2/18/22 Friday

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Russian FM Accuses NATO of 'Escalation for Sake of Escalation' Amid Troop Accumulation Claims
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Even though Russia has provided evidence of pulling back some troops from Crimea and Belarus following the completion of drills, the North Atlantic alliance has continued to claim that Russian troop levels near the Ukrainian border are increasing.

The Russian Foreign Ministry accused NATO on Friday of "escalation for the sake of escalation" in the ongoing crisis in Eastern Europe, where the alliance has accused Moscow of planning an invasion of Ukraine.

"The military-political situation in Europe continues to degrade. Russian proposals on security guarantees are aimed at correcting this situation, to which we have not received a clear answer from the alliance," Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said in a Friday statement.

"We hope that negotiations on them will continue. We will insist on NATO stopping its provocative expansion policy, refusing to deploy strike weapons that threaten us near our borders, and returning the configuration of the alliance's forces to the positions of 1997," she added.

Moscow has denied any intent to invade Ukraine, and the Ukrainian government has likewise said that Russian troops near its borders are insufficient to constitute an invasion threat. Nonetheless, the US government and Western media have continued to claim that such an attack could happen "at any time," and even that Moscow might try and use a "false flag" incident to create a casus belli.

The US State Department levied just such an accusation on Friday, telling Sputnik that it regards news from the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) of explosions and artillery shelling by Ukrainian forces as a "false flag operation."

"Announcements like these are further attempts to obscure through lies and disinformation that Russia is the aggressor in this conflict. This type of false flag operation is exactly what Secretary [Antony] Blinken highlighted in his remarks to the UN Security Council," a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

"It is also cynical and cruel to use human beings as pawns to distract the world from the fact that Russia is building up its forces in preparation for an attack. Russia is the sole instigator of these tensions and is threatening the people of Ukraine. It has put its troops on Ukraine's borders, and routinely abuses and violates the rights of the people of Donbas and Crimea," they added.

The DPR and its sister republic, the Lugansk People's Republic (LPR), are breakaway states in the Russophone Donbass region, which declared independence from Kiev in 2014 after a nationalist government came to power and attempted to reduce the status of the Russian
Denis Pushilin, the head of the DPR, announced on Friday that some 700,000 civilians were being evacuated eastward into Russia's Rostov region, warning that "a full-scale offensive can simply begin" at any moment.

Earlier this week, the Russian State Duma passed a resolution calling on Russian President Vladimir Putin to recognize the two Donbass republics as independent states, but he has so far declined to do so. Ukraine and NATO have accused Moscow of secretly supporting the rebels, but they have denied any interference in Ukrainian affairs. However, Moscow helped to negotiate the Minsk Protocol peace settlement process with Ukraine and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

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Biden Says He's 'Convinced' Putin Has 'Made the Decision to Invade Ukraine' in Coming Days
By -- Morgan Artyukhina

The self-declared people's republics of Lugansk and Donetsk announced on Friday plans to evacuate more than 700,000 civilians to western Russia amid a significant increase in bombardment of the area by Ukrainian forces.

US President Joe Biden said on Friday that he was "convinced" Russian President Vladimir Putin had made the decision to launch an invasion of Ukraine "in the coming days."

"As of this moment I'm convinced he's made the decision," Biden told reporters at the White House. He confirmed his position when a reporter asked him to do so. He said the attack will focus on the capital of Kiev.

When asked by reporters how his administration has such firm information after having waffled on making such a firm determination for months, Biden said "we have a significant intelligence capability" and abruptly ended the press conference.

The US has claimed for months that a Russian invasion of Ukraine was "imminent," and numerous predictions have come through the media alleging to pinpoint the exact date and even the time the attack would begin. Moscow denies it has plans to attack Ukraine and even the Ukrainian government says the Russian forces deployed near its borders are insufficient to pose a threat to them.

Biden's comment mirrors a dispute between US State Department spokesperson Ned Price and reporters earlier this month, who demanded evidence of the administration's claims the Russians were planning a "false flag" incident that would serve as a casus belli for invading Ukraine.

Biden renewed that accusation as well on Friday, claiming that information coming out of the Donbass about a significant increase in artillery and mortar shelling by Ukrainian forces, as well as other explosions of an unknown origin, were just the kind of staged Russian provocations his administration had been "warning about for weeks."

"All these are consistent with the playbook the Russians have used before," Biden declared.
He said that a Ukrainian offensive against the Donbass republics now "defies basic logic" and that Ukrainian forces had shown "restraint" by refusing to be "baited" by Russian forces. He did not elaborate as to what incidents amounted to baiting. However, Biden said he did not believe the pre-scheduled nuclear drills being observed by Putin this weekend are an indicator the Russian president intends to use nuclear weapons in the allegedly forthcoming invasion.

"How much of it is a cover for saying 'we're just doing exercises' ... it's hard to read his mind," Biden said.

The US president said "Russia can still choose diplomacy, it is not too late to de-escalate and return to the negotiating table." Indeed, both Moscow and Kiev have made clear their intention to continue negotiations, and NATO has, to a certain degree, considered parts of the security guarantees first proposed by Moscow in December. However, Washington has remained intransigent, and NATO has refused to reconsider its policy of eastward expansion that could one day lead to Ukrainian membership in the alliance.

"The military-political situation in Europe continues to degrade. Russian proposals on security guarantees are aimed at correcting this situation, to which we have not received a clear answer from the alliance," Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said in a Friday statement.

"We hope that negotiations on them will continue. We will insist on NATO stopping its provocative expansion policy, refusing to deploy strike weapons that threaten us near our borders, and returning the configuration of the alliance's forces to the positions of 1997," she added.

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Moscow May Deploy Forces to Latin American Bases if Security Talks With US Fail, Duma Lawmaker Says
By - Morgan Artyukhina

A senior Russian lawmaker has revived discussion about how Russia might turn the corner strategically in its negotiations with NATO on security guarantees, including the basing of Russian military equipment close to the US to balance out NATO forces positioned near Russia's borders.

"We have enough military-technical measures that will force the United States to take care of its own security, and not Ukraine, which is too far away from them. For example, the deployment of military bases in Latin America may be part of the answer," United Russia MP Yuri Shvytkin, who is Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Defense Committee, told Russian online news outlet Gazeta.Ru on Friday.

"The United States is afraid of this, because it will be close enough there for our missiles to fly up. I think that the Americans do not really want the missiles to reach New York or Washington quickly," Shvytkin added.
The MP was echoing comments by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov last month, who suggested in an interview with RTVI television network that Moscow might deploy Russian military infrastructure to Cuba or Venezuela.

"I don’t want to confirm anything, I won’t exclude anything ... It depends on the actions of [our] American colleagues," Ryabkov told RTVI’s Tina Kandelaki on January 13.

"The President of Russia has repeatedly spoken out on this topic, including what measures could be taken by the Russian Navy if things go completely in the direction of provoking Russia and further strengthening military pressure on us," he said, adding, "We do not want this, the diplomats must come to an agreement."

Several days earlier, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said it was “unacceptable” for Moscow to expect NATO to respect its sphere of influence by pledging not to expand further eastward or to station certain weapons in Eastern Europe.

