

2/11/22 Friday

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What is the Rodchenkov Act the US is Threatening to Sue Russian Olympic Skating Coaches Under?

By - Morgan Artyukhina

After the Russian Olympic skating team took the Gold following Kamila Valieva's first-ever quadruple jump by a woman, it soon emerged that she had failed a drug test taken in December. Now, the US is threatening to prosecute her coaches under a highly questionable US law.

Travis Tygart, head of the US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA), [told Reuters on Friday](#) that US prosecutors could soon bring charges against Valieva's coaches under the Rodchenkov Anti-Doping Act (RADA), which then-US President Donald Trump signed into law in 2020. The vaguely-worded law seeks to "impose criminal sanctions on certain persons involved in international doping fraud conspiracies" if they affect the result of US athletes at the event, and to "provide restitution for victims of such conspiracies."

It was named after Russian whistleblower Grigory Rodchenkov, a former director of the Russian Anti-Doping Center laboratory.

"It shall be unlawful for any person, other than an athlete, to knowingly carry into effect, attempt to carry into effect, or conspire with any other person to carry into effect a scheme in commerce to influence by use of a prohibited substance or prohibited method any major international sports competition," [the law states](#).

In defining these terms, it defers to the UNESCO International Convention against Doping in Sport, [which defines an](#) "anti-doping rule violation" as "the presence of a prohibited substance or its metabolites or markers in an athlete's bodily specimen," as well as various efforts to traffic in such substances, manipulate test results, or refuse to take a test.

The law cannot be brought against minors. However, it claims to have "extraterritorial jurisdiction," meaning it can be used against people who are not US citizens and in connection to violations that affect US athletes in "major international sport competitions."

As punishment, the law carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in a US prison and/or \$250,000 in fines if just one person is prosecuted, or \$1 million if more than one is prosecuted. It also allows the US to seize any property used or intended to be used to violate RADA.

When the RADA bill was first introduced in March 2020, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), a foundation created at the initiative of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), [had serious qualms](#) about the bill's effects, especially its extraterritorial nature.

WADA President [Witold Bańka said in a statement](#) that the bill could create overlapping laws that stand in the way of harmonization of anti-doping rules; that it would discourage rather than encourage whistleblowers to come forward; and spark other extraterritorial laws that would be used for discriminatory purposes against athletes, such as targeting athletes of specific nationalities, which would "set off a chain reaction" hurting all athletes.

Could the US Use RADA Against Valieva's Coaches?

Because the Olympic skater is just 15 years old, the Rodchenkov Act cannot be used to target her, but the US may try to use it against her coaches, Daniil Gleikhengauz, Eteri Tutberidze and Sergei Dudakov. The extraterritoriality of the law means that Tutberidze could potentially be arrested and extradited to the United States if she visits a country that has an extradition treaty with Washington.

However, several key facts about Valieva's case mean RADA is totally inapplicable and the threats are nothing more than a storm in a teacup.

According to the [International Testing Agency](#) (ITA), the leading anti-doping agency for the Beijing Winter Olympics, Valieva failed a December 25, 2021, drug test at the 2022 Russian Figure Skating Championships in Saint Petersburg, Russia, which returned a result showing the banned heart medication trimetazidine. The results of the test were obtained by the Russian Anti-Doping Agency ([RUSADA](#)) on [February 7, 2022](#), the day of Valieva's [gold medal performance](#), due to a severe backup at the Stockholm, Sweden, laboratory created by COVID-19 tests.

When RUSADA received the test result, Valieva's participation in the Olympics was immediately suspended. The following day, she appealed the agency's decision and the day after that, her suspension was rescinded and she was once again free to compete.

According to the [Russian Olympic Committee](#), Valieva has passed several drug tests since the December 25 test, including those in Beijing necessary to compete in the games.

In other words, her competition at the Olympics was legal and she did not have any banned substances in her system unfairly aiding her performance. Her team legitimately beat all her competitors, including the American team that took Silver and would stand to benefit from an invalidation of Valieva's performance.

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Watch: China Tests Out New Prototype of World's Largest Amphibious Aircraft

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Seaplanes are extremely versatile aircraft, able to land on any river, lake, or stretch of sea, plus on standard land runways, if they have regular landing gear. Developing one has been a top priority for China, not just because it has ample waterways, but because it sorely needs a powerful new rescue aircraft.

The Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC) said on Thursday it had fired up the four turboprop engines on its AG600-1003 prototype, which it hopes will become China's standard flying boat.

Given the name Kunlong, the aircraft was finished being assembled on December 26, 2021, and all four engines checked out in the test, China Central Television ([CCTV](#)) [reported](#).

"The AG600 aircraft has completed more than 100 hours of scientific test flights, accumulating and acquiring a large amount of flight test data," AVIC said in a statement, according to the [South China Morning Post](#).

“The research team improved the key design theories, methods and verifications such as in aerodynamics and hydrodynamics for the amphibious aircraft and made further breakthroughs in the key technologies of amphibious aircraft design.”

With a length of 121 feet and a wingspan of 127 feet, the AG600 is about the size of a Boeing 737 airliner, and bigger than the largest seaplane presently in service: Japan’s ShinMaywa US-2. The plane is expected to fill valuable roles in search and rescue, firefighting, and marine rescue, as well as other maritime roles.

Like other flying boats, the bottom of the AG600’s fuselage doubles as a boat hull, allowing it to float on the surface of the water. It also has two pontoon stabilizers on its wingtips to keep it from rolling over while sitting in the water. However, it also has retractable landing gear that allow it to takeoff and land from ordinary landing strips, and when the gear retracts it folds into pontoons on the side of the fuselage that also add to the plane’s stability on the water.

Its four engines are WJ-6 turboprop engines, a license-built version of the Soviet AI-20 engine built by Ivchenko design bureau and used in China’s Shaanxi Y-8 and Y-9 aircraft, as well as Tu-4, the Soviet Union’s reverse-engineered B-29 bomber, and the Il-38 maritime patrol aircraft still in use by the Russian Federation.

However, this isn’t the first iteration of the AG600. The first version [flew for the first time](#) in 2018, but a comparison between that aircraft and the present one shows extensive redesigning of its hull, as well as repositioning of its cockpit to be higher and further back.

China presently has a handful of Harbin SH-5 flying boats, which is almost as large as the US-2 and dates to the 1980s. It’s unclear if they would be retired or complemented by the AG600 once the newer plane enters service. New Zealand and Malaysia [have expressed interest](#) in buying the plane, and AVIC may market it to island nations, but it reportedly plans to fill relatively few orders for the seaplane.

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Sullivan Dismisses Russian ‘Invasion Order’ Rumors But Still Won’t Support Impending Attack Claims

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The US claimed for months that a Russian invasion of Ukraine was “imminent” before trying to unring the bell in recent weeks. However, that hasn’t stopped the Biden administration from simply repeating that an attack could happen “at any time” every few days, or from refusing to show journalists a single shred of evidence.

The Biden administration has gotten its messages tangled once again, with “Western and defense officials” telling the US Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) that the Kremlin had handed Russian generals invasion plans and a chief military adviser having to publicly walk that story back.

“We are in the window when an invasion could begin at any time, should Vladimir Putin decide to order it,” White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters at a regular press conference on Friday.

"I will not comment on the details of our intelligence information, but I want to be clear: it could begin during the Olympics, despite a lot of speculation that it would only happen after the Olympics. As we've said before, we are ready either way," he added.

He said that if Russia does invade Ukraine, the US would "respond decisively" with a slew of sanctions in conjunction with several other US allies, and "changes to NATO and the American force posture along the eastern flank of NATO," as well as "continued support to Ukraine." "Whatever happens next, the West is more united than it's been in years," Sullivan said, adding that NATO has been "enhanced."

In addition, the national security adviser urged all Americans in Ukraine to leave the country in the next 48 hours, claiming "the risk is now high enough and the threat is now immediate enough that this is what prudence demands."

Sullivan then laid out what the White House says it expects a supposed Russian invasion of Ukraine to look like, saying it would "begin with aerial bombing and missile attacks that could obviously kill civilians without regard to their nationality."

"A subsequent ground invasion would involve the onslaught of a massive force," he added.

Competing Narratives

However, Sullivan was competing with another narrative circulating on social media on Friday afternoon. PBS correspondent [Nick Schifrin tweeted](#) that "The US believes Russian President Vladimir Putin has decided to invade Ukraine, and has communicated that decision to the Russian military, three Western and defense officials tell me."

"The US expects the invasion to begin next week, six US and Western officials tell me," Schifrin said, adding: "US officials anticipate a horrific, bloody campaign that begins with two days or aerial bombardment and electronic warfare, followed by an invasion, with the possible goal of regime change."

Sullivan was asked about the PBS report at the presser and said the report "does not accurately capture what the US government's view is today. Our view is that we do not believe he has made any kind of final decision - or we don't know that he has made any final decision and we have not communicated that to anybody."

"We have not seen anything that says a final decision has been taken and the 'go' order has been given," he added.

Western Media Serves Governments' Political Order'

The Russian Foreign Ministry also swatted down the reports, telling Sputnik that Western media, contrary to the standards of honest journalism, was spreading "blatant misinformation" and engaging in "manipulations in order to introduce the thesis about Moscow's aggressive intentions into public opinion."

"In late 2021 - early 2022, the global media scene has been seeing a campaign unprecedented in its scale and sophistication, the purpose of which is to convince the global community that the Russian Federation is preparing an invasion of the territory of Ukraine," the ministry said, adding that both the media and the NATO powers had also ignored "the detailed and reasoned explanations of Russian officials" and Moscow's military concerns, particularly over the expansion of NATO and its continued military-technical assistance to Kiev.

"Essentially, the Western media served the political order of their governments by coordinated dissemination of unreliable information, participating in a full-scale information war," the ministry added.

Who Needs Evidence?

At the presser, Sullivan was also challenged on his refusal to offer any evidence to support his claims. Last week, State Department spokesperson Ned Price [attracted widespread condemnation](#) from journalists after a back-and-forth with Associated Press reporter Matthew Lee about his refusal to provide evidence Russia was planning a false flag attack to start a war with Ukraine by saying the journalist should find “solace” in Russian reports if he doesn’t believe the US government.

Lee invoked the false evidence used to justify the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and reporters on Friday did the same. Sullivan said the “fundamental distinction” between the two situations was that in 2003, the US wanted to start a war, whereas “we are trying to stop a war.”

He also said the US was sending 3,000 more troops from the US Army’s 82nd Airborne Division to Poland, a NATO ally on the border of both Russia and Ukraine, as part of “defensive deployments ... intended to deter aggression against NATO.” He added that the US had no intent of going to war with Russia and the troops were not being deployed for combat.

In light of the latest back and forth, it was also confirmed by Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov that - at the US’ request - Putin and US President Joe Biden would be holding a phone conversation on Saturday.

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Australia Officially Declares Koalas an Endangered Species

By - Evan Craighead

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government announced in January that it would commit some \$50 million toward long-term protection and recovery efforts for the country's koala population. However, conservationists have argued that the government should stop throwing money at the issue and instead develop an explicit recovery plan.

Australia has moved to list koalas as 'endangered,' boosting their level of protection from the previous designation of 'vulnerable,' [according to a Friday memo issued by Minister for the Environment Sussan Ley](#).

The move covers koalas in New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, and Queensland. "We are taking unprecedented action to protect the koala, working with scientists, medical researchers, veterinarians, communities, states, local governments and Traditional Owners," Ley announced.

The environment minister attributed the animals endangerment to drought, bushfires, deforestation, urbanization, and disease, including a chlamydia epidemic running rampant among Australia's koalas.

"Together we can ensure a healthy future for the koala and this decision, along with the total \$74 million we have committed to koalas since 2019 will play a key role in that process," Ley stated. Of that \$74 million earmarked for koala conservation, \$47 million will go toward protecting and restoring koala habitat. Around \$8.7 million will support koala health, genetic research, and medical support.

Another \$12 million has been committed for the National Koala Monitoring Program, which is tasked with assessing and responding to changes in koala population size, among other factors. Canberra's Friday decision came at the [joint recommendation](#) of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), the World Wide Fund for Nature Australia, and Humane Society International.

The April 2020 nomination cited two scientific reports that revealed the koala populations in Queensland and NSW have, respectively, plummeted by at least 50% and up to 62%, since 2001.

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Canadian Judge Orders End to Protesters' 'Freedom Convoy' Blockade at Ambassador Bridge
By - Evan Craighead

Canadians decrying their country's COVID-19 vaccination requirements have assembled in protest via a truck blockade at Ambassador Bridge, the busiest US-Canadian border crossing. The demonstration has severely disrupted the auto industry, prompting companies like Ford and General Motors to shut down plants and scale back production.

Following a four-and-a-half-hour virtual hearing, Ontario Superior Court Chief Justice Geoffrey Morawetz has ordered protesters at Ambassador Bridge to cease their 5-day blockade.

The order is set to go into effect at 7:00 p.m. local time on Friday.

"This gives individuals the opportunity and the time to clear the area," Morawetz declared.

The Windsor Police Service has also warned demonstrators that those still blocking the streets after the aforementioned time may be subject to arrest, and their vehicles may be seized by authorities.

"Charges and/or convictions related to the unlawful activity associated with the demonstration may lead to denial in crossing the USA border," [Windsor Police warned](#).

Hours earlier, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau assured US President Joe Biden that Ottawa intends to take "quick action" to deal with protesters blocking the key US-Canada trade corridor.

According to the [White House readout of the leaders' conversation](#), the nations agreed that individuals protesting Canada's COVID-19 vaccine mandates by blocking bridges and crossings "are having significant direct impacts on citizens' lives and livelihoods."

Canadian Transport Minister Omar Alghabra argued that the supply chain disruptions triggered by the demonstration have amounted to an "[illegal economic blockade](#) against the people of Ontario and against all Canadians."

Additionally, the Canadian province of Ontario moved to declare a state of emergency, with Premier Doug Ford arguing that it is illegal to impede the movement of people, goods, and services along critical infrastructures, such as bridges.

Despite the threat of being arrested and criminally charged for their protest, many Canadian truckers have claimed that they have no intention of packing up and heading home.

"We're not caving in, we're not moving, we're not backing down," Canadian trucker Joshua Singh told Fox News, prior to the court decision. "Just know that every trucker out here, we're willing to go to jail, we're willing to lose our trucks."

Protesters have demanded the Canadian government lift all mandates related to COVID-19 vaccines.

US officials have warned that the sentiments of the 'Freedom Convoy' demonstration could bleed over into the states.

In a recent memo, the US Department of Homeland Security told Biden that it "has received reports of truck drivers potentially planning to block roads in major metropolitan cities in the United States in protest of, among other things, vaccine mandates."

A group is expected to assemble in California as early as mid-February, and may coincide with Super Bowl LVI, which is slated to be held at the SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California.

The DHS warned that such a demonstration could severely impede transportation, federal government operations, and emergency services.

Potential counter-protests could also complicate the situation.

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Beijing Pledges to Support Hong Kong as City Observes Record Number of COVID-19 Infections

By - Evan Craighead

After months of no COVID-19-related deaths, health officials in Hong Kong have logged at least five fatalities related to the contagious disease this week. The newly-reported deaths come as the Chinese special administrative region has observed a drastic uptick in new COVID-19 infections, drastically limiting the availability of hospital beds.

Hong Kong officials are set to meet with mainland Chinese counterparts in the linking city of Shenzhen on Saturday to discuss measures to support the global financial hub's coronavirus strategy.

John Lee, Hong Kong's Chief Secretary for Administration, Health Secretary Sophia Chan, and Security Chief Chris Tang are expected to attend the February 12 meeting.

News of the planned discussion came as the city observed an increase in new daily COVID-19 infections, rising to 1,325 known infections and 1,500 preliminary positive cases, according to Chuang Shuk-kwan, a senior health official.

"Our health care system is overloaded, it's really beyond capacity," [Chuang told Reuters](#).

Many have attributed the spike in cases to Lunar New Year celebrations, including travel.

Despite containment efforts, the city's most-recent wave has brought about more than 1,000 daily COVID-19 infections for the first time since the pandemic began.

China's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office issued a statement on Thursday expressing that Beijing was "highly concerned" about the spike in Hong Kong's COVID-19 cases, which amounted to the city's fifth wave.

Officials from mainland China are said to be prepping thousands of lab and medical personnel, as well as millions of COVID-19 testing kits, to assist with public health efforts in Hong Kong. "The HKMAO, Hong Kong liaison office, National Health Commission, Guangdong and Shenzhen officials will join Hong Kong senior officials to go through Hong Kong's wish list and decide on the best way going forward," a Beijing-based source [told the South China Morning Post](#).

