower-level felony charges. However, despite nearly two years of protests, Hankison isn't being charged for killing Taylor, but for his gunshots that missed, striking the wall and endangering Taylor's neighbors. However, the detective who organized the mistaken raid on her apartment and another who took part and also shot Taylor, have both been fired from the force.

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Pentagon Hopes to 'Light a Fire' for Hypersonic Weapon Development During High-Level Defense Meeting

By - Evan Craighead

In October 2021, Gen. John Hyten, then-vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned that China's military capabilities would soon surpass that of both Washington and Moscow. Hyten claimed that, within a five-year period, Beijing had conducted hundreds of hypersonic weapons tests, versus the nine completed by the US.

As the US attempts to catch up with Russia and China's development of hypersonic weapons, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin plans to quicken Washington's pace by hosting a high-level meeting with a number of defense industry CEOs on Thursday.

The primary goal of the meeting, first reported last week by DefenseOne, is to "light a fire underneath the entire hypersonic industry" and "encourage industry to pick up the pace," according to CNN, citing two defense executives invited to attend.

A virtual meeting will be chaired by US Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks, and will be attended by Heidi Shyu, the under secretary of defense for research and engineering.

"This meeting is part of [Hicks'] regular, drumbeat engagements with industry in key areas of innovation and modernization to strengthen relationships and discuss ways to accelerate the development of cutting-edge capabilities and new operational concepts," Pentagon spokesperson Eric Pahon told DefenseOne in an emailed statement.

Topics will reportedly include topics ranging from "systems engineering concepts to the manufacturing workforce."

Attendees will include Lockheed Martin, Raytheon Technologies, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, Leidos, Aerojet Rocketdyne, BAE Systems and several other big-ticket weapon-makers.

The Pentagon's rare meeting with industry decision-makers also comes as an opportunity for Austin to deliver "brief framing remarks," Pahon noted.

In late November, 2021, Gen. David Thompson, vice chief of space operations, asserted that the US was significantly lagging behind Russia and China in its testing of hypersonic weapons. Hypersonic missiles travel at least five times the speed of sound (approximately 3,800 miles per hour [6116 kilometers per hour]).

"We're not as advanced as the Chinese or the Russians in terms of hypersonic programs," Gen. Thompson said during an appearance at the Halifax International Security Forum.

Meanwhile, the US Space Force is attempting to "figure out the type of satellite constellation that we need" to track hypersonic missiles, [according to Thompson](#). He noted that both the service's approach and timeline would evolve as a result.

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Archewell Productions Urges Spotify to Address 'Serious Harms' of COVID-19 Misinformation
By - Evan Craighead

Last week, iconic musicians Neil Young and Joni Mitchell removed their respective catalogs from Spotify in protest against the streaming platform's hosting of content that spreads COVID-19 misinformation. Their actions follow the issuance of an open letter from 270 doctors demanding Spotify cease hosting Joe Rogan's controversial podcast.

Archewell Productions, the production company of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, issued a statement on Sunday detailing that the couple had previously reached out to Spotify in April 2021 regarding the "all-too-real consequences of COVID-19 misinformation on its platform."

"Since the inception of Archewell, we have worked to address the real-time global misinformation crisis. Hundreds of millions of people are affected by the serious harms of rampant mis- and disinformation every day," said an Archewell spokesperson in a statement. Prince Harry and Meghan Markle are currently involved in an exclusive, multi-year podcast deal with Spotify via Archewell Audio. The company has pledged to produce content to "uplift and entertain" audiences by highlighting diverse perspectives and voices.

"We have continued to express our concerns to Spotify to ensure changes to its platform are made to help address this public health crisis," the spokesperson added.

"We look to Spotify to meet this moment and are committed to continuing our work together as it does."

Harry and Meghan's statement comes on the heels of protests by Neil Young and Joni Mitchell against the platform's decision to host content spreading misinformation on COVID-19 and related vaccines.

Young, specifically, called out the podcast, "The Joe Rogan Experience," which is regularly accused of propagating misinformation.

"They can have Rogan or Young," said the Canadian-born singer. "Not both."

In a Sunday statement, Spotify CEO Daniel Ek announced that podcasts discussing COVID-19 and vaccines would be slapped with advisories and include links to redirect users to a COVID-19 Hub.

The changes will be rolled out "in the coming days," Ek noted.

"To our knowledge, this content advisory is the first of its kind by a major podcast platform," [the company boasted](#).

The company also intends to begin testing ways to better highlight its Platform Rules within the creator and publisher tools. Such a move would be a step toward increasing "accountability" and raising awareness of what is acceptable on the platform.

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Locals Cry Foul as California Claims Homeless Encampment Cleanups Not Linked to Super Bowl LVI

By - Evan Craighead

Cleanup crews have been seen removing homeless encampments and related debris from Inglewood, California, and surrounding areas ahead of the upcoming Super Bowl LVI, slated for Sunday, February 13.

With just two weeks until the Super Bowl, Los Angeles-area residents are pushing back against the state's claim that a recent series of homeless camp cleanups are routine, and not due to the upcoming game expected to bring tens of thousands of tourists to the city.

Speaking to "Fox and Friends" last week, Venice neighborhood council member Soledad Ursua told co-host Steve Doocy that the government is using band-aid solutions to mask the city's long-term issues with homelessness.

"We see time and time again that our politicians offer Band-Aid solutions and the encampments just move," Ursua proclaimed. "There's no fix to really get the people on the right track and get them the help that they need."

[Photos published by TMZ](#) and other news outlets showed that areas near the 405 freeway—just miles away from the SoFi Stadium—were being cleaned up by private contractors, including one company called Planet Green.

California Highway Patrol personnel also appeared on the scene.

It was estimated at the beginning of the pandemic that around 48,000 people were living on the streets in California. Residents believe that local elected officials have improperly responded to the worsening crisis.

"They are just trying to survive," Sofi Villalpando, who works with displaced residents, told The Guardian. "It feels like [California authorities] are removing people so they won't be seen." Others claim that this approach is nothing new.

"We see this time and time again – with sports capitalism, celebrations or other big events like the Super Bowl or Olympics, the city tries to make the city look better for investors coming from out of town," said Annie Powers, an organizer for NOlympics LA, a coalition protesting the 2028 Olympics in LA.

The group fears the future event will have a similar impact on the homeless community in the area.

"So they're very encouraged to try to disappear the poor from the streets," Powers added.

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) has maintained that the homeless encampment clearings occurred due to what they have characterized as a fire safety issue.

"Caltrans' responsibility is to ensure the safety of the traveling public and to protect and maintain California's highway infrastructure," reads a Caltrans statement. "The department is coordinating with local partners to provide outreach and support including Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA).

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Her Impact Will Live On': Family of Chelsie Kryst Confirms Death of Miss USA 2019

By - Evan Craighead

Earlier on Sunday, New York authorities revealed that the woman who leaped to her death from a Midtown high-rise was identified as Chelsie Kryst, a 30-year-old former Miss USA. Sources told the New York Post that Kryst, a lawyer who also worked as a correspondent for Extra, jumped from the 60-story Orion building at 7:15 a.m., local time.

A family statement issued on Sunday confirmed the death of Kryst, a former Miss North Carolina who went on to win the national title in 2019.

"In devastation and great sorrow, we share the passing of our beloved Cheslie," read the family statement. "Her great light was one that inspired others around the world with her beauty and strength. She cared, she loved, she laughed and she shined."

"Cheslie embodied love and served others, whether through her work as an attorney fighting for social justice, as Miss USA and as a host on Extra. But most importantly, as a daughter, sister, friend, mentor and colleague – we know her impact will live on," said the family, requesting privacy amid the tough times.

Kryst was alone at the time she leaped from the building, according to authorities. She was last seen on the building's 29th floor terrace.

Authorities have yet to identify a motive for her death. No note was left at the scene, police claim.

Extra also issued a statement on Sunday, expressing that "our hearts are broken" over Kryst's death.

"Cheslie was not just a vital part of our show, she was a beloved part of our Extra family and touched the entire staff," the statement read.

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Some Countries In Africa Reach Possible Endemic Stage, Study Shows
By - Mary Manley

Top scientists are saying many African countries, including Malawi are reaching a less severe stage of the pandemic amid the rise of the omicron variant. Kondwani Jambo is an immunologist in Malawi who works for the Malawi-Liverpool-Wellcome Trust Clinical Research Programme. Jambo believes he and his team have found the pandemic's Holy Grail.

Last year, Kondwani [Jambo](#) had started a study to see how many people in his country of Malawi had been infected with COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic. The amount of Malawians who were infected by COVID-19 turned out to be a wide-reaching scale, and much higher than Jambo was anticipating. Many were already infected before the introduction of the omicron variant.

But more importantly, suggests Jambo, this means the Holy Grail for battling this pandemic: the endemic stage when COVID-19 infections aren't as severe and unpredictable, becoming something more akin to a seasonal bug, like the cold or the flu.

Scientists are saying Malawi is just one of several countries in Africa that have appeared to reach this substantial milestone in battling the pandemic.

It helps to understand that the average age for Malawians is only around 18. Before the wave of the omicron virus Malawi hadn't been hit too hard by COVID-19, or so it appeared. "Probably less than 10% [of the population], if we look at the number of individuals that have tested positive," Jambo said. The number of hospitalizations also remained surprisingly low.

However, Jambo remained suspicious, and being aware of the young age of most Malawians, predicted that a majority of infections were probably just asymptomatic, meaning many who were infected didn't suffer severely enough to be urged to get tested or go to the hospital.

This prompted Jambo and his team to find a new source of information. They turned their attention to a repository of blood samples that had been collected over the course of many months. Their findings? By the beginning of Malawi's third COVID-19 wave with the delta variant last summer, 80% of the population had already been infected with the coronavirus.

Similar studies have been performed in Kenya, Madagascar, and South Africa. "And practically in every place they've done this, the results are exactly the same," Jambo added.

Less than 5% of Malawians have been fully vaccinated, so their apparent resistance to severe disease was most likely built up due to poor exposure to earlier variants.

"Now we have had the beta variant- we have had the delta variant and the original," Jambo noted. "It seems like a combination of those three has been able to neutralize this omicron variant in terms of severe disease." Now with omicron peaking across Africa, each country has exhibited the same fortunate pattern: a huge rise in infections that hasn't been matched with a corresponding rise in hospitalizations, nor death.

South Africa was not so lucky. While they have also experienced immunization, it came at a high cost. Their population is much older than Malawi, which resulted in swamped hospitals during the delta wave last summer.

Shabir [Madhi](#) is the volcanologist at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa. He says the upside is that “we’ve come to a point where at least three quarters— and now after omicron, probably 80%— of South Africans have developed immunity and at least protection against severe disease and death.”

Mahdi has reason to believe this sort of immunization could last up to a year. To better move forward, “We need to ensure that at least 90% of people above the age of 50 are vaccinated,” Mahdi said.

He suggests that by the time the next variant comes, it will be important not to immediately panic over the mere rise in infections. Mahdi believes a rise in infections is inevitable and policies intended to stop it aren't just damaging but rather, “fanciful thinking,” saying that officials should instead be more focused on the unlikely possibility of severe illness and death.

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Apple Music Takes a Dig At Spotify By Claiming To Be ‘The Home Of Neil Young’
By - Mary Manley

A day after Spotify agreed to Neil Young’s request to have his music removed from the service, Apple Music took a dig at Spotify by calling their own platform “the home of Neil Young” while promoting the artist front and center in the browse section of their streaming service.

“We Love Neil” says Apple [Music](#), just a day after Spotify Music dropped Neil Young after the artist requested to be removed from the service. Young was anxious to get off of a platform he believed was spreading misinformation surrounding COVID-19.

The rockstar was influenced by a public letter published by hundreds of scientists, professors, and public health professionals who asked Spotify to develop a policy to handle misinformation surrounding COVID-19. Their letter cited the streaming service’s top economic grosser Joe Rogan, who hosts the “The Joe Rogan Experience” podcast, which has been accused of spreading falsehoods and conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19.

Young was none too pleased that his music was on the same platform as someone who spreads misinformation on COVID-19.

