

2/14/22 Monday

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Trudeau Says Canada's Federal Gov't Invoking Emergencies Act to Address Protest Blockades
By - Morgan Artyukhina

The "freedom convoy" protests by a group of truckers and their sympathizers who were protesting Ottawa's COVID-19 mitigation policies managed to block traffic across a key bridge from the United States to Canada for six days, creating extensive economic problems in both countries.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Monday he would invoke the Emergencies Act for the first time in the country's history, giving his cabinet special powers to address a national crisis. The act is being invoked because of protests that have blocked border crossings to the United States.

"We will not allow illegal and dangerous activities to continue," the prime minister said, calling the measure a "last resort" against the protest movement, which reportedly has links to right-wing political groups, according to an [investigation by Multipolarista](#).

By doing so, Trudeau will be able to impose restrictions on public assembly and travel and provide federal support for local and provincial police forces, [according to Reuters](#). Other powers the government gains under the declaration include deciding what are essential services and regulating the distribution of essential goods.

However, it also includes a provision for compensating those who receive financial harm due to government measures taken under the act. [According to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation \(CBC\)](#), the government is still confined by the protections offered by the [Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#), the Canadian Constitution's bill of rights.

An important difference from the War Measures Act that the Emergencies Act replaced in 1982 is that Trudeau's invocation of it must be approved by the Canadian Parliament within seven days and it can also later be revoked by lawmakers. It is unclear if Trudeau's Liberal Party, a minority in the legislature, will have the support of New Democrat leader Jagmeet Singh.

The governors of [at least four Canadian provinces](#) have publicly opposed Trudeau's plans to invoke the Emergencies Act, including Quebec, Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Some said the act should only be applied to jurisdictions that request it.

However, officials from the United States, including Biden administration officials and the US Chamber of Commerce, have [prodded their Canadian counterparts](#) for days to take action.

The War Measures Act was invoked three times before being discarded: during each of the World Wars, as well as in 1970 by the present prime minister's father, Pierre Trudeau, when the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) kidnapped the provincial Deputy Premier Pierre Laporte and British diplomat James Cross - a situation known as the October Crisis. During the events of 1970-1, Canadian troops were deployed to keep order in Quebec, where an independence movement had gained major sway among Francophones and deployed terrorist tactics against the government.

Truckers Oppose Vaccine Mandates

For weeks, groups have protested vaccine mandates and other COVID-19 mitigation measures proposed by Trudeau's government, including [a 17-day encampment](#) in the national capital of Ottawa by hundreds of big-rig truck drivers. Most recently, a group of truckers [shut down the Ambassador Bridge](#), which links Windsor, Ontario, with the US city of Detroit, Michigan, and serves as a vital trade artery between the two countries.

The six-day shutdown that [ended on Sunday](#) sent ripples through both nations' economies, causing shortages and even [temporary factory closures](#).

The protests have attracted widespread [support from right-wing figures](#) such as US Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) and former US President Donald Trump, who are opposed to government-mandated COVID-19 restrictions, including vaccination, masking, and quarantine requirements intended to interrupt and slow the spread of COVID-19.

Ironically, the truckers' protest, which has claimed to speak for all truck drivers, has been publicly opposed by the [Teamsters Unions](#) in both Canada and the United States.

"The real enemy for truckers is COVID-19," Teamsters Canada said in a [February 7 statement](#).

"The so-called 'freedom convoy' and the despicable display of hate lead by the political Right and shamefully encouraged by elected conservative politicians does not reflect the values of Teamsters Canada, nor the vast majority of our members, and in fact has served to delegitimize the real concerns of most truck drivers today," the union said.

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US Moving Ukrainian Embassy From Kiev to Lvov - State Department

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Russian forces drilling in Belarus are scheduled to complete their exercises on 20 February and some units have already begun preparing to head home, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said on Monday. This contrasts sharply with reports in the US media of a continued Russian buildup in Belarus and on its Western frontier.

Following the removal of most US Embassy staff from the Ukrainian capital of Kiev late last month, the US State Department has announced it is moving its embassy in Ukraine to the western city of Lvov.

According to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the shift is motivated by Washington's fears that Russia is planning to soon invade Ukraine, despite [assurances otherwise](#) from both Kiev and Moscow.

"With that in mind, we are in the process of temporarily relocating our Embassy operations in Ukraine from our Embassy in Kiev to Lvov due to the dramatic acceleration in the buildup of Russian forces", Blinken said. "The Embassy will remain engaged with the Ukrainian government, coordinating diplomatic engagement in Ukraine".

"These prudent precautions in no way undermine our support for or our commitment to Ukraine", the US secretary of state added. "Our commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity is unwavering".

The US already maintains a consulate in Lvov, which is close to Ukraine's western border with Poland. A [State Department official denied](#) over the weekend that the Lvov consulate was a "fallback" position or even that the Kiev embassy would close.

"We're shifting some people there in part because of its closer proximity to US diplomatic and consular facilities in neighbouring countries so we can maintain close coordination with colleagues in those neighbouring countries and ensure that, should military action on the part of Russia begin, we can move those people safely should we decide to do so", the official told reporters.

Still, according to [The Wall Street Journal](#) on Monday, when US workers left the Kiev embassy on Monday, the State Department "ordered the destruction of networking equipment and computer workstations and the dismantling of the embassy telephone system", rendering the "embassy inoperable as a diplomatic facility". The report was based on internal documents viewed by the New York paper.

The US has claimed for months that Russian troops engaged in military drills in Russia's southwestern regions are preparing to invade Ukraine, offering a variety of claims for which it has never furnished proof and [scolded journalists](#) who sought it. Moscow says its troops are no threat - something the Ukrainian government has agreed with, urging the US to stop spreading invasion panic.

In order to defuse the situation, the administration of Russian President Vladimir Putin has informed NATO of its primary security concerns, including that the alliance halt its eastward expansion and pledge not to accept Ukraine as a member or station offensive weapons on Ukrainian soil.

On Monday, Kiev [seemed to indicate](#) a willingness to consider giving up on its NATO membership ambitions, but that was quickly squashed. NATO has likewise indicated a willingness to discuss issues relating to its stationing of certain weapons in Eastern Europe, such as at the Aegis Ashore bases in Poland and Romania, but refused to close its "open-door" membership policy.

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'No Secrecy About This': Sudan Junta Leader Burhan Admits Security Cooperation With Israel
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, two allies of the ousted Sudanese military dictatorship, have long favored stability in Khartoum for political and economic reasons. However, both monarchies unexpectedly came out against the October 25 military coup. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the head of the military junta that seized power in Sudan last October, said on Saturday that his government has been cooperating with Israel. Burhan told Sudanese state-owned television in his first interview since the October 25 coup that officials from Israel and Sudan have [regularly exchanged visits](#) to cooperate on security and intelligence matters.

"We don't have secrecy about this. But no senior Israeli political official visited Sudan to announce it. All the delegations were from the security services to exchange information," he said, adding that the information had allowed the country to arrest "many terrorist organizations that could have destabilized the security of Sudan."

Indeed, reports have emerged in Israeli media about such visits, with the most recent being on Wednesday [when Reuters reported](#) that a Sudanese envoy was in Israel. Israel's [Kann News reported](#) late last month during an Israeli visit to Khartoum that because of the visits, "the general impression [in Sudan] is that Israel supports the military and the coup they carried out." In fact, Burhan first met with then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Entebbe, Uganda, at the residence of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni in February 2020, and agreed to gradually normalize relations, a senior Israeli official told [The Times of Israel](#) at the time. Before the end of the year, the Sudanese government signed the Abraham Accords recognizing Israel's existence as the UAE had done a few months prior. At the time, Burhan chaired the Sovereign Council collective executive that headed Sudan's transition government, under which Abdalla Hamdok served as prime minister.

On the day of the coup, Israeli daily paper [Israel Hayom reported](#), citing an unnamed Israeli official, that Jerusalem was unhappy with American condemnations of the military's overthrow of Hamdok and abolition of the Sovereign Council.

"The country is not democratic as it was ruled for 30 years by the authoritarian regime of Omar al-Bashir. While we understand why the US would like to see the democratization of Sudan, between the two Sudanese leaders, it is Burhan who is more inclined to bolster ties with the US and Israel," the official said.

"In light of the fact that the military is the stronger force in the country, and since Burhan is its commander in chief, the events of Monday night increase the likelihood of stability in Sudan, which has critical importance in the region, and it increases the chances of stronger ties with the US, the West, and Israel in particular," the official added.

Sudan had once been a redoubtable opponent of Israel, including hosting the 1967 Arab League summit in Khartoum, at which the [Arab powers pledged](#) to abide by "Three Nos" in their disposition toward Israel: no negotiations, no recognition, and no peace, in the aftermath of Israel's vast land seizures during the Six-Day War.

Bashir was reviled for his closeness to terrorist [groups like *al-Qaeda](#). Sudan was once on the list of countries targeted for regime change by US neoconservatives, [according to divulgences](#) by US Army Gen. Wesley Clark, the former commander of NATO's forces in Europe. However, the CIA also [used Bashir's government](#) as a convenient source of information on such terrorist groups.

After the revolution that forced Bashir from power in April 2019, Washington gave the new government more explicit support, removing it [from sanctions lists](#) and condemning attempts by the military, which is composed largely of Bashir's old officer corps, to usurp civilian power or crush the democratic mass movement that brought Bashir down.

Since the October coup, Sudanese have been back in the streets with [massive demonstrations](#), calling on the military to yield power to a legitimate civilian and democratic government, but Burhan's government has not hesitated to use deadly force against them. According to the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors, 81 people have been killed by the military in

demonstrations since October, with [two people being killed](#) in a [protest on Monday](#). Sudanese police also said 102 of their officers were also injured in the demonstrations.

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On Israel Visit, US Sen. Graham Claims Iran Close to Nuclear 'Break Out' Amid JCPOA Talks
By - Morgan Artyukhina

As negotiations on reviving the Iran nuclear deal seem to be edging closer, some very anti-Iran figures and opponents of the deal in Washington have increased their vocal criticisms of the Islamic Republic.