"The first step will be beefing up Hong Kong's testing capability," the source detailed, referring to the upcoming talks between Hong Kong and Beijing officials. "Contact tracing, quarantine measures will also be discussed."

Hong Kong officials also reported that a shipment of fresh produce was disrupted by the recent wave of COVID-19 infections. Mainland authorities are seeking to deploy more workers to border checkpoints that process trucks.

"As long as Hong Kong asks, the motherland will surely respond ... Hand in hand, we will surely be able to overcome the epidemic soon," reads a government statement issued by the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office.

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SCOTUS Again Rejects NYC Teachers' Appeal to Block COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate in Public Schools

By - Evan Craighead

Public school employees in New York City are facing termination on Monday, February 14, unless they waive their right to continue litigation or drop their objection to receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. As of Friday, almost 3,000 NYC municipal workers (0.8% of a roughly 370,000-person workforce) were eligible for layoffs.

The Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) has again denied a group of New York City public school teachers appealing to block the COVID-19 vaccine mandate for city employees who were not given a religious exemption.

SCOTUS Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who handles emergency appeals from the area that includes NYC, rejected the request for an emergency injunction on behalf of 15 people facing termination due to their refusal to get the COVID-19 vaccine.

The 15 NYC employees involved include a handful of public school teachers, supervisors, and staff.

According to the teachers' filing, the employees claimed they were suspended without pay for a period of four months, and will be terminated from employment on Monday without the injunction.

Sotomayor did not comment on the matter, nor did she refer the appeal to the full court.

A similar decision was issued by Sotomayor in October, 2021, greenlighting the city's enforcement of its COVID-19 vaccine mandate for some 148,000 public school employees.

According to NBC News, any employees seeking religious exemptions may have had their request denied because a religious official must support the individual's exemption.

The SCOTUS decision comes a month after the [high court ruled that the federal vaccine-or-test mandate](#) implemented by US President Joe Biden's administration amounted to "a significant encroachment into the Lives—and health—of a vast number of employees."

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Photos: NASA Publishes First Images Captured Via James Webb Space Telescope
By - Evan Craighead

Late last month, it was reported that NASA's \$10 billion James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) was nearing operation, after its initial December 25 launch. The JWST is humanity's largest and most complex space science observatory and is currently undergoing a monthslong commissioning process with final calibrations and adjustments.

NASA's JWST team announced in a Friday release that the telescope had achieved another milestone by capturing its first images of a star. The captures come as the team conducts its process of aligning the spacecraft's primary mirror via the Near Infrared Camera (NIRCam). "The entire Webb team is ecstatic at how well the first steps of taking images and aligning the telescope are proceeding. We were so happy to see that light makes its way into NIRCam," said Marcia Rieke, principal investigator for the NIRCam instrument and a regents professor of astronomy at the University of Arizona.

This image mosaic was created by pointing the telescope at a bright, isolated star in the constellation Ursa Major known as HD 84406.

The image, which features a bright and isolated star called HD 84406, will be used as the observatory's foundation to align and focus the telescope in the months to come. The team's primary goal is to adjust all 18 of the spacecraft's primary mirror segments until all 18 images become a single star.

"Taking so much data right on the first day required all of Webb's science operations and data processing systems here on Earth working smoothly with the observatory in space right from the start," noted Marshall Perrin, deputy telescope scientist for the JWST and an astronomer at the Space Telescope Science Institute. "And we found light from all 18 segments very near the center early in that search! This is a great starting point for mirror alignment."

The first images captured by the orbital observation platform are of a star approximately 258 light years from Earth.

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US Snowboarding Coach Peter Foley Under Investigation After Ex-Olympian Alleges Sexual Misconduct
By - Evan Craighead

As Team USA's Lindsey Jacobellis and Nick Baumgartner celebrated their mixed snowboardcross victory on Saturday, the gold medals shared the spotlight with an ongoing scandal in the US snowboard team, including accusations of sexual misconduct that have led to a head coach being restricted from the Olympic village.

US Ski & Snowboard confirmed on Friday that it is investigating allegations of sexual misconduct against Team USA snowboard coach Peter Foley by former US Olympic snowboarder Callan Chythlook-Sifsof.

Since February 6, Chythlook-Sifsof, a member of the 2010 US Olympic snowboard team, accused Foley of sexual harassment and claimed that he had taken "naked photos of female athletes for over a decade."

"I cannot watch another Olympic Games without saying this," Chythlook-Sifsof detailed in one post, which tagged Foley and the US snowboard team.

The former Olympian alleged that Foley made inappropriate sexual comments to her and another female teammate about a "very young Argentinian girl" who was present at a race in Lake Louise, Alberta, Canada, in 2014.

Foley has served as the US snowboard head coach since it was founded in 1994.

"US Ski and Snowboard has been made aware of the recent allegations," the statement said.

"We take these allegations very seriously and the allegations are being investigated."

Foley has denied wrongdoing.

"I was totally surprised by the allegations," the Team USA coach told The New York Times on Saturday. "I vehemently deny the allegations. I've been doing my best to concentrate on supporting the athletes at the Olympics."

The governing body for US Olympic skiing and snowboarding is also probing US snowboardcross Olympian Hagen Kearney regarding allegations of harassment, inappropriate behavior and repeated use of a racial epithet.

Kearney, who placed 17th in a snowboardcross event on Thursday, took to social media on Saturday to acknowledge that he used the n-word in an argument involving him and Chythlook-Sifsof.

"At no point during this instance did I fake punch at her, follow her, shout the N word repeatedly, and I have certainly never made rape jokes while being on the team," the Olympian said, noting that he had "profusely" apologized.

Kearney claimed that coaches were "promptly informed" of his behavior, which put his spot on the team in jeopardy.

US Olympians Lindsey Jacobellis and Nick Baumgartner spoke highly of Foley during their press spot after securing a gold medal in mixed snowboardcross.

"I can speak very highly of his character and he's always been supporting me through everything that I've gone through," Jacobellis told reporters.

Baumgartner told reporters that it was a "bummer" that Foley was restricted from the Olympic village, as that also meant that he had to miss out on video review.

"He knows what to do to make us better on that day," Baumgartner said of Foley.

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US Judge Rejects Ghislaine Maxwell's Request to Seal Motions for New Trial

By - Evan Craighead

Ghislaine Maxwell, who conspired with convicted child sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, has been convicted of child sex trafficking and several other offenses in connection with the grooming and sexual abuse of underage girls. Her legal team is now vying for a retrial after a juror claimed in interviews that he had been sexually abused as child.

Lawyers for Ghislaine Maxwell must openly file any retrial motions related to the convicted child sex trafficker's case, according to a Friday ruling by US District Judge Alison J. Nathan.

Nathan argued that public access to Maxwell's motions for retrial, along with any resulting publicity, do not violate the 60-year-old's right to fair proceedings.

"The Court is unpersuaded by the Defendant's concern that media interest in the motion warrants temporary sealing of the documents in their entirety," read Nathan's ruling.

The judge declared that prosecutors and the defense must both propose "narrowly tailored" redactions.

Maxwell's team argued that documents related to a retrial should be temporarily sealed because an early public filing "will provide a roadmap of the defense's examination of Juror 50 and will allow him to plan out and tailor his responses, or even potentially spoliage evidence, to paint himself and his conduct in the best light possible."

Following the trial, 'Juror 50,' identified as Scotty David, gave a series of interviews in which he claimed that he was a survivor of sexual abuse as a child.

Lawyers believe that David, who reportedly failed to disclose his history of sexual abuse during jury selection, may have swayed the votes of fellow jury members after revealing his alleged trauma.

David, claims he "flew through" the questionnaire on sex abuse and cannot recall how he responded to each question. However, the juror maintains that he answered the questions truthfully.

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Rapper Kodak Black Among Four Shot Outside West Hollywood Party for Justin Bieber

By - Evan Craighead

Justin Bieber, his wife, Hailey Baldwin, Drake, Khloe Kardashian, Tobey Maguire, rapper Kodak Black, and other celebrities flocked to 'The Nice Guy' restaurant early Saturday morning to attend an after-party that ended in gunfire and multiple hospitalizations. LA authorities believe a physical fight predated the multi-victim shooting.

LAPD Officer Lizeth Lomeli confirmed in a Saturday statement that four men—aged 60, 22, 20, and 19—suffered gunshot-related injuries during a Saturday morning incident in West Hollywood.

Authorities did not identify the injured by name.

As LA detectives have called on the public to assist in identifying a gunman. Social media footage and exclusive footage from TMZ.com shows rapper Kodak Black mingling and snapping photos with fellow artist Gunna just moments before a chaotic brawl breaks out.

Be advised, the following content may offend some audiences.

Gunshots are heard soon after, causing party guests to scatter and scramble for cover.

TMZ was among the first to report that Kodak Black, real name Bill Kapri, was among those shot early Saturday morning.

"Sources with direct knowledge" told the outlet that the rapper's injuries were non-life-threatening. Based on video footage, it appears Kodak Black was struck in the leg. Saturday's gunfire incident comes as one of many for Kodak Black, who was notably pardoned by US President Donald Trump early last year.

In April 2021, the rapper's bodyguard was shot outside a McDonald's in Florida, not long after his Cultur3 Fest music festival performance. The bodyguard survived the shooting.

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Beijing Agrees to Fulfill Hong Kong's Support Requests as City Grapples With Record COVID Infections

By - Evan Craighead

As Hong Kong grapples with record COVID-19 infections and the reemergence of related fatalities, leadership from the financial hub met with mainland Chinese officials in neighboring Shenzhen on Saturday to lay out a number of requests and discuss solutions for the embattled city amid its fifth wave.

Hong Kong Chief Secretary John Lee announced on Saturday that the city will not be imposing a citywide lockdown to combat the current wave of COVID-19 infections, which have reached a daily record of 1,514 new infections.

The decision comes as mainland China pledged to assist in enhancing Hong Kong's medical capacity.

"At the meeting we were all on the same wavelength," Lee said to reporters after the meeting in Shenzhen. "All support will be provided. Rapid tests and help building isolation facilities are things we agreed on."

Lee was joined by Hong Kong Health Secretary Sophia Chan and Security Chief Chris Tang, who also attended the meeting with mainland Chinese officials.

Overall, some 6,567 positive COVID-19 cases have been reported in Hong Kong since Sunday, and at least three COVID-19-related fatalities were logged this week, including the death of a four-year-old boy.

"I hope Hongkongers will be mentally prepared," Lee said in his public address, as reported by the South China Morning Post. "We are now in the toughest battle with this virus in two years, and we believe infection numbers will remain high.

As of this article's publication, hospital beds in Hong Kong remain above 90% capacity.

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University of Alabama to Cease Honoring KKK Leader, Rename Hall After School's First Black Student

By - Evan Craighead

Autherine Lucy, born October 5, 1929, made history in 1956 as the first Black student enrolled at the University of Alabama. Lucy attended classes for three days before being suspended due to segregationist pressure—a move that led to the university president's resignation. She later returned to the school, completing a Master's degree in 1992.

The University of Alabama's College of Education building, which was previously named after a leader of the Ku Klux Klan, will be renamed after Autherine Lucy, 92, the first Black student to attend classes at the university, and a trailblazer for the 1963 enrollments of Vivian Malone and James Hood.

"I am so grateful to all who think that this naming opportunity has the potential to motivate and encourage others to embrace the importance of education, and to have the courage to commit to things that seek to make a difference in the lives of others," said Autherine Lucy Foster, now 92 years old.

After earning a bachelor's degree from Miles College in 1952, Lucy and Pollie Myers, an activist with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, applied to the University of Alabama to further their education.

Lucy and Myers' applications were submitted two years before the Brown v. Board of Education verdict declared school segregation unconstitutional.

Although admitted, the public university attempted to retroactively reject the women's applications because they were not white. The rejection was challenged by the NAACP and future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, who secured a court order for Lucy to attend the school.

Myers was allegedly rejected from enrollment due to having a child out of wedlock.

Despite being allowed to attend classes in 1956, Lucy was subjected to hateful language, protests against her enrollment and violent acts, including classmates pelting her with rotten eggs. She was also barred from the school's dormitories and dining halls.

After three days of violent protests, the school moved to expel Lucy, arguing that her case against the university amounted to slander.

Although Lucy's enrollment lasted a mere three days, her tenacity throughout the years-long enrollment debacle paved the way for James Hood and Vivian Malone, who attended the university amid integration efforts in 1963. By 1965, Malone was the first Black student to graduate from the university.

After years of struggling to find employment due to the notoriety of her case, Lucy was able to obtain a position in the Birmingham School system in the mid-1970s.

In 1988, the University of Alabama moved to annul Lucy's expulsion, allowing her to enroll and graduate with an M.A. in Education in 1992.

In its attempt to right a wrong, the school has taken a number of steps to honor Lucy, including the 2010 erection of a clock tower in her name.

The College of Education building, now Autherine Lucy Hall, was previously named Graves Hall, after two-term Alabama Governor Bibb Graves, a 'Grand Cyclops' of the KKK who received political backing and other support from the American white supremacist group.

Lucy's family requested her maiden name (rather than Foster) be used for the dedication, as it was her name at the time of enrollment.

Before reaching a final decision on Friday, the school considered renaming the building after both Graves and Lucy. The announcement to honor the conflicting figures did not go over well, as evidenced by an editorial in *The Crimson White*, the university's student newspaper.

"Graves' Klan membership was a convenient stepping stone in his political career. He shed his white robes once they no longer suited his political purpose. While he became known as one of the most progressive governors in the South, his ability to do so came with the endorsement of a white supremacist organization," [wrote the paper's editorial board](#).

"Graves was a prominent figure in the Klan. He received a gold passport and carried the title of Grand Cyclops. White supremacy protected Graves and endangered Lucy. Commemorating their legacies together is disingenuous, but such false comparisons are par for the course in the state of Alabama."

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'Thought It Was The End': US Flight With Unruly Passenger Descends Nearly 9,500 Meters in 8 Minutes

By - Evan Craighead

American Airlines Flight 1775 from California's Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) to Reagan National Airport (DCA) in Washington, DC, was diverted to Kansas City International Airport (MCI) after making an unplanned, emergency diversion on Sunday afternoon. At least one person was detained by authorities upon landing.

A spokesperson for American Airlines confirmed in a same-day statement that an unruly passenger triggered the abrupt diversion of Flight 1775 on Sunday, approximately three hours after the flight departed LAX at 9:15 a.m. PT.

"American Airlines flight 1775 with service from Los Angeles (LAX) to Washington, DC (DCA) diverted to Kansas City (MCI) due to an unruly passenger," the spokesperson detailed. "We're grateful to our crew members, who are consistently dedicated to the safety and care of our customers and who handled the circumstances with the utmost skill and professionalism."

The diverted flight landed safely at MCI around 2:28 p.m. CT, the spokesperson confirmed. No injury report accompanied the release.

Officers with the Federal Bureau of Investigation [were reportedly on the MCI tarmac](#), as unruly passengers on commercial flights are subject to federal charges.

Although officials have yet to detail what led to the in-flight altercation, Twitter user Mouaz Moustafa (@SoccerMouaz) in several social media posts detailed that passengers of Flight 1775 assisted American Airlines crew members in subduing the suspect.

As the altercation ensued, pilots diverted the flight, prompting a descent of approximately 30,900 feet (9,418 meters) in less than eight minutes.

"Everyone on the plane thought it was the end for everybody," Mouaz detailed, noting that passengers struggled to restrain the man as the Airbus A321 made its diversion.

At one point, a coffee pot was reportedly weaponized to make the unruly passenger comply. The offending passenger was seen bloodied as authorities wearing gloves carried him off the aircraft.

Passengers were reportedly free to continue their respective trips to Washington, DC, after [providing witness interviews with FBI agents](#).

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Sen. Lindsey Graham: Trump 'Hurting His Chances' at Reelection by Fixating on 2020 Loss
By - Evan Craighead

Earlier this month, former US President Donald Trump chastised Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), referring to his longtime ally as a 'Republican in Name Only' (RINO) after the US lawmaker openly disagreed with him on whether a presidential pardon should be extended to Trump supporters prosecuted for participating in the January 6, 2021, insurrection.

Although the Republican nomination is reportedly Donald Trump's "for the taking" in 2024, the former US president should consider adopting talking points that aren't related to his 2020 loss to President Joe Biden, Sen. Lindsey Graham declared, during a Sunday appearance on ABC's "This Week."

"I am not contesting the 2020 election," Graham said, qualifying that there are election reforms that need to happen. "The 2020 election is over for me."

"Donald Trump is the most consequential Republican in the Republican Party today," Graham told George Stephanopoulos. "He has a great chance of being president again in 2024, he'll start comparing what he did as president versus what's going on now, and how to fix the mess we're in."