“I want you to let Spotify know immediately today that I want all my music off their platform. They can have Rogan or Young. Not [both](#),” the rock star wrote a letter to his management.

After Spotify dropped Neil Young, Apple Music was quick to swoop in and cause more of a headache for Spotify’s public relations team. Last year’s estimates have shown that while Spotify holds 35% of the world’s music subscription [market](#) in the palm of their hand, Apple only holds onto 16% of that same market. Perhaps in siding with Young, Apple hopes to gain some of Spotify’s 172 million paying subscribers.

The hashtag [#DeleteSpotify](#) went viral after news broke of the break-up. Some Twitter users even said they canceled their Spotify subscriptions in support of the “Heart of Gold” legend.

Apple Music sent out push [notifications](#), playlists, and a banner on their website which reads “We Love Neil.”

“The Joe Rogan Experience” is Spotify’s most popular podcast in the U.S., Canada, and the UK. In 2020, Rogan signed an exclusive deal to Spotify for a whopping 100 million dollars.

The episode that prompted medical professionals to take action against the streaming service features Dr. Robert Malone, who was suspended from Twitter for spreading misinformation about the Pfizer vaccine. [YouTube](#), which is owned by Alphabet, formerly Google, also removed the episode in question, a year after it pledged to remove all misinformation regarding vaccines. While on Joe Rogan’s podcast, Malone compared pandemic policies to the Holocaust.

But while Neil Young is now safe from the threat of misinformation promoted by Joe Rogan, he may have to watch out for Steve [Bannon’s](#) podcast “Bannon’s War Room,” which is available on Apple’s Podcasts app. Bannon’s podcast [aired](#) an episode today which also features the deplatformed Dr. Malone, one of the key instigators in the misinformation scrimmage between Young and Spotify.

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Arizona Mulls Making Bitcoin a Legal Tender

By - Mary Manley

A bill has been introduced by Arizona State Senator Wendy Rogers, a Republican representing the Grand Canyon State’s 6th District, to make the digital currency of Bitcoin a legal tender in the state of Arizona.

The proposed [bill](#) would make bitcoin a legal currency in Arizona, enabling citizens to make payments towards debts, public fees and taxes using the digital currency. Arizonans would even be able to receive their salaries in bitcoin. If the bill passes, Arizona would be the first state in the U.S. to make a cryptocurrency legal tender.

According to the [Coinbase](#) website, there will only ever be 21 million bitcoin, because the digital currency cannot be inflated or “manipulated in any way.” The price of a bitcoin in US dollars is susceptible to skyrocketing, with the current amount of a bitcoin being 37,905.01 USD. But bitcoins can also be broken down into smaller units. The satoshi is equivalent to 100 millionth of a bitcoin.

Senator Rogers has previously stated to make her state crypto-friendly, and was appointed to the Blockchain and Cryptocurrency Study Committee last September.

The bill’s introduction may be awkwardly timed. According to a Bloomberg [report](#), President Biden plans to release an executive order which would task federal agencies to assess the risks and opportunities of cryptocurrency in the United States, as a matter of national security. The order is expected as soon as next week, but what it means for Roger’s bill remains unknown. Texas may also consider making Bitcoin a legal tender. Don Huffines, Republican gubernatorial candidate and businessman, says he wants to make Texas a “bitcoin citadel” if he was elected into office.

In September, El [Salvador](#) became the first country in the world to make bitcoin a legal currency. President Nayib Bukele introduced a bill equating bitcoins currency to American dollars as well as other currencies with the status of legal tender there.

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The Uncertainty Surrounding Tom Brady's Retirement News
By - Nevin Brown

According to sources, seven-time Super Bowl champion Tom Brady, after 22 seasons, will announce his retirement from the NFL. While Brady has not officially announced his retirement, he has told the Tampa Bay Buccaneers that he is not close to deciding his future.

ESPN's Adam Schefter and Jeff Darlington broke the news on Saturday, January 29th at 2:29 EST over Twitter, that Tom Brady would reportedly retire from professional football. Their report came from unnamed sources that are alleged to be close to Brady.

In the aftermath of the bombshell announcement that the player, widely-held to be one of the greatest players in history, was set to retire, a slew of pushback came from those close to Brady. His father, Tom Brady Sr, [told a local San Francisco news station](#) that his son had yet to decide on his playing future.

[Tom Brady Sr told Mike Giardi of NFL Network](#), "This story Mike is total conjecture. Tommy has not made a final decision one way or the other and anybody else that says that he has is absolutely wrong."

Tom Brady's agent, Don Yee, [also told NFL Network that Brady's future](#) was still up in the air.

"I understand the advanced speculation about Tom's future. Without getting into the accuracy or inaccuracy of what's being reported, Tom will be the only person to express his plans with complete accuracy. He knows the realities of the football business and planning calendar as well as anybody, so that should be soon," Yee said in a statement.

The [Tampa Bay Buccaneers told Jeff Howe of The Athletic](#) that Brady was not close to coming to a final decision on his future.

The known source to confirm Brady's retirement was Tom Brady's company, TB12 Sports.

Following the news, the company released a tweet appearing to confirm his retirement but later deleted it.

The uncertainty surrounding Brady's retirement has led some to believe that the initial ESPN report jumped the gun. There remains a belief that Brady will this offseason announce his retirement from professional football, but that he [wants to control the timing of the decision](#).

Until Brady does officially inform the Buccaneers and the world of his decision, his retirement is speculation. Brady would still be required to file retirement papers with the NFL to make it official.

There is precedent for older players to announce their retirement early in the offseason, only to change course as a new season approaches. [Hall of Fame Quarterback Brett Favre came out of retirement twice](#) to continue his career, and Brady's longtime teammate, Rob Gronkowski, came out of retirement to join Brady in Tampa Bay last season.

Brady's list of achievements is unmatched in the history of the sport. His seven Super Bowl titles are the most-ever for a player and he is tied for second all-time in MVP awards with three. [He also owns the NFL career record](#) for games started (316), games won (243), pass completions (7,236), passing touchdowns (624), passing yards (84,520), playoff games (47), and playoff wins (35).

Brady is coming off of one of his most statistically-impressive seasons. He led the league in passing yards (5,316) and passing touchdowns (43). He led the Buccaneers to a 13-4 record and a playoff victory before being ousted by the Los Angeles Rams in the divisional round. Tom Brady will turn 45 in August and, in a [2015 email he said](#), "I've got another 7 or 8 years." Playing until 45 has been a long-stated goal of his. If he does retire, it will be one of the few goals where he has come up short.

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Manchester United Star Mason Greenwood Reportedly Arrested Over Rape Charges
By - Nevin Brown

Manchester United forward Mason Greenwood has been arrested over allegations of abuse and sexual assault following the release of images and audio to social media.

Greater Manchester area police have not confirmed that Greenwood has been arrested over the allegations, but on Sunday released a statement saying they were aware of "social media images and videos posted by a woman reporting incidents of physical violence."

They added, without identifying the detained, "An investigation was launched and following enquires we can confirm a man in his 20s has since been arrested on suspicion of rape and assault. He remains in custody for questioning. Enquiries are ongoing."

On Sunday morning, Manchester United, through a spokesperson, [responded to the allegations saying](#), "We are aware of images and allegations circulating on social media."

"We will not make any further comment until the facts have been established. Manchester United does not condone violence of any kind," the spokesperson noted.

By Sunday afternoon, the club had decided that there was enough evidence to make a decision on Greenwood.

"Mason Greenwood will not return to training or play matches until further notice," a second Sunday statement from United read.

Greenwood, accused of rape and assault, could face jail time if found guilty. [In the United Kingdom](#), there are three categories of harm in rape cases and two degrees of culpability which determine sentencing guidelines.

While life in prison is a possibility in cases of rape, the most severe guideline for sentencing is 15 years in jail. Factors that could see a rapist's sentence reduced in the UK include no previous convictions, remorse, previous good character, and age/lack of maturity.

Greenwood, 20, is United's third-leading goal scorer in the Premier League, with five goals. He made his Premier League debut for United at 16 and has 83 Premier League appearances

before the age of 21. He joined the club as a seven-year-old and sped through their youth ranks to their first team. He is the club's youngest ever in a European competition.

[In February 2021](#), United inked Greenwood to a new contract that would have kept him in Manchester until June 2025. The deal included an option to extend for an additional year.

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NATO Chief Calls For Europe to Diversify Its Energy Supplies

By - Nevin Brown

On Sunday, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg suggested that Europe diversify its energy supply.

[Stoltenberg said](#): "We are concerned about the energy situation in Europe because it demonstrates the vulnerability of being too dependent on one supplier of natural gas and that's the reason why NATO allies agree that we need to work and focus on diversification of supplies".

Russia, which supplies close to a third of Europe's natural gas, was not directly referenced, but the recent escalation in tensions between Russia and NATO over Ukraine is thought by some to be a catalyst for his comments.

A report out of the United Kingdom suggested that a Russian "invasion" of Ukraine was imminent. Moscow has consistently dismissed the accusations as incorrect and politically motivated.

NATO allies have discussed wide-ranging sanctions and military action should Russia invade Ukraine. However, the European Union, of which many nations are NATO members, is heavily dependent on Russian energy exports.

In 2019, [60.7% of the EU's energy](#) came from imports. Russia was the largest supplier of coal, crude oil, and natural gas, and, over the past decade, the EU has become increasingly reliant on Russian natural gas.

The growing demand for Russian natural gas led to the development of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. The pipeline runs under the Baltic Sea connecting Russia and Germany and has long been a politically divisive topic within NATO.

One primary stated concern was the ability for Russia to use energy as a bargaining chip. The pipeline was completed in September of 2021.

Europe is also in the midst of an energy crisis. The continent had to dip into energy reserves during an exceptionally hot summer and has seen lower than anticipated energy production from wind turbines.

[In the fourth quarter of 2021](#), natural gas prices at the Dutch TTF contract, the European benchmark, were at a record high of \$31.14/MMBtu. Prices have dropped in the first quarter of 2022, but supply remains low compared to recent averages.'

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US to Hit Putin's Inner Circle With Sanctions in Event of Ukraine 'Invasion' - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The US has prepared a list of people close to President Vladimir Putin to target with sanctions should Russia advance on Ukraine, the Financial Times reported on Monday, citing senior administration officials.

The list has reportedly been coordinated with US allies, focusing on the Russian leader's inner circle and their family members, many of whom have "deep financial ties with the west."

"The individuals we have identified are in or near the inner circles of the Kremlin and play a role in government decision making or are at a minimum complicit in the Kremlin's destabilizing behaviour," unnamed US officials said.

The officials did not reveal what names are on the list, which is said to include top Russian officials and executives of state-owned companies.

The newspaper noted that sanctions would cut them off from the international financial system.

On Sunday, UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said that London is not ruling out the possibility of seizing the British property of Russian "oligarchs" as part of tighter sanctions against Moscow in the event of escalation in Ukraine. When asked if it will affect British investors, Truss noted that "freedom and democracy" are "more important than immediate financial issues."

In a comment on Monday, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova urged Truss "not to take a step back" and reminded her of a list of former corrupt officials whom Russia has long asked to extradite.

Russia has repeatedly denied preparing an invasion of Ukraine. Moscow says that it has the right to move troops within its national territory and is not threatening anyone, dismissing the West's allegations to the contrary as a pretext for NATO's increased activity near Russian borders.

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US Urges Coalition Allies to Improve 'Secure' Detention of IS Fighters After Prison Attack

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - Washington urges its coalition partners in Syria to enhance secure detention of Islamic State (IS, a terrorist group banned in Russia) fighters and repatriate their nationals and other detainees remaining in the northeast of the Arab republic, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Monday.

In mid-January, about 200 terrorists affiliated with the IS escaped in an attack on a prison controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the Syrian city of Al-Hasakah. The IS attacked the facility in order to free imprisoned fighters. On Wednesday, the SDF said that the prison was back under control, and about 1,000 remaining terrorists have surrendered. According to the latest data, 175 terrorists were eliminated and 27 SDF soldiers were killed.

"We call on our partners in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, whose efforts successfully stripped ISIS of its captured territory, to improve the secure and humane detention of ISIS fighters, support rehabilitation initiatives, and urgently repatriate their nationals and other detainees remaining in northeast Syria. The U.S. government will continue its stabilization and other programs in the region to support these efforts," Price said.