On Monday, US Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) met with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett in Jerusalem, where they discussed security issues. He also met with Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, Defence Minister Benny Gantz, and representatives from the Mossad intelligence agency, who briefed the US senator on intelligence relating to Iran, [The Times of Israel reported](#). Graham has no administration appointment or role in the Senate that would necessitate such a trip.

"I mentioned the idea of formalising a mutual defence agreement, in very limited circumstances that would involve existential threats to the Jewish state", Graham told reporters at a press conference after.

Graham spoke on a wide variety of topics, including Ukraine and Taiwan, saying the two places are at "important, consequential moments in history".

"But the one we're not talking about enough is even more consequential: that the Iranians break out and acquire nuclear capability", [Graham said](#), calling it "the game-changer of all game-changers".

"Russia and China are rational actors, even though their behaviour is thuggish", the US senator added. "Iran is a theocracy motivated by religion that compels them to purify their faith and have the world submit. The Nazis wanted a master race, and the Iranians want a master religion. People like that cannot be ignored".

Graham said that if Iran did acquire a nuclear weapon, it would force rival Arab states to do so, many of which are scarcely any friendlier with Israel.

"I guarantee you the Jewish people can't live that way. One Holocaust was enough. There will be war. Why can't Iran have nuclear weapons? Because Israelis say, 'Never again'", Graham said, invoking a slogan used to denounce the Nazis' mass Judeocide in the 1930s and 40s. Although the Iranian monarchy was very close to both Israel and the United States, the 1979 Islamic Revolution had [very strong nationalist](#) overtones and disagreed sharply with the existence of a Jewish-only state in the Middle East, severing relations with Israel and declaring its support for the Palestinians, Hezbollah, and other groups opposing Israel. Iranian leaders have strongly denounced Israel, calling for it to be erased from the map - although they [have denied charges](#) of advocating genocide or of being anti-Semitic, saying their issue is with Zionism, not Judaism.

Iran has denied it has a nuclear weapons programme, which the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regulatory group has verified has not existed for nearly two decades. In 2010, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's top political and religious leader, [issued a legal ruling](#) finding the use of nuclear weapons and all weapons of mass destruction to be against the teachings of Islam.

In the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal, Iran formally renounced nuclear weapons in exchange for the removal of international economic sanctions. However, the US unilaterally pulled out of the deal three years later, with then-US President Donald Trump accusing Iran of secretly violating the deal and pursuing nuclear weapons again.

Iran has backed off the agreements it made in the JCPOA about keeping only small amounts of low-purity uranium-235, slowly increasing the quality and quantity of refined uranium it produces as a way of pressuring Washington to return to the deal. They have pledged not to produce uranium of more than 60% U-235, which nuclear weapons designers say is insufficient to construct a nuclear weapon with, and even [Israeli military intelligence](#) has conceded in recent months that there are no signs Iran is approaching a so-called "breakout" moment, when nuclear weapon construction would accelerate quickly.

When US President Joe Biden took office in early 2021, he opened negotiations with Iran to revive the deal, believing it was the best way to keep Iran's nuclear programme under control. Tel Aviv, which has never liked the JCPOA and approved of Trump's withdrawal from it, has cautiously approved of the talks, all the while emphasising it was [preparing for a "Plan B"](#) if the talks fail - a solo military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Graham has also been strongly critical, [claiming the Iranians](#) were "playing President Biden like a fiddle" and that a war between Israel and Iran has become more likely than ever.

However, those talks, presently in their eighth round and being conducted through intermediaries in Vienna, Austria, [seem to be nearing](#) a conclusion. Last week, the Biden administration [issued a sanctions waiver](#) for international cooperation with Iran on the country's civil nuclear programme, which includes partnerships to operate or refurbish several nuclear power plants in the country.

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Climate Change Threatens to Further Damage Already Fragile Antarctic Ecosystem, New Study Shows

Two of Antarctica's native flowering plants are spreading rapidly due to warmer temperatures caused by climate change. These changes may begin on a small scale, but their effects will take a toll on the entire surrounding area.

In a [new study](#) conducted by professor Nicoletta Cannone and her team from the University of Insubria in Como, Italy, researchers warn the increasing growth of Antarctic hairgrass (*Deschampsia antarctica*) and Antarctic pearlwort (*Colobanthus quitensis*) could upend the fragile ecosystem of the Antarctic.

The rapid spread of these two plants will change the area's soil acidity, bacteria, and fungi in the soil, as well as how organic matter decomposes.

"Antarctic terrestrial ecosystems respond quickly to these climate inputs. I was expecting an increase of these plants but not of this magnitude, we are receiving multiple evidences that a major change is occurring in Antarctica," Cannone says.

[Cannone](#) and her team have been studying the two native flowers across Signy Island from 2009 to 2019, leading to their discovery of the first recorded plant growth change in the southern Antarctic.

According to the study, the hairgrass plant grew five times faster between 2009 and 2018 than between 1960 and 2009. And pearlwort grew at a speed of almost ten times more. This rapid change will cause a major effect on "all components of terrestrial ecosystems," said Connone. While climate change is the primary culprit for the expansive growth of these two plants, the study explains that the declining population of the fur seal may have also played a role in aiding the speeding growth of these plants.

Despite cooling in the continent's summer temperature in 2012, at which the temperature was only slightly below 0°C, that brief period of cold did not influence the "vegetation community dynamics" on the island, according to the study. A strong summer warming resumed on Signy Island thereafter, with research showing strong and consistent warming over a recent 7 year period of 0.9°C.

Scientists have already noted in a previous study published by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences ([PNAS](#)), that the combination of the increase in fishing, tourism and warming weather could contribute to the introduction of invasive [species](#).

The increasing warmth of Antarctica's temperature could create a habitable living space for nonnative species. Scientists warn that when invasive species are introduced to a region it could cause irreversible loss of wildlife, and with an environment as [fragile](#) as Antarctica's, the possibility of irreparable damage to their ecosystem is a given.

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Kanye West and Julia Fox Call It Quits

By - Mary Manley

Sources close to the rapper and fashion designer reportedly said he's focused on his family and his music. West is going to be dropping his album "Donda 2" on 22 February, so maybe a girlfriend just isn't in the works for the working single dad of four.

The whirlwind romance has come to an end, after two months of dating West and Julia Fox have decided to end things.

A rep for the Italian-American actress and model [confirmed to TMZ](#) that "Julia and Kanye remain good friends and collaborators but they are no longer together". Fox's head remained high as she denied reports of her crying.

The news of the split comes just in time for Valentine's Day, but Fox doesn't seem too shaken up by the end of the romance, saying, "The media would love to paint a picture of me a sad

lonely woman crying on a plane by myself but it's NOT TRUE!!" She [added](#), "I have love for him [West] but I wasn't in love w the man Jesus Christ what do you guys think I am 12 years old?!" "And for the record the only time I cried in 2022 was on Feb 6th on my dead BFF bday", she added.

The last time the two were pictured together was in celebration of Fox's birthday on 2 February. The birthday bash was thrown for Fox, 32, at Lucien in New York City. West gifted Fox jewelry, and doled out "Baby Birkin" bags to her and her friends, a purse which [costs](#) about \$9,500.00 a pop.

But high-end gifts given to her by West aren't the only mementos she's walking away from the fling with. In the since-deleted post to her Instagram story, Fox acknowledges her "come up" in fame as a result of the short relationship.

On 21 January, she [said](#) on an episode of the podcast Forbidden Fruits, "People are like 'Oh, you're only in it for the fame, you're in it for the clout, you're in it for the money', honey, I've dated billionaires my entire adult life, let's keep it real".

The news of the former couple's split came a day after West spent his [Super Bowl Sunday](#) attacking Kid Cudi on Instagram. West claimed he cut Cudi from his "Donda 2" album in connection with the fellow rapper's friendship with Pete Davidson, Kim Kardashian's new BF. Cudi responded to West's Instagram attack, saying, "Too bad I don't wanna be on ur album you f*kin dinosaur hahaha. Everyone knows I've been the best thing about ur albums since i met u. ima pray for you brother".

Apparently, West's feelings for his ex-wife and the mother of his children, Kim Kardashian, haven't gone anywhere just yet.

The rapper took to Instagram on Valentine's Day, "I DON'T HAVE BEEF WITH KIM I LOVE MY FAMILY SO STOP THAT NARRATIVE IM NOT GIVING UP ON MY FAMILY", he wrote in the caption of a paparazzi photo of Kardashian and Davidson. "I BOUGHT THIS COAT FOR KIM BEFORE SNL I THOUGHT IT WAS PARTICULARLY SPECIAL I HAVE FAITH THAT WE'LL BE BACK TOGETHER".

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Queen Consort-to be Camilla Referred to Meghan Markle as 'That Minx', Reports Say
By - Mary Manley

The woman who had an ongoing love affair with the Prince of Wales, resulting in one of the most famous divorces in history, threw some hypocritical shade at her daughter-in-law. Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, reportedly called Meghan Markle, "that minx", as well as "a self-seeking troublemaker", a royal biographer says.

Tom [Bower](#), who is a British author known for his unauthorised celebrity biographies, is currently working on a biography of Meghan Markle. He says that Camilla was reportedly "suspicious" of Meghan's intentions before the American actress married Prince Harry in 2018.

Bower told [The Sun](#) that the two never got along, saying, "[Camilla] found it hard to believe that Meghan would sacrifice her career and independence to serve silently as a team player devoted to the monarchy".

He also adds that although she remained tight-lipped about her dislike towards Meghan, it was when the young couple was departing from the Royal Family, while also participating in explosive [interviews](#) on the same subject, that the Duchess of Cornwall would refer to Markle as "that minx" as well as "a self-seeking troublemaker whose antics will always end in tears".

The Duchess of Sussex (Meghan), who currently lives in a California mansion after saying adieu to her title as a "senior" royal in January 2020, didn't see eye to eye with the Duchess of Cornwall, either, says Tom Bower.