"We can’t go back to a world of spheres of influence," the US’ chief diplomat told CNN.

However, following Ryabkov’s comments, US President Joe Biden firmly asserted a US sphere of influence across Latin America, upgrading the region from the popular term “America’s backyard” to declare that “everything south of the Mexican border is America’s front yard.”

Soviet deployments to Cuba were common during the Cold War, most notoriously the R-12 and R-14 nuclear-armed ballistic missiles and II-28 bombers that triggered the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. However, after the missiles were withdrawn Soviet ship and aircraft stopovers in Cuba were common, including Tu-95 and Tu-142 reconnaissance aircraft on patrol.

More recently, Russian Tu-160 White Swan bombers made several trips to Venezuela, including in 2018 amid another tense situation with Ukraine and NATO. Caracas and Moscow reportedly agreed on the principle of establishing a Russian military base on La Orchila Island in the Caribbean Sea at the time.

Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke with Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel in late January about the situation, and the Kremlin said the two leaders have “synchronized positions,” although not on the deployment of Russian military forces to the island.

NATO has accused Russia of planning an invasion of Ukraine by deploying large numbers of troops near its western borders, although Moscow denies any plans for attacking Ukraine and says its troops are performing military maneuvers and drills with Belarusian forces. Moscow has said the crisis stems from a lack of guarantees of its security by NATO, which has continued to expand eastward and incorporate many former Soviet allies and even former Soviet republics. They have also expressed fears of NATO weapons deployed in Eastern Europe, including two Aegis Ashore installations in Poland and Romania that the US claims are for missile defense, but which are technically capable of firing offensive cruise missiles capable of reaching beyond Moscow.

So far, NATO has refused to significantly alter its stance on membership, including writing off Ukraine as a potential future member of the alliance.

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UNHCR Condemns Deadly Attack on Red Sea Afar Refugee Camp Amid TPLF’s New Eastern Ethiopia Offensive
By - Morgan Artyukhina

In late January, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) launched a new operation into neighboring Afar state, claiming to be chasing down Eritrean-backed militias responsible for attacks in Tigray. Weeks earlier, Ethiopian forces ended the TPLF’s monthslong occupation of Amhara and Afar.

Speaking at the UN offices in Geneva, Switzerland, on Friday, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spokesperson Boris Cheshkirov said that an Eritrean refugee camp in Afar had come under attack by gunmen, who killed five camp residents and sent thousands fleeing to safety.

“We condemn the attack on the refugee camp and reiterate the call for cessation of hostilities to avoid further destruction and potential loss of life for refugees and Ethiopians alike, and so that much needed humanitarian assistance can reach them,” Cheshkirov said.

The attack happened on February 3 at the Barahle refugee camp, a camp for ethnic Afar Eritreans that opened in 2009 amid Eritrea’s then-ongoing war with Ethiopia, Cheshkirov said. However, UNHCR was informed about the attack only after refugees fleeing it arrived in the Afar capital of Semera. Other refugees are believed to have fled in other directions, possibly towards the towns of Afdera and Dabure, more than 200 miles from Semera.

In addition to the killings, the gunmen also looted the camp and stole both refugees’ belongings and abducted several women.

"I had never seen anything like that," Mahamooda Ahmed, a refugee who fled the camp to Semera, told AFP for a Friday article. "I had never seen soldiers open fire on civilians. There were no soldiers for them to fight. It was civilians, including women and children. And they were using very heavy weapons."

Ahmed said he was missing two of his seven children, as well as one of his two wives, who got separated from the rest in the scramble after the attack began.

A March 2018 profile of the camp by UNHCR identified more than 12,000 refugees living in the camp, 63% of whom were under the age of 18. It is located near the border with Tigray.

The UNHCR report didn’t mention the identity of the attackers. The region has become a war zone once again after the TPLF launched a new offensive into Afar in late January, claiming it was chasing elements of a group called the Red Sea Afar Force. According to the UNHCR, the TPLF’s recent incursion into Afar has displaced more than 300,000 people.

Kindaya Gebrehiwot, a spokesperson for the TPLF, told AFP that Ethiopian government officials were “full of lies” and that Eritrean refugees “were not attacked.”

"Our forces only targeted armed troublemakers from the Afar government and Eritrean mercenaries," the spokesperson said.

Interestingly, on January 28, just a few days before the attack on the Barahle refugee camp, the Red Sea Afar Human Rights Organization (RSAHRO) sent a letter to UNHCR Filippo Grandi expressing their fears about the safety of Red Sea Afar in the area.

"Our local sources have confirmed that TPLF forces are firing heavy artillery into the town indiscriminately in which the refugee camp has been hit and refugees are dispersed", the letter said, according to the independent outlet Ethiopian Citizen.
"We are now alarmed of the ongoing war and left without receiving any information in the last three days from the camp. We also need to bring to your attention the content of the Tigray press release that contains a clear intent to carry out a genocidal campaign on the refugees under pretext of the unknown Red Sea Afar forces," read the letter from RSAHRO.

"It is historically known that the Afar in Eritrea call themselves Red Sea Afar people, and RSAHRO is deeply concerned that the TPLF will use this type of wordplay to cover up their military adventure in that specific area and commit massacres against unarmed refugees," the letter continued. Indeed, the TPLF’s announcement of the Afar offensive claimed the Red Sea Afar Force was backed by Eritrea, which is allied with the Ethiopian government against the TPLF.

However, the very real Afar Special Forces have been the primary group defending Afar from the TPLF. French radio station RFI spoke with several of the militia members, reporting on Thursday that they were fighting the TPLF without the help of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces.

Abdileh Ali Nour, head of security in Berhale district for the ASF, said the district had been totally overrun by the TPLF. "It's true that we fell back because of their superiority. But we will never give up our territory. The situation can be reversed from one day to another. If they lose their artillery and their tanks, for example, we could regain ground and our land."

London-based human rights monitor Amnesty International published a damning report on Thursday accusing the TPLF of mass murder, gang rape, and looting, among other offenses, in several towns in Amhara that it occupied last year.

The TPLF has been fighting the Ethiopian government since November 2020, when it launched a sneak attack on Ethiopian troops in Tigray. Last summer, the group invaded Amhara and Afar, making a drive on the capital of Addis Ababa, where it hoped to overthrow Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed with US endorsement. Since coming to power in 2018, Abiy has made moves to weaken the TPLF’s once-dominating power over Ethiopian politics and earned the lasting enmity of Washington by ending a 20-year-long war with Eritrea started by the TPLF.

The 15-month struggle has killed an unknown number of people in three Ethiopian states and driven more than 4 million people from their homes, according to UN estimates. The UN World Food Program estimates some 9.4 million Ethiopians are in need of food assistance.

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Helicopter Crashes Along Miami Beach Shoreline, Two People Transported to Hospital

By - Evan Craighead

At least two individuals have been hospitalized with trauma injuries after a helicopter plummeted into the ocean just off the coast of Miami Beach, Florida, on Saturday afternoon.