The US remains committed to efforts contributing to the defeat of the IS terrorists, he added. "The United States commends the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) for their heroic and effective response to the sustained ISIS attack on the Hasakah detention center and the surrounding area," the statement said.

On Thursday, the Syrian Military Prosecutor's office said that the events in Al-Hasakah are the result of the US project of maintaining control over northeastern Syria. According to the Syrian authorities, the international coalition led by the United States allowed IS terrorists to carry out the attack on the prison in order to show that the terrorist threat still exists in the region and thereby justify Washington's illegal presence in the country.

The armed conflict in Syria has been going on since 2011 with Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces fighting different insurgent groups. In late 2017, the IS was declared defeated in Syria and Iraq, but counterterrorism operations are still underway.

Washington backs the Kurdish armed formations located in the country despite protests from the Syrian government. The US military currently controls parts of the provinces of Al-Hasakah, Raqqa, Aleppo and Deir Ez-Zor, where the largest Syrian oil and gas fields are located.

Damascus does not recognize the so-called autonomous administration of northern and eastern Syria and calls the presence of the US military on its territory an occupation and state piracy with the aim of outright theft of oil.

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PREVIEW - Biden Set to Meet Qatari Emir at White House to Discuss Range of Global Issues

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will meet with Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani on Monday to discuss a range of global and regional issues including energy supply stability and Middle East security.

The leaders will meet at the White House on Monday to consult on ways to promote security and prosperity in the region and ensure the stability of global energy supplies, administration officials have said.

The meeting will take place on the heels of a meeting between Al Thani and European Union leadership on Friday, during which Qatar's reliability as an energy provider for the EU was discussed.

Concerns about global energy supply security are linked to concerns about the potential impact a Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent responses could have on the energy market.

The White House said that they are considering alternatives to natural gas supplies from Russia to Europe, including from the Middle East and North Africa.

Biden and Al Thani during their meeting, officials have said, will discuss supporting the people of Afghanistan in the wake of the US withdrawal and Taliban takeover of the country, during which

Qatar played a role in chartering flights of evacuees from the country. The leaders will also discuss strengthening commercial ties and investment cooperation between the US and Qatar, according to the White House.

Biden looks forward to Al Thani's visit and affirming the strong partnership between the US and Qatar during their meeting, the White House said.

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RPT - China's Envoy Says Upcoming UNSC Meeting on Ukraine Should Help Ease Tensions

UNITED NATIONS, January 28 (Sputnik) - China's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Zhang Jun said the upcoming meeting of the UN Security Council on the situation in Ukraine should help to avoid further escalation of tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

Following the United States' request on Thursday, the UN Security Council decided to discuss Ukraine on Monday at 10:00 a.m. EDT (3:00 p.m. GMT).

"Both sides have shown a willingness to continue their negotiations, and let them settle the differences through dialogue, through negotiations," he said. "What the Security Council should do is to help to de-escalate the situation, instead of adding fuel to the fire."

Zhang also pointed out to statements previously made by Moscow indicating Russia has no intention to invade Ukraine, adding that both sides should be allowed to settle their differences through direct dialogue.

Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy earlier referred to the US-called Council's meeting as a "PR stunt" aimed to discuss "its own baseless allegations."

Western nations say they continue to press for a diplomatic solution to the escalating Russia-Ukraine tensions, even as American troops were placed on "high alert" for possible deployment to Eastern Europe while NATO dispatched additional ships and fighter jets to the region. Moscow has repeatedly denied any intention of attacking any country, blaming the West for increasing tensions in the region and pointing to NATO's military activities near its borders.

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RPT - US Turned NATO Into Force That Carries Out Washington's Military Agenda - Anti-War Group

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - NATO became an organization devoid of a purpose after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the United States decided to continue building the alliance and turned it into a force that executes Washington's military agenda, United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC) coordinator Joe Lombardo told Sputnik.

Over the past several months, relations between the United States and NATO on the one side and Russia on the other have been characterized by heightened tensions over the alliance's plans to expand further eastward, including in Ukraine. Russia has said such a move by NATO represents a threat to its national security and will not permit it, but has emphasized that it does not plan to attack any country.

"It is good that some of the NATO member states are opposed to the belligerent move on the part of the United States in Ukraine," Lombardo said. "NATO had no purpose after the fall of the Soviet Union but the US continued to build it with countries all over the world and it became simply a force to carry out the US military agenda around the world as in Afghanistan. I don't think the people of Europe want war with Russia and this puts pressure on their governments." Lombardo said he believes it is important that Russia does not back down from its position for Ukraine not to become part of the alliance and for NATO and US troops to withdraw from the former Soviet states and the former Warsaw Pact countries as it was agreed to in 1990.

"The United States is not very good at keeping its side of these agreements as we have seen with its withdrawal from the JCPOA agreement with Iran, various nuclear agreements and virtually every treaty it signed with the US indigenous peoples," he said. "If it is allowed to continue to break agreements, this will continue to happen and none of us will be safe."

On Wednesday, US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan delivered Washington's response to Russia's security proposals for Europe. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday that Russia is reviewing the response, but stressed that the United States left the main question about NATO non-expansion unanswered.

Moscow published its security proposals for NATO and the United States in late 2021 as tensions concerning Ukraine reignited. Russia requested guarantees that the alliance would not expand eastward. The United States has insisted it will not allow anyone to slam NATO's open door policy shut.

When asked whether it is still possible to prevent a not war, Lombardo said, "Yes, I think there will not be a war, despite the propaganda and the aggressive moves on the part of the United States and Ukraine."

"I think this just helps them sell more weapons and try to get concession," he said. "It is best that there not be concessions or the US will do this over and over again until there is an accident that can lead to real war, even a nuclear war."

On Monday, a Defense Department spokesperson said that 8,500 US troops had been placed on heightened alert over the situation regarding Ukraine.

"The US putting 8,500 troops on high alert is just another threat," Lombardo said. "It should be condemned by everyone."

Lombardo went on to say that the pro-war propoganda in the United States is constant and hypocritical.

"They claim that Russia is aggressive for having troops on its own territory, but NATO and the US are not aggressive by surrounding Russia, holding 'war games' near the Russian border and bringing missiles to the border," he said. "The US corporate media always says the Russian troops are on the Ukrainian border, not the Russian border. The image of most in the United States is that Russia is threatening to invade Ukraine and the US is supporting Ukraine's rights. It is very difficult for the truth to be heard in the United States."

Lombardo noted that he had visited Ukraine twice in recent years and shared the witnessed the effects of the US regime change operation there that resulted in a radical, anti-Russian government with Nazi-fascist elements.

"The US played a major role in the 2014 coup in Ukraine that brought in a very right-wing, pro-fascist government that is very anti-Russian," he said. "I have been in Ukraine twice in recent years and I watched one of the fascist torch-lit marches where they chanted 'Hang the Russians from the trees.' This is in a country that might be majority Russian. Now the United States is trying to use this right-wing force against Russia and that is a danger to the entire world."

Lombardo pointed out that Ukraine has a larger border with Russia than any other European country and the United States is trying to use that reality to its geo-strategic advantage.

"The United States wants to be able to use Ukraine to further surround and threaten Russia militarily. Just as the United States refused to allow this during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Russia must not allow this," he said.

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RPT - Russian Ambassador Regrets Canada Avoids Direct High-Level Contacts With Russia

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik he regrets that current contacts between Moscow and Ottawa are now limited to the level of ambassadors and said it would be useful to have high-level contacts to solve matters of concern despite existing differences.

"I tell all Canadians here that for us, relations with Canada are valuable in themselves, as with any sovereign state. Canada is a very energetic voice within NATO on Ukrainian and European security issues," Stepanov said. "In this context, it would be natural and normal within the framework of normal diplomatic practice for Canada to be able to have a high-level channel of communication with Russia."

Stepanov underscored that at present, the contacts between the two nations are limited to the level of ambassadors in the two capitals and stressed that there is a complete lack of desire on the part of Canada to communicate with Russia at a higher level.

"This is regrettable. I tell them all that this is regretful, sad," he said. "If the Canadian side had a sincere desire to establish contact at a high or highest level with us, we would always be open to this."

The ambassador said such contacts would be helpful for Ottawa to better understand situations like the one in Ukraine.

"If Canada wants to form an independent opinion about what is happening in the broad understanding of Euro-Atlantic security now, why this escalation is happening, or it is concerned about the situation related to the intra-Ukrainian conflict in the east of Ukraine, then for me, as a Russian ambassador and career diplomat, it would be natural and correct if we had high-level direct contact with Canadians," he stated.

Stepanov also pointed out that he has repeatedly told the Canadian side - both publicly and privately - that Russian President Vladimir Putin never refuses contacts with foreign partners. "If someone calls, he always picks up the phone, and [Canadian] Foreign Minister [Melanie] Joly has an open invitation to visit Moscow," he said. "We would be happy to exchange views with Canadians on all topics of interest or concern to them, even despite the obvious political differences between our capitals. This is how diplomacy works: if you have questions or problems, people sit down to talk in order to reach an understanding of positions."

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RPT - Human Dignity, Death Penalty Incompatible, Biden Must Act to End Practice - Activist

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik), Ekaterina Chukaeva - President Joe Biden must realize capital punishment and respect for human dignity are incompatible and take decisive action to cease such a practice, Kathleen Lucas, a member of Death Penalty Abolition Steering Committee, Amnesty International USA told Sputnik after the US executed two inmates in Oklahoma and Alabama in one day.

On Thursday, Oklahoma executed death row inmate Donald Grant for murdering two women during a robbery at a hotel in 2001. Grant, 46, killed McLeyea, the manager of the hotel, and Smith, the front desk clerk, during a robbery to bail his girlfriend out of jail, according to media reports. Grant was executed by lethal injection, the third in Oklahoma since the practice resumed in the state last year. Experts for Grant's defense attorneys diagnosed him as schizophrenic but the state's experts claimed the diagnosis was false.

Also on Thursday, the state of Alabama executed another death row inmate Matthew Reeves for the murder of a man who gave him a ride back in 1996. Reeves claimed that the authorities did not help him understand the paperwork about his execution. However, the state later contended that Reeves was intellectually sound to fill out the form. The decision was backed by the Supreme Court.

"President Biden must recognize that respect for human dignity and the death penalty are incompatible and take definitive action now to end these ultimate human rights violations," Lucas said.

During the election campaign, Biden pledged to work to pass legislation to abolish the federal death penalty. In summer, Attorney General Merrick Garland imposed a temporary moratorium on federal executions as the Justice Department reviews the Trump administration's decision to revive the practice after a 17-year hiatus.

Lucas added that Amnesty International welcomes Biden's abolitionist pledge and the moratorium on federal executions, however, there are issues he should deal with.

"The president must: commute all existing federal death sentences, close federal death row, dismantle the execution chamber, and work with members of Congress to abolish all aspects of the federal and military death penalty, and incentivize states to follow the federal lead," she said. According to Lucas, the death penalty should not be an option in all federal, military, and state homicide cases.

"The Solicitor General's Office should be arguing in court that the death penalty violates both international law and the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment," Lucas concluded.

'INEFFICIENT PUNISHMENT SCHEME'

Speaking on the execution in Oklahoma, Akin Adepaju, the Chairman of the Board of Pennsylvanians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, told Sputnik that it comes at a time when opposition to the death penalty among Americans is at its highest level.

"Donald Grant's execution despite substantial evidence that he lived with mental illness and brain damage further highlights to the American people and the world that the death penalty is an inefficient punishment scheme," Adepaju who is also a law professor who teaches Advanced Criminal Procedure and Death Penalty and the Law at University of District of Columbia.

He noted that after the execution the public will call more for Biden's action on his expressed opposition to the death penalty.

"President Biden, even without congressional action, has the authority to commute all federal death sentences to life without the possibility of parole. This would ensure that even if future administrations revive federal executions, they would not be able to execute anyone currently on federal death row, which is disproportionately full of people of color," he said.

Biden could also urge the US Congress to provide federal incentives for state and local prosecutors to avoid seeking capital punishment, according to Adepaju.