In an announcement marking the Queen's Platinum [Jubilee](#) last week, Queen Elizabeth II said it was her sincerest wish that Camilla will be known as Queen Consort, despite Camilla being [vilified](#) for years as a person who destroyed the marriage between her now husband, Charles and the late Princess Diana.

After a [decade](#) of being hounded by the press, the tide has officially turned in Camilla's favour with this royal announcement, but only time will tell if Meghan will be shown that same level of forgiveness by senior royal members, too.

While Prince William announced his support in light of the Queen's decision to make Camilla Queen Consort, all was [silent](#) from across the pond on Harry and Meghan's end. Instead, four days after the announcement of his step-mother's new title, Harry participated in the Tackle HIV podcast as a part of National HIV Testing week in the UK.

His mother, Princess Diana, famously used her power as a royal to tackle the stigma of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s. Harry says he sees it as his duty to finish the work started by his mother, and if that happened, he "would feel a huge sense of pride that my mum and so many of her generation started something incredible". He [added](#), "I could never fill her shoes".

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US Tycoons Exacerbate Climate Crisis by Covertly Profiting From Fossil Fuels - Report

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The biggest US private equity investors have exacerbated the climate crisis by covertly profiting from unsustainable fuel projects around the world, a new report by Private Equity Stakeholder Project and LittleSis revealed on Tuesday. At least 12 major US private equity companies, including the Carlyle Group and the Blackstone Group, have benefited from the most destructive oil and gas investments in fracking, oil pipelines, coal plants and offshore drilling, the report said.

Private equity is a type of investments that take place opaquely and, as a rule, is exempt from public disclosures making it hard to track. In most cases, the investment capital comes from such institutional investors as public and private funds that manage funds of regular workers. More than \$7.5 trillion is currently invested around the world by the private equity industry in every sector of the economy, the report said. In 2021 alone, private equity firms have closed deals buying stakes in companies for a total of \$1 trillion.

The Carlyle Group has established joint ventures with an array of oil and gas firms like Hilcorp Energy, which is one of the largest methane emitters whose underwater pipeline project poses a threat to Alaska wildlife, the report said.

Blackstone Group owns one of the dirtiest coal plants in the United States and is a major stakeholder in the owner of the Dakota Access Pipeline, the report added.

The list of private equity companies with investments in oil and gas industries also includes KKR & Co. Inc., Ares Management, Arclight Capital, Kayne Anderson and Riverstone Holdings.

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Amnesty International Urges New York City to Ban Facial Recognition Technologies

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The New York City authorities should implement a comprehensive ban of facial recognition technologies because they violate the rights of residents living in areas where the risk of police stop-and-frisk practices is big, Amnesty International said in a report on Tuesday.

"Banning facial recognition for mass surveillance is a much-needed first step towards dismantling racist policing, and the New York City Council must now immediately move towards a comprehensive ban," Amnesty International artificial intelligence and human rights researcher Matt Mahmoudi said.

The Amnesty International research on the matter showed that law enforcement surveillance operations affect residents who are already targeted for stop-and-frisk, particularly residents of certain New York's boroughs with non-white populations.

"We have long known that stop-and-frisk in New York is a racist policing tactic. We now know that the communities most targeted with stop-and-frisk are also at greater risk of discriminatory policing through invasive surveillance," Mahmoudi said.

The researcher pointed out that the "shocking" reach of facial recognition technology affected the entire city and police should reveal its methods of using such means of surveillance.

Such practice violates the right to privacy and threatens the rights to freedom of assembly, equality and non-discrimination, Mahmoudi said.

The New York Police Department (NYPD) used facial recognition technologies at least in 22,000 cases in 2016-2019, according to data by the Decode Surveillance NYC project that mapped more than 25,000 CCTV cameras across New York City.

Amnesty International said it will launch a website that will enable residents to find out how much any route in New York City might be exposed to facial recognition technologies.

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US Issues Rules for Chinese Military Industrial Complex Sanctions - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury published on Tuesday rules regarding sanctions on China's military industrial complex.

"The Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is adding regulations to implement a November 12, 2020 Executive order related to securities investments that finance Communist Chinese military companies, as amended by a June 3, 2021 Executive order related to the Chinese military-industrial complex and Chinese surveillance technology," the release said.

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US Producer Prices Up 1% in January as Inflation Stays High - Labor Dept. Data

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The US Producer Price Index grew more than expected in January as domestic producers received more for their output in a trend that looked set to exacerbate inflation growing at its fastest pace in 40 years, data from the Labor Department showed on Tuesday.

Final demand for the so-called PPI jumped 1% last month, after climbing 0.2% in December, and against the growth of 0.5% forecast for January by economists polled by US media, the data showed.

In the 12 months through January, the PPI grew by 9.7%, virtually unchanged from December. Economists had expected a 9.1% growth instead year-on-year for last month.

Core PPI, stripped of volatile food and energy prices, rose 8.3% in the 12 months to January, also virtually unchanged from December, and higher than the 7.9% forecast by economists.

"This is another dose of hot inflation data, including on month-over-month terms, including when excluding food and energy," economist Adam Button said in a post on the ForexLive forum. "As this continues and spreads, it adds more and more pressure on companies to raise prices."

The US economic recovery from coronavirus shocks has led to runaway inflation as prices of goods and services rose from the lows of the pandemic. Supply chain disruptions, a hangover of the pandemic, have put further pressure on manufacturers, forcing them to pass costs on to retailers who, in turn, passed those on to consumers.

The economy grew 5.7% in 2021 after a 3.5% contraction in 2020. But inflation, measured by the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, grew even faster, expanding by 7% in the 12 months to December and 7.5% in the year to January — both the fastest since 1982.

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Defense Industry Mergers Into Giant Contractors Endanger US Security - White House

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - A new Pentagon report warns that the merger of dozens of US defense contracting companies into a handful of gigantic corporations over the

past 30 years has put national security and the economy at risk, the White House said on Tuesday.

"The Department of Defense released a new report today on the state of competition in the defense industrial base," the White House said in a fact sheet. "The report surveys the state of competition across key defense sectors and finds that extreme consolidation poses risks to our nation's national and economic security."

The report emphasizes that promoting competition is a top priority for the Defense Department and outlines a series of actions that it will pursue to rebuild its competitive bench, lower costs for taxpayers, and safeguard national security, the White House said.

"Since the 1990s, the number of aerospace and defense prime contractors has shrunk from 51 to just five. The same pattern has played out across categories of major weapons systems: ... today, 90% of missiles come from three sources," the fact sheet noted.

Such consolidation leaves the Defense Department increasingly reliant on a handful of companies for critical defense capabilities and it also hurts taxpayers, as companies no longer feel the competitive pressure to innovate or perform at the highest level to win contracts, the White House pointed out.

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Biden, Democrats Moving Toward 'Gas Tax Holiday' Plan Ahead of Elections - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration and Democratic lawmakers are considering a federal gas tax holiday to reduce pump prices of fuel that could bring relief to US consumers ahead of crucial elections this year, The Washington Post reported on Tuesday. A group of politically-vulnerable Democratic senators have introduced a bill that would suspend the tax, of roughly 18 cents per gallon, that would last through the November midterm elections and possibly the year-end, the report said.

The idea is to be deliberated at a lunch on Tuesday and the White House has signaled that "all options are on the table," to ease the burden of Americans facing the worst price pressures in 40 years, according to the newspaper.

Gasoline sold at pumps topped \$3.48 per gallon last week, roughly \$1 more than at the same time last year and at their highest since 2014. US prices as a whole, measured by the Consumer Price Index, grew at their fastest pace since 1982 during the year to January.

One hesitation on the part of the proponents of the gas tax holiday was whether consumers would benefit or the bigger winners would be energy companies and their middlemen, who would somehow keep pump prices high, diluting the impact for ordinary Americans, the Post said.

Just over a year into his presidency, tackling soaring gasoline prices and broader inflation has been among President Joe Biden's greatest challenges as the Democratic party tries to hold on to its control of Congress and the Senate in the November elections. A CNN poll from last week showed just 15% of Americans say they "strongly" approve of the job he is doing as president while 41% "strongly" disapprove.

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

The administration has approved the release of 40 million barrels from the US reserve to local petroleum refiners under an exchange program, for the companies to return the crude received, with an additional amount as "interest," later.

By reducing the amount of oil transacted on the open market, the president had hoped to curb the prices of gasoline and crude, which are both at seven-year highs. But the plan has barely worked as crude prices shot up another 25% this year on supply tightness created by output constraints with producer group OPEC+ and fears of more outages in the event of a Russia-Ukraine conflict.

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US Hopes Lavrov Genuine About Another Round of Dialogue, Ready to Engage - Envoy to NATO

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is hopeful that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov is genuine when talking about another round of dialogue, and Washington is ready to engage, Julianne Smith, permanent representative to NATO, said on Tuesday.

"When Lavrov talks about another round of dialogue, of course, we are open to that and prepared to sit down," Smith told a briefing. "We all hope it's genuine."

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US Planning to Verify Russia Moving Forces Back From Ukraine Border - Envoy to NATO

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is planing to verify Russia's statement that it is moving forces back from the border with Ukraine, Julianne Smith, permanent representative to NATO, said on Tuesday.

"We'll have to verify that and take a look," Smith told a briefing, when asked about Russia's statement that they are moving troops back. "We want to make sure we understand what they are talking about when they say deescalation and we want to verify that that is in fact what is happening."

Earlier in the day, the Russian Defense Ministry said that southern and western military units have started returning their troops to places of permanent deployment following drills.

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RPT: PREVIEW - US Defense Chief Travels to E. Europe for Talks With Allies on Russian Troop Movements

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin will have bilateral and multilateral meetings with allies in Eastern Europe this week to discuss security matters pertaining to Russia's military activity near Ukraine's border.

"Secretary Austin will be departing tomorrow [Tuesday] on a overseas trip to meet with senior government and military leaders in Belgium, Poland and Lithuania, and in Brussels, of course, he'll meet with allied and defense ministers across NATO leadership in the defense ministerial obviously to discuss Russia's military build up in and around Ukraine," Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said during a press briefing on Monday.

The NATO Defense Ministerial is scheduled to take place Wednesday and Thursday.