Trump would be placing himself in a losing position if he "looks backward," the Senate Republican said.

"If he continues to talk about the 2020 election, I think it hurts his cause and quite frankly, hurts the Republican Party," Graham said.

While Graham and Trump have consistently had each others' back in recent election cycles, the former's once-staunch support for the latter has waned since the deadly January 6, 2021, storming of the US Capitol building.

Speaking from the Senate Floor, Graham delivered a fiery speech in which he told his Republican colleagues to "count me out" in matters related to delaying the election. "If you're a conservative, this is the most offensive concept in the world, that a single person could disenfranchise 155 million people," Graham said at the time, concluding that Biden and Harris were "lawfully elected."

Despite claiming in an interview that "he'd never been so humiliated and embarrassed for the country" after the January 6 insurrection, Graham traveled to Florida one month later to visit Trump at his Mar-a-Lago resort.

The senator may not be caught playing a round of golf with Trump, but it appears that Graham and the one-term GOP president have at least a working relationship.

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Show Business: NFL Was 'Aware' Eminem Would Kneel in Solidarity With Kaepernick's Protest
By - Evan Craighead

It was previously reported that no artist would be permitted to kneel during the Super Bowl LVI halftime performance, following a behind-the-scenes disagreement between Super Bowl officials and those performing alongside Dr. Dre. The kneel is a callback to ex-NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick's peaceful protest against racial injustice.

Eminem, one of several artists to perform with hip-hop legend Dr. Dre on Sunday, appears to have defied the National Football League when he took a knee for his portion of the star-studded halftime show.

Sources have since asserted to the New York Times, however, that Eminem's kneel during his performance of "Lose Yourself" was well-rehearsed, and not as radical as some may have perceived.

Brian McCarthy, a spokesperson for the NFL, told the outlet that the league was aware of Eminem's plans to kneel because officials "watched it during rehearsals this week."

Puck's Eriq Gardner previously reported that Eminem was told to nix the kneel from his performance, as the NFL wanted to avoid a "divisive culture war moment." The report also claimed that rapper Snoop Dogg, who has been open about gang affiliation, was asked to not wear certain articles of clothing, like blue bandanas.

Kaepernick notably led a kneeling movement in the National Football League (NFL) to protest police brutality against Black people in the US.

His form of protest during the national anthem performances before NFL games was construed by some to be disrespectful to the American flag and US service members.

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Louisiana Senate Candidate Burns Confederate Flag in Political Advertisement

By - Mary Manley

Gary Chambers is running for US Senate in Louisiana, and his message is clear: Black Americans are still suffering under what remains of and imitates systematic inequality structures created by the Confederacy. Though Chambers faces an uphill battle in the race for Senate, his political ads are drawing attention to issues surrounding inequality.

A Wednesday-released campaign ad from the Chambers camp saw the political candidate strategically shaking out a Confederate flag, carefully pinning it to a clothesline, dousing it in gasoline, and lighting it on fire - all while denouncing restrictive voting laws.

The Confederate flag, which was first designed amidst the Civil War, is seen by many as a symbol of racism and white supremacy. Photos from the [insurrection](#) on January 6 show many of these same flags, as well as QAnon and Neo-Nazi symbols and slogans, which were toted on clothing attire and flags.

"The attacks against Black people, our right to vote, and participate in this democracy are methodical," he [says](#) in the advertisement's voiceover. "Our system isn't broken, it's designed to do exactly what it's doing, which is producing measurable inequity."

This isn't the first time an ad from Chambers' campaign has sparked interest on social media. Chambers' advertisement, in which he smoked a rolled blunt of [marijuana](#) while his voiceover listed statistics associated with laws on the drug, generated 6.7 million views since it was posted on January 18.

"Black people are four times more likely to be arrested for marijuana laws than white people," says Chambers in his January political ad.

Chambers, 36, is a community activist from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He is currently running as the Democratic opponent to Republican Senator John Neely Kennedy, 70, who has held the position since 2017. Kennedy was first elected to the Senate with 61% of the vote in his state, and received former President Donald Trump's endorsement when he announced his reelection bid last year.

Kennedy has also voiced views on President Joe Biden's promise to nominate a Black woman to the Supreme Court, [saying](#) he wants Biden to put forward a Supreme Court nominee "who's not going to try to rewrite the Constitution every other Thursday to try to advance a 'woke agenda.'"

Chambers is facing a daunting race against Kennedy. He says that while there is a perception that Louisiana is mostly conservative, he believes there is still a key demographic who want issues surrounding racial inequality in the state to be addressed. "The demographics of this state say that we can do exactly what Georgia has done," said Chambers.

"We have a Democrat as our governor right now, which is something that is often lost: the only Democratic governor in the Deep South," he added. "This is a [winnable](#) state." Louisiana's population of Black Americans is [around](#) 33%.

Erick Sanchez, Chambers' senior adviser, said that the campaign was pleased with the reception of their advertisements. "Our ads are representative of Gary's passion to raise awareness for the issues that leave the often forgotten communities in this country behind," he said. "While the imagery might be deemed controversial by some, the harsh realities that are highlighted in these ads should be infuriating to all."

Chambers' involvement in the political race is not a new endeavor, he previously ran for a US House seat but was unable to clinch the win in the Bayou State.

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Maggie Haberman's New Book Has Trump 'Terrified,' Says Former Communications Chief
By - Mary Manley

Trump's former communications chief, Alyssa Farah, said Thursday that the former president is 'terrified' of what may surface from Maggie Haberman's new book "Confidence Man." Axios has already revealed an excerpt from the book which says Trump flushed files down his toilet, but according to Farah, that's just the tip of the iceberg.

[Farah](#) revealed that her former boss, US President Donald Trump, is 'terrified' of what Haberman's new book will reveal. During an appearance on "The View," she said she's still connected to people who are close to the former president, and referenced the breaking story on Trump flushing files down his White House toilet.

"I still talk to some folks in Trumpworld- the ones who have not engaged in criminality- the former president is terrified of Maggie Haberman's book. This is the first big anecdote, but there is quite a bit more to come," she said.

While writing her book, Haberman discovered that White House staff under Trump's presidency would "periodically find the toilet clogged- the engineer would have to come and fix it, and what the engineer would find would be wads of clumped up, wet, printed paper, such as notes that they believe he threw down the toilet," said Haberman in an interview with [CNN](#) on Thursday. "What it could be, could be anybody's guess, it could be Post-its, it could be notes he wrote to himself, it could be other things, we don't know. But it certainly does add another dimension to what we know about how he handled material in the White House," Haberman said.

Haberman went on to explain that, while it wasn't unusual for Trump to tear up documents and discard them, even though as president he was required by law to transfer all forms of work documents, letter, and emails to the National [Archives](#), it was a first for her to actually hear about him flushing the documents down a toilet.

"We had known for several years since my colleague Annie Karni broke the story that Trump was ripping up pieces of paper and that his staff was having to tape it back together for archival purposes. This is how he has handled documents and pieces of paper all his life, in terms of ripping them up, but this was something different," she added.

The book, which comes out in October, has also been reported to reveal other explosive revelations concerning the twice-impeached former US president. Reports say the book will discuss how Trump told people he is still in contact with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, and that Trump took 15 [boxes](#) of important documents to his home in Florida, which he was supposed to hand over to government officials before leaving office.

Haberman, who hails from The New York Times, has become one of the most prominent reporters of the Trump presidency, and was the most-cited journalist during Robert Mueller's investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. She also won a

Pulitzer Prize in [2018](#) for her coverage of the White House during Trump's term. Known for getting her information straight from the horse's mouth, it's no wonder Trump may be "terrified" of what she is preparing to reveal.

Despite being such a well-decorated and heavily acknowledged journalist, Haberman now finds herself under fire by other members of the media who believe she hoarded the Trump allegations for her book.

"I have no problem with government officials, journalists, or anyone in the government, media, or any other agency choosing to do a book after their career. What I do have a problem with is people like Maggie Haberman, Jon Bolton, and others choosing profit over Democracy," tweeted David [Weissman](#), opinion writer for Occupy Democrats.

Haberman has been covering Trump for a [decade](#), before he ran in the 2016 presidential election, before he became a contentious political figurehead, when he was simply recognized by most Americans as a reality television star.

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Hundreds of Starlings Drop Dead in Wales After Locals Hear 'Huge Electrical-Type Bang'
By - Mary Manley

Hundreds of birds dropped dead from the sky in Wales on Thursday, after witnesses reported hearing a "huge electrical-type bang." Officials confirmed that around 200 dead starlings were found near the villages of Waterston and Hazelbeach in Pembrokeshire on Friday morning. The injured birds were seen scattered across roads, as well as in hedges and other nearby vegetation, while local [officers](#) worked to clear the birds' small, blood-covered bodies from the road and surrounding areas.

Local resident Claire Eaton had taken an injured bird home to care for it. "It was really traumatic, on the road there were quite a few dead birds. Blood splattered everywhere. I saw a flash in the sky about an hour previously," she said of the experience.

"It was like something out of a horror film. I think the cause of this is man made, and people need to respect our wildlife," she added.

Ian Mccaffrey, who works in Waterston, reported hearing a large electrical-type bang as he left work on Thursday night. He says following the shocking noise, dozens of birds fell from the sky and landed on his car. Mccaffrey said the loud sound was similar to lightning.

European Starlings are the continent's most frequently found songbirds. First brought to New York in 1890 by Shakespeare enthusiasts, they're now considered a pest in the United States. But the small birds are also capable of creating mesmerizing fluid formations when they fly in large groups. The formations are called [murmuration](#), and dazzle anyone lucky enough to witness the dance.

Pembrokeshire's local newspaper editor, Tom Sinclair, said the fallen birds could be heard in the hedges, chirping and crying. Sinclair estimates that close to 1,000 birds have died.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) said that the starlings may have been disturbed during their evening roost. "When this happens during night-time, it can cause them to collide with the ground as they become disorientated," the [organization](#) said.

What caused the mass death is still unclear, according to a spokesperson for the Pembrokeshire Council. The RSPB has said they are investigating the mysterious matter. A similar incident happened in [Rome](#) on January 1, 2021, when hundreds of dead starlings were discovered littering the streets of Italy's capital following a New Year's [firework](#) display. Powerful Magnitude 5.7 Earthquake Strikes Guam - USGS

[17 hours ago](#) (Updated: 16 hours ago)

A powerful 5.7 magnitude earthquake has struck 168 kilometers southwest of Merizo Village, Guam. The United States Tsunami warning system has not issued a tsunami warning for Guam. [According to the United States Geological Survey](#), the earthquake struck at 20:29:45 (UTC) and a depth of 10 kilometers. There is a high likelihood that a magnitude 3 or higher aftershock will occur in the next week.

The earthquake is unlikely to lead to [economic losses, injuries, or casualties](#). It is expected that some villages and towns in Guam will experience weak shaking as a result of the quake.

The earthquake originally registered as a 6.2 magnitude earthquake but was downgraded to 5.7.

Guam is a United States territory Micronesia, in the Pacific Ocean with a population of roughly 170,000. People born on Guam are US citizens.

Guam remains incredibly important to the US military as the closest territory to Asia.

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From Cloning to the Macron Strain: How Could Russia Use the French President's DNA?

By - Nevin Brown

Everyone who keeps up with Western media knows that Russians are no good. Capable of pulling out a country from the European Union or invading a neighbour by just relocating troops within their own land: if they are not trying to steal your election, watch out for your DNA!

It turns out that the grotesquely long table that Vladimir Putin and Emmanuel Macron shared during their talks in Moscow was not a symbol of deteriorating relations between Russia and the West, as some speculated. It was, instead, about the French president refusing to get PCR-tested in Russia. Why? Because he feared the Russians would "get their hands" on his DNA, according to Reuters, citing sources from the Elysee Palace.

Strap yourselves in for an exciting journey through the options that could have been given a go by the devious Russians had Emmanuel Macron not shielded himself from a sneaky PCR test! Le Clone?

This option is as obvious as it is effective. The plan could have been simple: just get the French president to take the necessary health precaution and you have an opportunity to clone him and... mon dieu, then do whatever one may imagine!

Imagine a world with not one Macron, but two, three, four, five, six, seven, or even twelve whole Macrons. A dozen Macrons freshly cloned out of the oven. Delicious and decadent these twelve Macrons would make for an exceptional gift or just a little treat after a hard day. Oh, the power the Russians would have over the French with an entire box of Macrons at their disposal. Or imagine how useful it would be to have your own personal army consisting of him. World leaders would tremble over the mere thought of another mildly competent politician boring their populations into a deep slumber only to see their lands seized by their adversaries. Macron the Monotonous, destroyer of fun, inducer of yawns, sleepier of sleep, one sheep, two sheep...zzzz. It's a pity that the world leaders who had visited the Kremlin before Macron were less cautious: clearly, we are to expect a bunch of clones of, say, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (who visited Moscow in early February) or Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (who did the same in late January).

Unraveling Family Secrets?

People today do DNA tests for various reasons: from mere curiosity about one's genome to dramatic family stories with sensitive paternity issues.

Many have already giggled at how the decision not to take the PCR test could have been a nod to political stereotypes. But what if it's actually a totally different kind of story? Maybe, the French president was afraid that the Russians will reveal some secrets of his family tree? Given that the PCR method is also used for DNA paternity test, one has to restrict their imagination when it comes to what Macron could have feared.

Genetic Code?

Let's ditch the speculations about the paternity tests, as people also turn to DNA research when they want to know more about themselves.

What do I eat to be healthier? Do I have some kind of genetic repulsion for certain products or do I just hate broccoli? What sports suit me better? What should I avoid? Do I have pre-disposition for some illnesses? What are my body's strengths and what are its weak spots? These and many other questions, as it turns out, can be answered if you have some scientists look closely at your DNA samples. Imagine that the Kremlin finds out about all the weaknesses written into your genetic code. Would you want that? The leader of the French nation would certainly not!

The Macron Strain

Was it Macron's desire to keep his DNA out of the Russians' hands or was he scared that he would inadvertently become a biological weapon capable of crippling the French government worse than the croissant shortage of 2017?

Macron is no fool, the long cotton swab needed to conduct a PCR test would be the perfect instrument to administer a deadly illness. Infected with a disease or virus so terrible only the Russians could have concocted it, Macron would be a Trojan horse of despair throughout France.

Unemployment, rising petrol prices, pension reform, and general ineptitude are all plights that Macron can stomach bestowing on the people of France. But the Russian cold, a cold so cold that it could only come from Russia, would be a bridge too far.

Jokes aside, Macron's bizarre phobia of Russian-administered PCR coronavirus tests has raised eyebrows: the 13-foot-long table long that the two shared quickly became the butt of many memes and jokes.

In the end, the extensive negotiations appeared to have ended with the two sides managing to find common ground and hinting at new conversations in the future.

And, of course, the DNA of the French president remains safe... well, if one ignores the fact that the genetic material can be left in a lot of places: a toilet, a used glass of water, even a door handle. But if this small scientific tweak sits well with the Elysee Palace, why should anyone else be worried?

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Selfie Care: New AI Medical Program Can Spot Genetic Disease With a Single Picture
By - Nevin Brown

A new AI medical program developed by a team of researchers at the University of Bonn called GestaltMatcher can spot rare genetic diseases with a single picture. The technology will help clinicians quickly diagnose ailments and help in the discovery of new genetic disorders, according to the project's abstract.

The Institute for Genomic Statistics and Bioinformatics (IGSB) at the University Hospital Bonn team used 17,560 patient photos for the project. Around 12,000 came from [digital health company FDNA](#) with another 5,000 from the University of Bonn and nine additional universities. The [study was published in Nature Genetics](#).

The artificial intelligence technology can spot subtle facial features and compares them to its own database to determine an approximate genetic disease. The AI has analyzed a total of 1,115 different rare diseases, and has been touted as having the ability to detect unknown genetic diseases.

Dr. Peter Krawitz, from the Institute for Genomic Statistics and Bioinformatics (IGSB) at the University Hospital Bonn, [said](#): "The goal is to detect such diseases at an early stage and initiate appropriate therapy as soon as possible."

A vast majority of genetic diseases also come with an identifiable physical abnormality, with many causing a particular facial feature to be present.

According to Tzung-Chien Hsieh, a member of the University of Bonn team, "The face provides us with a starting point for diagnosis," adding, "It is possible to calculate what the disease is with a high degree of accuracy."

"This means we can now classify previously unknown diseases, search for other cases and provide clues as to the molecular basis," Krawitz says of the technology.

The technology reportedly does not need a wide variety of examples to pinpoint a genetic ailment.