The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has launched an investigation into a Robinson R44 helicopter that went down "under unknown circumstances", crashing into the Atlantic Ocean at around 1:10 p.m., local time, on February 19.
Authorities have confirmed that two of the three occupants have been taken to Jackson Memorial's Ryder Trauma Center. All three individuals are in stable condition. Footage of the downing has since been tweeted by the Miami Beach Police Department. The incident reportedly occurred near the beach area off 10th Street and Ocean Drive, prompting closures between 9th and 11th Street. Eyewitness footage taken moments after the crash showed a number of concerned beachgoers swimming near the site. Be advised, the following content contains language that may offend some. The aircraft, identified as a Robinson R44, has been the subject of FAA scrutiny for some time, due to a litany of often fatal flaws, as well as repeated reports of low-impact crashes over the past two decades. From 2006 to 2016, the Robinson R44 was associated with at least 42 fatal crashes in the US alone, translating to 1.6 deadly incidents per 100,000 hours flown, according to the Los Angeles Times. As of last year, at least 313 Robinson R44-involved crashes have been reported worldwide, resulting in 176 deaths. While many issues plaguing the Robinson Helicopter Company's controversial chopper remain unreported, 'mast bumping' has previously been identified as the cause of at least 18 deaths in New Zealand. 'Mast bumping' occurs when an inner part of the main rotor mechanism collides with the main rotor drive shaft. Contributing factors include turbulence and low-gravity events, which could lead to the chopper breaking up mid-flight.

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Ex-CNN Exec Allison Gollust Secretly Drafted Interview Topics With Then-Gov Andrew Cuomo, Probe Says
By - Evan Craighead

As AT&T eyes a major merger involving CNN parent company WarnerMedia and Discovery, executives at both companies are concurrently faced with a number of internal issues, including the admittedly undisclosed relationship between ousted CNN Worldwide President Jeff Zucker and Allison Gollust, who recently resigned as CNN's chief marketing officer. A top communications official with WarnerMedia confirmed to staffers in a recent call that senior-level CNN executive Allison Gollust's Tuesday resignation was not exclusively related to her relationship with Jeff Zucker, as a third-party probe unearthed journalism ethics violations within extensive communications between her and disgraced New York Governor Andrew Cuomo (D). Cravath, Swaine & Moore, a New York-based law firm, launched an investigation last year to examine allegations of workplace misconduct leveled against then-CNN host Chris Cuomo.
Investigators soon learned that Chris Cuomo advised his brother and governor, Andrew Cuomo, on how to handle the media amid a slew of sexual misconduct allegations that ultimately led to the upending of the latter’s career.

The damning review uncovered evidence that Zucker and Gollust were more than simply longtime CNN colleagues concealing their romantic relationship from the company’s human resources department.

Furthermore, it was found that Gollust, who briefly worked for then-Gov. Andrew Cuomo in 2012 and 2013, remained in extensive contact with the New York governor, despite the nature of her job.

In particular, Gollust likely committed ethics violations in her reported correspondence ahead of a March 2020 interview with then-Gov. Cuomo. Prior to his CNN appearance, Gov. Cuomo informed Gollust of a number of interview topics that he would be comfortable responding to during the broadcast.

"Done," the CNN chief marketing officer wrote in response to Cuomo’s submitted questions. While Chris Cuomo, Andrew Cuomo, Zucker, and Gollust have all rebuked the need for their respective exits, the domino effect of high-profile resignations at CNN has prompted many questions regarding the outlet’s practices, standards, and the extent of CNN journalists’ connections with leaders they claim to hold accountable.

Risa Heller, a spokesperson for Gollust, told the New York Times that the referenced communications with Cuomo "in no way suggested that inclusion of these topics was a condition of the interview, nor did [Gollust] suggest the interview should be limited."

"WarnerMedia relying on this everyday practice as justification for dismissing Allison demonstrates how ignorant they are of journalistic practices, and further proves that her dismissal is nothing more than retaliation," Heller suggested.

She also claimed that it "was well known by the entire network" that Gollust was acting "as the principal booker for Governor Cuomo during the early days of the pandemic."

On Tuesday, CNN parent company WarnerMedia detailed that the third-party probe found that Gollust, Zucker, and Chris Cuomo committed unspecified "violations of company policies, including CNN’s news standards and practices."

The investigation relied on interviews with more than 40 individuals, as well as a review of more than 100,000 texts and emails.

"I realize this news is troubling, disappointing and frankly painful to read," WarnerMedia CEO Jason Kilar said in an email addressed to company employees. "These are valid feelings that many of you have. We have the highest standards of journalistic integrity and those rules must apply to everyone equally."

The executive shakeup at CNN, which advertises itself as "the most trusted name in news," notably comes ahead of a tentative AT&T merger involving Discovery and WarnerMedia.

Earlier this month, Discovery announced that the joint effort with AT&T was cleared of US antitrust concerns and had satisfied the Hart-Scott-Rodino Act, which requires companies to provide both the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and US Department of Justice with advance notice of mergers with a minimum deal value.

HBO, Cartoon Network, CNN, Warner Bros., TNT, and TBS are among the many WarnerMedia brands set to be transferred.
The telecom giant’s merger is slated for May 17, 2021. David Zaslav has been selected to head the forthcoming entity, to be dubbed ‘Warner Bros. Discovery.’

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DC Authorities Mulling Reinstallation of Fences as US Capital Braces for ‘Freedom Convoy’ Protests
By - Evan Craighead

After three weeks of demonstrations against sweeping COVID-19 vaccine mandates, authorities are pushing back against a trucker-led movement by towing lorries and arresting some 100 protesters. Meanwhile, American truckers with parallel beliefs reportedly intend to recreate the convoy demonstration with 1,000 trucks in Washington, DC on February 23. Familiar fencing may once again be erected in Washington, DC, as authorities prep for 'The People's Convoy,' a collection of US-based truckers demanding rollbacks on COVID-19 vaccine mandates and related masking requirements.

The United States Capitol Police (USCP) acknowledged the planned protest in a Friday statement, noting that the demonstration—slated to begin on February 23—will likely coincide with US President Joe Biden's first State of the Union (SOTU) address on March 1. "Law enforcement agencies across the National Capital Region are aware of plans for a series of truck convoys arriving in Washington, DC around the time of the State of the Union," read the USCP memo.

The USCP pledged to "facilitate lawful First Amendment activity," with assistance from local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, including DC's Metropolitan Police Department, the US Park Police, US Secret Service, the DC National Guard, and additional allied agencies. Capitol Police and the Secret Service are collaborating to draft a contingency plan and preemptive measures that can be taken to ensure the demonstration does not mirror the situation in Canada.

"The United States Capitol Police and the United States Secret Service have been closely working together to plan for the upcoming State of the Union," the USCP said in a same-day, follow-up statement. "The temporary inner-perimeter fence is part of those ongoing discussions and remains an option, however at this time no decision has been made."

Authorities throughout the US have recently been put on high alert concerning the possibility of some truckers launching an anti-vaccine mandate demonstration. While DC is the present venue, some far-right protesters attempted to organize a convoy to descend on Super Bowl LVI in Inglewood, California, but were unable to draw the necessary crowd on short notice.