In Poland, Austin will meet with the Polish president and minister of national defense to enhance bilateral cooperation and security in the region, Kirby said, adding that the US defense chief will also take time to meet with US and Polish troops stationed in the country.

Austin will then travel to Lithuania to meet with the Lithuanian president, prime minister and minister of defense to discuss regional security matters as well, Kirby said. Austin, while in Lithuania, plans to have a joint meeting with his counterparts from Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, Kirby added.

The United States accuses Russia of planning to invade Ukraine as early as Wednesday. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy over the last several days cautioned people not to panic over reports of an alleged Russian invasion, saying there is no sign that military escalation will occur on its shared border with Russia.

However, during a speech on Monday, Zelenskyy said they were told Russia will invade the country on Wednesday, but he did not disclose who provided them with that assessment.

Over the past few months, the United States and its European partners have grown worried of Russia's military activity near the Ukrainian border in alleged preparation for an "invasion."

Moscow has denied the accusation, repeatedly stating that it is not threatening anyone and at the same time expressing strong concerns over NATO's military activity near Russian borders, which it deems a threat to its national security. Moscow has also said it has the right to move troops within its national territory.

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Trudeau Invokes Emergencies Act to Grant Gov't More Powers to Deal With Mass Protest
(Adds details, background in paras 3-12)

TORONTO, February 14 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has invoked a previously unused emergency law to grant his government additional powers in response to the protests in Ottawa and across the country against COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

"The federal government has invoked the Emergencies Act to supplement provincial and territorial capacity to address the blockades and occupations," Trudeau told a news conference in Ottawa on Monday.

The Prime Minister vowed that the measures would be "time-limited, geographically targeted, reasonable and proportionate to threats they are meant to address," however, was short on details about the scope of the emergency powers. Earlier in the day, at least two provincial premiers demanded that the measures apply only in requesting jurisdictions.

The declaration will remain in force for 30 days, effective immediately, according to Justice Minister David Lametti.

Trudeau only highlighted that the federal government intends to designate certain settings and infrastructure, such as international border crossings and airports, as entities to secure and protect. Furthermore, the country's federal police force, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), will have the authority to enforce to enforce municipal laws.

The Emergencies Act, which became law in 1985, is defined as a "urgent and critical situation of a temporary nature" that threatens the ability of the government to preserve the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of Canada and endangers the lives, health and safety of citizens, does not entail a military deployment, Trudeau asserted.

The Trudeau government's most forceful measure to quell the protests also allows it to expand anti-money laundering and terrorism financing rules to cover crowdfunding platforms and the payment services they use, such as cryptocurrencies, and authorizes Canadian financial institutions to temporarily cease providing financial services in instances where the provider suspects that an account is being used to fund the protests.

The declaration is being met with some resistance, with at least four premiers speaking out against Trudeau's decision and official opposition Conservative Party interim Leader Candice Bergen calling it "concerning." However, the pronouncement is expected to hold up with New Democrat Party (NDP) Leader Jagmeet Singh, whose party often sides with the governing Liberals' initiatives, expressing support for the Prime Minister's decree.

The Canadian Civil Liberties Association said the move has failed to meet the legal test.

"The federal government has not met the threshold necessary to invoke the Emergencies Act. This law creates a high and clear standard for good reason: the Act allows government to bypass ordinary democratic processes. This standard has not been met," the association said in a tweet.

The wave of protests across Canada began in mid-January, with thousands of truckers and other demonstrators converging upon Ottawa to express strong opposition to vaccine mandates for truckers crossing the US-Canada border.

The protest has since evolved into an anti-government demonstration, with various groups uniting in opposition of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, leading to blockades of several critical arteries, such as land border crossings between the United States and Canada, most notably the Ambassador Bridge linking Detroit and Windsor, Ontario.

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Pentagon Awards Eli Lilly \$1Bln for Newly Authorized Omicron Covid Treatment

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly won a more than \$1 billion US army contract for the manufacture and distribution of the monoclonal antibody drug bebtelovimab in support of the national emergency response to COVID-19, the Defense Department said in a press release.

Last week, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) gave emergency authorization to bebtelovimab, an antibody that neutralizes the Omicron variant.

"Eli Lilly and Company [of] Indianapolis, Indiana, was awarded a \$1,080,000,000... contract for manufacture, distribution and storage of Bebtelovimab in support of the national emergency response to COVID-19," the release said on Monday.

The company announced last week that the US and Eli Lilly had struck a deal to supply up to 600,000 doses of bebtelovimab for at least \$720 million.

Eli Lilly has said that monoclonal antibodies, such as bebtelovimab, may be associated with worse clinical outcomes when given to hospitalized patients with COVID-19 in need of high flow oxygen or mechanical ventilation.

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US Donates 5Mln Doses of J&J Vaccine to Africa for Continent-Wide Distribution - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration donated to Africa an additional five million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine for the novel coronavirus, which are currently being distributed to countries across the continent, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

"I also announced the US government is making a direct donation of 5 million doses of Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine to the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust (AVAT), the African Union's vaccine procurement and distribution effort," Blinken said in a press release on Monday following a meeting with global partners to bolster coordination to combat the disease.

The United States has donated to Africa more than 155 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines, Blinken said.

Blinken said he hosted a meeting with foreign ministers and leaders of international organizations, including the World Health Organization, to discuss an enhanced global action plan to combat the novel coronavirus and other global health threats.

The United States and its global partners discussed ways to improve the administration of vaccines, to secure vaccine supply chains, to address misinformation, and to support health workers, Blinken said.

Germany, France, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Japan, South Korea, India, the European Commission, African Union, and others, participated in the meeting.

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Top US, Ukrainian Generals Exchange Assessments of Security Environment in E. Europe - JCS

(Adds background in paras 4-9)

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley had a telephone call with his Ukrainian counterpart Lt. Gen. Valery Zaluzhny to discuss security issues in Eastern Europe, Spokesperson Dave Butler said.

"Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark A. Milley spoke with Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces Lt. Gen. Valery Zaluzhny today by telephone," Butler said in a press release on Monday. "The military leaders continued to exchange perspectives and assessments of the security environment in Eastern Europe."

The United States is accusing Russia of making plans to invade Ukraine this week, but Moscow has rejected those claims, stating it has no intention to invade any country while pointing to NATO's military activities near its borders.

The call comes as US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin heads to Europe for bilateral and multilateral meetings with allies to discuss security matters pertaining to Russia's military activity near Ukraine's border.

The Pentagon earlier said the US does not intend to move newly-arrived troops in Poland into Ukraine. Meanwhile, the State Department said it is relocating personnel from the embassy in Kiev to Lviv amid concerns of Russia's military buildup.

Russia, for its part, has signaled that it is willing to negotiate and pursue a diplomatic resolution. Later on Monday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told CNN Russian President Vladimir Putin is ready to hold talks on security guarantees and the situation around Ukraine.

Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said the US welcomes Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's comments that there is space and time for diplomacy. However, Pentagon and State Department officials have said while they welcome the overtures they want to see a de-escalation in Russian military activity near the borders.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said he told Putin on Monday that some phases of military drills are coming to completion. The biggest of those maneuvers, Allied Resolve 2022, is underway in Belarus. The exercise, which aims to practice ways of repelling foreign aggression and terrorist attacks, will run into Sunday.

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Judge Denies Bail for US-Russia Dual Citizen in \$4.5Bln Crypto Scheme, Releases His Wife (Updates with quote in para 3; more details, background in paras 5-9)

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - Chief US District Court Judge Beryl Howell on Monday ordered Ilya Lichtenstein, a dual citizen of the United States and Russia, to remain in detention and his wife, Heather Morgan, to be released from detention prior to further legal proceedings against the couple on charges of engaging in a \$4.5 billion cryptocurrency scheme.

The US authorities arrested Lichtenstein and Morgan last week for allegedly conspiring to launder cryptocurrency stolen from a \$4.5 billion hack of the virtual exchange Bitfinex in 2016. Law enforcement recovered more than 94,000 bitcoin in the case, valued at more than \$3.6 billion at the time of the seizure.

"The court finds that the relevant statutory factors weigh in favor of detention for defendant Lichtenstein," Howell said. "But as to defendant Morgan, she will be released on all the stringent conditions that were set out by the magistrate judge in New York."

Lichtenstein and Morgan are charged with conspiracy to commit money laundering and conspiracy to defraud the United States, which carry maximum sentences of 20 years and five years in prison, respectively. A US federal court initially granted Lichtenstein and Morgan bail on bonds totaling \$8 million before the decision was challenged and subject to review.

US government prosecutors requested pre-trial detention based on an alleged risk of flight by the couple. Prosecutors in a court filing argued that Lichtenstein and Morgan could have access to Russian financial accounts and identity documents, and have incentive to flee the charges against them.

Lawyers representing the couple argued during the hearing and in court filings that Lichtenstein and Morgan would not pose a flight risk or community to the community if subjected to home incarceration and the other stringent bail conditions.

Morgan underwent surgery at the end of January to remove a lump in her breast and is still recovering, the lawyers said. She also is at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 and suffering severe complications due to asthma and pre-existing damage from a bout of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, the lawyers added.

The judge said the evidence presented by the government is strong against both Lichtenstein and Morgan, the case against Morgan is weaker.

Lichtenstein was born in Russia and emigrated with his family to the United States as a child to avoid religious persecution. Russian Consul General Sergey Ovsyannikov told Sputnik that Lichtenstein has not attempted to contact the Russian Consulate for assistance.

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he'll meet with allied and defense ministers across NATO leadership in the defense ministerial obviously to discuss Russia's military build up in and around Ukraine," Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said during a press briefing on Monday.

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Probe Into Hillary Clinton Penetration of Trump 2016 Campaign 'Accelerating' - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) – Special Counsel John Durham's long-running probe into allegations that Hillary Clinton's campaign in 2016 sought to fraudulently link her Republican opponent Donald Trump to Russia has expanded and accelerated in recent weeks with new witnesses coming forward to testify, Fox New News reported.