"This wide variation in appearance trained the AI so well that we can now diagnose with relative confidence even with only two patients as our baseline at best, if that's possible," Krawitz detailed.

The technology could be applied to other medical imaging services to help assist in diagnosis, according to Krawitz.

“The GestaltMatcher Database (GMDB) will improve the comparability of algorithms and provide the basis for further development of artificial intelligence for rare diseases, including other medical image data such as X-rays or retinal images from ophthalmology,” Krawitz said. The technology could be coming to medical practices soon. In Germany, doctors are already using an AI to assist in their practices. The developers of the technology believe its ability to be quickly disseminated could see it become a key tool in diagnostics.

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US Takes Aim at Kamila Valieva But Did It Forget About The Exum Findings & Case of Carl Lewis?

By - Nevin Brown

The controversy surrounding 15-year-old Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva’s positive drug test has gripped the world and has turned the Beijing Winter Olympics on its head. Instead of celebrating the achievements of the world’s best athletes, bureaucrats, media, and lawyers are bickering over who is to blame.

Valieva became the first female figure skater to land a quadruple axel in Olympic competition during the team figure skating event. Her groundbreaking performance helped Russian athletes secure the gold in team figure skating, until Valieva’s December 25, 2021, drug test came to light and put the medal ceremony on ice.

Just mere moments after Valieva landed the first-ever quadruple jump by a woman at the Olympics, reports began to emerge that she had failed a drug test administered well ahead of the Beijing Games. In the days since, the US has led the war path, going so far as threatening Valieva's coaches with prosecution under the [Rodchenkov Anti-Doping Act](#).

The politics surrounding the developments were kicked up a notch when the International Testing Agency, the leading anti-doping agency for the Beijing Olympics, noted in a report that the young skater had failed a test that weeks later showed traces of the banned heart medication trimetazidine.

It has since been determined that the test results, which were only obtained by the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) on February 7, 2022 - the same day of Valieva's winning Olympic performance, were severely delayed after a Swedish lab in Stockholm was backed up with COVID-19 tests.

The Russian Olympic Committee, defending RUSADA's decision to allow Valieva to compete in the Olympics, stated, "the doping test of an athlete who tested positive does not apply to the period of the Olympic Games. At the same time, the athlete repeatedly passed doping tests before and after December 25, 2021, including while already in Beijing during the figure skating tournament. All the results are negative."

The idea of an Olympic athlete failing a drug test right before or during the Olympics has brought some in the American media to a crossroads. The title of an article by Christine Brennan of USA Today tells you everything you need to know, "[Russian Kamila Valieva must be suspended. If not, the Olympics are forever tainted.](#)"

If Christine Brennan can't stomach the idea of a national Olympic federation allowing one of their athletes to compete following a failed drug test that contains a minor amount of a banned substance weeks before the start of the Beijing Olympics, then she should consider emigrating because her own country - the US - is one of the worst offenders.

USOC's Long Documented History of Cover-ups

The former director of the United States Olympic Committee's (USOC) drug control administration, [Dr. Wade Exum, filed two lawsuits against USOC](#) for discrimination in the early 2000s and alleged that the agency knowingly allowed American athletes to compete after failing drug tests throughout the 1980s and 90s.

In his suit, he stated that he believed not "being a team player," and covering up doping violations led to his dismissal, as well as his race. Exum wasn't alone in raising concern over the USOC's desire to prioritize athletic excellence over integrity.

His predecessor, Dr. Robert Voy, M.D., the chief medical officer of the USOC from 1983 to 1989, supported his claims and left the agency after seeing how doping violations were buried. He later wrote a book titled "Drugs, Sports, and Politics."

In it, he wrote, "Based on my experience and expertise, I believe that the USOC and/or the various NGBs, have covered-up evidence of American Olympic level athletes testing positive for banned PEDs (performance enhancing drugs)."

At the time of the allegations, in the early 2000s, the USOC dismissed them as false.

[Documents provided by Exum revealed](#) that US athletes tested positive for drugs over 100 times between 1988 and 2000, but only a handful were barred from competition.

The USOC claimed that they had valid reasons for the dismissal of their athlete's positive tests. It's likely that those athletes' chances of ending up on the podium had something to do with it.

The Case of Carl Lewis

Carl Lewis remains one of the most famous American track and field athletes. The nine-time Olympic gold medal winner was dominant in the 100- and 200- meter sprints, as well as the long jump.

After winning three gold medals in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, Lewis was among the favorites to repeat in the 100 meters, 200 meters, and long jump at the 1988 Seoul Games. However, prior to the Olympics in 1988, he failed three tests for stimulants found in a cold medication.

Lewis was first disqualified by the USOC but was later reinstated when they accepted his appeal on the basis of inadvertent use. The USOC allowed Lewis to fail three tests the same way and accepted the excuse of inadvertent use.

Years later, in 2003, [Lewis said](#), "There were hundreds of people getting off." He added, "Everyone was treated the same."

Lewis wasn't the only high-profile American athlete to get a pass from USOC. Sprinter Joe DeLoach and tennis star Mary Joe Fernandez also appeared in the documents provided by Exum, whose positive tests were swept under the rug.

DeLoach, the gold medal winner in the 200 meters in the 1988 Olympics, also failed a drug test prior to the games. He too had tested positive for a substance found in cold medication. The International Association of Athletics Federations investigated the matter in 2003 and said his positive test contained a low dosage. The use of cold medication appeared to be popular among elite US sprinters.

Fernandez won the bronze for singles tennis and a gold medal in doubles in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. Before the 1992 Olympic tennis competition, she tested positive for pseudoephedrine but faced no discipline.

The contents of Exum's documents spanning from 1988 to 2000 showed that 19 individuals who tested positive but faced no suspensions would go on to win medals.

The issue of the USOC covering up positive tests goes back even further. According to a report from the [Orange County Register](#), 34 American track-and-field athletes tested positive for banned substances before the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. None of the athletes were disciplined and were instead told to get clean before the games.

When Exum brought to light the USOC's dirty laundry, few were surprised.

Dick Pound, chairman of the World Anti-Doping Agency from 1999 to 2007, [in a telephone interview with the Associated Press in 2003](#), said of Exum's accusations, "It's what many people suspected about the US Olympic Committee, that it was being covered up." He added, "There were lots of rumors around."

Exum's findings bring to mind the old saying: "the cover-up is worse than the crime."

The USOC Never Faced Any Real Backlash

However, the USOC never faced any consequences over the accusations, and they have largely faded into the background over the past two decades.

Part of the reason the USOC skirted criticism is that Exum's discrimination complaints never gained legal traction, and the courts determined there wasn't enough evidence to prove the USOC discriminated against Exum on a racial bias.

While Exum's claims of discrimination may have been difficult to prove, the evidence he brought to light about the USOC's practice of protecting athletes with positive doping tests was from their own records. His legal failure had nothing to do with the USOC's wrongdoing.

All of this raises the question, has the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) changed?

For two decades, the USOPC has fostered a reputation of protecting athletes with questionable testings, a claim supported by multiple investigations and documents. In the two decades since, there has hardly been a peep. Did they learn their lesson? Or did they simply get better at covering up?

The USOPC, unlike most national Olympic committees, does not receive a consistent annual grant from the government. It instead relies on corporate and individual contributions and on the proceeds of its direct marketing program, predominantly licensing the images of its more successful athletes on cereal boxes and other products.

The USOPC is as much a corporate brand as it is a sports booster. A company that profits off of Americans' interest in the Olympics, USOPC understands that Americans dominating the medal stands is a good place to start, but so is avoiding scandal. The motivation for the USOPC to hide positive doping tests is coming from all directions.

The United States can finger wag about morality and the true spirit of sport all they want. There is documentation of them spending two decades, from 1980 to 2000, hiding athletes' testing results from the spotlight. Whether or not they've done so over the past two decades remains to be seen. With the number of medals stripped from their athletes, professional baseball's own steroid reckoning, and the American cultural value of being the best, there's reason to believe the past 20 years were a lot like the 20 that preceded them. But perhaps, only time will tell?

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Majority of Americans Believe Sending Troops to Ukraine to Fight Russian Soldiers a Bad Idea - Poll

By - Nevin Brown

A YouGovAmerica poll found that a majority of Americans believe that sending troops to Ukraine to fight Russian soldiers is a very bad idea. The poll found that Americans generally favor supporting Ukraine through financial aid and economic sanctions on Moscow in the event of a so-called invasion.

[The poll asked respondents](#) whether they thought a variety of potential US responses to a Russian invasion of Ukraine was a good idea, a bad idea, or not sure. Russia has not invaded Ukraine and Moscow has consistently refuted Western intelligence reports that an invasion is imminent.

Approximately 55% of poll respondents believe that sending troops to Ukraine to fight Russian soldiers is a bad idea, while only 13% believe it is a good idea, according to the results. Another 50% of poll respondents agreed that it is a good idea to impose economic sanctions on Russia should it invade Ukraine, whereas 20% of respondents agreed economic sanctions would be a bad idea.

Some 42% of poll respondents were unsure if it was even a good idea to allow Ukraine into the NATO military bloc.

The poll showed that there was a significant divide between Democrat and Republican respondents over how to best deal with a possible invasion of Ukraine.

Republicans were more likely to respond negatively to poll questions regarding imposing economic sanctions on Russia, allowing Ukraine to join NATO, sending financial aid to Ukraine, sending troops to NATO ally countries in eastern Europe, sending weapons to Ukraine, and sending soldiers to Ukraine to provide help - but not fight - Russian soldiers.

The largest divide between the political parties was over sending troops to NATO allies in eastern Europe. Some 52% of Democrats answering the poll believed that sending troops to eastern Europe was a good idea, compared to 15% who said it was a bad idea. Another 34% of Republicans said it was a good idea, while 29% thought it was a bad idea.

Sanctions for Russia and financial aid for Ukraine, in the event of an invasion, appear to be the two routes that could garner bipartisan support, according to the poll.

The poll did not provide for the respondents to offer a rationale for their answers.

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Cretaceous Fruit Ninja: New Dinosaur Discovery Compared to 'Edward Scissorhands'

By - Nevin Brown

A newly-discovered dinosaur in Catalonia was the size of a bus and had five razor-like claws akin to the character American actor Johnny Depp played in the film "Edward Scissorhands." The discovery was [published in a new paper](#) and experts believe the "scissorhands" were useful for warding off predators and could have been used to slice open fruit, making *Portellsaurus sosbaynati* more of a prehistoric fruit-ninja than a blade-wielding killing machine.

Dr. Andres Santos-Cubedo of Jaume I University, said of the dinosaur that "it was a large animal with a spiked thumb and enlarged nostrils. It ate a plant-based diet."

The dinosaur, an herbivore, was an excellent forager due in part to its huge nostrils. It stood about 10 feet tall, weighed over four tons, could rise up on its hind legs to 26 feet, and carried a long heavy tail to balance when feeding.

Portellsaurus roamed Spain around 130 million years ago. The newly-announced creature sheds light on the evolution of ornithomimids, according to researchers. The species started out as small, bipedal grazers, but grew in size and numbers, becoming one of the most successful species in the Cretaceous era, spreading across North America, Europe, and Asia.

"*Portellsaurus sosbaynati* is the oldest known dinosaur species in the province of Castello — about 130 million years old. It's closely related to the Chinese dinosaur *Bolong* and the African dinosaur *Ouranosaurus*," noted Santos-Cubedo.

The authors write that the discovery, "indicates the Iberian Peninsula was home to a highly-diverse assemblage of medium-to-large bodied styracosternan hadrosauriforms during the Early Cretaceous."

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Linking US to Canada, Ambassador Bridge Set to Re-Open, Canadian Authorities Say
By - Nevin Brown

A key surface route between the United States and Canada, the Ambassador Bridge, is set to re-open after a 'Freedom Convoy' blocked the bridge that spans the Detroit River and links Detroit, Michigan, and Windsor, Ontario.

The bridge was cleared of protesters by Canadian authorities on Sunday and is expected to resume normal activities.

White House Homeland Security adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall said in a [statement](#): "Canadian authorities intend to reopen the Ambassador Bridge today after completing necessary safety checks. We stand ready to support our Canadian partners wherever useful in order to ensure the restoration of the normal free flow of commerce can resume."

A caravan had been blocking the route since Monday, reportedly costing the United States and Canada hundreds of millions of dollars in lost commerce. The Ambassador Bridge is the busiest international border crossing in North America, and facilitates roughly a quarter of all merchandise trade between the two countries.

[On Friday](#), a Canadian judge issued an order to break up the blockage but protesters refused to depart. By Saturday, the number of protesters had dwindled, and on Sunday police cleared the bridge of all remaining people.

The so-called Freedom Convoy was said to have been spurred by a mandate from Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau requiring unvaccinated Canadian truckers crossing the border to quarantine upon their return.

The mandate saw a coalition that claimed to be primarily of disgruntled truckers, but included assistance from conservative groups, who helped to organize the event.

Canadians, and Canadian truckers, are statistically heavily pro-vaccine, with 80% of adult Canadians fully vaccinated. The [Canadian Trucking Alliance estimates](#) that of the estimated 120,000 truckers who work cross-border routes, 85% to 90% are vaccinated.

The high visibility of the protests has led to me-too events in France and New Zealand, as well as a proposed protest at Sunday's Super Bowl football game in Los Angeles, California.

The United States and Canadian governments have had discussions over how to prevent future blockade events aimed at suffocating crucial international trade routes.

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Los Angeles Rams Best Cincinnati Bengals in Super Bowl LVI by Three Points
By - Nevin Brown

The Los Angeles Rams defeated the Cincinnati Bengals 23-20 to claim the franchise's second Super Bowl and their first since moving back to Los Angeles in 2016. The Cincinnati Bengals fall to 0-3 in Super Bowls as a fourth quarter drive to tie the game came up short.

Super Bowl LVI, played at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California, was a back and forth affair, as the Rams jumped out to a 13-3 2nd quarter lead on the strength of their talented wide receiving duo of Cooper Kupp and Odell Beckham Jr.

Kupp would be named Super Bowl MVP: He hauled in nine passes for 92 yards and two touchdowns along with a crucial seven-yard rushing attempt to get a first down on what would be the game-winning drive.

Beckham hauled in the Rams' first touchdown of the game on a 13-yard reception and set up their second score with a 35-yard haul. Kupp later finished off the drive with an 11-yard touchdown reception, but a missed extra point left the score 13-3.

The Bengals were quick to respond and orchestrated a 12-play, 75-yard drive that resulted in a touchdown. The Bengals ran a trick play to find their way into the end zone. Running back Joe Mixon took a handoff and then found Tee Higgins for a six-yard touchdown pass - it was the first passing touchdown of his NFL career.

The game flipped when Beckham left the game after he suffered a non-contact left knee injury in the 2nd quarter. The Rams' offense fell apart and the Bengals were able to capitalize on turnovers from Rams quarterback Matt Stafford.

The Bengals entered halftime down 13-10 but had the ball to start the half and wasted no time. The first play of the second half was a 75-yard touchdown reception by the Bengals' Tee

Higgins. Upon replay, it appeared that the referees missed an offensive facemask penalty on the play, but until the final minutes of the game, the referees kept their flags in their pockets. With the Bengals now leading for the first time, 17-13, the Rams looked to respond with a touchdown drive of their own. On their very first play, Stafford threw an interception that bounced off his receiver's hands.

The Bengals, blessed with strong field position, struggled to move the ball against the Rams defense. They faced a fourth down and one-yard situation that they converted on a quarterback run with the Bengals' Joe Burrow, but only managed 11 yards from eight plays and settled for a field goal that stretched their lead to 20-13 with 4:23 left in the third quarter.

The Rams responded right away with their own field goal drive to make the score 20-16, but the game would enter a phase of defensive gridlock as the third quarter gave way to the fourth. Early in the fourth quarter, Burrow suffered a knee injury that appeared to limit him for the rest of the game and turned the tide in favor of the Rams.

Kupp and Stafford would find their chemistry once again as they marched down the field on a 15-play, 79-yard touchdown drive to take the lead with 1:25 left in the game.

The Rams, leading 23-20, were certainly rueing their missed extra point from earlier in the game. The Bengals would only need to get in field goal position to send the game into overtime. As the game wore on, the Rams defense had been gaining momentum and by the end of the fourth quarter, they were able to consistently get pressure on the Cincinnati quarterback.

The Bengals tried to mount a game-tying drive but were stifled when their fourth and one attempt with 49 seconds was incomplete. With the ball turned over on downs, the Rams simply kneeled to bleed out the remaining game clock to secure their first Super Bowl victory since 1999.