"The Canadian convoy was pretty organic when it happened," Maureen Steele, a national organizer of the US-based effort, told Newsweek. "Ours, they had a month's notice, so our concern is disruptive groups coming in. We're trying to just prepare for counter-protests and to take safety precautions for that."
She detailed that the group is expected to include some 1,000 trucks, and will amass more
demonstrators as the convoy advances via Interstate 40, from Barstow, California, to DC.
"Safety precautions" are being taken in preparation for expected counter-protesters, Steele said.

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Canadian 'Freedom Convoy' Losing Steam as Riot Police Carry Out Historic Show of Force in
Ottawa
By - Evan Craighead

Hundreds of Canadian police officers donning riot gear took to Ottawa on Saturday to retake
control of the streets around the besieged capital’s Parliament buildings. Authorities in Ottawa
stated that although smaller demonstrations have continued in the city, police intend to crack
down on any "unlawful occupation."
Freedom Convoy demonstrations appear to be winding down in Ottawa after riot police
equipped with batons and guns carried out dispersal operations to remove the remaining
protesters from the capital’s streets.
Along with more than 170 arrests, several investigations have been launched due to weapons
seizures.
"We’re not going anywhere until you have your streets back," said Ottawa Interim Police Chief
Steve Bell, as reported by the Associated Press.
Bell stressed that demonstrators who refuse to disperse will face "financial sanctions and
criminal charges."
The day prior, officers on horseback appeared to incite the crowd as they pushed back against
protesters.
Authorities claim that demonstrators were "putting children at risk" by bringing their kids to the
police line.
Organizers with 'Freedom Convoy 2022,' a key group apart of the demonstration, issued a
statement on Friday calling for truckers to move from around the Canadian Parliament buildings
to "avoid further brutality."
Nevertheless, dozens of lorries were towed away by tow truck operators who protected their
identities by donning neon green ski masks and taping their decals.

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Discovery of Largest Galaxy Yet Observed Baffles Astronomers
By - Nevin Brown
Astronomers in Europe have discovered the largest galaxy ever observed. Alcyoneus, named
after a Greek giant slain by Heracles, is a radio galaxy some 16.3 million light-years wide,
making it over four times the size of the previous record-holder, IC 1101, with a 3.9 million light-year diameter.

Using the pan-European LOFAR telescope, astronomers captured the radio light that the black hole at the center of Alcyoneus emits. The massive plume of radio energy gives the radio galaxy its astronomical description. A radio galaxy features a black hole at its center that shoots material into space at near light speed. The speed creates so much heat that stardust dissolves into plasma and creates an observable glow, the radio light.

The discovery of Alcyoneus has raised new questions on how galaxies expand. According to the team of astronomers, Alcyoneus is, outside of its massive size, relatively mundane. "Beyond geometry, Alcyoneus and its host are suspiciously ordinary: the total low-frequency luminosity density, stellar mass and supermassive black hole mass are all lower than, though similar to, those of the medial giant radio galaxies," the researchers wrote.

The discovery of a massive galaxy with "ordinary" characteristics has left astronomers to speculate and continue their research. One theory is that Alcyoneus is surrounded by a low-density environment. Another is that it exists within a filament of the cosmic web.

While questions surrounding Alcyoneus will continue to be investigated, the discovery has given astronomers new insights into the universe.

The researchers note that "very massive galaxies or central black holes are not necessary to grow large giants, and, if the observed state is representative of the source over its lifetime, neither is high radio power."

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Florida Inmate’s Death in Transit Sees 10 Prison Guards Placed on Leave, One Resign
By - Nevin Brown

A Florida inmate’s death while in a prison transit vehicle has led to 10 corrections officers placed on leave and one submitting their resignation, according to a statement from the Florida Department of Corrections (FDC). The inmate died on Monday and the FDC statement was made on Saturday.

The FDC statement did not detail who the prisoner was, why they were being transported, or how they died. The matter, according to a statement released by the agency, is an “open and active investigation,” and “the victim and staff member names cannot be released.”

The prisoner was being held at Dade Correctional Institution, according to Molly Best, a spokeswoman for the FDC. The individual was pronounced dead “while the transport van was stopped at Florida Women’s Reception Center,” a Florida state prison for women located in the town of Ocala, approximately 345 miles north of Dade.

The FDC statement claims that they “immediately notified the Office of Inspector General and the Florida Department Law Enforcement.”
The Miami Herald learned of the death through a source and questioned the FDC on Friday evening before any public statement had been released. The following morning the FDC released a statement and made the death public. The FDC statement revealed that the Dade Correctional Institution warden had recently been replaced, and offered that the “new warden is conducting a holistic review of facility operations.” The press release was scarce on details but contained a statement from the Secretary of the Florida Department of Corrections, Ricky Dixon, which read: “As Secretary, I will be unwavering in my support for staff who perform their jobs with respect and integrity, but I will also be unrelenting in disciplining staff who act outside of the ethical standards of our profession; they will be held accountable for their actions, up to, and including criminal prosecution.” Dixon was appointed secretary in 2021. Florida has the United States’ third-largest state prison system. The Dade Correctional Institution is a mixed security class prison and is routinely considered one of the most dangerous jails in Florida.

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Trump Organization Reportedly Negotiating Move to Host Saudi Golf League Events
By - Nevin Brown

According to sources, the Trump Organization, former US President Donald Trump’s company, has held talks with LIV Golf Investments, a Saudi Arabian-backed golf league, over the potential for Trump-owned golf courses to host events. Anonymous sources have suggested that at least two of Trump’s US golf courses have been floated as sites for a new tour. His Bedminster, New Jersey, and Doral, Florida, courses appear to be the front runners.

The Trump Organization owns 11 courses in the United States, two in Scotland, and one in Ireland. The Trump National Golf Club in Charlotte, North Carolina, was designed by retired professional golfer Greg Norman, who is head of the Saudi-backed LIV Golf Investments group. LIV Golf Investments and a proposed tour funded by Saudi Arabia’s sovereign wealth fund have been shrouded in controversy. Comments made by decorated American golfer Phil Mickelson to Alan Shipnuck, author of the upcoming Mickelson biography, “Phil: The Rip-Roaring (and Unauthorized!) Biography of Golf’s Most Colorful Superstar,” made public on Thursday has increased scrutiny.

Mickelson reportedly told Shipnuck: “They’re scary mother----ers to get involved with,” elaborating that “... they killed [Washington Post reporter and US resident Jamal] Khashoggi and have a horrible record on human rights. They execute people over there for being gay. Knowing all of this, why would I even consider it? Because this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reshape how the PGA Tour operates.”

Mickelson has been a key figure in recruiting current Professional Golfers’ Association (PGA) Tour golfers to the event, and views the threat of a breakaway tour that can attract top golfers as key to gaining financial benefit for players currently on the PGA.
Trump has also had recent issues with the PGA. In 2016, as Trump was campaigning for president, the PGA moved one of its events from his Doral, Florida, golf course, and in the aftermath of the January 6 Capitol attack, the tour moved the PGA Championship away from his New Jersey golf course.

Trump's golf courses have routinely struggled to post profits. His Doral, Florida, course reported $162.3 million in losses between 2012 and 2018 according to tax records, and, overall, he has reported $315.6 million in losses since 2000 at his golf courses.

The financial terms of a possible deal are unknown, but LIV Golf Investments has promised massive purses at golf tournaments as a means of luring the best golfers in the world away from the PGA Tour. Trump, as president, overlooked human rights concerns regarding Saudi Arabia if it benefitted his own economic interests.