"For instance, it could provide more funding for crime victims and locally-led crime prevention measures that we know works in helping heal our communities," he suggested.

At the moment, the authorities of the 27 states, as well as the federal government and the military are eligible to carry out death penalties, which primarily come in a form of lethal injections. Over 2,000 prisoners across the United States have so far been sentenced to death. The most recent record was established by former US leader Donald Trump, whose final days of presidency saw 13 executions of federal inmates, and the first death penalty in 17 years in the country was carried out in July 2020.

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RPT - Russia Raised Concerns Over Reports Canada's Military Trained Neo-Nazis - Envoy

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - Russia expressed concerned over reports that neo-Nazi formations in Ukraine are being trained as part of the Canadian military's Operation UNIFIER, Russian Ambassador to Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

Stepanov said following the Canadian government's announcement to extend and expand Operation Unifier, he was immediately contacted by the local media.

"I offered them to look at it from two sides. First, over the past few months, the Canadian media themselves have reported that, as it turned out, as part of Operation Unifier, dozens, if not hundreds of fighters of right-wing radical neo-Nazi formations, such as the Right Sector and Azov, were trained in the framework of this operation," the envoy said. "Canadian journalists

wondered why, in fact, people who wear swastikas suddenly say in their social networks that they were trained by Canadians as part of Operation Unifier."

Stepanov said Canada's Ministry of Defense reacted reluctantly to reports from the Canadian media, but said "yes."

"They said they have an internal investigation. They are trying to understand how this could happen," he went on to say. "But after that, it was tabooed and there were no further reports on how this investigation was going on, what the results of this investigation were. I expressed concern."

"I say: fascists pass through your Unifier, who then go to the Donbas and kill civilians. Even the Americans imposed sanctions on Azov," he added. "But it turns out that you have Azov fighters undergoing training in your seemingly peaceful training mission. This is one part of our concern."

Moreover, Stepanov continued to say, he offered the Canadian journalists to look at the decision on Unifier from the point of view at what is happening in Ukraine.

"Ukraine is a sovereign country. Do we all recognize territorial sovereignty? Is the east of Ukraine a part of Ukraine, as the Ukrainian government says? Yes!" he said. "You are training Ukrainian military formations as part of the Unifier operation, they do not then dissolve in the air after that. They go to the east of Ukraine and kill other Ukrainians. That is, in fact, even within the framework of this seemingly peaceful, harmless mission, you are preparing some Ukrainians to kill others. How can you explain this to me? And no one gave me an answer."

Stepanov expressed hope, however, that this will somehow reach the Canadian government through the press and there will follow official reaction to this.

"But here the question is that Ukraine is the subject of Canada's domestic politics," he noted.

"One and a half million influential wealthy Ukrainian community live there, and everyone is trying to be tough on Russia in public: who will outplay whom, who will speak out more harshly in favor of Ukraine against Russia. This is a self-perpetuating propaganda spin going on here. This is a big problem."

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US Turned NATO Into Force That Carries Out Washington's Military Agenda - Anti-War Group

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - NATO became an organization devoid of a purpose after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the United States decided to continue building the alliance and turned it into a force that executes Washington's military agenda, United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC) coordinator Joe Lombardo told Sputnik.

Over the past several months, relations between the United States and NATO on the one side and Russia on the other have been characterized by heightened tensions over the alliance's plans to expand further eastward, including in Ukraine. Russia has said such a move by NATO represents a threat to its national security and will not permit it, but has emphasized that it does not plan to attack any country.

"It is good that some of the NATO member states are opposed to the belligerent move on the part of the United States in Ukraine," Lombardo said. "NATO had no purpose after the fall of the Soviet Union but the US continued to build it with countries all over the world and it became simply a force to carry out the US military agenda around the world as in Afghanistan. I don't think the people of Europe want war with Russia and this puts pressure on their governments." Lombardo said he believes it is important that Russia does not back down from its position for Ukraine not to become part of the alliance and for NATO and US troops to withdraw from the former Soviet states and the former Warsaw Pact countries as it was agreed to in 1990.

"The United States is not very good at keeping its side of these agreements as we have seen with its withdrawal from the JCPOA agreement with Iran, various nuclear agreements and virtually every treaty it signed with the US indigenous peoples," he said. "If it is allowed to continue to break agreements, this will continue to happen and none of us will be safe."

On Wednesday, US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan delivered Washington's response to Russia's security proposals for Europe. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday that Russia is reviewing the response, but stressed that the United States left the main question about NATO non-expansion unanswered.

Moscow published its security proposals for NATO and the United States in late 2021 as tensions concerning Ukraine reignited. Russia requested guarantees that the alliance would not expand eastward. The United States has insisted it will not allow anyone to slam NATO's open door policy shut.

When asked whether it is still possible to prevent a not war, Lombardo said, "Yes, I think there will not be a war, despite the propaganda and the aggressive moves on the part of the United States and Ukraine."

"I think this just helps them sell more weapons and try to get concession," he said. "It is best that there not be concessions or the US will do this over and over again until there is an accident that can lead to real war, even a nuclear war."

On Monday, a Defense Department spokesperson said that 8,500 US troops had been placed on heightened alert over the situation regarding Ukraine.

"The US putting 8,500 troops on high alert is just another threat," Lombardo said. "It should be condemned by everyone."

Lombardo went on to say that the pro-war propaganda in the United States is constant and hypocritical.

"They claim that Russia is aggressive for having troops on its own territory, but NATO and the US are not aggressive by surrounding Russia, holding 'war games' near the Russian border and bringing missiles to the border," he said. "The US corporate media always says the Russian troops are on the Ukrainian border, not the Russian border. The image of most in the United States is that Russia is threatening to invade Ukraine and the US is supporting Ukraine's rights. It is very difficult for the truth to be heard in the United States."

Lombardo noted that he had visited Ukraine twice in recent years and shared the witnessed the effects of the US regime change operation there that resulted in a radical, anti-Russian government with Nazi-fascist elements.

"The US played a major role in the 2014 coup in Ukraine that brought in a very right-wing, pro-fascist government that is very anti-Russian," he said. "I have been in Ukraine twice in recent years and I watched one of the fascist torch-lit marches where they chanted 'Hang the

Russians from the trees.' This is in a country that might be majority Russian. Now the United States is trying to use this right-wing force against Russia and that is a danger to the entire world."

Lombardo pointed out that Ukraine has a larger border with Russia than any other European country and the United States is trying to use that reality to its geo-strategic advantage.

"The United States wants to be able to use Ukraine to further surround and threaten Russia militarily. Just as the United States refused to allow this during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Russia must not allow this," he said.

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Russian MMA Legend Khabib Nurmagomedov Launches Fight Promotion in US, Rivaling UFC

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - Retired Russian MMA legend Khabib Nurmagomedov held his MMA promotion's US debut, challenging the market dominance of his former employer, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC).

Eagle FC, established by Nurmagomedov in 2020, kicked off its first event in the United States in Miami, Florida on Friday night. The event, Eagle FC 44, will be headlined by a heavyweight bout between Russian Sergei Kharitonov and Surinamese-Dutch Tyrone Spong.

The card also includes fights featuring UFC veterans Rashad Evans, Ray Borg, Cody Gibson and others. Nurmagomedov framed Eagle FC as a promotion that can draw away fighters from organizations like the UFC if they feel they are not being treated fairly.

"I think for big organizations like UFC, Bellator, they have to be careful with their fighters because Eagle FC is here. Of course, we're trying to sign good athletes, great athletes, with good names. [At the] same time, we're working with the young generation too... I just want to say be careful. If they don't treat good fighters (sic), Eagle FC is here," Nurmagomedov said on Thursday during a press conference.

Nurmagomedov during a December press conference in which he announced the promotion's entry to the US scene expressed his desire to use his knowledge and experience in the sport to create a platform for fighters around the world to display their talents.

Nurmagomedov, a native of Dagestan, is widely considered one of the greatest MMA athletes in the sport's history, having won the UFC Lightweight Championship and beat names like Conor McGregor and Dustin Poirer while maintaining an undefeated 29-0 professional record.

Nurmagomedov retired from MMA in October 2020 after his father and coach Abdulmanap Nurmagomedov passed away from COVID-19 complications. The athlete met with Russian President Vladimir Putin several times throughout his career and was awarded BBC's 2020 World Sports Star of the Year.

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US, French Defense Chiefs Discuss Need to Bolster NATO Amid Ukraine Crisis - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his French counterpart Florence Parly discussed over the telephone the continued need to strengthen the NATO alliance amid the Ukraine crisis, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke with France's Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly today over the phone...They also discussed the continued need for NATO Allies to demonstrate unity and bolster the Alliance in the face of potential Russian aggression," Kirby said in a press release on Friday.

Austin and Parly discussed Russia's military activity on its Western border and in Belarus, Kirby said.

Austin thanked France for its leadership role on deterrence on the NATO's Eastern flank and in counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel, Kirby said.

The United States and its allies have accused Russia of amassing troops and military equipment in preparation for an invasion of Ukraine. Washington has threatened massive sanctions should Russia decide to invade Ukraine.

Russia has repeatedly rejected the accusations, saying that it has the right to move its troops within its sovereign territory and is not planning to attack any country.

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US Army Order Almost \$500M In More Antigen COVID-19 Virus Testing Kits - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The iHealth Labs company has won an almost half-a-billion dollar additional order from the US Army to provide more COVID-19 antigen tests, the US Defense Department announced in a press release.

"iHealth Labs Inc., Sunnyvale, California, was awarded a \$499,999,992 modification to contract for COVID-19 antigen tests," the Defense Department said in the press release on Friday.

The order was announced the day the US military awarded an earlier contract to the same company to purchase more than 104 million COVID-19 antigen over-the-counter test kits.

Both purchases were made in support of President Joe Biden's 500 Million Free At-Home COVID-19 Tests, the release said.

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CORRECTION - Russia Raised Concerns Over Reports Canada's Military Trained Neo-Nazis - Envoy

(Fixes misspelling in headline)

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - Russia expressed concerned over reports that neo-Nazi formations in Ukraine are being trained as part of the Canadian military's Operation UNIFIER, Russian Ambassador to Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

Stepanov said following the Canadian government's announcement to extend and expand Operation Unifier, he was immediately contacted by the local media.

"I offered them to look at it from two sides. First, over the past few months, the Canadian media themselves have reported that, as it turned out, as part of Operation Unifier, dozens, if not hundreds of fighters of right-wing radical neo-Nazi formations, such as the Right Sector and Azov, were trained in the framework of this operation," the envoy said. "Canadian journalists wondered why, in fact, people who wear swastikas suddenly say in their social networks that they were trained by Canadians as part of Operation Unifier."

Stepanov said Canada's Ministry of Defense reacted reluctantly to reports from the Canadian media, but said "yes."

"They said they have an internal investigation. They are trying to understand how this could happen," he went on to say. "But after that, it was tabooed and there were no further reports on how this investigation was going on, what the results of this investigation were. I expressed concern."

"I say: fascists pass through your Unifier, who then go to the Donbas and kill civilians. Even the Americans imposed sanctions on Azov," he added. "But it turns out that you have Azov fighters undergoing training in your seemingly peaceful training mission. This is one part of our concern."

Moreover, Stepanov continued to say, he offered the Canadian journalists to look at the decision on Unifier from the point of view at what is happening in Ukraine.

"Ukraine is a sovereign country. Do we all recognize territorial sovereignty? Is the east of Ukraine a part of Ukraine, as the Ukrainian government says? Yes!" he said. "You are training Ukrainian military formations as part of the Unifier operation, they do not then dissolve in the air after that. They go to the east of Ukraine and kill other Ukrainians. That is, in fact, even within the framework of this seemingly peaceful, harmless mission, you are preparing some Ukrainians to kill others. How can you explain this to me? And no one gave me an answer."

Stepanov expressed hope, however, that this will somehow reach the Canadian government through the press and there will follow official reaction to this.

"But here the question is that Ukraine is the subject of Canada's domestic politics," he noted.

"One and a half million influential wealthy Ukrainian community live there, and everyone is trying to be tough on Russia in public: who will outplay whom, who will speak out more harshly in favor of Ukraine against Russia. This is a self-perpetuating propaganda spin going on here. This is a big problem."