With the Super Bowl victory, the Mayor of Los Angeles, [Eric Garcetti will transform the iconic "Hollywood" sign that rests on Mount Lee to read "Rams House."](#)

The Super Bowl Halftime performance saw rap icons Dr.Dre, Snoop Dogg, Mary J. Blige, Kendrick Lamar, Eminem, and, in a surprise, 50 Cent perform. Eminem at one point kneeled during the performance in a nod to former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick who began kneeling during the national anthem in 2016 over police brutality towards racial minorities and sparked a national debate.

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Super Bowl Bets: Bengals Have the Early Betting Lead Over Rams
By - Nevin Brown

Before the Super Bowl kicks off, the Cincinnati Bengals are the bettors' choice to win, even though they've remained four-point underdogs to the Los Angeles Rams. DraftKings has seen the Bengals receive the majority of bets in 16 of the 17 states it markets.

The heavy action on the underdog Bengals will likely spur a flurry of late bets on the Rams. Jason Scott, vice president of trading for BetMGM, told ESPN that most bets are placed in the hours right before kickoff.

[Scott sent a text telling ESPN](#): "I'm expecting the big players to come [Sunday] for the Rams." Still, the Bengals appear to be the people's team, as they've continued to garner plenty of massive bets.

The largest wager Caesar's Sportsbook has received yet is on the Bengals to win straight up. Jim "Mattress Mack" McIngvale, a Houston, Texas furniture salesman, [allegedly bet \\$9.5 million on the Bengals to win](#) the Super Bowl.

The eccentric businessman routinely places massive bets on sporting events to offset losses on furniture promotions. In this case, he is running a promotion where he will refund any purchase of over \$3,000 if the Bengals win the Super Bowl.

The Super Bowl is one of the most important days of the year for American sports betting. It's estimated that [31.4 million Americans will bet an estimated \\$7.61 billion](#) on the Super Bowl. Getting the odds right and making sure the money is evenly divided between the two teams is key for betting companies to maintain profitability.

Adam Pullen, assistant director of trading for Caesars Sportsbook, said, "We'll be hoping for the middle, with the Rams winning but not covering [the spread]," he added, "We think we're in a good position overall. Still a ways to go, and it's big bet after big bet coming in."

The Cincinnati Bengals are competing in the franchise's third Super Bowl and their first since 1989. Led by second-year quarterback Joe Burrow, the Bengals have had a surprise run through the playoffs. The Bengals bested the Oakland Raiders in the Wild Card round, the one-seeded Tennessee Titans in the Divisional round, and the two-seeded and back-to-back defending AFC champions the Kansas City Chiefs.

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Sullivan Tells Congress US to Offer Ukraine \$1Bln in Sovereign Loan Guarantees - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan briefed US lawmakers on Monday about the Ukraine situation and offers to give Kiev \$1 billion in sovereign loan guarantees to ease concerns of war in the country, Fox News reported, citing a source familiar with the matter.

The US will offer Ukraine \$1 billion in sovereign loan guarantees – meaning the loan's risk is taken on by the US government – in order to calm concerns about the possibility of conflict in the country with Russia, reporter Chad Pergram said via Twitter.

The situation around Ukraine has worsened in recent weeks with NATO raising concerns over an alleged Russian military buildup near the Ukrainian border and urging allies to boost their military support for Kiev. Russia has denied accusations that it intends to invade Ukraine and expressed its own concerns about NATO activity in Eastern Europe.

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Nearly 6 in 10 Americans Dissatisfied With Rising Level of Immigration in US - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - An absolute majority of Americans has expressed significant dissatisfaction with the increasing level of immigration levels in the United States, a new Gallup poll revealed on Monday.

"Nearly six in 10 Americans, 58%, are dissatisfied with the level of immigration into the U.S. today, while 34% are satisfied. This marks an eight-percentage-point increase in dissatisfaction since last year and a return to the 2019-2020 range," a release on the poll said.

More than one third of those who said were dissatisfied also said they prefer if the immigration level into the United States is decreased - nearly double the number who expressed such a view in 2021. Only one out of ten would like to see more immigrants accepted into the country, the report said.

The results of the poll also reveal along partisan lines with Democrats saying they are mostly satisfied with the level of immigration, while 69 percent of Republicans say they want to see it decreased.

"This rise in dissatisfaction is driven mostly by Republicans, likely unhappy with the shift in immigration policy that has occurred between the Trump and Biden administrations. Republicans who are dissatisfied overwhelmingly favor decreasing the immigration level," the report said.

Dissatisfied independents are more than three times as likely to say they would like it to be decreased rather than increased, the report said.

The record level of illegal immigrants entering the United States under the Biden administration - estimated to be more than 2 million in 2021 - has contributed to criticism from Democrats, Republicans and Independents, the report also said.

"Additionally, Biden has drawn criticism from both sides of the aisle for his border policy, and his approval ratings for handling immigration have been more negative than positive, with declining approval from Democrats," the report added.

The poll was conducted by telephone from January 3-16 among 811 adults in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia, according to the report.

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US Backs Efforts to Fulfill Minsk Accord, Claims Russia Leaving Donbas Would Be Good Start

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States backs efforts to implement the Minsk accords and believes that the pullout of Russian forces "deployed in Eastern Ukraine" would be a good step, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

"We strongly support sincere efforts at progress from all sides to implement the Minsk Agreement, but to be clear, Russia meeting its commitments by withdrawing its forces from Eastern Ukraine would be a good start," the spokesperson said.

Russia has repeatedly denied having any troops on the ground in Ukraine's breakaway region of Donbas.

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US Remains Open to Meeting Again With Russian Counterparts - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to engage with Russia in an effort to find a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis following the phone call between the two presidents, and stands ready to meet again with Russian counterparts, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

"We remain open to meeting again with Russian counterparts," spokesperson said. "We are actively working to reach a diplomatic solution and we remain engaged with the Russian government following President Biden's call with President Putin."

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Biden Urges Congress to Act on Gun Control on Anniversary of Parkland School Shooting

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden urged Congress on Monday to act decisively to tighten gun control regulations and prevent mass shootings, while commemorating the victims of the Parkland school massacre.

"On February 14th, 2018, a gunman stole the lives of 14 students and 3 educators at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida," Biden said in a statement.

He recalled that the tragedy was the deadliest high school shooting in US history.

Biden said he had asked Congress to pass a budget that provides an additional half a billion dollars for measures to reduce violent crime.

"I have also requested increased funding for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and the US Marshals. And Congress must do much more — beginning with requiring background checks on all gun sales, banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, and eliminating immunity for gun manufacturers," he said.

The US administration has put forward a comprehensive plan to reduce gun crime, Biden added. This initiative includes preventing the proliferation of illegal guns and cracking down on gun dealers who willfully violate the law.

"We can never bring back those we've lost. But we can come together to fulfill the first responsibility of our government and our democracy: to keep each other safe." Biden said. In October 2021, Nikolas Cruz, 23, pleaded guilty to killing 17 people in the 2018 Parkland school shooting.

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Almost Half of Canadians Say Trudeau 'Not Up to Job' Amid Trucker Protests - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Almost half of Canadians believe that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is not up to the job as trucker protests continue, according to a Maru Public Opinion poll out on Monday.

The findings show that 48% of Canadians think Trudeau has demonstrated that he is "not up to the job" of serving as prime minister, while 35% disagree with the statement, and 18% did not give a definitive answer.

Only 16% say they want to vote for him because of how he has tackled situation as compared to 63% who feel the opposite, and 21% who have no opinion.

The poll also revealed that 53% of Canadians think Trudeau looks weak, and 44% believe he has "inflamed the situation."

Just one in six, or 17%, of Canadians believe that Trudeau has done his utmost to calm things down, with 29% thinking that he has acted as a prime minister should in the face of the protest, according to the poll.

In January, a mass protest consisting of truckers, farmers and other citizens began in Canada.

The so-called Freedom Convoy protesters descended on the capital Ottawa to demand the government scrap COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

The protest spread then to other provinces, with truckers blocking several US-Canada border crossings, including the Ambassador Bridge connecting Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario. The bridge was cleared of protesters on Sunday.

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RPT - No Hostilities in Ottawa Amid Ongoing Protests Against COVID-19 Restrictions - Resident

OTTAWA, February 11 (Sputnik) - The mass protests of truckers and ordinary citizens in the capital of Canada, Ottawa, against draconian COVID-19 restrictions are taking place in an atmosphere of a festival and not accompanied by hostility or violence, resident Yuri Natchetoi told Sputnik.

The wave of protests across Canada began in January, with tens of thousands of truckers, farmers and other Canadians converging on Ottawa to express strong opposition to vaccine mandates. The protest has since evolved into an anti-government demonstration, with various groups uniting in opposition to the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

On Monday, Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson declared a state of emergency for the city due to the ongoing protests.

"The streets are pretty quiet now. There are a lot of truckers who came here and a lot of people supporting them. All the hotels in the city are now full. Many [locals] rent out their basements, attics, rooms. In general, the atmosphere in Ottawa is of a festival. In summer, we celebrate a day of Canada, when a lot of people come to Ottawa, everyone is happy. People walk around with flags, posters. Every fourth car is decorated with Canadian flags. People thus express their support for the convoy," Natchetoi said on Friday.

According to Yuri, the protest has already become massive and covers not only Ottawa, but also other Canadian cities, including Toronto and Montreal. Moreover, it has ceased to be related to COVID-19 restrictions only and became a protest for the rights and freedoms of people in Canada.

People are frustrated with the government officials because they refuse to begin dialogue with the protesters while their numbers continue to grow, Natchetoi said.

At the same time, the police behave with restraint and do not get into fights with protesters, Yuri said.

"They [government] brought additional police forces from Toronto, Kingston. You can see it by their chevrons. They just stand and keep order and do not crack down on protesters. Last week, they confiscated several cans of gasoline because of the alleged fire hazard but then they stopped doing it after people sued them and people began to voice their outrage over it," Natchetoi said.

Many sympathizers bring food and cook meals for both, protesters and police. One can see policemen and truckers sitting at the same table and drinking coffee without any sharp confrontation between the two sides of protest, according to Yuri.

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Biden Blocking Afghan Financial Assets Amounts to 'Economic Warfare' - Human Rights Lawyer

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's move to retain \$7 billion of Afghan Central Bank assets in the New York Federal Reserve is an illegal form of economic warfare that is starving the people of Afghanistan, University of Illinois Professor of International Law Francis Boyle told Sputnik.

On Friday, Biden signed an executive order to allow \$7 billion in Afghan Central Bank funds deposited in the US to be split between a humanitarian trust and compensation to terror victims. "They [Biden administration] are going to try to satisfy public opinion by saying they are using it for humanitarian purposes and giving it out step by step. But it is just practicing economic warfare against the people of Afghanistan," Boyle said. "It is calibrated to buy time and be ineffective. They are brutally starving these poor people to death."

Boyle said the Biden administration had no right to arbitrarily seize the Afghan government assets.

"It is outright thievery for the Biden Administration to give these Afghanistan Central Bank assets to United States citizens for any reason," he said. "The Biden Administration is proceeding in bad faith here."

The lawyer said, according to Article II (c) of the 1948 Genocide Convention, the Biden administration's economic warfare against Afghanistan verges on genocidal by "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part."

The Taliban movement (under UN sanctions for terrorist activities) sees the US decision to freeze Afghan funds held in US banks as a showcase of theft and the moral decline of the United States, Mohammad Naeem, a spokesman for the Taliban political office said.

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US Olympic Ski and Snowboard Team Says Aware of Allegations of Inappropriate Behavior

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The US Olympic Ski and Snowboard organization is aware of and investigating allegations of inappropriate behavior being made by former athlete Callan Chythlook-Sisof against coach Peter Foley and fellow athlete Hagen Kearney, US Ski and Snowboard communications official Tom Horrocks told Sputnik.

Chythlook-Sisof posted statements to Instagram on Friday alleging that Foley whispered inappropriate sexual comments about a fellow competitor to her and another teammate. She also alleged that Kearney repeatedly used racial slurs, and when confronted by Chythlook-Sisof about the matter, got in her face and feigned punching her.

"US Ski & Snowboard has been made aware of the recent allegations. We take these allegations very seriously and the allegations are being investigated. The concerns regarding Hagen were dealt with at the time and appropriate action was taken," Horrocks said on Friday. Chythlook-Sisof, who competed with US Ski and Snowboard from 2005 to 2014, also said in her post that there are "more serious actions" by Foley that may come to light.

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US, European Partners Finalizing Anti-Russia Sanctions, SWIFT Ban Off Table - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States and its European partners are finalizing sanctions targeting major Russian banks should the Ukraine situation escalate, but banning Russia from the SWIFT financial system is off the table, Reuters reported citing US and European Union officials.

The report said on Friday that the sanctions could target VTB and Sberbank.

Banning Russia from SWIFT was taken out of consideration after objections from European countries, the report said.

US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin are scheduled to have a telephone call on Friday about the situation over Ukraine.

The precarious situation around Ukraine has worsened in recent weeks with the United States and the European Union raising concerns over Russian military buildup at the Ukrainian border, and NATO urging allies to boost their military support for Kiev. The EU also expressed concerns over the possible disruption of Russia's energy supplies to Europe in the event of an escalation, while holding talks with the United States and other suppliers concerning the issue.

Russia in turn has on many occasions denied allegations of intending to invade its neighbor, pointing out that NATO's military activity near Russian borders poses a threat to its national security while hampering efforts toward peaceful resolution in Ukraine.

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Protesters Continue Blocking Canada-US Border Bridge as Injunction Enters Into Force

WINDSOR, February 11 (Sputnik) - Anti-covid mandate protesters continue to block Ambassador Bridge, a key trade crossing on the US-Canada border, after a court-ordered injunction took effect in the evening, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

One police officer told Sputnik that authorities are a ways from clearing the blockade.

Earlier in the day, a Canadian judge ordered authorities to clear the blockade starting at 7:00 p.m. EST (midnight GMT) on Friday.

Several hundred protesters are gathered on the road leading up to the international bridge, waving the Canadian flag and listening to music, according to a Sputnik correspondent.

Some protesters have signs on their vehicles that read "F*** Trudeau" and "What's More Trustworthy: Trudeau government [or] Sushi from from a gas station."

In mid-January, a mass peaceful protest began in Canada consisting of truckers, farmers and other Canadians. The protesters descended on the capital Ottawa to demand the government scrap discriminatory COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

The protest has since spread and truckers also blocked several US-Canada border crossings, including Ambassador Bridge, which connecting Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario.

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Sullivan, EU Official in Call Coordinate Response to Potential Russian Invasion of Ukraine

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and the European Commission President's Head of Cabinet Bjoern Seibert during a video call coordinated the transatlantic response to a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said.

"They discussed their concerns about Russia's continued build-up of military forces around Ukraine, as well as preparations to impose massive consequences and severe economic costs on Russia should it choose military escalation. They coordinated the details of a potential transatlantic response, including both financial sanctions and export controls, imposed in coordination by the United States, the European Union, and other partners and Allies," Horne said on Friday.

Sullivan and Seibert also agreed to continue the US-EU partnership on a wide range of issues, including on energy security and international infrastructure development, Horne added.

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No Evidence Russia Pushed Trump Aide to Sway Republican Party's View on Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - There is no evidence to suggest that during the 2016 US presidential election Russia directed former Trump campaign aide J.D. Gordon to change the Republican party's stance pertaining to sending lethal assistance to Ukraine, BuzzFeed News reported citing new unredacted parts of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's probe into allegations of Trump-Russia collusion.

"The evidence did not establish that J.D. Gordon was acting at the direction of Russia when he arranged a change in the 2016 Republican Party platform pertaining to assistance to Ukraine," the document revealed on Friday.

Gordon advocated against the Republican party supporting the United States sending lethal security assistance to Ukraine.

Gordon said then-Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump had stated he did not want the United States to get into a possible World War III over Ukraine.

US investigators had suspected Gordon may have had ties to Russia because of his brief engagements with the Russian national Maria Butina, who was charged in US court with conspiracy and acting as an unregistered Russian agent.

Mueller's final report was completed in the spring of 2019 and showed no collusion had taken place between Russia and the Trump campaign or with aides during the subsequent transition. Trump had repeatedly said the investigation was a political witch hunt by Democrats to overturn the results of the 2016 presidential election.

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Russia Sought Putin-Biden Call Monday But Agreed With US Proposal for Saturday - Official

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Russia wanted to schedule the upcoming call between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden on Monday but eventually agreed with the White House's counter-proposal to schedule it for Saturday, a US official said.

"President Biden and President Putin of Russia will be speaking on Saturday morning. Russia proposed a call Monday. The White House counter-proposed Saturday, and they accepted," the US official said in a statement on Friday.