Following the 2018 Khashoggi killing, there were multiple calls for Trump to come down hard on Saudi Arabia and acknowledge US intelligence that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was aware of the plan to kill Khashoggi.

Trump said of Riyadh: "They have been a great ally," adding, "I’m not going to destroy our economy by being foolish with Saudi Arabia."

Saudi Arabia’s sovereign wealth fund finances LIV Golf Investments and is chaired by the crown prince.

LIV Golf Investments and the Trump Organization have yet to comment on the reports.

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Ex-Minnesota Police Officer Kim Potter Sentenced to 2 Years in Prison for Killing Daunte Wright

By - Mary Manley

The former Minnesota police officer Kim Potter, who pulled a gun after mistaking it for her taser, has been sentenced to two years in prison for killing 20 year-old Daunte Wright. Potter will be required to serve two-thirds (16 months) of her sentence in prison, according to Minnesota law. Potter was convicted of first and second-degree manslaughter in December after she fatally shot Daunte Wright during a traffic stop in April 2021.

"This has been an extremely difficult decision," Hennepin County, Minnesota Judge Regina Chu said before announcing the sentence. "The evidence is undisputed that officer Potter never intended to use her firearm," Judge Chu said.

"This is not a cop found guilty of murdering for using his knee to pin down a person for nine-and-a-half minutes as he gasped for air," Judge Chu added, referring to the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020. "I recognize there will be those who disagree with the sentence. That I granted a significant downward departure does not in any way diminish Daunte Wright's life. His life mattered."

The courtroom was extremely emotional on Friday. The Wright family had asked Judge Chu to sentence Potter to the maximum amount of time for her killing of Daunte Wright. In a sentencing memo filed on Tuesday, prosecutors requested Potter be sentenced to seven years and two months in prison.
Potter apologized to the Wright family in court on Friday, saying, "To the family of Daunte Wright, I am so sorry that I brought the death of your son, father, brother, uncle, grandson, nephew and the rest of your family to your home."

She said directly to the mother of Daunte Wright, "Katie, I understand a mother's love, and I am so sorry I broke your heart. My heart is broken for all of you. Earlier, when you said that I didn't look at you during the trial, I don't believe I had a right to. I didn't even have a right to be in the same room with you. I am so sorry that I hurt you so badly."

"I pray for Daunte and all of you many, many times a day. He is not more than one thought away from my heart and I have no right for that, for him to be in my heart," Potter continued.

"And I do pray that one day, you can find forgiveness, only because hatred is so destructive to all of us. And that I pray peace will always be with you and your family. Again, I am so sorry. And to the community of Brooklyn Center, I owe you all an apology to you. I loved working for you and I am sorry what's happened to our community since the death of Daunte. And the men and women who work for you still are good, honorable people and will work hard for you," Potter said.

During the sentencing hearing, Daunte Wright's mother gave an emotional speech saying, "Daunte loved hard, loved his family, friends, and his song. Daunte's smile was genuine and big just like his dreams. You took this. You took his future when he could've been so many things. April 11 was the worst day of my life... She failed Daunte, our family, and our community."

"They left him on the ground for hours as people all over the world watched. I had to cry from behind a caution tape. I couldn't go to be with him. My motherly instincts was to go to hold him, caress him, kiss him, and even in my mind in that moment, I wanted to save him, another opportunity that was stolen from me. She left our world with so much darkness and heartache."

Katie Wright said, who compared the death of her son to that "sinking feeling a mother gets when she turns around and realizes her son is missing in a grocery store."

Katie Wright then went on to point out that Potter's first response was to start crying out of fear of being punished and going to prison. Wright then says Potter should have asked if her son was okay after she shot him, or focused on getting him the appropriate medical attention, as opposed to asking for her union rep, "Chuck", to be called.

The mother of Daunte Wright's son, Chyna Whitaker, says their two-year-old son hasn't been the same since his father was killed. "Kim Potter took my son's best friend away from him and things haven't been the same since. I am now a single mother, not by choice, by force," said Whitaker.

"I now suffer from severe PTSD: whenever I'm pulled over, I have extreme anxiety, afraid of making a mistake and something ending up going wrong," added Whitaker, who was crying. "I can't watch any movies or videos that have to do with police brutality because it reminds me of Daunte being killed."

Daunte Wright's family had asked for the maximum sentencing for Potter. They say they feel frustrated with the outcome of her shortened sentence, which is two years.

"So once again, we are standing here to say that we're very disappointed in the outcome. Yes, we got a conviction, and we thank everybody for that. But again, this isn't okay. This is the problem with our justice system today, and white women tears trumps, trumps, justice. And I thought my white woman tears would be good enough because they're true and genuine," Katie Wright, Daunte Wright's mother said.
Katie Wright is white, while Aubrey Wright, who is Daunte's father, is Black. Daunte's sister, Diamond Wright, had told the court how her family had discussed the death of George Floyd, saying, "Maybe we have enough white in us to not be a threat to the police, we were wrong. We have repeatedly seen that one hint of black in our skin makes us a target." Daunte Wright's father, Aubrey Wright, said he felt cheated, hurt, and upset at the outcome of the trial.

"I walked out of this courthouse feeling like people are laughing at us because this lady [Potter] got a slap on the wrist, and we still every night sitting around crying, waiting on my son to come home. I'm upset," Aubrey Wright said.

Kim Potter's trial comes just weeks after the beginning of a federal trial that is investigating the three other officers involved in the killing of George Floyd, 46, who was murdered on May 25, 2020, by former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Chauvin was sentenced to 22 years in prison for the crime, which was seen as a major turning point for members of the Black Lives Matter group, the anti-racism movement that began in 2013.

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73 Percent of Americans Estimated to be Immune to the Omicron Variant, Model Shows
By - Mary Manley

According to a model calculated by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), 73% of Americans are currently immune to the omicron variant of COVID-19, which first hit the States in November. The IHME also predicts that the immunity rate could reach 80% by mid-March. "We have been exposed to this virus and we know how to deal with it," said Dr. Ali Mokdad, who is a professor at the IHME. "I am optimistic even if we have a surge in summer, cases will go up, but hospitalizations and deaths will not," he added.

At least 80 million Americans have been infected by COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, with 913,000 Americans having died from the highly infectious disease. The U.S. is still averaging around 113,000 new cases a day, according to The New York Times' data.

The news of potential immunity may come as a relief to many hospital workers, who have been overwhelmed in intensive care units (ICU) across hospitals nationwide. By February 4, at least 14 states had more than one-third of their ICU beds filled with COVID-19 patients.

But compared to where hospitals were four weeks ago: things have been getting better. A majority of states are considered to have 'moderate' stress levels for their hospitals, which according to the IHME, means between 10% and 30% of ICU beds are used for COVID-19 patients.

Only two states are considered to be in the 'low stress' category, and those are New Jersey (8% of beds) and Connecticut (6% of beds). Three states are considered to be in the 'high stress' category: Idaho has 37% of ICU beds occupied by COVID-19 patients, while Arkansas has 31% of beds occupied, and West Virginia has 30%.