More witnesses have emerged to cooperate with the investigation and testify before the federal grand jury considering the case than had previously been reported, the report said on Monday. On January 25, Durham's investigators sent transcripts of testimony by several grand jury witnesses to defense lawyers representing Michael Sussman, former lawyer for the 2016 Clinton campaign.

Durham recently issued a new filing in which he alleges that the Clinton campaign paid an internet company to infiltrate servers at the Trump Tower in New York and the White House in Washington to try to make the invented Trump-Russia connection stick.

Sussman has been charged with making a false statement to a federal agent and has pleaded not guilty, the report said.

The indictment against Sussmann, says he told then-FBI General Counsel James Baker in September of 2016 that he was not working for any client when he had held a meeting in which he presented purported data that allegedly demonstrated a secret communications channel between the Trump Organization and Alfa Bank, which has ties to the Kremlin, the report added. Trump has repeatedly said the allegations against him by the Clinton campaign and the Democrats are the political equivalent of a witch hunt intending to delegitimize his victory in the 2016 election as well as obstruct the work of his administration.

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US Protesters to Rally in California March 5 to Advocate Against Coronavirus Mandates

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - A rally is in the process of being organized in southern California to advocate against novel coronavirus-related mandates, advocacy group The Unity Project said in a statement.

"It's official, the American truckers in The People's Convoy will join forces with the Defeat the Mandates rally in Southern California on Saturday, March 5, 2022," the statement said. "As an event sponsor, The Unity Project is inviting all of our strategic partners to get involved and show up by the thousands to represent all that California is fighting for."

The rally will be a one-day event that will feature doctors and other prominent individuals who are against coronavirus-related mandates, the organizer said. Musicians, actors and athletes that oppose mandates are also expected to speak, the group added.

Organizers will hold a phone call on Tuesday to advance work on the event, including more details about opportunities to get involved, the lineup of speakers and performers, and how to support US truckers advocating against covid mandates, the group said.

An exact location for the event is expected to be announced soon, the organizer said.

Last week, media reported that the Department of Homeland Security warned local authorities about a possible trucker protest in the United States opposing coronavirus mandates that could kickoff in California this week and work its way through major US cities until it reached the US capitol over the coming weeks.

Canadian truckers, farmers and other citizens took part in a blockade over the last several weeks to protest the government's COVID-19 vaccine mandate. The so-called Freedom Convoy protesters descended on the capital Ottawa to demand the government terminate the requirement.

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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US Accounting Firm Will Not Back Trump Organization's Financials Amid Probe - Letter

NEW YORK, February 14 (Sputnik) - Accounting firm Mazars told the Trump Organization it can no longer back financial statements prepared for Donald Trump's private businesses, according to a letter from the firm that comes amid investigations into whether the former US president had illegally inflated the value of his assets.

"We have come to this conclusion based, in part, upon the filings made by the New York Attorney General," Mazars said in a copy of the letter that was shared on Twitter on Monday.

"While we have not concluded that the various financial statements, as a whole, contain material discrepancies based upon the totality of the circumstances, we believe our advice to you to no longer rely upon those financial statements is appropriate."

New York Attorney General Letitia James' office is investigating whether Trump had used financial statements prepared by Mazars to defraud lenders into providing him the best possible loan terms.

As evidence to her investigation, James made a court filing on Monday that included a copy of the Mazars letter, as she pressed ahead with attempts to question Trump and his son Donald Trump Jr. and daughter Ivanka Trump.

Trump's lawyers have asked a judge to prohibit James' investigation. But the attorney general's office has argued that the Trump Organization, which represents the former president's private and family businesses, had engaged in "fraudulent or misleading" practices.

The New York Times said the Mazars letter could bolster James' investigation, which focuses on whether the statements made by the accounting firm helped overvalue the various hotels, golf clubs and other properties under the Trump Organization.

Republican Trump came to power in the November 2016 US election after beating Democrat Hillary Clinton, campaigning as an independent businessman who would reshape politics in Washington. He left office in January 2021 after losing to another Democrat candidate, Joe Biden, in the previous year's election. He has indicated that he will run again in the 2024 election.

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Judge Denies Bail for US-Russia Dual Citizen in \$4.5Bln Crypto Scheme, Releases His Wife

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Ex-US Navy Engineer Pleads Guilty to Trying to Sell Submarine Secrets, Faces Life Sentence (Updates with additional information in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - Former US Navy engineer Jonathan Toebbe pleaded guilty on Monday to trying to sell classified information regarding nuclear submarines and may possibly face a sentence of life in prison, a court filing revealed.

"It is agreed between the United States and your client as follows: Mr. Toebbe will plead guilty to Count One of the Indictment, Conspiracy to Communicate Restricted Data, in violation of Title 42, United States Code, Sections 2274(a) and 2014," the filing by US Attorney's Office for the Northern District of West Virginia, signed by Toebbe and his lawyer, said on Monday.

The maximum prison sentence the defendant may face is a term of not more than life in prison along with a fine of not more than \$100,000 and up to five years of supervised release, according to the filing.

In October 2021, Toebbe and his wife Diana were charged with espionage for the alleged sale of military secrets obtained through his job as a US Navy nuclear engineer to what they believed was a foreign government rather than an FBI sting operation.

The parties also agreed to a binding term of imprisonment within the range of 151 to 210 months in accordance to US federal law, the filing said.

"Each party may request a sentence anywhere within this range. The Court will determine the amount of the supervised release and any fine," the filing added.

Toebbe agreed to provide the authorities access to all of his electronic devices and accounts so the federal officials can locate the \$100,000 the FBI paid him in the cryptocurrency Monero in exchange for the secrets he wanted to sell, according to the filing.

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Canada Approves \$393Mln Loan to Ukraine, \$6.1Mln in Lethal Weapons - Trudeau

TORONTO, February 14 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has approved lethal military aid to Ukraine in the amount of \$6.1 million as well as a loan of up to \$392.9 million amid rising tensions with Russia, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said during a press conference. "Today, we are announcing that Canada will offer a loan of up to C\$500 million [\$392.9 million USD] in loans to the government of Ukraine. following conversations with our Ukrainian partners, I have approved the provision of C\$7.8 million [\$6.1 million USD] worth of lethal equipment and ammunition," Trudeau said on Monday.

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White House on Zelenskyy Inviting Biden to Visit Ukraine: No Travel to Announce or Preview

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said there are currently no travel arrangements to announce regarding Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy invitation for US President Joe Biden to visit Ukraine. Zelenskyy invited Biden to visit Kiev in the coming days and said the visit could help de-escalate tensions with Russia. Ukraine' Office of the President said that Zelenskyy spoke by telephone with Biden, thanked him for the United States' support and invited Biden to visit Ukraine. "I don't have any travel plans to announce or preview at this time," Jean-Pierre said on Monday.

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US Adds 5 States, Territories on COVID-19 List, Advises Avoiding Travel Due to High Risk

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a travel alert advising Americans that it has added five countries and territories on its list of states for which it advises avoiding traveling to due to the alleged high risk of the novel coronavirus.

"Avoid travel to South Korea" the CDC said in the travel alert on Monday that also included Azerbaijan, Belarus, Comoros and the French territories of Saint Pierre and Miquelon south of the Canadian island of Newfoundland.

The CDC said for Americans who had to travel to these five places should make sure they are vaccinated and up to date with their vaccines before travel.

However, the CDC warned that "even fully vaccinated travelers may be at risk for getting and spreading COVID-19 variants."

The CDC urged travelers to follow recommendations or requirements in the five places, including wearing a mask and staying six feet apart from other individuals.

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White House Says US Considering Offering Sovereign Loan Guarantees to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering providing additional microeconomic support for Ukraine in the form of sovereign loan guarantees, White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a press briefing.

"I can confirm it is something we are considering as part of the additional microeconomic support, we are exploring to help Ukraine's economy amid pressure resulting from Russia's military buildup," Jean-Pierre said on Monday.

Earlier in the day, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan briefed US lawmakers about the Ukraine situation and Washington's offer to provide Kiev with \$1 billion in sovereign loan guarantees to ease concerns of war in the country, according media reports.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Monday that Kiev was committed to peace and wanted to resolve all issues exclusively through negotiations.

* National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) of Ukraine chief Oleksiy Danilov said that the closure of airspace and ports had not been discussed today, and urged the media not to sow panic.

* Danilov said that he saw no prerequisites for a large-scale Russian invasion in the coming days.

* The United States is shutting down its embassy in Kiev and is moving diplomatic operations to the western part of the country, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement.

* The United States has no plans to move newly-arrived US troops in Poland into Ukraine, and they will not be accidentally drawn into the country should there be an invasion by Russia, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said.

UN CHIEF TALKS WITH RUSSIAN, UKRAINIAN FOREIGN MINISTERS

* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres spoke by phone on with foreign ministers Sergey Lavrov of Russia and Dmytro Kuleba of Ukraine, spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told a press briefing on Monday.

* Guterres in phone calls with Lavrov and Kuleba of expressed his serious concern over the escalating tensions around Ukraine, Dujarric said.

* Lavrov briefed Guterres via video link about Russia's negotiations with NATO and OSCE member states on the proposed security guarantees in Europe.

ZELENSKYY-SCHOLZ TALKS

* Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy held a meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Kiev, during the talks the parties discussed economic and energy support for Ukraine amid security challenges.

* Ukraine would like to join NATO, Zelenskyy said, adding that this would be a "security guarantee" for Kiev.

* Zelenskyy said that he had discussed with Scholz the risks associated with the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, with some disagreements remaining in their assessments.

RUSSIA'S SECURITY GUARANTEES PROPOSALS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin has conceptually approved the foreign ministry's draft of Moscow's responses on security guarantees proposals, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik on Monday

* Russia's response to US and NATO responses to security guarantees proposals has been formulated on 10 pages, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said at a meeting with Putin.

* Lavrov told Putin that Washington's response to key issues of Moscow's proposals on security guarantees is negative.

* The United States will decide on any additional bilateral engagements with Russia after receiving Moscow's response on the matter of security proposals, US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price.