The White House announced earlier in the day that Biden would hold a telephone call with a number of allies, including with the leaders of Germany and France as well as with the NATO and EU chiefs, to discuss the situation in Ukraine and tensions with Russia.

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No Hostilities in Ottawa Amid Ongoing Protests Against COVID-19 Restrictions - Resident

OTTAWA, February 11 (Sputnik) - The mass protests of truckers and ordinary citizens in the capital of Canada, Ottawa, against draconian COVID-19 restrictions are taking place in an atmosphere of a festival and not accompanied by hostility or violence, resident Yuri Natchetoi told Sputnik.

The wave of protests across Canada began in January, with tens of thousands of truckers, farmers and other Canadians converging on Ottawa to express strong opposition to vaccine mandates. The protest has since evolved into an anti-government demonstration, with various groups uniting in opposition to the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

On Monday, Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson declared a state of emergency for the city due to the ongoing protests.

"The streets are pretty quiet now. There are a lot of truckers who came here and a lot of people supporting them. All the hotels in the city are now full. Many [locals] rent out their basements, attics, rooms. In general, the atmosphere in Ottawa is of a festival. In summer, we celebrate a day of Canada, when a lot of people come to Ottawa, everyone is happy. People walk around with flags, posters. Every fourth car is decorated with Canadian flags. People thus express their support for the convoy," Natchetoi said on Friday.

According to Yuri, the protest has already become massive and covers not only Ottawa, but also other Canadian cities, including Toronto and Montreal. Moreover, it has ceased to be related to COVID-19 restrictions only and became a protest for the rights and freedoms of people in Canada.

People are frustrated with the government officials because they refuse to begin dialogue with the protesters while their numbers continue to grow, Natchetoi said.

At the same time, the police behave with restraint and do not get into fights with protesters, Yuri said.

"They [government] brought additional police forces from Toronto, Kingston. You can see it by their chevrons. They just stand and keep order and do not crack down on protesters. Last week, they confiscated several cans of gasoline because of the alleged fire hazard but then they stopped doing it after people sued them and people began to voice their outrage over it," Natchetoi said.

Many sympathizers bring food and cook meals for both, protesters and police. One can see policemen and truckers sitting at the same table and drinking coffee without any sharp confrontation between the two sides of protest, according to Yuri.

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Trucker Blockade on Ambassador Bridge Costing \$100M In Auto Parts Trade Daily- Attorneys

OTTAWA, February 11 (Sputnik) - The trucker blockade of Ambassador Bridge, a key trade border crossing between Canada and the United States, comes at a cost of some \$100 million in auto parts trade every day, attorneys representing the Automotive Parts Manufacturers Association said in a court document.

"It is estimated that approximately \$100 million dollars' worth of parts cross the border every day between the United States and Canada," the attorneys said on Friday.

Overall, the blockade at the bridge is estimated to cost \$50 billion dollars worth of trade per day, the attorneys said.

Moreover, the attorneys said several Canadian companies have already shutdown and others have laid off workers temporarily.

Earlier on Friday, a Canadian judge ordered the removal of anti-vaccine mandate protesters at the bridge.

In mid-January, a mass peaceful protest began in Canada consisting of truckers, farmers and other Canadians. The protesters descended on the capital Ottawa to demand the government scrap discriminatory COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

The protest has since spread and truckers also blocked several US-Canada border crossings, including Ambassador Bridge, which connecting Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario.

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Blinken Discusses De-Escalation, Defense With Ukrainian Counterpart - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed with Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba global efforts to de-escalate the situation with Russia and bolster Ukraine's defenses, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said.

"The Secretary briefed on global efforts to urge de-escalation and enhance defense and deterrence measures against Russia's unprovoked and continued build-up of troops and equipment in Ukraine and around its borders," Price said on Friday in a release.

Blinken also reaffirmed US support for Ukraine and underscored that any Russian aggression would result in swift, severe, and united consequences, Price added.

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US Officials Predict Assault on Ukraine as Soon as February 16, Europe Skeptical - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US officials are predicting a Russian assault on Ukraine as soon as February 16 despite skepticism from their European partners, Politico said in a report, citing multiple officials.

Russia will start a physical assault that could be preceded by missile barrages and cyberattacks before the end of the Olympics on February 20 and as soon as February 16, the report cited the US officials as saying. US President Joe Biden told Western leaders about the date during a conversation earlier on Friday, the report also said.

However, a British official reportedly said they have "a different interpretation" of the February 16 intelligence that is more skeptical of the US conclusion. Another European official reportedly said that it is "difficult to say" whether an invasion is imminent.

US officials in recent weeks have warned Americans to leave Ukraine as soon as possible to avoid getting stuck in the country in the event of a Russian invasion. There will not be a US military effort to evacuate individuals from Ukraine, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said earlier on Friday.

Russia has repeatedly denied the allegations, saying it has no plans to attack any country, including Ukraine, but it reserves the right to move troops on its sovereign territory as it sees fit. Russia has warned that NATO's plans to further expand eastward represents a direct threat to its national security.

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Canadian Judge Orders Removal of Trucker Protesters at Ambassador Bridge - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - A Canadian judge ordered the removal of anti-vaccine mandate protesters from Ambassador Bridge, a key border crossing on the US-Canadian border, the Canadian media outlet The Logic reported.

The order will take effect at 7:00 pm ET Friday afternoon in order to give protesters time to clear the area, the report said.

Canadian Judge Geoffrey Morawetz will reveal more details about his ruling later in the day, the report added.

In mid-January, a mass peaceful protest began in Canada consisting of truckers, farmers and other Canadians. The protesters descended on the capital Ottawa to demand the government scrap discriminatory COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

The protest has since spread and truckers also blocked several US-Canada border crossings, including Ambassador Bridge, which connecting Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario.

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UPDATE - US Stocks End Down Over 2% as White House Says Fears Imminent Russia Attack on Ukraine

(Adds closing values, details paras 4-8)

NEW YORK, February 11 (Sputnik) - US stocks plunged more than 2% on the average after the White House warned that Russia might invade Ukraine as early as next week despite admitting that it had no confirmation of Moscow's intent.

The three major US stock indices - The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the S&P 500 and the Nasdaq Composite - fell between 1.4% and 3% on Friday, after rallying between 1% and 2% on Tuesday and Wednesday. That left the three indexes down for the week after two previous weeks of gains.

The plunge in stocks came after US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told a White House media briefing that a Russian attack on Russia could happen by next week and would likely begin with an air assault. Sullivan, however, added that the White House did not claim that Russian leader Vladimir Putin has made a final decision on the matter.

"Stock traders quickly hit the 'sell button' after reports that the US expects Russia to move forward with invading Ukraine," said Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA. "A period of calm was somewhat expected regarding the Ukraine situation but that does not seem to be the case anymore."

Stocks also fell on Thursday on Federal Reserve official James Bullard's suggestion that the central bank impose shockingly high interest rates to deal with inflation.

At the close, the mostly industrial stocks-based Dow index was down 1.4% on Thursday and off 4.4% for the year.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 US stocks, shed 1.9% for the day and was down almost 7.3% on the year.

Nasdaq, made of highly-valued tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Nasdaq and Google, led losses, with a 2.8% slump for Thursday and 11.9% for 2022.

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Unredacted Mueller Report Says Evidence Insufficient to Charge Stone, Trump Jr. - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Unredacted copies of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's report into his probe of alleged collusion between former US President Donald Trump and Russia show that there was insufficient evidence to charge campaign member Roger Stone and son Donald Trump Jr. with computer offenses, BuzzFeed reported.

"The evidence was not sufficient to charge that former Trump Campaign member Roger Stone joined or participated in the hacking conspiracy. Applying the Principles of Federal Prosecution, the Office also determined not to charge Donald Trump Jr. with a misdemeanor computer-intrusion offense for accessing a third-part website using a password sent to him by WikiLeaks," the unredacted report said.

The investigation into allegations of collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia was opened by the FBI in July 2016, ahead of the presidential election in November 2016. In May 2017, Trump dismissed FBI Director James Comey, under whose leadership the probe was initiated, and Special Counsel Robert Mueller was appointed to lead the investigation. Mueller released a redacted report in April 2019, showing no evidence of the alleged collusion.

Buzzfeed filed a Freedom of Information Act request that resulted in the US Justice Department being ordered by a court to disclose the previously-redacted Mueller report material requested by the organization.

While Trump has characterized the Mueller probe as a political witch hunt to reverse the result of the 2016 election, Russian officials have said the allegations were made up to excuse the defeat of presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, as well as deflect public opinion away from actual instances of election fraud and corruption.

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Top US General Discusses Security in E. Europe With Transatlantic Counterparts - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley discussed with his counterparts from a number of allied countries, including the United Kingdom and Germany, the security situation in Eastern Europe amid tensions between Ukraine and Russia, the Defense Department said in a press release.

"Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Gen. Mark A. Milley conducted a series of calls today by phone with his counterparts from: Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, United Kingdom," the press release said on Friday. "The military leaders discussed items of mutual security concern, including ongoing coordination during the adjustment of US force posture in Europe."

Earlier on Friday, Milley also spoke with Russian Chief of the General Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov and discussed topical issues of international security.

The calls took place amid a series of reports citing new US intelligence claims that Russia is preparing to invade Ukraine at any moment. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan confirmed the reports during a press briefing on Friday but noted that the Biden administration does not know whether Moscow has made a final decision to attack Ukraine.

Russia has repeatedly denied the US claims, saying it does not plan to attack Ukraine or any country but reserves the right to move troops on its sovereign territory as it sees fit. In addition, Russia has warned that NATO's plans to expand further eastward pose a direct threat to its national security and hamper efforts for a peaceful resolution of the situation in Ukraine.

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Pentagon Confirms Sending 3,000 More Soldiers to Poland at Biden's Direction

(Adds details in paras 7-9)

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) – US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has ordered sending 3,000 more soldiers to Poland, the Pentagon confirmed amid mounting tensions around Ukraine.

During a White House briefing earlier in the day, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan claimed that Russia might attack Ukraine "at any time," including during the Olympics, and would likely begin with an air assault. Moscow has repeatedly denied having any intention of attacking Ukraine.

"At the direction of the President, Secretary Austin today ordered to Poland the remaining 3,000 soldiers of the 82nd Airborne Infantry Brigade Combat Team based at Fort Bragg, N.C.," a spokesperson said in a statement e-mailed to Sputnik on Friday.

The troops will depart Fort Bragg over the next couple days, and are expected to be in place by early next week.

"This second tranche of Airborne soldiers will join in Poland the first tranche of 1,700 soldiers and key enablers that Secretary Austin ordered there on February 2nd. Nearly two-thirds of this first tranche has already arrived," the official said.

The deployment is temporary in nature, according to the statement.

The 300 members of the 18th Airborne Corps headquarters element that Austin ordered to Germany have also arrived in-country, it added.

By deploying these 5,000 additional highly mobile and flexible personnel, the Pentagon reassures NATO allies in its commitment to deter potential aggression against the alliance's eastern flank, the statement added.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, commenting US decision on Friday, said that the White House hysteria is more indicative than ever.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* The UK Foreign Office advises its citizens to refrain from any travel to Ukraine, according to an updated travel advisory.

* The United States is continuing to reduce its embassy footprint in Ukraine, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said.

* Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy set the task to increase the country's territorial defense forces to 2 million people, Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, said.

UK-RUSSIA DEFENSE CHIEFS MEETING

* UK Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said on Friday after meeting with Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu that both sides have agreed on the importance of the implementation of the Minsk agreements.

* Shoigu told Wallace, that it is impossible to reduce tensions in Europe without addressing Russia's key security concerns.

- * The level of Russian-UK relations is close to zero, it is necessary to stop aggravating the situation in relations between Russia and NATO, Shoigu said.
- * London urges Moscow to de-escalate the tense situation on the Ukrainian border, Wallace said.
- * NATO intends to continue to comply with all agreements signed with the Russian government in the past in a bid to address Moscow's security concerns, Wallace said.
- * Wallace has debunked media reports that the United Kingdom was planning to send 600 troops to Ukraine.

PROTESTS IN CANADA

- * Canada's province of Ontario has declared a state of emergency in connection with protests of truckers opposing COVID-19 vaccine mandates, Premier Doug Ford said on Friday.
- * Ontario will impose fines of up to \$78,835 and up to a year in prison per person in response to trucker protests, Ford said.

AFGHANISTAN FUNDS

- * President Joe Biden signed an executive order on Friday to allow \$7 billion in Afghan Central Bank funds deposited in the US to be split between a humanitarian trust and compensation to terror victims.
- * The Taliban movement (under UN sanctions for terrorist activities) sees the US decision to freeze Afghan funds held in US banks as an showcase of theft and the moral decline of the United States, Mohammad Naeem, a spokesman for the Taliban political office, said.
- * The transfer of frozen Afghan funds to victims of terror in the United States will require a New York court ruling, a senior administration official said.

RUSSIA'S SECURITY GUARANTEES PROPOSALS

- * Russia has considered the answers of Washington and NATO on its security guarantee proposals and will respond soon, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said during a meeting with his UK counterpart, Ben Wallace, on Friday.
- * Moscow cannot accept a joint response to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's letter regarding the principle of the indivisibility of security, Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

VALEEVA CASE

- * The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) said on Friday that it plans to lodge an appeal with the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) on the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) decision to lift the temporary suspension of Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva.
- * Moscow completely supports Valieva amid a doping test controversy at the Winter Olympics in Beijing, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- * The Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) has launched an investigation into the personnel of Valieva amid a doping test controversy at the Winter Olympics in Beijing.

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US Senator Introduces Bill to Sanction Belarus, Other Countries Aiding in Ukraine Invasion

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US Senator James Lankford has introduced legislation that would sanction Belarus or any other country aiding Russia in a potential invasion of Ukraine, Lankford's office said in a press release on Friday.

"Senator James Lankford (R-OK) introduced the Belarus Aggression Accountability Act to deter Belarus from allowing Russia to use its territory to invade Ukraine. Lankford's bill would sanction Belarus or any country that aids Russia's ongoing, unprovoked aggression toward the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine," the release said.

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Biden, Transatlantic Leaders Express Desire for Diplomatic Solution to Ukraine Crisis - WH

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joseph Biden and transatlantic leaders have expressed desire for a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis and also spoke about latest engagements with Russia, the White House said in a readout on Friday.

"The leaders expressed their concern about Russia's continued build-up of military forces around Ukraine and reaffirmed their support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity," the readout said. "They expressed their desire for a diplomatic solution to the crisis, and discussed recent engagements with Russia in multiple formats."

The call was joined by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Polish President Andrzej Duda, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, according to the readout.

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Pentagon Confirms Sending 3,000 More Soldiers to Poland at Biden's Direction

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would likely begin with an air assault. Moscow has repeatedly denied having any intention of attacking Ukraine.

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US Establishes \$6Bln Program to Preserve Clean Nuclear Infrastructure - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The US government today took the first steps to establish a \$6 billion civil nuclear credit program that supports the continued operation of nuclear reactors, the Energy Department said in a press release on Friday.

"The US Department of Energy (DOE) today released a Notice of Intent (NOI) and Request for Information (RFI) on the implementation of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law's \$6 billion Civil Nuclear Credit Program," the release said. "The nuclear credit program supports the continued operation of US nuclear reactors, the nation's largest source of clean power."

According to the Energy Department, fluctuating energy markets and a range of other economic factors have led to 12 commercial reactors across the United States being shut down since early 2013. The closures have resulted in increased carbon emissions in the areas where the reactors were located, poorer air quality, and the disappearance of thousands of high-paying jobs, according to the release.

Nuclear power currently provides 52 percent of the nation's 100 percent clean electricity, and the Biden-Harris Administration has identified 93 reactors as a vital resource to reach net-zero emissions by 2050, the release added.

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UN Mission Confirms Two Foreign Journalists Detained by Taliban in Kabul Released

UNITED NATIONS, February 11 (Sputnik) - Two foreign journalists detained by the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism activities) in the Afghan capital of Kabul have been released, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said in a statement on Friday.

Earlier in the day, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said that two journalists on assignment for the UN and Afghans working with them had been detained in Kabul.

"UNAMA welcomes the release of the reporters by Afghanistan's de facto authorities," UNAMA said via Twitter. "No Afghan or international journalist, nor civil society activist, should be picked up and held incommunicado."

The Wall Street Journal reported earlier on Friday the Taliban had detained nine foreigners in Kabul, including an American citizen and a British journalist.

Since the Taliban takeover in August, national and global journalistic associations have voiced concern over a rise in violence against media workers, with many reporters detained and media outlets shut down.