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Russian Ambassador Regrets Canada Avoids Direct High-Level Contacts With Russia

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik he regrets that current contacts between Moscow and Ottawa are now limited to the level of ambassadors and said it would be useful to have high-level contacts to solve matters of concern despite existing differences.

"I tell all Canadians here that for us, relations with Canada are valuable in themselves, as with any sovereign state. Canada is a very energetic voice within NATO on Ukrainian and European security issues," Stepanov said. "In this context, it would be natural and normal within the framework of normal diplomatic practice for Canada to be able to have a high-level channel of communication with Russia."

Stepanov underscored that at present, the contacts between the two nations are limited to the level of ambassadors in the two capitals and stressed that there is a complete lack of desire on the part of Canada to communicate with Russia at a higher level.

"This is regrettable. I tell them all that this is regretful, sad," he said. "If the Canadian side had a sincere desire to establish contact at a high or highest level with us, we would always be open to this."

The ambassador said such contacts would be helpful for Ottawa to better understand situations like the one in Ukraine.

"If Canada wants to form an independent opinion about what is happening in the broad understanding of Euro-Atlantic security now, why this escalation is happening, or it is concerned about the situation related to the intra-Ukrainian conflict in the east of Ukraine, then for me, as a Russian ambassador and career diplomat, it would be natural and correct if we had high-level direct contact with Canadians," he stated.

Stepanov also pointed out that he has repeatedly told the Canadian side - both publicly and privately - that Russian President Vladimir Putin never refuses contacts with foreign partners. "If someone calls, he always picks up the phone, and [Canadian] Foreign Minister [Melanie] Joly has an open invitation to visit Moscow," he said. "We would be happy to exchange views with Canadians on all topics of interest or concern to them, even despite the obvious political differences between our capitals. This is how diplomacy works: if you have questions or problems, people sit down to talk in order to reach an understanding of positions."

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IMF Tells El Salvador Bitcoin Carries Large Risks, Could Cause 'Contingent Liabilities'

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) views El Salvador's decision to adopt Bitcoin as legal tender as one that carries large risks for financial and market integrity and could lead to "contingent liabilities," an IMF country report said.

"Since September 2021, the government has adopted Bitcoin as legal tender," the report said on Friday. "The adoption of a cryptocurrency as legal tender, however, entails large risks for financial and market integrity, financial stability, and consumer protection. It also can create contingent liabilities."

The report comes two days after the IMF made a separate call to El Salvador to reverse its decision to make Bitcoin legal tender.

In Friday's report, the IMF said its Executive Directors agreed on boosting financial inclusion and noted that digital means of payment - such as the Chivo e-wallet - could play this role. However, the IMF Executive Directors emphasized the need for strict regulation and oversight of the new financial ecosystem of Chivo and Bitcoin.

The Executive Directors also expressed concern over the risks associated with issuing Bitcoin-backed bonds.

"Efforts to improve financial inclusion are welcome, but Bitcoin use carries significant risks and Bitcoin should not be used as an official currency with legal tender status," the report said.

"Narrowing the scope of the Bitcoin law will contain some of the macroeconomic risks. Strict regulation and supervisory oversight are needed to mitigate remaining fiscal, financial integrity and financial stability risks."

El Salvador President Nayib Bukele announced in November plans to build a Bitcoin city at the base of a volcano in the country, with the cryptocurrency used to fund the project.

Bitcoin hit a low of \$32,981 this week, losing about half its value from a record high of \$67,734 in November.

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Biden Says US to Move Troops to Eastern Europe, NATO Countries in Near Term

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The United States will soon move troops to Eastern Europe and to NATO member states, US President Joe Biden told the White House press pool. "I'll be moving US troops to Eastern Europe and the NATO countries in the near term," Biden said on Friday evening when asked to comment about the ongoing situation between Russia and Ukraine.

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At least 5,000 flights Canceled in US This Weekend Due to Snow Storm

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The authorities have canceled more than 5,000 flights in the United States on Friday of Friday and over the weekend due to expected winter storm on the East Coast, the website FlightAware.com reported.

"Total cancellations within, into, or out of the United States tomorrow: 3,109," it said on Friday evening, adding that some 600 flight have been canceled for Sunday in addition to nearly 1,300 flights being canceled today.

The largest number of cancellations - more than 700 - were reported by New York's JFK international airport. Two other New York's airports - LaGuardia and Newark - canceled more than 500 flights each. Boston's Logan international airport reported some 600 canceled flights.

A major winter storm dubbed "Kenan" is expected to hit parts of the East Coast with heavy snow and strong winds.

Some regions on the Est Coast, including the New York City metropolitan area, may receive up to 6 inches of snow, local media reported.

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US Stocks Post 1st Positive Week in 4 in January After Mauling on Interest Rate-Hike Fears

NEW YORK, January 28 (Sputnik) - Wall Street posted its first positive week on Friday after three consecutive weeks of losses triggered by growing evidence that the era of cheap money in the United States will end soon with a series of interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve to bring inflation under control.

The three major US equity indices - Nasdaq Composite, S&P 500 and the Dow Jones Industrial Average - posted their biggest one-day gain since the first week of December as sellers retreated after sending stocks described to be overvalued down by as much 20% over the past three weeks.

The outlier for Friday's rebound was Nasdaq, whose mega-capitalized technology names such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon and Google, turned from boon to bane during the selloff.

Nasdaq finished Friday's session up 3% and the week flat. The index lost almost 13% of its value over a four-week long drop that began a week before the selloff that hit the S&P500 and the Dow.

The S&P 500, which lists the top 500 US stocks, gained 2.4% on the day and 0.8% on the week.

The Dow, which groups mostly industrial stocks, rose 1.7% for Friday and 1.3% for the week.

"Wall Street is finishing the trading week wanting to believe that the US growth outlook is still there for 2022 and that the bull case will still be there once we get past this last inflation surge and first round of Fed rate hikes," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.

The Federal Reserve slashed interest rates to almost zero after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, and kept them at that range to aid the economic recovery. The central bank also provided more than \$2 trillion of support to the economy, buying at least \$120 billion of bonds and other assets monthly until November last year.

The US federal government spent trillions of dollars more on pandemic relief support in that same duration. The substantial sums of money in support of spending along with higher wage payouts by companies and supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic measures has led to runaway inflation.

The Federal Reserve's preferred inflation gauge, the Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index, grew by 4.9% year-on-year in December and 5.8% for all of 2021 - the highest growth in inflation since 1983, data from the Commerce Department showed on Friday.

The central bank says between three and four rate hikes may be needed this year to mitigate some of that inflation pressure, and even then it would be nowhere near to getting price pressures under control.

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Biden Says Having 45,000 Bridges in Poor Condition in US 'Unacceptable'

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said during his his visit to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, that having 45,000 bridges in poor condition in the United States is not acceptable.

"Across the country there are 45,000 bridges in poor condition. It is simply unacceptable," Biden said after visiting a bridge in Pittsburgh that collapsed just hours before he arrived to talk about infrastructure.

Biden noted that solely in Pennsylvania there are more than 3,000 old bridges that are in need of repairs.

"We have to do something about this," Biden said.

The bridge collapsed just hours before Biden arrived to Pittsburgh for a speech about infrastructure in the United States. The authorities said there were several vehicles on the bridge when it collapsed, resulting in at least ten individuals suffering injuries and three of them being taken to a hospital.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) -

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* A conflict with Russia is not inevitable, there is still room for diplomatic maneuvers, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Friday.

* The United States is ready to listen to Russia during the upcoming UN Security Council meeting over Ukraine next week but is prepared to call out disinformation, a senior Biden administration official said.

* The United States welcomes Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's comments that Russia does not want a war as tensions mount over Ukraine, a senior Biden administration official said.

* The Biden administration is not weighing the possibility of imposing sanctions on Russia's oil and natural gas exports, or cutting the country off from the SWIFT global payments system, The Wall Street Journal reported, citing unnamed administration officials.

RUSSIA'S SECURITY GUARANTEES PROPOSALS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin said in a phone conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron that responses of the United States and NATO disregard Russia's principal concerns on security guarantees, the Kremlin said on Friday.

- * Putin will find time to explain his position regarding Washington's response to Moscow's proposals on security guarantees, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- * If the United States and NATO do not change their positions on Russia's proposals on security guarantees, they should understand that Moscow will not change its stance too, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.
- * Finland and Sweden, which are not NATO members, advised the alliance not to sign under Russia's proposals on non-expansion of the bloc, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * The United States remains focused not on fighting in Ukraine as the main thing is to reassure NATO partners and allies, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said at a briefing on Friday.
- * The United States has so far only put its troops on high alert and not yet moved any of them in response to the crisis around Ukraine, Austin said.
- * Tensions around Ukraine now are not higher than before, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said.
- * The UN Security Council is scheduled to discuss the situation in Ukraine on January 31 at 15:00 GMT, the Security Council president, Mona Juul of Norway, said.
- * NATO is not planning to deploy combat troops in Ukraine, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.

IMF-ARGENTINA AGREEMENT

- * Argentina reached a debt settlement agreement with the International Monetary Fund, Argentine President Alberto Fernandez said on Friday.
- * The International Monetary Fund said in a statement that it has reached an agreement with Argentina on the key policies on refinancing the country's debt.

IRAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT TALKS

- * Negotiations on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will resume in Vienna next week, European External Action Service said on Friday.
- * Russian President Vladimir Putin and his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, have discussed the situation around the JCPOA during a phone conversation, the Kremlin said.
- * The resumption of the eighth round of negotiations on the restoration of the Iran nuclear deal is expected next week, negotiations have reached an advanced stage when political decisions are required, Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's permanent representative to international organizations in Vienna, said.

PITTSBURGH BRIDGE COLLAPSE

- * A bridge collapsed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on Friday and damaged a gas line, just hours before President Joe Biden was to arrive in the city to talk about infrastructure.
- * Investigators with the US National Transportation Safety Board were sent to Pittsburgh to help probe the collapse of a bridge that resulted in at least 10 people suffering non-life-threatening injuries, the NTSB said.

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US Diplomat to Visit Lithuania to Boost Exports of American Goods, Services - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - US Under Secretary for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Jose Fernandez will be visiting Lithuania on January 30-February 1 to discuss bolstering exports of American goods and services to the country's market as part of the memorandum of understanding signed in November, the State Department said on Friday.

"Under Secretary for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Jose W. Fernandez will travel to Vilnius, Lithuania, January 30 - February 1," the department said in a press release.

"The US delegation led by Under Secretary Fernandez will include senior leaders from the Export-Import Bank of the United States (EXIM) to discuss the implementation of the recently signed \$600 million memorandum of understanding to expand opportunities for US exporters and Lithuanian buyers in areas such as high-tech manufacturing, business services, and renewable energy.

The US diplomat will also discuss support for Lithuania amid alleged political and economic pressure from China, the release said.

Following the visit to Lithuania, Fernandez will head to Brussels, Belgium to meet with the European Union officials and discuss joint efforts to address economic coercion and expanding transatlantic trade by the agency of the US-EU Trade and Technology Council, according to the release.

The memorandum of understanding between the two countries was signed on November 24 at the Lithuanian Embassy in Washington, DC. The document envisages deepening engagement of EXIM and Lithuania's Ministry of Economy and Innovation to provide opportunities for US exporters and Lithuanian buyers in a number of areas, including manufacturing, business services, renewable energy, transformational exports, and small businesses.

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US Armed Forces Order 106M In More COVID-19 Testing Kits From iHealth - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The US military awarded a contract to iHealth Lab to purchase more than 104 million COVID-19 Antigen over-the-counter test kits in support of President Joe Biden's 500 Million Free At-Home COVID-19 Tests, the Pentagon said in a press release on Friday.

"On January 26, 2022, the Department of Defense in coordination with the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), awarded a contract modification to iHealth Lab Inc., located in Mountain View, California, to procure an additional 104,166,665 over-the-counter COVID-19 test kits," the release stated.

The new contract will support the president's plan to deliver 500 million free at-home COVID-19 tests to the nation in response to the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus, the Defense Department said.

The procurement was funded through the American Rescue Plan Act to supply critical medical resources to the nation, the Defense Department said.