VALIEVA CASE

* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday, commenting on the decision of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) to dismiss appeals regarding Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva's case, that Moscow welcomed the ruling and the entire country wishes her to win.

* The Executive Board of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) decided that no medal ceremony will be held for winners of the figure skating team event at the Beijing Olympics.

* The laboratory in Stockholm, despite the problems with the increase in the coronavirus incidence among the staff and the quarantine rules, announced its intention to provide the results of the doping test of Valieva by end-January, the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) said in a statement.

PROTESTS IN CANADA

* The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) arrested 11 individuals and seized a cache of weapons from a splinter group involved in demonstrations against vaccine mandates and the government in Coumts, Alberta, the country's federal police force said on Monday.

* Thousands of names of individuals in Canada and the United States who provided donations to the Freedom Convoy protest against vaccine mandates have been leaked online by hackers, VICE News reported.

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Several Canadian Premiers Come Out Against Trudeau's Plan to Invoke Emergencies Act

TORONTO, February 14 (Sputnik) - At least four Canadian premiers have come out against Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's plan to invoke a previously unused emergency law to grant his

government additional powers in response to the anti-government demonstrations in Ottawa and across the country.

"The illegal blockades must end, but police already have sufficient tools to enforce the law and clear the blockades, as they did over the weekend in Windsor. Therefore, Saskatchewan does not support the Trudeau government invoking the Emergencies Act," Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe said in a statement via Twitter.

Moe's message was echoed by Alberta's Jason Kenney, Manitoba's Heather Stefanson and Quebec's Francois Legault.

Should the Emergencies Act be invoked, both Moe and Kenney demanded that the measure apply only in jurisdictions that request it.

The Emergencies Act, which became law in 1985, is defined as a "urgent and critical situation of a temporary nature" that threatens the ability of the government to preserve the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of Canada and endangers the lives, health and safety of citizens. The wave of protests across Canada began in January, with tens of thousands of truckers and hundreds of other demonstrators converging on Ottawa to express strong opposition to vaccine mandates and demand that the government scrap them.

The protest has since united various groups of citizens in opposition to Trudeau's government.

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State Dept. Says Russia Could De-Escalate Ukraine Crisis Within 'Hours or Days'

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The world could see signs of de-escalation in Ukraine within a matter of hours or days if Russia makes the political decision to make it happen, State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Monday.

"In the course of hours or days we could see tangible signs of de-escalation if Russia makes the political decision to do," Price said.

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UN Chief Says No Alternative to Diplomacy on Ukraine, All Sides Should Intensify Efforts

UNITED NATIONS, February 14 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Monday that there is no alternative to diplomacy to defuse the tensions around Ukraine and noted that he expects all sides to intensify efforts on that front.

Earlier on Monday, Guterres held separate talks the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Russia and Ukraine.

"My message is clear: There is no alternative to diplomacy. All issues - including the most intractable - can and must be addressed and resolved through diplomatic frameworks. It is my firm belief that this principle will prevail," Guterres said. "I welcome the recent flurry of diplomatic

contacts and engagements, including between heads of state. But more needs to be done, and I expect all to intensify their efforts."

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Pentagon Says Confident US Intelligence on Russia Shared With Ukraine 'Sufficient'

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department is confident that the intelligence the United States has shared with Ukraine about Russia's military activity near its border is sufficient and convincing, spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"We have been very transparent with our Ukrainian partners about the intelligence assessments that we've been seeing and the things that we've been seeing in that environment," Kirby said during a press briefing. "I'm comfortable and confident that it has been a sufficient level of detail to convince."

The United States has been warning that Russia allegedly prepares to invade Ukraine as early as Wednesday.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy indicated during the past several days that there is no sign a military escalation will occur on his country's border with Russia, however, during a speech on Monday he said Ukraine was told Russia will invade on Wednesday. Zelenskyy did not disclose who provided them with that assessment.

Over the past few months, the United States and its allies have accused Russia of a troop build-up near the Ukrainian border in an alleged preparation for an invasion. Russia has denied the accusation, repeatedly stating that does not plan to attack any country, including Ukraine. Russia has also said NATO's plans to expand further westward represent a direct threat to its national security and it reserves the right to move troops on its sovereign territory as it deems necessary.

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Guterres Says Deeply Worried by Heightened Tensions, Speculation About War in Europe

UNITED NATIONS, February 14 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Monday he is deeply worried by the heightened tensions around Ukraine and increased speculation about a potential military confrontation in Europe, warning that the world cannot accept even a possibility of such a disastrous scenario.

"I am deeply worried by the heightened tensions and increased speculation about a potential military conflict in Europe. The price in human suffering, destruction and damage to European and global security is too high to contemplate. We simply cannot accept even the possibility of such a disastrous confrontation," Guterres told a briefing.

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US Says Will See Signs of De-Escalation in Hours or Days if Russia Chooses This Path

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States could see tangible signs of de-escalation in Ukraine if Russia makes a political decision to choose this path, Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

"There are a range of steps that the Russian Federation could take that would signal de-escalation ... In the course of hours or days, we could see tangible signs of de-escalation if Russia makes a political decision to do so," Price told a briefing.

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US Crypto Firm to Pay \$100Mln to Settle Lending Business Charges - Market Regulator

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US Crypto company BlockFi agreed to pay \$100 million to settle charges of failing to register its retail lending products in a first of its kind action, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said in a press release Monday.

"The Securities and Exchange Commission today charged BlockFi Lending LLC (BlockFi) with failing to register the offers and sales of its retail crypto lending product. In this first-of-its-kind action, the SEC also charged BlockFi with violating the registration provisions of the Investment Company Act of 1940," the agency said.

BlockFi agreed to pay a \$50 million penalty to settle federal charges and another \$50 million to 32 states for similar violations, the release added.

From March 4, 2019 until today, BlockFi offered and sold BIAs - BlockFi Interest Accounts - to the public. Through BIAs, investors lent crypto assets to BlockFi in exchange for the company's promise to provide a variable monthly interest payment, the SEC said.

BIAs are securities under applicable law, hence the firm was required to register its offers and sales the product but failed to do so, the agency said.

BlockFi did not admit or deny the SEC's findings, but agreed to adhere to a cease-and-desist order which stops the company from violating regulations. BlockFi also agreed to no longer offer or sell BIAs in the United States.

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US to Decide on Further Engagement With Russia After Receiving Security Proposals Response

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States will decide on any additional bilateral engagements with Russia after receiving Moscow's response on the matter of security proposals, US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

"Any additional bilateral engagement between the United States and the Russian Federation, which again, we hope takes place and takes place in the context of de-escalation, we would continue to closely coordinate that engagement with our Ukrainian partners, with our European allies as well," Price said. "But as for the next steps, first, it's our impression that we'll be in receipt of the Russian response and we'll have to take from there."

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US FAA Expects to Finish Environmental Review for SpaceX's Starship on March 28

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said on Monday that it has pushed back the target date for finishing an environmental review of SpaceX's proposed launch program in Texas to March 28.

"The FAA is announcing that the new target date to complete its environmental review of the SpaceX Starship / Super Heavy is now March 28, 2022. The previous target date was Feb. 28, 2022," the release said.

The FAA stresses in the release that completing the environmental review does not guarantee that a vehicle operator license will be issued to SpaceX.

"The environmental review is just one part of the FAA commercial space licensing process," the release said. "SpaceX must also meet FAA safety, risk and financial responsibility requirements."

The FAA revealed that it has received more than 19,000 public comments on the draft environmental review.

Moreover, the release added, the FAA is continuing consultation and coordination with other agencies.

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Ukraine's Aspirations to Join NATO Not Matter for US, Any Country to Decide - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - Ukraine's aspirations to join the NATO alliance are not a matter for the United States or any other country to decide, US Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

Earlier in the day, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Kiev still wants to join NATO despite the opposition from Russia and some Western countries.

"Ukraine's aspirations are not a matter for us to decide. Ukraine's aspirations are not a matter for any other country to decide. We've been very clear about this," Price said.

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US Has No Plans to Put Troops From Poland in Ukraine, Will Not Be Drawn In - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States has no plans to move newly-arrived US troops in Poland into Ukraine, and they will not be accidentally drawn into the country should there be an invasion by Russia, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday. "There's no intention, there's no plan, there's no approval to put these troops into Ukraine," Kirby said during a press briefing. "They're not going to be accidentally drawn into Ukraine."

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US Will Carefully Review Russia's Followup Response Once Received - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States has taken note of reports that Moscow is finalizing its response to NATO's and Washington's security suggestions and will thoroughly review it once it receives it, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday

"We've seen the comments from the Kremlin, from Moscow today indicating that their response and their words have been finalized," Price told a briefing. "We're yet to see a response ... but we will of course carefully review the Russian written response when we do receive it."

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US Hopes to Engage in Good Faith Dialogue, Diplomacy With Russia Over Ukraine- State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes to engage in good faith dialogue with Russia over Ukraine, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Monday.

"We hope to engage in good faith Dialogue and diplomacy, but in order for it to be good faith, of course, that will require the Russians to respond in kind in order for this to bear fruit," Price said. "It will also have to take place in the context of deescalation."

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Florida National Guard Withdrawn From Ukraine 'Out of Abundance of Caution' - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - Florida National Guard trainers have been withdrawn from Ukraine "out of an abundance of caution," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

"It was out of an abundance of caution," Kirby told a briefing, when asked why Secretary Lloyd Austin had ordered that Florida National Guard trainers be pulled out of Ukraine.

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State Dept. Says Heard Lavrov's Comments on Way for Diplomacy, But Sees No De-Escalation

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States has taken note of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov saying that there is still a path for diplomacy, but it does not see any signs of de-escalation in Ukraine, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday. "We have taken note of his comments," Price told a briefing. "What we have not taken note is any indication of deescalation. We have not seen any tangible, any real sign of deescalation."

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US Still Does Not Believe Putin Has Made Final Decision to 'Invade' Ukraine - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States still does not believe that Russian President Vladimir Putin has made any final decision to attack Ukraine, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

"We still don't believe some final decision has been made," Kirby told a briefing.