COVID patients in the ICU are typically people who haven't received their vaccination for the disease.
Dr. Andrew Schlachter from Saint Luke’s in Kansas City said, “It is utterly tragic that we're seeing families broken. We're seeing wives widowed. We're seeing babies who are losing their mothers at the exact time of their birth. We're having families wrought with distress who aren’t nearby and not able to come to the bedside. We're hearing pleas, we’re hearing begs... asking for any therapy that’s possible,” he told The Star in January 2022.

“And in truth, we do everything we can, we try our absolute hardest. But the best thing that we can offer is going back in time and wishing those patients had been vaccinated,” he added.

Patients who are suffering severely from COVID infections and require life support equipment have to stay longer in the ICU than others, and end up staying for weeks and maybe months, says Dr. Schlachter.

According to Our World in Data, 65% of Americans are fully vaccinated. That data is from Wednesday. States with the lowest vaccination rates include Wyoming (57.5%), Mississippi (58.5%), and Louisiana (59.9%).

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California Bill Would Allow Private Citizens to Go After Gun Manufacturers
By - Mary Manley

The California bill would allow private citizens to go after gun makers in order to enforce the state’s ban on assault weapons, in the same way that Texas citizens are allowed to chase down abortion providers.

Just days after Sandy Hook families settled in court with gun manufacturer Remington, California seems poised to introduce a new law that would allow private citizens to enforce the state’s ban on assault weapons.

California Governor Gavin Newsom backed the legislation on Friday, which was modeled after the Texas Heartbeat Act. The Texas law signed in September 2021 allows private citizens to sue doctors and women’s health organizations who provide abortions when there is a detectable heartbeat, which could be as early as six weeks, well before many women are even aware that they are pregnant.

The Firearms Policy Coalition (FPC), who referred to the law as “modern-day Jim Crow laws,” has threatened a court challenge should the proposed bill be passed. Jim Crow laws, which lasted from the late 19th century to the mid 20th, were racial laws meant to segregate and discriminate Black people from white facilities and communities.

Gun-rights activists who opposed the Texas abortion ban are now having their fear fulfilled: liberal states, like California, will use Texas’ arguments to further tighten their laws on guns.

Governor Newsom is using the bill to openly challenge both the state of Texas and the U.S. Supreme Court. He says the legislation will either expose the Supreme Court’s “hypocrisy” if they choose to block the bill, or will “get them to reconsider the absurdity of their previous decision,” he said, referring to Texas’ abortion law.
"There is no principled way the US Supreme Court cannot uphold this California law. None. Period full stop. It is quite literally modeled after the law they just upheld in Texas," Newsom said.

But Assembly Minority Leader James Gallagher (R-Yuba) believes the Governor is using the bill as a smokescreen in order to hide his faltering policies.

"California already has the strictest gun laws in the nation, so it's not clear what Governor Newsom is hoping to accomplish here besides a sad publicity stunt," said Gallagher.

The bill has yet not yet been filed, but is reportedly said to apply to all distributors who sell, manufacture, and import assault weapons, .50 BMG rifles, ghost guns and ghost gun kits, allowing Californians to seek court orders against distributors, as well as recover up to $10,000 in damages for each weapon.

The news of the bill comes just days after families of Sandy Hook victims won a lawsuit with the company, Remington, who manufactured the military-style rifle Bushmaster that was used by Adam Lanza in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. After nearly a decade of legal battles, the families will receive $73 million from the now-bankrupt gun manufacturer Remington.

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One Student Dead, Two Injured After Stabbing at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania

The fight happened inside of the Thurgood Marshall Living and Learning Center, which is a student dorm on the University's campus, which investigators report started around 9:30 p.m. Wednesday night. The residence hall houses over 370 students.

A student has died after a stabbing at Lincoln University near Oxford, Pennsylvania on Wednesday night. Two other students were injured during the fatal event, and were rushed to Delaware's Christiana Hospital. They have since then been treated and released. The student who died was 21 years-old.

Arrests have yet to be announced.

Eric Dickerson was reportedly one of those three who was injured. He was reportedly stabbed three times and survived, but his close friend, who has not been identified, died at the scene. Dickerson's family is currently seeking help to cover his medical costs via GoFundMe.

"This is every parent's nightmare," said Chester County District Attorney Deb Ryan. "We extend our deepest condolences to the family and loved ones impacted as a result of this tragedy."

Students at the university held a vigil Thursday night to mourn the death of their fellow classmate.

"We are deeply saddened by the incident that occurred on campus last night," Lincoln University said in a statement. "Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families. We take the safety of our students seriously and are working with local authorities as there is an ongoing investigation."

"The Chester County District Attorney’s Office says this was an isolated incident and that there's no immediate threat to the public. But still, no one has been arrested," the university added.
The Chester County District Attorney’s Office has requested anyone with information regarding the stabbing to aid them in their investigation.

Lincoln University is a public four-year college that was founded in 1854. In 1866, it was renamed in honor of the recently slain president Abraham Lincoln, and was the first degree-granting Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in the country, according to their website.

"This is very much a peaceful community, so when something like this happens, it's just always very tragic. This is such a quiet place to live, even though [I'm] living across the street from a college campus, they still keep it fairly quiet, except if it's, like, homecoming or something," an anonymous source told 6ABC Philadelphia.

US Special Forces Leave Ukraine After Escorting Embassy Diplomats to Poland - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US special forces have left Ukraine from Lviv, CNN reported on Tuesday, citing US European Command spokesman Capt. Bill Speaks.

The soldiers departed on Monday night after escorting the embassy personnel from Lviv to Poland, the channel said, citing a source in the know.

Biden to Announce Major Investment in US Critical Minerals Supply Chain on Tuesday

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden Administration and major US companies will announce major investments to expand the domestic critical minerals supply chain to break dependence on China and boost sustainable practices, the White House announced on Tuesday.

"Today, President Biden will meet with administration and state partners, industry executives, community representatives, labor leaders, and California Governor Gavin Newsom to announce major investments in domestic production of key critical minerals and materials," the press release said.

Joe Biden will announce that the Department of Defense’s Industrial Base Analysis and Sustainment program has awarded MP Materials $35 million to separate and process heavy rare earth elements at its facility in Mountain Pass, California, establishing a full end-to-end domestic permanent magnet supply chain, the White House said. Currently, China controls 87% of the global permanent magnet market, which are used in EV motors, defense systems, electronics, and wind turbines.

"Berkshire Hathaway Energy Renewables will announce that this spring, they will break ground on a new demonstration facility in Imperial County, California ... If successful, this sets the
company a path towards commercial scale production of battery grade lithium hydroxide and lithium carbonate by 2026," the release continued. Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm will discuss the Department of Energy's plans to invest $3 billion in refining battery materials such as lithium, cobalt, nickel, and graphite, and battery recycling facilities, creating good-paying clean energy manufacturing jobs, the White House said.

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US Considers Russia's Actions in Donetsk, Luhansk 'Beginning of Invasion' – White House

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States considers recent actions by Russia with regard to Ukraine, including President Vladimir Putin's order to ensure peace in the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics by means of Russia's armed forces, to be the "beginning of an invasion," White House Deputy National Security Adviser Jon Finer said on Tuesday. "We think this is, yes, the beginning of an invasion, Russia's latest invasion into Ukraine," Finer told CNN.