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Trudeau Promised 'Quick Action' to Enforce Law in Canada Trucker Protests - White House

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promised US President Joe Biden that he will take quick action to enforce the law in response to anti-COVID vaccine mandate protests by truckers, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday during a press briefing.

"The two leaders agreed that the actions of the individuals who are obstructing travel and commerce between our two countries are having significant, direct impacts on citizens' lives and livelihoods," Psaki said. "The Prime Minister promised quick action in enforcing the law, and the President thanked him for the steps he and other Canadian authorities are taking to restore the open passage of bridges to the United States."

The Biden administration has been in close touch with Canadian counterparts about how to address the challenges that the protests are posing to the supply chain, Psaki said. The US has taken steps to detour routes so that trucks experiencing blockages can cross, Psaki added. Biden and Trudeau agreed to stay in close touch in the coming days to ensure that the free flow of traffic is restored at vital transit points, Psaki also said.

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US Has Not Heard Back From North Korea Despite Outreach - White House

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has not received any response from North Korea despite recent outreach efforts, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Friday.

When asked whether it is correct to say that the Biden Administration has not heard back from the North Koreans despite the outreach, Psaki said, "Correct."

State Department spokesperson Ned Price said last week that The United States continues to receive no affirmative response from North Korea to resume denuclearization talks.

Price added that the Biden administration continues to coordinate closely with South Korea, Japan, and US partners in the Indo-Pacific region and around the world who support denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

On January 13, North Korea launched a Hwasong-12 ballistic missile with a range of 4,500 kilometers (2,796 miles), making it the longest-range missile tested by Pyongyang since 2017. The launch was North Korea's seventh this year.

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Biden Administration Unveils New Indo-Pacific Strategy as 'Challenges' From China Mount

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration on Friday unveiled its new Indo-Pacific strategy that focuses on strengthening US partnerships and presence in the region amid increasing "challenges" posed by Chinese activity.

"Under President Biden, the United States is determined to strengthen our long-term position in and commitment to the Indo-Pacific. We will focus on every corner of the region, from Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, to South Asia and Oceania, including the Pacific Islands ... This intensifying American focus is due in part to the fact that the Indo-Pacific faces mounting challenges, particularly from the PRC [People's Republic of China]," the administration said in a written copy of the strategy.

The United States will pursue five objectives in the Indo-Pacific region, according to the strategy: advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific, building connections within and beyond the region, driving regional prosperity, bolstering regional security, and building resilience to transnational threats.

The US is in a period of foreign policy that will demand more of the country in the Indo-Pacific than has been asked of them since the Second World War, the administration's strategy said. US allies and partners including the EU and NATO will harness the opportunity to align their approaches and implement initiatives to multiply their effectiveness, the strategy also said.

The US will work with partners inside and outside the Indo-Pacific to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait while remaining consistent with the One China policy, Taiwan Relations Act, Three Joint Communiques and Six Assurances, according to the strategy. The US will also engage the Indo-Pacific to address threats posed by climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, the strategy added.

The strategy's unveiling comes as Secretary of State Antony Blinken is on a trip to the region, where he is speaking to leadership from Australia, Japan, South Korea, Fiji and others about an array of issues affecting the Indo-Pacific.

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US Unable to Change China, Seeks 'Balance of Influences' - Official

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) – The United States understands its limited ability to change China and therefore focuses on seeking a "balance of influences" with Beijing, a senior American official said on Friday.

"We recognize the limitations in our ability to change China, and therefore seek to shape the strategic environment around China by building a balance of influences that advances the future we seek, while blunting Beijing's efforts to frustrate US objectives and those of our partners [in the Indo-Pacific]," the official told a press briefing.

The US continues to identify China as one of the main challenges in the region in view of the latter's increasingly "assertive" actions, the official added.

In January, White House National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell said that the US is seeking coexistence with China in the Indo-Pacific and not domination and primacy in the region.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken is visiting the region this week for meetings with counterparts from the Quad group, namely India, Japan and Australia.

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Canada's Trudeau Says 'Everything on Table' to End 'Unlawful' Protests

NEW YORK, February 11 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday everything was on the table to defuse the Freedom Convoy protests against COVID-19 related restrictions across the country.

"Make no mistake: the border cannot and will not remain closed," Trudeau said at a news conference. "Everything is on the table because this unlawful activity has to end - and it will end."

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US Auto Workers Could Lose \$51 Million in Wages Due to Trucker Protest - Consulting Group

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Auto workers in the US state of Michigan, the center of the automobile industry in the United States, could lose up to \$51 million in wages this week as a result of the trucker anti-vaccine mandates protest at the US-Canada border, the Anderson Economic group said on Friday.

"This is a serious disruption with significant human impacts," Anderson Economic Group CEO Patrick Anderson told CNN. "With the industry already short-handed and production lines awaiting parts, any further interruption is very costly."

In mid-January, a mass peaceful protest began in Canada consisting of truckers, farmers and other Canadians. The protesters descended on the capital Ottawa to demand the government scrap discriminatory COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

The protest has since spread and truckers also blocked several US-Canada border crossings. Ambassador Bridge, connecting Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario, is the key border crossing through which the two countries conduct trade.

Anderson said the amount of lost wages could increase well beyond \$51 million if the truck blockades at US-Canada border crossing in Michigan and elsewhere continue beyond one week.

Canada does not have an automobile industry but US automakers - including Ford, General Motors and Stellantis - operate facilities in the country.

Manufacturers have cut back production at several car factories in Michigan and Ontario, as the protests add pressure on the companies to pay wages amid already weakened national and global supply chains, Anderson said.

The United States and Canada trade \$140 million in vehicles and car parts daily.

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US Stocks Down 2% as White House Claims Russia May Attack Ukraine 'at Any Time'

NEW YORK, February 11 (Sputnik) - US stocks plunged by 2% for a second day in a row on Friday, after the White House claimed that Russia might invade Ukraine "at any time," despite admitting that it had no confirmation of Moscow's intent.

The three major US stock indices — The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the S&P 500 and the Nasdaq Composite — fell between 1% and 2%, adding to Thursday's drop of between 1.5% and 2%. That set Wall Street up for a weekly loss, after two prior weeks of gains.

The plunge in stocks came after US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan claimed during a White House media briefing that a Russian attack on Ukraine may happen "at any time," including during the Olympics, and would likely begin with an air assault. Sullivan, however, added that the White House did not say that Russian President Vladimir Putin has made a "final decision" on the matter.

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US to Send 3,000 Additional Troops to Poland in Coming Days - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States is about to send 3,000 additional troops to Poland in coming days, Reuters reported on Friday, citing four officials.

Earlier in the day, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan claimed that an alleged Russian attack on Ukraine may begin "at any time," starting with aerial and missile bombing. Russia may also undertake a rapid assault of Kiev as part of its alleged invasion plans, Sullivan added. Moscow has repeatedly denied having any intention of attacking Ukraine.

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US Forces Sent to NATO's Eastern Flank Not There to Fight Russia in Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US forces sent to European countries on NATO's eastern flank are not there to fight a war against Russia in Ukraine, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"These deployments of US service members to Poland, to Romania, to Germany, these are not soldiers who are being sent to go fight Russia in Ukraine. They are not going to war in Ukraine, they are not going to war with Russia. They are going to defend NATO territory consistent with our Article V obligation," Sullivan said during a press conference.

Sullivan added that the deployment of US forces to NATO's eastern flank is defensive and not escalatory in nature.

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Sullivan Expects Biden to Engage With Putin About Ukraine By Phone

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday he expects President Joe Biden to have a phone talk about Ukraine with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"I would expect that President Biden will engage by telephone with President Putin but I don't have anything to announce for you on that right now," Sullivan told a press briefing

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Biden to Remain in Contact With Allies on Potential Response to Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will remain engaged with allies and partners on the diplomatic efforts with Russia and on the potential responses should Russia decides to invade Ukraine, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"President Biden and his team will remain in close contact with our allies and partners to coordinate both on the potential for diplomacy and on any response that is necessary should Putin decide to order military action," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

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White House Claims Russian Attack on Ukraine Likely to Begin With Aerial Bombing

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States claims an alleged Russian attack on Ukraine could begin with aerial and missile bombing amid unconfirmed reports of Moscow planning a military incursion, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday. "If a Russian attack on Ukraine proceeds, it is likely to begin with aerial bombing and missile attacks that could obviously kill civilians without regard to their nationality. A subsequent ground invasion would involve the onslaught of a massive force with virtually no notice. Communications to arrange a departure could be severed and commercial transit halted," Sullivan said during a press briefing. Russia could also undertake a rapid assault of Kiev as part of its alleged invasion plans, Sullivan added.

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US Not Saying Putin Has Made Final Decision to Invade Ukraine - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States cannot say with confidence whether Russian President Vladimir Putin has made a final decision to invade Ukraine but concerned with what its intelligence is seeing on the ground, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday. "We are not saying that a decision has been taken, final decision has been taken by President Putin [to invade Ukraine]. What we are saying is that we have a sufficient level of concern based on what we are seeing on the ground and what our intelligence analysts have picked up," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

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US Calls on Americans in Ukraine to Leave in Next 24 to 48 Hours – Sullivan

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling on all Americans in Ukraine to leave in the next 24 to 48 hours, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"We encourage all American citizens who are in Ukraine should leave as soon as possible. And in any event, in the next 24 to 48 hours," Sullivan told reporters.

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US Continuing to Reduce Embassy Footprint in Ukraine - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States is continuing to reduce its embassy footprint in Ukraine, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"We're continuing to reduce Kiev Embassy footprint," Sullivan told reporters.

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White House Says US Believes Russian Invasion of Ukraine Could Begin During Olympics

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said in a press briefing on Friday that Washington believes that Russia can invade Ukraine during the Olympics.

"We are in the window when an invasion could begin at any time should Vladimir Putin decide to order it," Sullivan said. "It could be happening during the Olympics despite a lot of speculation that it will only happen after the Olympics."

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US WWII Veteran Who Witnessed German Surrender: 'It Took Them 5 Minutes to Sign'

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US WWII veteran Louis Graziano shared with Sputnik how he helped prepare the room for the formal signing of the unconditional surrender by Nazi Germany on May 7, 1945, which he said only took five minutes.

February 11 marks 77 years since the end of the historic Yalta Conference, where Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill met to discuss the post-war world architecture. The meeting between the Allied leaders was held at the Black Sea coastal resort in the city of Yalta, also known as the Crimea Conference. The conference was also hosted by the Soviet Union in its Crimean palaces Livadia, Yusupov, and Vorontsov.

The 1945 Yalta Conference is thought of as being among the three most important wartime summits among states that defeated the Nazi, along with the 1943 Tehran conference and 1945 Potsdam conference. In Yalta, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin gathered to talk post-war

reorganization of the nations liberated from the Nazi rule and collective security that would ensure sustainable peace.

"I was in charge of the buildings in Reims, France. The Little Red Schoolhouse in Reims is where the surrender took place. It was my job to set up the war room in the schoolhouse putting out name cards for all the officials who were coming in to sign. There were the Frenchmen there, the Germans and the British, and the Russians and the Americans," Graziano said. "It took them five minutes to sign the surrender."

NAZI GERMANY FORMAL SURRENDER

Graziano noted that he learned about three to four days prior that they were bringing the Germans in.

"Actually, we did not know it was going to happen, but it did," he said.

When getting the room ready, the veteran recalled, it felt really good knowing that he was going to be there to witness the signing. He also knew that with the signing, all of them would be going home soon. It was about 2:41 in the morning when the historic signing took place, the veteran recalled.

The veteran said Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, supreme Allied commander in Europe, did not want to be in the room at the time of the signing in case the Germans backed out. He was two rooms up from there waiting to see if they were really going to sign. After the signing, Graziano took German general Alfred Jodl and a translator to Eisenhower's room. Eisenhower asked them if they were satisfied with everything and they replied, "Yes." They then clicked their heels, turned around and walked out. Graziano said, "after the Germans left we all celebrated."

Graziano worked as a hairstylist before he was drafted in. He was twenty at the time. He was ordered to report to Fort Niagara, New York and then onto Camp Hood in Texas for training. He went through 20 weeks of combat training and from there, he was sent to Camp Shanks in Orangetown, New York for four more weeks before they sent him to Fort Dix in New Jersey. While he was at Fort Dix, he went into the city and made a record for his father and told him in the record everything they were going to do to Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini when they got there.

"Everything I told him came true," Graziano said.

He later learned that his father had played that record everyday.

D-DAY

Graziano said he was in the third wave that landed on Omaha Beach in France on June 6, 1944.

"We had to do what we had to do, I did what I had to do. I can't say I was afraid or anything. I just went there to fight," he said. "We just got in there and had to fight. We didn't have to think about it or be scared."

Following their landing, they fought their way to Saint-Lo commune, which took them 43 days. After that, they kept marching until they got to Reims, France.

At that time, Reims hosted the headquarters of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, and Graziano was put in charge of the utilities and getting stuff for the men in the camp. Graziano was also in the Battle of the Bulge. In December 1944, he was still in Reims when his commander ordered him to go find General George Patton's troops who got lost.

"We had to go find them and take them to Bastogne," he said. "We found them between Reims and Metz. We had to fight our way to Bastogne. I got frozen feet on that assignment. When we

got back to Reims, I had to go to the hospital to see about my feet. They were severely frostbitten. I had to stay in the hospital for two to three weeks. They finally told me I could be discharged because I kept wanting to get back with my men. I had to wear two pairs of socks that were bigger than my feet."

Graziano continued to say that during his time in Reims, he managed to build a mess hall from German prefabricated houses. The veteran then asked for German prisoners and two guards that could speak German and English, and got it finished in three weeks.

"I got that mess hall built, and then the General put me in charge of the whole city of Reims, France, for the buildings that the troops occupied. Then I built an open air theater for the men, I built it on the hill and put seats up the hill for them," he added.

LOVE OF HIS LIFE

Graziano said he got married in Reims and honeymooned in Paris, France.

"It was love at first sight and we were together for 62 years before she passed," Graziano said of his wife, Bobbie, whom he met through friends.

They got married in October and headed home in December to start a life together in America.

"She left the day before I did. She had to go back with the ladies," Graziano said. "I got home on Christmas Day. I figured Bobbie would get there a day or so before I would, but she didn't. I learned later her ship had problems and another ship had to pick up the ladies. It took 30 days for her to get there."

"I was supposed to land in New Jersey. But the storm was so bad and they had to change course and we landed in Virginia. The General said that we had to wait two weeks before we could get someone to take our group to New Jersey. I told the General that I could take them. I am from around there. So, I got home on Christmas," he said.

Graziano just turned 99 years old on February 6. He said that upon returning to the United States, he went back to doing hairstyling. That is what he did before the war. His sister still kept the beauty shop going so he could go back to work. He has been a hairstylist since 1939. He is still working occasionally. Moreover, the veteran does some work at the church. He is in charge of all the utilities at the church. But most importantly, he now enjoys his time with his dog and his family.

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US Planning to Pull OSCE Observers, Embassy Staff From Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United States is planning to withdraw observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mission in Ukraine and staff from the US Embassy in Kiev, CNN reported on Friday, citing two sources familiar with the matter.

The Biden administration is pulling the OSCE observers from the country amid a deteriorating security environment, the report said. They are also discussing the possibility of pulling staff from the embassy in Kiev, the report added.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Friday encouraged Americans in Ukraine to leave the country amid worries that Russia will invade – an accusation denied by Russia.

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Over 40,000 Twitter Users Experienced Service Disruptions - Downdetector

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Nearly 50,000 users of the social media platform Twitter experienced service disruptions on Friday due to unknown reasons, according to data from website status monitor Downdetector.

A total of 42,812 user reports of problems with Twitter came in around 12:45 p.m. EST (5:45 p.m. GMT), Downdetector data showed.

Problems were reported with both the Twitter website and mobile application, Downdetector said.

Reports of problems dropped after several minutes, with users commenting that service had been restored for some.

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State Dept. Preparing US-Russian Meetings Including Between Biden, Putin - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US diplomats are currently busy preparing for a number of potential meetings between American and Russian officials including between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden, CNN reported on Friday.

The possible meetings also may be held between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov or lower-level meetings, the report said citing two department officials.

When asked about the preparations a State Department spokesperson said the US remains open to meeting again with the Russians and will continue to closely coordinate with allies, according to the report.

The White House announced earlier in the day that Biden will hold a telephone call later on Friday with a number of allies, including with the leaders of Germany and France as well as with the NATO and EU chiefs, to discuss the situation in Ukraine and tensions with Russia.

The situation regarding Ukraine has worsened in recent weeks with Washington, London and other NATO allies raising concerns about Russia's military build-up at the Ukraine border, saying Moscow is preparing an invasion.