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US Says Committed to De-Escalation With Russia, But Scales Up Efforts to Deter Moscow

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States remains committed to keeping the path of de-escalation with Russia over Ukraine open, but at the same time intensifies its efforts to deter Moscow, Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

"We are intensifying our efforts to deter Russia and to impose costs should Moscow decide to go ahead with military action," Price said in a press briefing. "We remain committed to keeping the prospect of de-escalation through diplomacy alive. We will remain committed to doing that

for as long as we can. But Russia must de-escalate and engage in genuine dialogue and diplomacy."

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Austin Heads to Europe to Meet Allied Defense Chiefs Over Russia's 'Buildup' – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will depart on a trip to Europe on February 15 to meet with allied defense ministers over Russia's "troop buildup" near Ukraine, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

"[Austin will] meet with senior military and government leaders in Belgium, Poland and Lithuania. In Brussels, he'll meet with Allied defense ministers across NATO leadership in the defense ministerials to discuss Russia's military buildup in and around Ukraine. He will also reiterate United States commitment to our allies made in Article Five, continue the Alliance's progress on deterrence and defense while ensuring the alliance is prepared to face tomorrow's challenges," Kirby told a briefing.

In Poland, Austin will meet with the Polish president and the minister of national defense to "enhance bilateral cooperation and security and deepen the Polish-American Partnership, which we believe is vital to addressing today's current threats and challenges," the spokesman said. He will also get a chance to meet with US troops and observe the conditions of American rotational presence in the country.

The secretary will also travel to Lithuania to meet with its leadership and reaffirm commitment to working together on strengthening the Lithuanian armed forces and "continuing to stand shoulder to shoulder against threats and adversaries."

Separately, Austin will meet jointly with his counterparts from Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia together.

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US Closing Embassy in Kiev, Relocating Diplomatic Operations to Western Ukraine - Blinken
(Adds details in paras 3-6, background in paras 7-8)

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is temporarily shutting down its embassy in Kiev and moving diplomatic operations to the western part of the country due to escalation concerns, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday.

"[W]e are in the process of temporarily relocating our Embassy operations in Ukraine from our Embassy in Kyiv to Lviv due to the dramatic acceleration in the buildup of Russian forces," Blinken said in a statement. "The Embassy will remain engaged with the Ukrainian government, coordinating diplomatic engagement in Ukraine."

Blinken went on to say that Washington is continuing diplomatic efforts to deescalate the ongoing crisis.

"These prudent precautions in no way undermine our support for or our commitment to Ukraine," the secretary underscored. "Our commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity is unwavering."

Blinken added that the United States remains engaged with the Russian government after Saturday's phone call between presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin.

"The path for diplomacy remains available if Russia chooses to engage in good faith," he said. "We look forward to returning our staff to the Embassy as soon as conditions permit."

On Saturday, the State Department said that the United States is relocating some of its diplomatic personnel from the Ukrainian capital to the city of Lviv due to security concerns. American citizens are being urged to leave Ukraine as soon as possible and Poland has agreed to help Americans depart Ukraine by simplifying entry procedures, according to the US Embassy in Ukraine.

In the past few months, the West and Ukraine have accused Russia of a troop build-up near the Ukrainian border in alleged preparation for an "invasion." Moscow has denied the accusation, repeatedly stating that it is not threatening anyone and at the same time expressing strong concerns over NATO's military activity near Russian borders, which it deems a threat to its national security. Moscow has also said it has the right to move troops within its national territory.

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US Closing Embassy in Kiev, Relocating Diplomatic Operations to Western Ukraine - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is shutting down its embassy in Kiev and is moving diplomatic operations to the western part of the country, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on Monday.

"With that in mind, we are in the process of temporarily relocating our Embassy operations in Ukraine from our Embassy in Kyiv to Lviv due to the dramatic acceleration in the buildup of Russian forces," Blinken said. "The Embassy will remain engaged with the Ukrainian government, coordinating diplomatic engagement in Ukraine."

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Jury Seated in US Federal Court in Second Trial of Ahmaud Arbery Murder - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - A jury was seated in US federal court in the trial of three Georgia men charged with hate crimes in the murder of Black man Ahmaud Arbery in November of 2020, the Denver Post reported on Monday.

Twelve jurors and four alternates were selected from a pool of 64 people who met the criteria to be impartial jurors, the report cited US District Court Judge Lisa Godbey Wood as saying.

The judge then instructed the lawyers in the case to be prepared to make opening statements, the report said.

The trial is the second one for father and son Greg and Travis McMichael and their neighbor William "Roddie" Bryan, who were found guilty of murdering Arbery in earlier trial. The McDaniels chased Arbery in their pickup truck while he was jogging in the belief he committed crimes in the neighborhood and shot him to death with a shotgun.

Travis McMichael testified in the first trial that he shot Arbery in self-defense after Arbery attacked and punched him, while grabbing for his shotgun. The men were not arrested or charged until a video of the incident leaked two months later.

The McMichaels were sentenced to life in prison without parole but federal prosecutors in the trial will now seek to convince the jury that the trio targeted Arbery because he was Black and that they violated his civil rights. The defendants have pleaded not guilty.

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US Welcomes Lavrov's View 'There's Still Time, Space for Diplomacy' - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes the comments of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov that time and space still exist for diplomacy to resolve escalating tensions, US Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Monday.

"We welcome the views expressed by Minister Lavrov, that he believes there's still time and space for diplomacy. We would agree with that. That's the way we would like to see this proceed, so I think that's welcoming," Kirby said during an interview with CNN.

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Canadian Police Arrest 11, Confiscate Guns From Group Blocking Border in Alberta

TORONTO, February 14 (Sputnik) - The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) arrested 11 individuals and seized a cache of weapons from a splinter group involved in demonstrations against vaccine mandates and the government in Coutts, Alberta, the country's federal police force said on Monday.

"The Alberta RCMP recently became aware of a small organized group within the larger Coutts protest... as a result of this investigation, the Alberta RCMP executed a search warrant during the early hours of Feb. 14, on three trailers associated to this criminal organization. This resulted in the arrest and detainment of 11 individuals," the RCMP said in a statement.

Canada's federal police force confiscated 13 long guns as well as multiple handguns and sets of body armor, the statement read.

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Hackers Leak Names of Protesters Who Donated to Canada's Freedom Convoy - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - Thousands of names of individuals in Canada and the United States who provided donations to the Freedom Convoy protest against vaccine mandates have been leaked online by hackers, VICE News reported on Monday.

The incident occurred on Sunday night when hackers targeted the GiveSendGo crowdfunding site that helped raise \$8.7 million for the participants of the Freedom Convoy in Canada and released the names of more than 92,000 donors, the report said.

A previous attempt by the government to stop donations to the protesters resulted in another crowdfunding platform, GoFundMe, freezing of some \$9 million and saying they would redirect the funds to a charity of their choice. GoFundMe refunded the funds after public backlash and warnings by US lawmakers that they will investigate it for theft.

Nobody has taken responsibility for Sunday's hack and leak, and the database containing the names is longer available. VICE News said it had reviewed it and found out that 56 percent of donations came from the United States and 29 percent from Canada, the report said.

As the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau assumed more emergency powers on Monday, thousands of donors from the United Kingdom, Australia, Ireland and other countries are now making donations in support of the protest, the report said.

The hacked GiveSendGo site on Sunday redirected visitors to another site where they were greeted by a video from the Disney film Frozen and a message accusing protesters of being "insurrections," the report said.

"On behalf of sane people worldwide who wish to continue living in a democracy, I am now telling you that GiveSendGo itself is now frozen," the message said.

In mid-January, a mass protest against COVID-19 vaccine mandates by truckers, farmers and other Canadians began and spread across Canada. The truckers formed a Freedom Convoy protesters that descended on the capital Ottawa and said will stay until their demands to scrap the mandates are carried out.

Latest polls reveal that two-third of Canadians agree with the protesters and want the mandates canceled.

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ICAO Council Current Agenda Does Not Include Ukraine-Related Matters - Russian Envoy

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The list of items expected to be discussed during the ongoing 225th session of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Council does not have any questions related to Ukraine, Russia's envoy to the organization Sergey Gudkov told Sputnik.

Some airlines, including Norwegian Air Lines and Dutch airline KLM, have decided to avoid flying over Ukraine owing to security concerns, while some carriers, including German Lufthansa and Polish LOT, as well as the foreign ministries of Austria, Czech and Lithuania, said they were closely monitoring the situation in Ukraine and may suspend flights in the future. Turkish Airlines offered customers flights on different dates or a refund for tickets bought prior to February 14. "The list of issues to be discussed at the 225th Session of the ICAO Council does not include any matters related to Ukraine," Gudkov said.

The Italian Civil Aviation Authority (ENAC) told Sputnik earlier in the day that it recommended the country's airlines avoid Ukrainian airspace.

On Sunday, Ukrainian SkyUp airline said that international insurance companies have notified Ukrainian air carriers of the termination of aircraft insurance when flying over the country in the next 48 hours due to the risk of hostilities. Lessors, in turn, have demanded that Ukrainian airlines return all aircraft to the territory of the European Union.

Oleksandr Bilchuk, the head of the the country's aviation agency, said on Sunday that Ukrainian airspace remained open and there were no grounds for closing the sky. On the same day, Ukraine allocated about \$600 million in guarantees to insurers and lessors to ensure the safety of flights over Ukraine.

Western countries and Kiev have repeatedly accused Russia of amassing thousands of troops along the Ukrainian border in preparation for an alleged incursion and provoking escalation in ties. Russia has denied these accusations, saying that it is not threatening anyone, and that the West is using the accusations as a pretext for deploying more NATO troops close to its borders.

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Texas Sues Meta for Allegedly Capturing, Selling Users' Biometric Data - Attorney General

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The state of Texas is suing Meta for allegedly failing to disclose and selling Texans' biometric data, which is in violation of state law, Attorney General Ken Paxton said on Monday.