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US State Dept. Says No Decision Made on Releasing \$130M In Military Aid to Egypt

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has made no decision on releasing \$130 million in military assistance to Egypt that is currently on hold until Cairo addresses human rights issues raised by the Biden administration, State Department Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Friday.

"The Secretary has yet to make a decision regarding the \$130 million in foreign military financing since September 2021 until the government of Egypt affirmatively addresses specific human rights-related conditions," Porter said during a conference call.

There are no updates on the status of the funding, Porter said.

US media reported earlier in the day that the Biden administration decided to freeze the security package for Egypt due to the Egyptian government's human rights abuses.

Washington has conveyed its disapproval to Cairo after the government of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi failed to meet US State Department standards on respect for human rights. During the 2020 US presidential election campaign, then candidate and now President Joe Biden pledged to end the issuing of what he called blank checks for al-Sisi, whom he described as then-president Donald Trump's favorite dictator.

However, US human rights activists remain skeptical about the move considering it comes after the Biden administration approved this past week a new \$2.5 billion sale of US weapons and equipment to Egypt.

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Sherman Discussed Response to Russian Proposals With European Allies - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and diplomats from France, Germany, Italy, and the UK during a phone call discussed written responses to Russia's proposals on security guarantees and the Normandy format meeting, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout on Friday.

"The participants discussed the US and NATO written responses to Russia, the Normandy format meeting held in Paris on January 26, and our ongoing commitment to diplomacy," Price said. "They agreed on the importance of continued close coordination and unity in the face of

Russia's unprovoked military buildup on Ukraine's borders and reaffirmed that any further military incursion into Ukraine will be met with swift, severe, and coordinated consequences." Participating in Thursday's call with Sherman were French MFA Secretary General Francois Delattre, German MFA State Secretary Andreas Michaelis, Italian MFA Secretary General Ettore Sequi, and UK Minister of State for Middle East, North Africa and North America James Cleverly. On Wednesday, US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan delivered Washington's response to Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday that Russia is reviewing the response but stressed that the United States, in its response to Russia's proposals on security guarantees, left the main question about non-expansion of NATO to the east unanswered. Moscow published its security suggestions for NATO and the US in late 2021 as tensions flared high around Ukraine. It requested, in particular, guarantees that the alliance would not expand eastward. The US insists it will not allow anyone to slam NATO's open door policy shut.

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Austin, German Defense Minister Discuss Russia Buildup, Support for Ukraine - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his German counterpart Christine Lambrecht shared their concerns over Russia's military deployments near Ukraine and stressed their support for Ukrainian territorial integrity in a conversation, the Defense Department announced in a readout of the conversation on Friday.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin spoke with German Federal Minister of Defense Christine Lambrecht to discuss concerns with Russia's ongoing, unprovoked military build-up near and in Ukraine," the readout said. "Both leaders emphasized their strong support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Austin and Lambrecht also discussed their recent diplomatic engagements with Russia, the readout said.

In addition, the two defense chiefs discussed "the need for Russia to stand down from its dangerous path and agreed that Russia would face severe consequences in the event of a further invasion into Ukraine," the readout added.

Austin and Lambrecht similarly exchanged views on the importance of maintaining NATO unity and strong deterrence along NATO's Eastern Flank and agreed to remain in close contact as the situation evolved, according to the readout.

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Verizon, AT&T Reach Deal With US Government on Expanded 5G Service at Airports - FAA

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - Verizon and AT&T have concluded an agreement with the US government about the extended use of 5G service at airports across the United States, the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) announced in a press release on Friday.

"Through continued technical collaboration, the FAA, Verizon, and AT&T have agreed on steps that will enable more aircraft to safely use key airports while also enabling more towers to deploy 5G service," the release said.

The FAA thanked the two major wireless companies for providing the precise data about the exact location of wireless transmitters and the thorough analysis of how 5G C-band signals interact with sensitive aircraft instruments.

"The FAA used this data to determine that it is possible to safely and more precisely map the size and shape of the areas around airports where 5G signals are mitigated, shrinking the areas where wireless operators are deferring their antenna activations," the release said.

The agreement will enable the wireless providers to safely turn on more towers as they deploy new 5G service in major markets across the United States, the FAA explained.

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Canadian Truck Drivers Protesting COVID Restrictions Begin Arriving in Ottawa - Police

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - Canadian truck drivers who have been protesting the federal government's vaccine mandate and border restrictions because of COVID-19 have arrived in Ottawa, police said on Friday.

"As you all know, there is a major demonstration taking place over the next several days here in the nation's capital. In fact, demonstrators have already arrived, and we have already started to manage a series of pop-up demonstrators in the core over the last 24 hours," the Ottawa Police said in a tweet. "They have confirmed that there will be a large number of trucks and participants and the main planned demonstrations will take place on Saturday and Sunday. With demonstrations of this scale, there are significant risks to be mitigated but that we cannot eliminate."

Police also said they plan to keep emergency lanes open, but warned that with thousands of trucks amassing in the core of Ottawa's downtown for the next few days, they expect "major traffic safety issues."

They said they will have a significant police presence, as well as emergency services personnel in the downtown area and on major highways and roads. The public should expect major congestion and traffic delays, the police said, while encouraging those who do not need to be in the downtown core to stay away.

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Biden Says US Authorities to Fix All Damages After Bridge Collapse in Pittsburgh

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - US authorities are going to fix all damages caused by the bridge collapse in Pittsburgh, President Joe Biden said while visiting the scene of the incident on Friday.

The bridge collapse, which left 10 injured, occurred just hours before Biden's scheduled trip to Pittsburgh for a speech about its infrastructure.

"We're going to fix them all," Biden said after touring the damage, adding that there are more bridges in Pittsburgh than anywhere in the world.

He also applauded efforts of local first responders and said he will stay in touch with officials on the ground about the incident.

There were several vehicles on the bridge when it collapsed, resulting in at least 10 individuals suffering injuries, three of whom were taken to the hospital.

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US House Panel Probing January 6 Events Subpoenas 'Alternate Electors' for Trump

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The US House Select Committee investigating the events of January 6, 2021 at the US Capitol said on Friday that it has issued subpoenas requesting information from 14 individuals who acted as alternate electoral college voters for former President Donald Trump during the 2020 presidential election.

"The Select Committee is seeking information about attempts in multiple states to overturn the results of the 2020 election, including the planning and coordination of efforts to send false slates of electors to the National Archives. We believe the individuals we have subpoenaed today have information about how these so-called alternate electors met and who was behind that scheme," Committee Chairman Bennie Thompson said in a press release.

The Select Committee encourages the subpoenaed individuals to cooperate with the investigation and help ensure that nothing like what happened at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, happens again, the release said.

The Select Committee obtained information that the individuals met on December 14, 2020, in seven US states carried by then candidate Joe Biden and submitted bogus Electoral College votes for Trump, the release said.

The votes were then used by multiple people advising Trump to justify delaying the election certification by Congress on January 6, the release added.

US authorities have arrested more than 725 individuals in nearly all 50 states for crimes related to the breach of the Capitol complex on January 6, according to the release.

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US Ready to Listen to Russia Explanations at UNSC Meeting Over Ukraine - Senior Official

(Updates with details, background in paras 3-8)

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to listen to Russia explain its actions during the upcoming UN Security Council meeting over Ukraine next week but is prepared to call out disinformation, a senior Biden administration official said on Friday.

"We also see Monday's meeting as an opportunity for Russia to explain what it is doing and we've come prepared to listen, we'll also be prepared to call out disinformation and diversionary tactics Russia may use including their claims that Ukraine is provoking the conflict and NATO is to blame for these tensions," the official said.

US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield will speak during Monday's UN Security Council meeting and will be prepared to respond to Russia's position, the official said. The United States expects other UN Security Council member states to express a desire to resolve tensions through diplomacy rather than war, the official said. The United States is confident there is broad support across the UN Security Council to uphold the meeting if there is a procedural challenge, the official added.

The US mission at the United Nations has been very engaged in diplomatic efforts to address the situation around Ukraine, the official said, adding that Thomas-Greenfield meets regularly with her counterparts from Europe, Russia, China and Ukraine.

Military escalation in Ukraine could undermine international order and lead to devastating humanitarian crisis, the upcoming UN Security Council meeting to address the Ukraine crisis will compliment the bilateral and multilateral security talks that have taken place this month, the official said.

The United States and its allies have accused Russia of amassing troops and military equipment in preparation for an invasion of Ukraine. Washington has threatened massive sanctions should Russia decide to invade Ukraine.

Moscow has repeatedly rejected the accusations, saying that it has the right to move its troops within its sovereign territory and is not planning to attack any country.

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China's Envoy Says Upcoming UNSC Meeting on Ukraine Should Help Ease Tensions

UNITED NATIONS, January 28 (Sputnik) - China's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Zhang Jun said on Friday the upcoming meeting of the UN Security Council on the situation in Ukraine should help to avoid further escalation of tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

Following the United States' request on Thursday, the UN Security Council decided to discuss Ukraine on Monday at 10:00 a.m. EDT (3:00 p.m. GMT).

"Both sides have shown a willingness to continue their negotiations, and let them settle the differences through dialogue, through negotiations," he said. "What the Security Council should do is to help to de-escalate the situation, instead of adding fuel to the fire."

Zhang also pointed out to statements previously made by Moscow indicating Russia has no intention to invade Ukraine, adding that both sides should be allowed to settle their differences through direct dialogue.

Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy earlier referred to the US-called Council's meeting as a "PR stunt" aimed to discuss "its own baseless allegations."

Western nations say they continue to press for a diplomatic solution to the escalating Russia-Ukraine tensions, even as American troops were placed on "high alert" for possible deployment to Eastern Europe while NATO dispatched additional ships and fighter jets to the region. Moscow has repeatedly denied any intention of attacking any country, blaming the West for increasing tensions in the region and pointing to NATO's military activities near its borders.

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UN Chief Calls on Warring Parties Worldwide to Observe Olympic Truce

UNITED NATIONS, January 28 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged all parties to conflicts around the world to observe the truce during the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing, China.

"With conflict spreading and tensions rising, the Olympic truce represents a chance to overcome differences and find paths towards lasting peace," Guterres said via Twitter.

Guterres said he call son everyone to observe the truce during the 2022 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games and "stop hostilities throughout their course."

The UN chief said earlier that he will attend the opening of the Olympic Games in Beijing, noting that the event should be an instrument of peace in the world.

The 2022 Olympic Games will take place from February 4 to February 20.

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US Believes China Wants De-Escalation in Ukraine Crisis to Avoid Harm to Interests

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The United States believes China prefers de-escalation in Ukraine because of the possibility a conflict in Europe could have a negative impact on its interests, a senior US administration official said on Friday.

"I would certainly suggest that it's not in China's interest to see a conflict in this situation, not just because of the Olympics but I think more broadly the impact of a devastating conflict in Europe would have on China's interests all over the world," the official told a conference call. "We hope China will be speaking to these principles, the importance of upholding these principles to the path of diplomacy on Monday as well."

The United Nations Security Council will hold a special meeting to address the situation over Ukraine on Monday. Russia has criticized the US-requested meeting, calling it a "PR stunt." The US has been engaged in very active talks with China on a range of issues, but particularly on Russia and Ukraine recently, the official said. American officials have been in active talks with the Chinese mission in the United States regarding the UN Security Council meeting scheduled for Monday.

The US and its allies have accused Russia of amassing troops and military equipment in preparation for an invasion of Ukraine. Washington has threatened massive sanctions should Russia decide to advance on Ukraine.

Russia has repeatedly rejected the accusations, saying that it has the right to move its troops within its sovereign territory and is not planning to attack any country. Moscow views the allegations as a pretext for deployment of NATO military equipment close to Russian borders.

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US Focus Not on Fighting in Ukraine, It's on Reassuring NATO Partners and Allies - Austin

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The United States remains focused not on fighting in Ukraine as the main thing is to reassure NATO partners and allies, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said at a briefing on Friday.

"Our focus isn't on fighting in Ukraine, it's on reassuring NATO partners and allies," he told journalists.