On Monday, Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, saying that the decision was long overdue. The decision was followed by an order to "ensure the implementation of peacekeeping functions" by Russia's armed forces on the territory of the republics.

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US, Allies Discuss Whether Blinken Will Meet With Lavrov as Planned on Feb. 24 - Official

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has discussed with its allies whether Secretary of State Antony Blinken will move forward with meeting Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov later this week in the wake of Moscow's decision to recognize the self-proclaimed republics of Donbas, US Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer told MSNBC.

"Whether Secretary Blinken goes ahead with his meeting with Sergey Lavrov is something we've been discussing overnight with our partners and allies, and I'll leave it to the State Department to determine whether or not that meeting goes forward," Finer said Tuesday.

On Monday, President Vladimir Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, saying that the decision was long overdue. The US and the European Union have vowed "significant" sanctions on Russia.
A State Department spokesperson told Sputnik the same day that the United States has nothing to announce at the moment about possible changes in Blinken’s plans to meet with Lavrov in Geneva on February 24.

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Ukraine’s Naftogaz Chief Sees ‘Resistance’ in EU to ‘Meaningful’ Russia Sanctions

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - There has been strong resistance within the European Union to "meaningful" sanctions on Russia following the latter's recognition of the self-proclaimed Donbas republics as independent, Yuriy Vitrenko, CEO of Ukraine's Naftogaz oil and gas company, told Newsweek.

"I think that we'll see a lot of resistance from many vested interests not to impose meaningful sanctions," Vitrenko said.

Russia, he stated, is "not afraid" of threats.

"You cannot influence Putin's behavior just with threats ... When he does something bad there are no consequences, it encourages him to do it again," the executive argued.

A weak Western response to Russia’s actions would be dangerous for Kiev, according to Vitrenko.

"The problem is, unfortunately, that the combination of economic hardship and Russian propaganda paves the way for social unrest, with at least some social groups inside Ukraine welcoming Russian annexation," he said. "That's his preferred scenario."

On Monday, President Vladimir Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, saying that the decision was long overdue.

The US is expected to unveil new sanctions on Tuesday. The European Commission has said that EU sanctions will affect individuals who supported the decision to recognize the two republics, as well as organizations operating in these regions.

In recent months, Kiev and the West have actively accused Russia of plans to invade Ukraine, while Moscow has maintained that it has no such intention, expressing concern over NATO's activities near Russian borders, as well as increased military support from Western nations to Ukraine.

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White House Welcomes Germany Halting Nord Stream 2 Certification

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is in close contact with Germany on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and welcomes its decision to halt certification of the project following Russia's recognition of the self-proclaimed Donbas republics as independent, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.
"[US President] made clear that if Russia invaded Ukraine, we would act with Germany to ensure Nord Stream 2 does not move forward. We have been in close consultations with Germany overnight and welcome their announcement," Psaki said in a statement. "We will be following up with our own measures today."

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US Envoy to UN: Putin Has Torn Minsk Agreements to Shreds

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - Linda Thomas-Greenfield, US ambassador to the United Nations accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of destroying the Minsk agreements by his move to recognize independence of Luhansk and Donetsk self-proclaimed republics. "Today, President Putin has torn the Minsk agreement to shreds. We have been clear that we do not believe he will stop on that. In light of President Putin's latest actions, we must all stand up for the principles upon which this organization was founded," Thomas-Greenfield told the UN Security Council.

Russia has repeatedly accused Kiev of reneging on their commitments under the Minsk agreements while saying that Moscow itself was never a party to the accords but rather a mediator.

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US Envoy to UN Calls DPR, LPR Recognition Attack on Ukraine’s UN Membership Status

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - Linda Thomas-Greenfield, US ambassador to the United Nations called Russia’s decision to recognize the Donetsk and Luhansk self-proclaimed republics as independent an attack on Ukraine’s status as a member state of the United Nations.

"It is an attack on Ukraine status as a UN member state. It violates a basic principle of international law, and it defies our charter. What is more, this move by President Putin is clearly the basis for Russia’s attempt to create a pretext for a further invasion of Ukraine," Thomas-Greenfield said at an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council she requested in response to Putin’s decision.

On Monday, President Vladimir Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the Donbas republics, saying that the decision was long overdue. Later that day he ordered to deploy Russian troops to the two regions to ensure peace there.

The US ambassador said she did not believe the troops would be deployed there on a peaceful mission.

"He has since announced that he will place Russian troops in these regions. He calls them peacekeepers. This is nonsense. We know what they really are," she said.
Donbas Recognition Makes It Harder for US to Use Ukraine Against Russia - Ex-US Official

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Russia recognizing the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent makes it harder for the United States to use Ukraine and the conflict in its breakaway region as a leverage against Moscow, former US Assistant Treasury Secretary Paul Craig Roberts told Sputnik.

On Monday, President Vladimir Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the Donbas republics, saying that the decision was long overdue.

Roberts believes that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy might be actually "relieved" by Russia's move.

"Zelensky has not been able to function as president, because he is caught between Washington and the CIA controlled neo-Nazi militias and is up for reelection," he said. "Now that Russia has given recognition to the republics, Zelensky can resist Washington's push to use Ukraine's military to attack the Donbass Russians. Zelensky will gain authority from the Kremlin's decision as the decision will make it more difficult for Washington to use Ukraine against Russia. Of course, Washington won't stop trying."

Roberts noted that Russia has tried for eight years to resolve the Donbas crisis and treated the region as a part of Ukraine. He referred to the open part of the Russian Security Council meeting on Monday that preceded Putin's decision during which "various members discussed their eight years of frustrations with negotiating with the US, NATO, EU that never went anywhere."

"It is impossible not to admire the patience of the Russians, although it was patience at the expense of the lives of Donbas Russians," he stated. "Today the Russian government ran out of patience, and I don't think they will have much patience with the West in the future."

When asked about Ukraine's NATO prospects, Roberts doubted that it would become a member.

"Unless Russia collapses militarily, Ukraine will never become a NATO member," he said.

When tensions around Ukraine flared late last year, Russia published its security suggestions for NATO and the United States. Moscow specifically requested guarantees that the alliance would not expand eastward to include Ukraine and Georgia, to which Washington has replied by insisting it will not allow anyone to slam NATO's open-door policy shut.

The situation in Donbas has further escalated in recent days, with the DPR and LPR reporting increased shelling by Ukrainian armed forces and ordering general mobilization in anticipation of an offensive by the Ukrainian army. The evacuation of Donbas citizens, first of all, women, children and the elderly, to Russia began late last week.
US Orders Relocation of All Remaining Diplomats in Ukraine to Poland - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration ordered the relocation of US diplomats, including the embassy staff, still remaining in Ukraine to Poland due to security concerns, Bloomberg reported citing sources. The report said on Monday that American diplomats may return to Ukraine on Tuesday if there is no Russian invasion. The US embassy staff in Ukraine was previously relocated from Kiev to the western city of Lviv.