Russia has said it has no plans to attack any country, including Ukraine, but has warned that NATO's plans to expand further eastward represent a threat to its national security.

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UPDATE - Disbarred US Attorney Pleads Guilty to \$5Mln Cryptocurrency Fraud - Justice Dept. (Updates with more details, background in paras 6-11)

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Disbarred US attorney Philip Reichenthal pleaded guilty in federal court to a conspiracy to defraud individuals who believed they were purchasing the cryptocurrency Bitcoin in the amount of \$5 million, the Justice Department said in a statement on Friday.

"Damian Williams, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, announced today announced that PHILIP REICHENTHAL, a disbarred attorney, pled guilty in Manhattan federal court today to conspiracy to commit wire fraud, in connection with a scheme to defraud investors who believed they were purchasing Bitcoin," the statement said.

Reichenthal, 78, engaged in the scheme with Randy Craig Levine, who is also know by several other names including Viktor Lapin and Alexander Martinez Lavrov, the statement said.

Levin fraudulently induced purchasers to send millions of dollars to Reichenthal, who was a licensed attorney at the time of the fraud, the statement added.

Of the \$5 million, Reichenthal sent about \$1.9 million to a bank account in Russia, according to the statement.

The US authorities arrested Reichenthal in September of 2020, the statement noted.

"As a licensed attorney and escrow agent, Philip Reichenthal was entrusted to keep investors' money safe. But as he admitted today, he betrayed that trust by siphoning millions of dollars of investor money. Now he stands guilty of wire fraud and awaits sentencing for his crime," the statement said.

The Justice Department said that Levine and Reichenthal were involved in two fraudulent schemes. In 2018, Levine induced another individual to wire to Reichenthal more than \$3 million. Reichenthal wired more than \$2 million from this amount to several bank accounts in Guatemala related to Levine, the statement said.

"In the second fraudulent scheme, from approximately February 2019 to May 2019, Levine induced a Florida resident involved in brokering Bitcoin transactions ("Individual-2") to cause investors to send to Reichenthal over \$2 million of the investors' money to fund the purchase of Bitcoin," the statement said.

Reichenthal also sent over \$1.9 million to bank accounts in Mexico, from where the money was then wired to a bank account in Russia and held in the name of one of Levine's aliases, the statement added.

Reichenthal will be sentenced at a later date and the extradition proceedings for Levine are pending, according to the statement.

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UPDATE - One Person in Critical Condition, 9 Officers Injured in Phoenix Shooting Incident - Police

(Modifies headline and lede; updates with new information throughout)

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - A woman and nine police officers have been injured in a shooting at a barricaded house in Phoenix, Arizona, early on Friday morning, the Phoenix Police Department (PPD) said.

The incident took place as an officer responded to a shooting at 54th Avenue and Elwood Street in south Phoenix, but was fired upon when arriving on the scene.

"The Phoenix Police Department received a 911 call saying that an adult female has been shot. When an officer approached to help, he actually was invited by the suspect, an adult male. As he approached the door, the suspect ambushed him and shot several times," a PPD spokesperson said.

The officer was able to get to safety and called for reinforcement. An unidentified resident then placed a baby outside of a nearby home and when the officers attempted to take the baby to safety, the suspect opened fire again. The baby was not hit but one woman whom the police call "the initial shooting victim" was injured and remains in critical condition.

"The suspect opened fire again striking four officers and striking four other officers. Four directly with gunfire and four with ricocheting or shrapnel," the PPD spokesperson said.

When the officers eventually entered the suspect's home, they saw that he was dead.

"There is no threat to the public. The area will be restricted while investigators are on scene," the PPD spokesperson said, adding that an investigation into the motives for the incident is ongoing.

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IMF Says Lebanon Needs to Implement Comprehensive Reforms to Stabilize Economy

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Lebanon needs to implement comprehensive reforms, including anti-corruption measures and a credible monetary and exchange rate system, in order to resuscitate its economy, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a statement on Friday.

"The unprecedented and complex nature of the Lebanese crisis requires a comprehensive economic and financial reform program to stabilize the economy, address deep-seated challenges, and lay the ground for sustainable and strong growth," the statement said.

The IMF is recommending a recovery program based on five pillars that include fiscal reforms and financial and public sector restructuring that would avoid draining of public resources.

"Strengthening governance, anti-corruption, and... frameworks to enhance transparency and accountability" along with "a credible monetary and exchange rate system" would all assist in rebuilding the Lebanese economy, the statement added.

Lebanon saw its finances collapse after the coronavirus pandemic measures severely hurt the country's tourism, which makes up about 18% of its economy. Lebanese GDP has plummeted by 58.1% since 2019, bringing government revenue to \$21.8 billion in 2021, according to the World Bank.

2/11/2022 12:50:52 PM -05:00

UN 'Encouraged' by US Decision to Use Afghan Funds for Humanitarian Aid, 9/11 Victims UNITED NATIONS, February 11 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is encouraged by the US decision to split \$7 billion in Afghan Central Bank funds deposited in New York between a humanitarian trust and compensation to the families of victims of the September 11 terror attacks, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"We have said on several occasions and we've called many times for the release of Afghanistan's frozen assets, and I think we're encouraged by the step taken today in this regard," Dujarric told a briefing.

The spokesman added that the United Nations was trying to get more details on the US announcement.

2/11/2022 12:43:54 PM -05:00

NY Man Pleads Guilty to Felony Charges for Offenses During US Capitol Riot - Justice Dept. WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - A New York man pleaded guilty today to assaulting law enforcement and other felony charges during the breach of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, the Justice Department said Friday.

"Greg Rubenacker, 26, of Farmingdale, New York, pleaded guilty to all 10 counts of an indictment returned in the District of Columbia, including charges of assaulting, resisting, or impeding officers, civil disorder, obstructing an official proceeding, and committing an act of physical violence on the Capitol grounds," the department said in a press release.

Prosecutors said Rubenacker fought with police officers inside the Capitol Building on January 6 and along with others tried to remove unauthorized people from the Rotunda, the release said. He also smoked marijuana and recorded videos that he posted to social media before he and others were pepper sprayed by officers, according to the release.

Rubenacker was arrested on February 2021 in Farmingdale, New York. He is slated to be sentenced on May 13, 2022 and faces up to 20 years in prison, the Justice Department said.

2/11/2022 12:37:55 PM -05:00

UN encouraged by US allowing Afghan Central Bank Funds to be split between humanitarian trust and terror victims - spokesperson

Sputnik

2/11/2022 12:36:42 PM -05:00

Disbarred US Attorney Pleads Guilty to \$5Mln Cryptocurrency Fraud - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Disbarred US attorney Philip Reichenenthal pleaded guilty in federal court to a conspiracy to defraud individuals who believed they were purchasing the cryptocurrency Bitcoin in the amount of \$5 million, the Justice Department said in a statement on Friday.

"Damian Williams, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, announced today announced that PHILIP REICHENTHAL, a disbarred attorney, pled guilty in Manhattan federal court today to conspiracy to commit wire fraud, in connection with a scheme to defraud investors who believed they were purchasing Bitcoin," the statement said.

Reichenenthal engaged in the scheme with Randy Craig Levine also know by several other names including Viktor Lapin and Alexander Martinez Lavrov, the statement said.

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US Consumer Sentiment Hits Worst Level Since 2011 as Inflation Throttles - UMich Survey

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - US consumer sentiment has hit the lowest point since 2011 as inflation from a combination of soaring wages and supply disruptions throttle an economy rebounding from the coronavirus pandemic, the University of Michigan said on Friday about its closely-followed survey on consumers.

"Sentiment continued its downward descent, reaching its worst level in a decade, falling a stunning 8.2% from last month and 19.7% from last February," the university said about the UMich Consumer Sentiment Index, which showed a reading of 61.7 for early February, down from 67.2 from January and 76.8 a year ago.

The US economy grew by 5.7 percent in 2021, the fastest rate since 1984, from a 3.5% contraction in 2020 caused by the coronavirus pandemic measures. But inflation grew even faster, with the Consumer Price Index expanding 7.5%, its most since 1982.

Wages grew by 4.7% last year. Meanwhile, the federal government, its multiple agencies and the 50 US states combined spent trillions of dollars on pandemic-related aid that pumped up the economy from the pandemic's lows, sending prices of goods and services soaring.

The overwhelming rise in price pressures has weighed heavily on consumer spending, which accounts for about 70% of US gross domestic product.

As a result, most economists have resigned to seeing a lower trajectory for the UMich Consumer Sentiment Index, though the pace of its decline surprised some.

"The speed of the drop in (consumer) expectations is somewhat concerning," economist Adam Button said on the ForexLive financial media platform.

Richard Curtin, chief economist of UMich's consumer surveys, said the decline of the index was among households with incomes of \$100,000 or more - a vital demographic of the middle class that had at least some of its wealth invested in the stock market for short-term gain or long-term retirement.

"The impact of higher inflation on personal finances was spontaneously cited by one-third of all consumers, with nearly half of all consumers expecting declines in their inflation adjusted incomes during the year ahead," Curtin said. "In addition, fewer households cited rising net household wealth since the pandemic low in May 2020, largely due to the falling likelihood of stock price increases in 2022."

US stock markets experienced a multi-year bull run that heightened during the pandemic as many Americans flush with cash from government stimulus programs invested in stocks. But worries about impending interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve seem to have brought to an

end the long-running rally, with the S&P 500 index for top US stocks declining 6% for the year after a 27% gain in 2020.

The Federal Reserve has said that a series of rate hikes will be needed this year and possibly next year to bring inflation back to its target of 2% per year.

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Webb Telescope Alignment Going Well, Sees 'First Light' Photons in Outer Space - NASA

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), the most complex optical instrument ever sent into the cosmos, has successfully completed the first of seven stages of its alignment process, one million miles from Earth and has sent its first images of photons from outer space back, project engineers said on Friday.

"It was early in the morning of February 7 that we got our first light," deputy telescope scientist for Webb Marshall Perrin and astronomer at the Space Telescope Science Institute told a NASA press conference.

All 18 segments of the complex mirror design of the space telescope were successfully detecting light, just as the plans and projections for the telescope had predicted, Perrin continued.

"We found light from all 18 segments [of the telescope] very near the center early in that search. This is a great starting point for mirror alignment ... Everything is going smoothly. We are elated and relieved," he said.

It will take the Webb scientists and engineers about a month more to complete the JWST's initial alignment and then they will mature that alignment, Perrin explained. The project was right on track and it was running within a day or so of the original preflight schedule that it was expected to be on, he said.

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UN Chief Calls for Stability in Libya After New Premier Named to Challenge Incumbent

UNITED NATIONS, February 11 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres calls on Libyan political forces to consider the preservation of stability to be the top priority after the Tobruk parliament elected a new interim prime minister, despite the objections of the incumbent, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

On Thursday, the Libyan parliament voted to elect Fathi Bashagha, who served as interior minister in the Government of National Accord, as the new prime minister. The head of the Government of National Unity, Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, however, said he had no intention of transferring power before a presidential election.

"The Secretary-General calls on all parties and institutions to continue to ensure that such critical decisions are taken in a transparent and consensual manner," Dujarric said. "The Secretary-General further calls on all parties to continue to preserve stability in Libya as a top priority."

On Monday, the Libyan parliament voted for a roadmap that provides for a general election within 14 months after an amendment to the constitutional declaration is adopted. On Thursday, it voted by a majority to approve the amendment to the constitutional declaration.

Libya ceased to be a united country in 2011 de facto after its leader Muammar Gaddafi was ousted and assassinated. Last March, a transitional government was voted at a UN-backed gathering of Libyan delegates in Geneva in the hope that it would lead the country into a general election on December 24, 2021. Nevertheless, the polls were delayed after the eligibility of some of the 98 candidates was questioned.

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Canada's Ontario Declares State of Emergency Over Freedom Convoy Protests - Premier
(Updates with additional statements, background in paras 3-8)

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) – The Canadian province Ontario has declared a state of emergency in connection with protests by truckers and other Canadians opposing COVID-19 vaccine mandates, Premier Doug Ford said on Friday.

"Today, I am using my authority as Premier of Ontario to declare a state of emergency in our province," Ford told a press conference.

The premier said the protest at the Ambassador Bridge, which connects Canada and the United States but is currently blocked by trucks, represents a siege and an illegal occupation.

"This is no longer a protest. With a protest, you peacefully make your point and you go back home," he said.

Ford added that there will be consequences for actions by individuals blocking the bridge and they will be severe.

The wave of mass peaceful protests across Canada began in January, with tens of thousands of truckers, farmers and other demonstrators converging on Ottawa to oppose and demand the end of COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

The protest has since evolved into an anti-government demonstration, with various groups uniting in opposition to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his government.

On Monday, Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson declared a state of emergency for the city due to the ongoing protests.

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Ontario to Impose Fines, Up To a Year in Prison in Response to Trucker Protests - Premier

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Canada's Ontario will impose fines of up to 100,000 Canadian dollars (\$78,835) and up to a year in prison in response to trucker protests, Premier Doug Ford announced on Friday.

"I will convene Cabinet to use legal authorities to urgently enact orders that will make crystal clear it is illegal and punishable to block and impede the movement of goods, people and services along critical infrastructure. This will include protecting national border crossings, 400-series highways, airports, ports, bridges and railway," he told a press conference.

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Canada's Ontario Declares State of Emergency Over Freedom Convoy Protests - Premier

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Canada's Ontario province declares a state of emergency in connection with protests of truckers opposing COVID-19 vaccine mandates, Premier Doug Ford said on Friday.

"Today, I am using my authority as Premier of Ontario to declare a state of emergency in our province," he told a press conference.

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Quad Nations Condemn N. Korea Missile Launches in Defiance of UN Resolutions - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - The four Quadrilateral Security Dialogue group of nations, or Quad, and comprising the United States, Japan, India and Australia, condemned North Korea's recent ballistic missile tests in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions, a statement issued at the Quad Foreign Ministers' meeting in Melbourne, Australia, said on Friday.

"We condemn North Korea's destabilizing ballistic missile launches in violation of UN Security Council resolutions (UNSCRs), reaffirm our commitment to the complete denuclearization of North Korea consistent with UNSCRs, and reconfirm the necessity of immediate resolution of the issue of Japanese abductees," the statement said.

The Quad nations also stressed the importance of international law, peace and security in the maritime domain underpins the development and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region, the statement said.

"We reiterate the importance of adherence to international law, particularly as reflected in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to meet challenges to the maritime rules-based order, including in the South and East China Seas," the statement added.

The Quad nations planned to deepen their engagement with regional partners, strengthen maritime domain awareness, protect their ability to develop offshore resources consistent with

UNCLOS and ensure freedom of navigation and overflight in the region, according to the statement.

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Blinken Thanks Japan for LNG Shipments to Europe - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed gratitude to Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi for Tokyo supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Europe when they met at a Quad gathering in Melbourne on Friday, Department of State spokesman Ned Price said.

"Secretary Blinken thanked Japan for supporting Europe's energy security through LNG shipments to the region," Price said in a readout.

The two reaffirmed the vital importance of the US-Japan alliance, the readout continued.

They also "committed to work closely together to deter further Russian aggression against Ukraine" and discussed measures to press the military government of Myanmar.

In addition, Blinken condemned North Korea's recent ballistic missile launches but reaffirmed his openness to diplomacy and dialogue with Pyongyang, the readout said.

The United States and the European Union said in late January that they are working together to ensure sufficient and timely shipments of natural gas to European consumers and avoid supply shocks amid mounting tensions over Ukraine. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said that the bloc's immediate priority is to diversify energy sources in order to avoid possible supply disruptions from its main supplier Russia.

Moscow has repeatedly denied having any intention of invading Ukraine, while pointing to NATO's military activity near Russian borders, which it deems a threat to its national security.

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Resident, Police Officers Injured in Shooting in Phoenix, Arizona - Police Department

WASHINGTON, February 11 (Sputnik) - A woman and five police officers have been injured in a shooting at a barricaded house in Phoenix, Arizona, early on Friday morning, the Phoenix Police Department said.

"The barricade situation has been resolved. There is no threat to the public. The area will be restricted while investigators are on scene," the Phoenix Police Department police said.

The police originally said several officers were injured in the standoff with a barricaded suspect, but later specified that five officers have been injured.

The incident took place as officers responded to a shooting at 54th Avenue and Elwood Street in south Phoenix, but were fired upon when arriving on the scene.

An unidentified resident placed a baby outside of a home and when the officers attempted to take the baby to safety, the suspect opened fire again. The baby was not hit but one woman was injured and remains in critical condition, according to the Phoenix Police Department.