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Human Dignity, Death Penalty Incompatible, Biden Must Act to End Practice - Activist

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik), Ekaterina Chukaeva - President Joe Biden must realize capital punishment and respect for human dignity are incompatible and take decisive action to cease such a practice, Kathleen Lucas, a member of Death Penalty Abolition Steering Committee, Amnesty International USA told Sputnik after the US executed two inmates in Oklahoma and Alabama in one day.

On Thursday, Oklahoma executed death row inmate Donald Grant for murdering two women during a robbery at a hotel in 2001. Grant, 46, killed McLeyea, the manager of the hotel, and Smith, the front desk clerk, during a robbery to bail his girlfriend out of jail, according to media reports. Grant was executed by lethal injection, the third in Oklahoma since the practice resumed in the state last year. Experts for Grant's defense attorneys diagnosed him as schizophrenic but the state's experts claimed the diagnosis was false.

Also on Thursday, the state of Alabama executed another death row inmate Matthew Reeves for the murder of a man who gave him a ride back in 1996. Reeves claimed that the authorities did

not help him understand the paperwork about his execution. However, the state later contended that Reeves was intellectually sound to fill out the form. The decision was backed by the Supreme Court.

"President Biden must recognize that respect for human dignity and the death penalty are incompatible and take definitive action now to end these ultimate human rights violations," Lucas said.

During the election campaign, Biden pledged to work to pass legislation to abolish the federal death penalty. In summer, Attorney General Merrick Garland imposed a temporary moratorium on federal executions as the Justice Department reviews the Trump administration's decision to revive the practice after a 17-year hiatus.

Lucas added that Amnesty International welcomes Biden's abolitionist pledge and the moratorium on federal executions, however, there are issues he should deal with.

"The president must: commute all existing federal death sentences, close federal death row, dismantle the execution chamber, and work with members of Congress to abolish all aspects of the federal and military death penalty, and incentivize states to follow the federal lead," she said. According to Lucas, the death penalty should not be an option in all federal, military, and state homicide cases.

"The Solicitor General's Office should be arguing in court that the death penalty violates both international law and the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment," Lucas concluded.

'INEFFICIENT PUNISHMENT SCHEME'

Speaking on the execution in Oklahoma, Akin Adepaju, the Chairman of the Board of Pennsylvanians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, told Sputnik that it comes at a time when opposition to the death penalty among Americans is at its highest level.

"Donald Grant's execution despite substantial evidence that he lived with mental illness and brain damage further highlights to the American people and the world that the death penalty is an inefficient punishment scheme," Adepaju who is also a law professor who teaches Advanced Criminal Procedure and Death Penalty and the Law at University of District of Columbia. He noted that after the execution the public will call more for Biden's action on his expressed opposition to the death penalty.

"President Biden, even without congressional action, has the authority to commute all federal death sentences to life without the possibility of parole. This would ensure that even if future administrations revive federal executions, they would not be able to execute anyone currently on federal death row, which is disproportionately full of people of color," he said.

Biden could also urge the US Congress to provide federal incentives for state and local prosecutors to avoid seeking capital punishment, according to Adepaju.

"For instance, it could provide more funding for crime victims and locally-led crime prevention measures that we know works in helping heal our communities," he suggested.

At the moment, the authorities of the 27 states, as well as the federal government and the military are eligible to carry out death penalties, which primarily come in a form of lethal injections. Over 2,000 prisoners across the United States have so far been sentenced to death. The most recent record was established by former US leader Donald Trump, whose final days of presidency saw 13 executions of federal inmates, and the first death penalty in 17 years in the country was carried out in July 2020.

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US Rate Hikes Could Pause in Spring After March Start - Federal Reserve Official

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve looks set to raise US interest rates in March but the central bank could also pause its monetary tightening by spring to gauge the impact on the economy as it did not want to "slam the brakes" on economic growth, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis President Neil Kashkari said.

"I believe the Fed will raise interest rates at its March meeting," Kashkar said. "A pause in rate hikes in the spring is possible. We don't want to slam the brakes [on the economy]."

The Federal Reserve slashed interest rates to almost zero after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 and kept them there to aid recovery. The central bank also provided more than \$2 trillion of support to the US economy, buying at least \$120 billion of bonds and other assets monthly until November last year.

Separately, the US federal government spent trillions of dollars on pandemic relief support in that same duration. All that money, along with higher wage payouts by companies and supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic, has led to runaway inflation.

The Federal Reserve's preferred inflation gauge, the Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index, which excludes volatile food and energy prices, expanded by 4.9% year-on-year in December. For all of 2021, the broader index rose by 5.8%. Historical data from the Commerce Department showed it was the highest growth in inflation since 1983 for both December and last year.

Kashkar said the Federal Reserve needed to act and act firmly on inflation and that would be reflected in its monetary tightening.

"It would not be appropriate to indicate that rate hikes would be gradual or deliberate," he said, adding that inflation was "far too much beyond our control."

The Federal Reserve has said that between three and four rate hikes may be needed this year to mitigate some of the current inflation, and even then it would be nowhere near to getting price pressures under control.

Kashkari, however, said he anticipates that by mid-year, inflation will show signs of slowing.

"If inflation falls faster than expected, that is good news, and the Fed will need to do less. We need more information before deciding what we'll do in a few months," he said.

The Federal Reserve has three upcoming policy meetings between now and spring, with the first in mid-March, and the latter two in early May and mid-June. Bond market traders expect the central bank to hike rates by no more than 25 basis points, or a quarter percent, at each round, underscoring its challenge in fighting inflation.

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US Has Not Yet Moved Any Troops in Response to Ukraine Crisis – Pentagon Chief

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) – The United States has so far only put its troops on high alert and not yet moved any of them in response to the crisis around Ukraine, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Friday.

"We haven't actually moved any troops. We put troops on higher alert and even if and when we do move troops, the purpose of those troops deploying would be to reassure allies or directly in support of NATO or both," Austin told a press briefing.

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Austin Says Biden Has Been Clear, Does Not Intend to Put US Combat Troops in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has been clear about his intention not to place combat forces in Ukraine amid increased tensions with Russia, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Friday.

"The President has been real clear that he does not intend to put combat troops into Ukraine for the purpose of conducting combat operations," Austin said during a press event at the Pentagon.

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US Supplies of Military Hardware to Ukraine Ongoing, New Shipment Arrived Friday - Austin

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The United States remains committed to providing Ukraine with security assistance, and another shipment of military equipment arrived in the country earlier on Friday, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told a briefing.

"The US remains committed to helping Ukraine defend itself through security assistance," Austin told reporters.

Speaking about deliveries of military equipment to Ukraine, he said that they were ongoing.

"Those deliveries of equipment are ongoing, another shipment arrived today," he said.

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US Has Zero Offensive Combat Weapons Systems, Permanent Bases in Ukraine - Top General

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The United States does not have any combat weapons systems or permanent bases in Ukraine and the US role in that country is limited to training and advising, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said on Friday.

"The United States has zero on offensive combat weapon systems, nor any permanent forces nor basis in Ukraine. Our role is limited in that we help train, advise and assist with tactics, techniques and procedures. We participate in institutional development of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense," Milley said during a press briefing.

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UN Allocates \$20Mln to Assist Displaced People in Yemen's Marib - Griffiths

UNITED NATIONS, January 28 (Sputnik) - UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Martin Griffiths, said on Friday he has allocated \$20 million in urgent response aid to displaced people in Marib and other regions in Yemen.

"I have allocated \$20 million from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund for an urgent response to new displacement in Yemen," Griffiths said via Twitter. "Renewed hostilities have increased humanitarian needs and displaced more than 65,000 people."

Humanitarian needs soared as well in Yemen's Al Jawf and Hadhramaut governorates, bringing the total number of people in need of assistance to 270,000.

The United Nations said basic services in Marib were not designed to support the increasing number of people and are completely overstretched at this point.

In addition, protection risks for individuals on the move and in displacement camps continue to remain a concern for the United Nations.

Since February 2020, the Houthi rebels have been conducting a large-scale military operation to seize the Marib province, which is an important political, military and economic center that hosts the defense ministry's headquarters.

UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg has described the escalation in Marib as the "worst in years."

Yemen has been gripped by a conflict between government forces, led by President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, and the Houthi Ansar Allah movement since 2014. The situation in the country was further complicated after Saudi Arabia joined the conflict on the side of Yemen's government in 2015, launching air, land and sea operations against the rebel Islamist movement.

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UN Human Rights Office Says Its Staff Visited Prison in Yemen's Saada Hit by Airstrikes

UNITED NATIONS, January 28 (Sputnik) - The United Nations deployed a team to the detention facility in Yemen's northern city of Saada to collect information on the number of casualties after the prison was hit by the Saudi-led Coalition's airstrikes last week, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said in a statement on Friday.

"Staff from the UN Human Rights Office in Yemen were inside that this week as part of an interagency mission following the 20 the 21st of January airstrikes that took place there," the statement said. "The information they have collected paints a chaotic and desperate picture after the prison inside that was struck."

The OHCHR said the team is working to verify the number of civilian casualties, but so far it has received reports of some 91 detainees who were killed, and 236 others injured.

Following the attack and calls from UN Chief Antonio Guterres for a probe, the Saudi-led Coalition said it was investigating the incident.

"We urge them to ensure that the investigation is... transparent, independent and impartial, to establish why the prison was hit, to ensure individual accountability," the OHCHR said. "We have asked the coalition to share their information with us."

The UN human rights office also noted that during its recent visit to the detention facility, it saw no signs indicating the site, formerly used by Houthis as a barracks, continues to have a military function.

Houthis recently targeted Abu Dhabi with drone attacks, killing three and injuring six others. In response to Houthi's recent drone attacks, the Saudi-led coalition, including the UAE, launched a campaign against the group, targeting their warehouses and other infrastructure in Yemen. Yemen has been gripped by an internal conflict between the government forces and the Houthi movement for over six years. Since 2015, the Saudi-led coalition fighting on the government's side has been conducting air, land and sea operations against the rebels. The Houthis often retaliate by firing projectiles and bomber drones on Saudi territory. The United Nations has described the situation in Yemen as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

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Pentagon Chief Austin Says Conflict With Russia Not Inevitable, Still Time for Diplomacy

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - A conflict with Russia is not inevitable, there is still room for diplomatic maneuvers, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Friday at a briefing.

"Conflict is not inevitable, there is time and space for diplomacy," Austin told reporters.

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US Ready to Listen to Russia Explanations at UNSC Meeting Over Ukraine - Official

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to listen to Russia explain what it is doing during the upcoming UN Security Council meeting over Ukraine next week but is prepared to call out disinformation, a senior Biden administration official said on Friday.

"We also see Monday's meeting as an opportunity for Russia to explain what it is doing and we've come prepared to listen, we'll also be prepared to call out disinformation and diversionary tactics Russia may use including their claims that Ukraine is provoking the conflict and NATO is to blame for these tensions," the official said.

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US Welcomes Lavrov's Comments That Russia Does Not Want War - Official

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's comments that Russia does not want a war as tensions mount over Ukraine, a senior administration official said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, Lavrov said that Russia does not want a war with the West, and there will be no war if it depends on Moscow. The foreign minister added that Russia wants to "work honestly" when it comes to its proposals on security guarantees, adding that the West is "hysterically" the topic of Russia's alleged threat to Ukraine.

"I would say on the Russian Foreign Minister's comments from this morning, I would say we welcome his comments that Russia does not want war and we would welcome a reply from the Russian government to the principles we have laid out for them but this needs to be backed up with action. While we welcome the message, we need to see it backed up by swift action," the official said.

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UN Agency Warns Over 80% of Residents in Ethiopia's Tigray Region 'Food Insecure'

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - Eighty-three percent of people in Ethiopia's Tigray region are food insecure after 15 months of war and three-quarters of families experience severe lack of food, the World Food Program (WFP) said in a food security assessment on Friday.

"The Tigray Emergency Food Security Assessment found that 83 percent of people are food insecure. Families are exhausting all means to feed themselves, with three quarters of the population using extreme coping strategies to survive," the WFP said.

The WFP explained that diets in the Tigray region are increasingly impoverished as food items become unavailable and families rely almost exclusively on cereals while limiting portion sizes and the number of meals to make available food stretch further.