"Today, I'm here to announce a lawsuit against Meta Platforms Inc., more commonly known as Facebook," Paxton said during a press conference. "By 2021, we have over 20 million users of Facebook from Texas. In violating the law, one of the things that Facebook did was not disclose to consumers that they were capturing their biometric identifiers, particularly facial geometry." Paxton noted that Meta allegedly sold this biometric data to third parties, in violation of state law. Moreover, Paxton said Meta is supposed to terminate all biometric data after a short time but it has not done that.

The lawsuit could amount to billions of dollars in damages, according to Paxton.

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UN Chief Voices Concern Over Growing Ukraine Tensions to Lavrov, Kuleba - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 14 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in phone calls with foreign ministers Sergey Lavrov of Russia and Dmytro Kuleba of Ukraine on Monday expressed his serious concern over the escalating tensions around Ukraine, spokesman Stephane Dujarric told a press briefing.

"The Secretary-General expressed to both foreign ministers a serious concern over the heightened tensions around Ukraine," Dujarric said. "He welcomed the ongoing diplomatic discussions to defuse those tensions and underlined yet again the fact that there is no alternative to diplomacy."

Dujarric added that Guterres will deliver a press statement on Ukraine at 3:15 p.m. EST (20:15 GMT).

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UN Chief Speaks by Phone to Russia's Lavrov, Ukraine's Kuleba - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 14 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres spoke by phone on Monday with foreign ministers Sergey Lavrov of Russia and Dmytro Kuleba of Ukraine, spokesman Stephane Dujarric told a press briefing.

"The Secretary-General held a virtual meeting earlier today with Sergei Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation," Dujarric said. "He also spoke a very short while ago with the Foreign Minister of Ukraine, Dmytro Kuleba."

Dujarric said the call between Guterres and Lavrov lasted over 20 minutes, and, in addition to Ukraine, the two officials discussed Libya, Syria and the ongoing issues with US visas for Russian diplomats intending to come to the UN headquarters in New York.

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Father of Florida Gun Massacre Victim Blames Biden for Continuing Death Toll - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The father of a teenage boy who died in a school shooting massacre four years ago in Florida climbed a construction tower near the White House and shouted accusations at President Joe Biden for failing to take any effective measures on gun control, the WJLA news channel reported on Monday.

The report identified the man as Manuel Oliver, who was the father of Joaquin Oliver, one of the 17 people shot dead in a 2018 massacre at Stoneham Douglas High School in Florida. Monday is the fourth anniversary of the attack.

Oliver hung a banner on the front of the construction tower in front of the White House which said, "45K [45,000] people died from gun violence on your watch, according to the report."

Reporter Jay O'Brien said via Twitter that he spoken with Oliver last Thursday and Oliver told him he was still upset at the Biden administration's failure to take any serious action to push through any new legislation to control the proliferation of guns in the United States. The Second Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees the right of the American people to keep and bear arms.

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US Capital's Indoor Mask Mandate to Be 'Dialed Back' on March 1 - Mayor

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The US capital's coronavirus indoor mask mandate will be scaled back on March 1, DC Mayor Muriel Bowser said on Monday.

"The expiration of the indoor mask mandate will happen on February 28, and as of March 1, the District's indoor mask requirements will be dialed back," Bowser said during a press conference. The indoor mask mandate in DC will no longer apply to restaurants and bars, gyms, entertainment venues, places of worship, grocery stores, businesses, city government offices with no public interaction, Bowser said.

However, the mayor said masks will still be required in private businesses that decide to leave the indoor mask mandate in place, as well as in nursing homes, healthcare facilities, schools, public transportation, and other local government facilities where employees interact with each other and the public.

Bowser said that since the height of the Omicron wave that hit DC in December, cases have dropped more than 90% and there's also been a reduction in hospitalizations following additional measures put in place to mitigate the spread of the disease.

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Federal Reserve Credibility in Question Should it Not Rise Interest Rates Enough - Bullard

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The US central bank's credibility will be on the line if it does not hike interest rates enough to rein in runaway inflation, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis President James Bullard said on Monday.

"Our credibility is on the line here and we do have to react to the data," Bullard told the CNBC network. "I do think we need to front-load more of our planned removal of accommodation than we would have previously. We've been surprised to the upside on inflation. This is a lot of inflation."

The Federal Reserve slashed interest rates to almost zero after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. It is expected to resort to a series of rate hikes this year to counter inflation, growing at its fastest pace in 40 years on the Consumer Price Index as well as the

central bank's preferred inflation indicator - the Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index.

Goldman Sachs said last week that it expects the Federal Reserve to institute seven quarter-percentage point rate hikes this year, up from the Wall Street bank's previous forecast of five hikes. The Federal Reserve has seven policy meetings scheduled between March and December, meaning it could raise interest rates every time it meets this year.

Bullard shocked markets last week by saying that he wished for the Federal Reserve to have a full percentage point rate increase by July 1. The Federal Reserve meets three times between March and July 1 and would have to increase rates by more than a quarter percentage point at least once to achieve Bullard's target.

"I think my position is a good one, and I'll try to convince my colleagues that it's a good one," Bullard said, adding that he would, however, defer to the decision by Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell.

Powell, who is considered to be one of the more moderate voices of the US central bank, has said that the Federal Reserve will be "nimble" with rate hikes to ensure no excessive disruptions to the economy and markets.

Bullard said the inflation experienced by the United States was "very bad" for low- and moderate-income households.

"People are unhappy, consumer confidence is declining," Bullard said. "This is not a good situation. We have to reassure people that we're going to defend our inflation target and we're going to get back to 2%."

The Federal Reserve is mandated to keep inflation at or below 2% a year while striving to grow the economy and achieve maximum employment, defined by a jobless rate of 4% or below.

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US National Guard Troops Out of Ukraine, Small Group Remains With Diplomats - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The US National Guard troops who were in Ukraine to serve as advisers have been moved out of the country but a small American military presence remains with diplomatic staff, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said on Monday.

"What I can tell you is that those Florida National Guard [troops], they have definitely moved and there's a small military presence still in Ukraine connected to our diplomatic presence," Kirby said during an interview with CNN.

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Trudeau to Invoke Previously Unused Emergencies Law to Grant Gov't Extra Powers - Reports

TORONTO, February 14 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau intends to invoke a previously unused emergency law to grant his government additional powers in response to the peaceful protests against COVID-19 vaccine mandates in Ottawa and across the country, state broadcaster CBC reported on Monday.

Trudeau informed Liberal Party parliamentarians of his intentions during a caucus meeting earlier on Monday, the report said. The Prime Minister will also hold a virtual meeting with the premiers of Canada's province, the report added.

The Prime Minister is not considering at present using the military to suppress the protests, the report said.

The Emergencies Act, which became law in 1985, is defined as a "urgent and critical situation of a temporary nature" that threatens the ability of the government to preserve the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of Canada and endangers the lives, health and safety of citizens. The wave of protests across Canada began in January, with tens of thousands of truckers and hundreds of other demonstrators converging on Ottawa to express strong opposition to vaccine mandates and demand that the government scrap them.

The protest has since united various groups of citizens in opposition to Trudeau's government.

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Ontario to Remove COVID-Related Capacity Limits, Vaccine Passports by March 1 – Premier

TORONTO, February 14 (Sputnik) – The Canadian province of Ontario is moving to end a number of coronavirus containment measures, including vaccination passports and capacity limits in indoor public settings, by the start of March, Premier Doug Ford said on Monday, noting that the move is unrelated to anti-vaccine mandate trucker protests.

Canada's largest province will free businesses, where proof of vaccination is required, from COVID-related capacity limits beginning on Thursday, February 17 and proof of vaccination, colloquially known as the vaccine passport, will be dropped on March 1.

"Effective March 1, we intend to eliminate capacity limits in all indoor public settings... at the same time we will lift proof of vaccination requirements for all settings," Ford told a news conference.

Masking mandates will remain in place for "a little bit longer," Ford added.

The premier emphasized that the decision was made not because of anti-mandate and anti-government demonstrations throughout the province, but "despite" them. Ford underscored that his government will not "tolerate" disruptions to trade routes or "occupiers holding a million people hostage," referring to the ongoing demonstrations in Ottawa.

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Blinken Tells Ukraine's Kuleba Immediate US Priority to Deescalate Situation - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke by telephone with Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba and emphasized that the United States' priority is to deescalate the situation with Russia, but any military aggression will trigger a swift response by Washington and its allies, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Monday.

"The Secretary noted the United States and partners remain united in our commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, including its economic and financial stability," Price said. "The Secretary highlighted that, although the United States' immediate priority is to support efforts to de-escalate the situation, any further military aggression by Russia against Ukraine will be met with a swift, coordinated and forceful response."

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Ukraine 'Invasion' Will Deal Harder Blow to Stocks Than Crimea Did in 2014 - Goldman Sachs

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - Should conflict reignite in Ukraine, the negative impact to stock markets would likely be worse than in 2014 when Crimea reunited with Russia, a senior analyst at Wall Street bank Goldman Sachs told CNBC.

"If we look at some of the recent episodes — if we look at the annexation of Crimea, for example — we think it pushed the risk premium up by about 20 basis points, which had roughly a 5% impact on the equity market, and this would probably be bigger," Goldman Sachs Chief Global Equity Strategist Peter Oppenheimer said.

Global equity markets have mostly fallen in volatile trading lately, with Europe's Stoxx 600 index down 1.7% on Monday and Wall Street's S&P 500 opening lower as well, after White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan claimed Russia could invade Ukraine "any day now." The Stoxx 600 has fallen by almost 6% since the start of 2022, while the S&P 500 has lost more than 7%.

"So the sort of moves that we're seeing — perhaps an adjustment of risk premia between 20 and 40 basis points, — that could in itself reduce the equity market by a little bit more than 5% seems reasonable," Oppenheimer said.

In the March 2014 referendum, Crimea voted to secede from Ukraine and rejoin Russia. Kiev and Western countries refused to recognize the move and placed sanctions on Moscow. Russia insists that the referendum was held in accordance with the law and the issue is now historically closed.

Over the past months, the West has been accusing Russia of building up troops near Ukraine. Moscow denies having any intention of invading Ukraine, saying that the claims is intended to justify NATO and the US deploying more troops and weapons close to Russian borders.