As a result of the on-going conflict, the WFP said it estimates families in the northern part of Ethiopia received less than 30 percent of their caloric needs in the past several months. This has exacerbated the food crisis and consequently families and individuals will need humanitarian food assistance through the end of this year, the WFP said. Fighting has prevented convoys from getting to Tigray since mid-December and conditions on the ground have posed a threat to the safety of staff as well as food supplies, the WFP added. **This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.**

Four More Russian Diplomats to Leave US on Saturday, 184 Remaining - Embassy

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The Russian embassy will be left with 184 employees after four more diplomats depart the United States on January 29, following Washington's September order for 55 staffers to leave, Ambassador Anatoly Antonov said on Friday. "Last September, the Americans handed over a list of 55 embassy employees ordered to leave the US in two stages in 2022 – 27 employees to depart by January 30, another 28 by June 30 of this year," Antonov said. "To date, 23 employees have left as part of the first group, another four are returning home on January 29. After this expulsion, 184 employees will remain in the Russian embassy, including diplomats, as well as administrative and technical staff." Russia reserves the right to respond, the diplomat added. "In all circumstances, we act on the basis of reciprocity," he said. "Russia is in favor of creating normal living conditions for diplomats in the US and Russia. Our proposal to lift all restrictions, including with regards to visas, remains on the table." Antonov said on Wednesday that the Department of State had informed them he would be forced to leave by April if Russia failed to issue visas to guards of the US ambassador in Moscow.

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US Rules Out Cutting Russia Off From SWIFT, Sanctions on Oil, Natural Gas - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration, for now, is not weighing the possibility of imposing sanctions on Russia's oil and natural gas exports, or cutting the country off from the SWIFT global payments system, The Wall Street Journal reported on Friday, citing unnamed administration officials. According to the report, Washington is finalizing a list of sanctions against Russia in case Moscow decides to advance on Ukraine. The sanctions will target a number of state-owned banks, including VTB Bank, and completely ban trade in new issues of Russian sovereign debt. They will also include export control measures with respect to key sectors of the Russian economy, such as microelectronics, the report said.

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Biden Cutting Off \$130M In Military Aid to Egypt Over Human Rights Concerns - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The US government will hold back on \$130 million in military aid previously planned for Egypt's military because of concerns about the Cairo government's abuse of human rights, CNN reported on Friday.

The aid is being withheld as a signal of Washington's disapproval after the government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi failed to meet US State Department standards on respect for human rights, the report said, citing a senior State Department official.

The report came out only two days before the January 30 deadline when the State Department was scheduled to announce plans for the funds, which have been suspended from being disbursed to Egypt in September 2021, as was originally planned, because of human rights concerns, the report added.

During the 2020 US presidential election campaign, then candidate and now President Joe Biden pledged to end the issuing of what he called blank checks for al-Sisi, whom he described as then-president Donald Trump's favorite dictator.

However, US human rights activists remain skeptical about the move, noting that it comes after Biden approved this past week an enormous new \$2.5 billion sale of US weapons and equipment to Egypt, according to the report.

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US Concerned About Negative Effects of Potential Sanctions on Russia - Reports

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

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has expressed concern about possible negative effects on the major US banks as a result of potentially implementing sanctions against Russia, Bloomberg reported on Friday citing unnamed sources familiar with the matter.

The National Security Council members and other senior Biden administration officials discussed possibly implementing additional sanctions on Russia with senior banks executives, including Citigroup, Bank of America, JPMorgan Chase and Goldman Sachs, to ensure that such action will not result in disruption of the global financial system, the report said.

The United States and the European Union are considering cutting off Russia's access to the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) system in a new sanctions package considered amid the tensions around Ukraine. However, this option has come up only occasionally in talks between the Biden administration and the banks, the report said.

The Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, which is responsible for administering and enforcing economic sanctions, also took part in the discussions with the US banks in order to share its position on the possible impact of the sanctions, the report added. The United States and its allies have accused Russia of amassing troops and military equipment in preparation for an invasion of Ukraine. Washington has threatened massive sanctions should Russia decide to invade Ukraine.

Russia has repeatedly rejected the accusations, saying that it has the right to move its troops within its sovereign territory and is not planning to attack any country.

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US Transport Safety Agency Says on Way to Pittsburgh to Investigate Bridge Collapse

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - Investigators with the US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) were sent to Pittsburgh to help probe the collapse of a bridge that resulted in at least 10 people suffering non-life-threatening injuries, the NTSB said on Friday in a statement. "NTSB launching go-team to Pittsburgh bridge collapse. Chair Jennifer Homendy will be board member on scene. Arrival time this afternoon," NTSB said via Twitter.

The bridge collapse occurred just hours before US President Joe Biden is scheduled to arrive in the city for a speech about its infrastructure. Biden will proceed with the trip as planned despite the bridge collapse and will stay in touch with officials on the ground about the incident, the White House said.

There were several vehicles on the bridge when it collapsed, resulting in at least 10 individuals suffering injuries, three of whom were taken to the hospital, Fire Chief Darryl Jones told reporters.

Biden is grateful to first responders who rushed to assist victims of the collapse and will continue to communicate with officials about additional assistance the administration could provide, the White House added.

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US Consumer Sentiment at Weakest Point in More Than 10 Years - Survey

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - US consumer sentiment is at its weakest point in more than a decade due to stifling inflation as Americans may view the impending interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve as a problem rather than solution to the economic crisis, the University of Michigan said in its consumer survey on Friday.

"Sentiment fell throughout January, posting a cumulative loss of 4.8%, sinking to its lowest level since November 2011," Director of Consumer Sentiment Surveys at the University of Michigan Richard Curtin said, referring to the university's Consumer Sentiment Index. "Although their

primary concern is rising inflation and falling real incomes, consumers may misinterpret the Fed's policy moves to slow the economy as part of the problem rather than part of the solution." The Federal Reserve slashed interest rates to near zero after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March of 2020, and kept them at that level to aid recovery. The US central bank also provided more than \$2 trillion of support to the US economy, buying at least \$120 billion of bonds and other assets monthly until last November.

Separately, the US federal government spent trillions of dollars more on pandemic relief support in that same timeframe. The significant sums of money spent, along with higher wage payouts by companies and supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic measures, has led to runaway inflation.

The Federal Reserve's preferred inflation gauge, the Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index, which excludes volatile food and energy prices, expanded by 4.9% year-on-year in December. For all of 2021, the broader index rose 5.8%. Historical data from the Commerce Department showed it was the highest growth in inflation since 1983 for both December and last year.

The Federal Reserve has said three to four interest rate hikes may be needed this year to mitigate some of that inflation pressure and even then it would be nowhere near to getting price pressures under control.

"The danger is that consumers may overreact to these tiny nudges, especially given the uncertainties about the coronavirus and other heightened geopolitical risks," Curtin said. "Clear policy communication is insufficient if it does not also advance consumers' understanding of the economic tradeoffs involved and their plans to actively alleviate any undue harm."

Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis President Neel Kashkari said on Friday that the central bank was likely to have its first pandemic-era rate hike in March as widely expected.

But Kashkari said there could be a pause in the Federal Reserve's monetary tightening later in the spring season, which concludes on June 21. The central bank has three upcoming policy meetings between now and spring, with the first in mid-March, and the latter two in early May and mid-June.

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IMF Reaches Agreement With Argentina on Refinancing Country's Program - Statement
(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-8)

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a statement on Friday that it has reached an agreement with Argentina on the key policies on refinancing the country's debt.

"IMF staff and the Argentine authorities have reached an understanding on key policies as part of their ongoing discussions of an IMF-supported program," the statement said.

Both sides agreed on the path to fiscal consolidation, which will be a key policy anchor of the program, to gradually improve public finances and reduce monetary financing, the statement said.

This path will allow spending increases in such areas as infrastructure and science and technology, and will protect targeted social programs, the statement said.

"We agreed that a strategy to reduce energy subsidies in a progressive manner will be essential for improving the composition of government spending," the statement said.

IMF and Argentina also reached an understanding on the framework for monetary policy implementation and agreed that additional financial support from Argentina's international partners would help bolster the country's external resilience, the statement said.

The IMF team and the Argentine authorities agreed to continue cooperating in the coming weeks when final agreement on the program arrangement would be subject to approval of the IMF Executive Board.

The IMF-Argentina talks have been ongoing for months over the servicing of a \$40 billion loan from the 2018 program as pressure mounted on the Argentine authorities to secure an agreement that will let the government to borrow again to replenish its foreign-exchange reserves and overcome soaring inflation.

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UPDATE 2 - Bridge Collapses in Pittsburgh, Injures 10 People Hours Before Biden's Visit - Fire Chief

(Updates with more details in paras 6, 7; modifies headline, lede)

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - A bridge collapsed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, early on Friday and at least ten people suffered non-life-threatening injuries just hours before President Joe Biden was to arrive in to discuss the city's infrastructure.

"Please avoid the area of Forbes and Braddock for a confirmed bridge collapse. Fire, EMS [Emergency Medical Services] and Police responding. No reported injuries at this time," Pittsburgh Public Safety said via Twitter.

It added that there is a strong smell of natural gas at the site of the incident and urged people to avoid the area.

"Gas line has been cut. Updates on injuries will be provided once PIO [Public Information Officers] is on scene," it said.

The local chapter of the Red Cross said it has been contacted to provide victim assistance. Fire Chief Darryl Jones told reporters that at least ten people suffered non-life-threatening injuries, but three of them were taken to a hospital.

Jones explained there were three to four vehicles on the bridge when it collapsed and rescue teams are still trying to ensure they have removed everyone from under the structure.

Meanwhile, the White House said Biden has been informed about the accident and their team is in touch with state and local officials on the ground, spokesperson Jen Psaki said via Twitter.

"[The president] is grateful to the first responders who rushed to assist the drivers who were on the bridge at the time. The President will proceed with trip planned for today and will stay in touch with officials on the ground about additional assistance we can provide," Psaki added.

The Pittsburgh police told the local WTAE-TV channel that no serious injuries have been reported.

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Israel Purchases 5Mln Novavax Vaccines Against COVID-19 - Company

WASHINGTON, January 28 (Sputnik) - The Israeli government has signed a deal to purchase 5 million doses of the Novavax COVID-19 vaccine, the American pharmaceutical company said on Friday.

"Novavax and Israel's Ministry of Health today announced an agreement for the purchase of NVX-CoV2373, the company's recombinant nanoparticle protein-based COVID-19 vaccine candidate with Matrix-M™ adjuvant." the statement said, adding that this "would be the first protein-based alternative available in Israel."

Initially, Novavax will send "5 million doses of its protein-based vaccine with an option for Israel to purchase an additional 5 million doses," it added.

The company's president and CEO, Stanley Erck, noted that Israel has been at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19.

"We thank the Israeli Ministry of Health for their commitment to providing a protein-based COVID-19 vaccine option, based on well-understood technology, to the people of Israel," he said.

In December, the World Health Organization recommended Nuvaxovid, a COVID-19 vaccine developed by Novavax, for emergency use. The company says that it has started work on developing an "Omicron-specific construct" of the antigen in its COVID-19 vaccine as part of a two-pronged strategy to curb the spread of the new coronavirus variant.

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UN Security Council Will Discuss Ukraine on Monday at US Request - President UNITED NATIONS, January 28 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council is scheduled to discuss the situation in Ukraine on January 31 at 15:00 GMT, the Security Council president, Mona Juul of Norway, said on Friday.

"There will be a meeting on Monday called by the US," Juul said. "We think it is a positive development ... We think that the Security Council should express itself on the acute Ukraine situation."

Irish Ambassador to the United Nations, Geraldine Byrne Nason, said she expects the meeting to help ease tensions and provide information to assess the facts of what is happening on the ground.

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Russian Deputy Envoy Hopes UNSC Will Reject US Request to Hold Meeting on Ukraine

UNITED NATIONS, January 28 (Sputnik) - Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Friday he hopes UN Security Council member states will not support the US request to convene a meeting on Ukraine.

"I can't recall another occasion when a Security Council member proposed to discuss its own baseless allegations and assumptions as a threat to international order from someone else," Polyanskiy said via Twitter. "Hopefully fellow UN Security Council members will not support this clear PR stunt shameful for the reputation of UN Security Council."