US Open for Engagement Between Biden, Putin - Official

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) – Washington is open for engagements between the American and Russian presidents, while weighing certain preconditions for that, a senior US administration official said on Monday, following President Vladimir Putin's decree to recognize the Donbas republics as independent. "We are open for further engagement between the two leaders," the official told a conference call. The United States however is considering several pre-conditions for it, including the absence of Russia’s "further military action inside Ukraine," they added.

US Requests Emergency UN Security Council Meeting on Ukraine Later on Monday - Source

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has requested an emergency UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine to be held later on Monday, a source in the Council told Sputnik. "The United States has asked for a meeting to be held tonight," the source said.

Washington to Be Closely Looking at Russia's Moves in Coming Hours, Days - Senior Official
WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States will be closely watching Russia’s actions regarding Ukraine in coming hours and days in order to respond accordingly, a senior administration official told reporters on Monday.

"We are going to be looking very closely at what they [Russia] do over the coming hours and days, and our response will be measured according to their actions," the official said.

Earlier on Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced his decision to recognize independence of the Luhansk and Donetsk people's republics which are two breakaway regions of Ukraine. The United States immediately condemned this move.

US Would Not Consider Deployment of Russian Troops in Donbas as New Move - Official

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States would not consider the movement of Russian troops into the Donbas region to be a new step, a senior American administration official said.

"Russia has occupied these regions [Donbas] since 2014. It has been Russia's position that there are no Russian forces present in this part of the Donbas," the official told a conference call on Monday. "The reality as we pointed out on a number of occasions over these past years has been quite different. There have been Russian forces present in these areas throughout."

US, Allies Discussing Diplomacy, Sanctions After Russia’s Donbas Recognition - Official

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to consult with its allies about both a diplomatic solution and sanctions against Russia following the latter’s decision to recognize the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics as independent, a senior administration official told reporters on Monday.

"We will continue to consult with our allies and partners about both diplomatic solutions and the consequences we will impose on Russia, should it further invade Ukraine," the official said.

"Russia continues to escalate this crisis that it created in the first place. We'll continue to pursue diplomacy until the tanks roll. We are under no illusions about what is likely to come next. And we're prepared to respond decisively when it does."

Biden Will Not Send US Forces to Fight Inside Ukraine - US Official

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WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is not going to deploy any American soldiers to fight inside Ukraine, a senior administration official told reporters on Monday.

"[Biden] has no intention of sending American forces to fight inside Ukraine," the official said after Russia announced its decision to recognize independence of Donetsk and Luhansk breakaway republics of Ukraine.

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Biden Bans Investment, Trade with DPR, LPR, More Measures to Follow Tuesday - Official

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has issued an executive order banning any new investment and trade with the Donetsk and Luhansk people’s republics (DPR and LPR), and more measures in response to Russia’s recognition of the two regions will be announced tomorrow, a senior administration official told reporters on Monday.

“We have long anticipated that Russia might take this action and as you saw, we were ready to respond immediately,” the official said. “President Biden has issued today an executive order that will prohibit new investment, trade, financing by US persons to, from or in the so-called DNR and LNR regions.”

The order will also provide authority to impose sanctions on any person deciding to operate in those areas.

“We will take further measures tomorrow to hold Russia accountable for this clear violation of international law and Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as of Russia’s own international commitments,” the official added.

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Biden in Call With Zelenskyy Condemned Russia’s Recognition of DNR, LNR - White House

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joseph Biden in a phone call with Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy denounced Moscow’s decision to recognize independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk people’s republics (DPR and LPR), the White House said in a readout.

“President Biden strongly condemned Russian President Putin’s decision to purportedly recognize the “independence” of the so-called DNR and LNR regions of Ukraine,” the readout said. “He updated President Zelenskyy on the United States’ response, including our plan to issue sanctions. President Biden reiterated that the United States would respond swiftly and decisively, in lock-step with its Allies and partners, to further Russian aggression against Ukraine.”
Earlier in the day, Russian President Vladimir Putin recognized the independence of DPR and LPR, saying the decision was long overdue. Following Putin’s announcement, Biden also spoke with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, according to a separate release from the White House. “The leaders strongly condemned President Putin’s decision to recognize the so-called DNR and LNR regions of Ukraine as “independent,” the readout said. “They discussed how they will continue to coordinate their response on next steps.”

West Ignoring Russia’s Security Concerns Led to Recognition of DPR, LPR - US Think Tank

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Russia’s decision to recognize the independence of the self-proclaimed republics of Luhansk and Donetsk is the result of the West refusing to accept Moscow’s legitimate security concerns, Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity Director Daniel McAdams told Sputnik.

On Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the two Donbas republics, saying that the decision was long overdue. "The Minsk Agreements are dead, but it was not Putin that killed them. It was Western arrogance and refusal to accept that, like the US and its allies, Russia has legitimate security concerns that as with any other country it refuses to compromise," McAdams said. "Syria has indicated that it would also recognize DNR and LNR [DPR and LPR]. I suspect many will follow. The big question is China."

"Putin’s move today showed how stupid are the US and UK ‘experts’ and government officials who kept endlessly repeating ‘Russia is about to invade Ukraine’ over and over. This is especially true for US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Blinken," McAdams added. "Their incompetence is now on display. As I’ve been saying all along, why would Russia want to ‘own’ Kiev? Lugansk and Donetsk are now separated from Ukraine - probably forever - without a shot fired."

When asked about the potential reaction of NATO, the expert wondered whether the allies would be able to demonstrate unity. "NATO is cracking up," he added. "It will be worth seeing what Germany’s next move might be. Will they agree to cancelling NordStream 2? In that case it might be a cold rest-of-winter for them."

McAdams noted that sanctions are already being announced. "For starters they will be against Lugansk and Donetsk," he said. "That is funny and confusing - does that mean the US already recognized these regions as part of Russia? Because if not, the US is sanctioning Ukraine!"

When tensions around Ukraine flared late last year, Russia published its security suggestions for NATO and the United States. Moscow specifically requested guarantees that the alliance would not expand eastward to include Ukraine and Georgia, to which Washington has replied by insisting it will not allow anyone to slam NATO’s open-door policy shut.
The situation in Donbas has further escalated in recent days, with the DPR and LPR reporting increased shelling by Ukrainian armed forces and ordering general mobilization in anticipation of an offensive by the Ukrainian army. The evacuation of Donbas citizens, first of all, women, children and the elderly, to Russia began late last week.

RPT: ANALYSIS - Biden Inflation-Fueling Policies Likely to Intensify Anti-Establishment Protests

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is pouring fuel on the already raging fires of inflation by throwing money into non-productive programs that will likely accelerate anti-establishment movements, financial analysts told Sputnik.

Inflation in the US has sky-rocketed to a 40-year high of 7.5 percent this year. On Friday, Federal Reserve Bank of New York President John Williams said inflation was too high and he expects the country's central bank to raise the target interest rate in March.

IS BIDEN TO BLAME?

Rising inflation often forces the US central bank to boost interest rates to cool consumer spending. A rate hike makes borrowing money more expensive - impacting everything from credit cards, mortgages, and car loans - while increasing rates on high-yield savings accounts. This combination in the end incentivizes consumers to spend less and save more.

Earlier this week, Federal Reserve official James Bullard called for steep rate hikes to fight inflation growing at 7.5% per year versus the Fed's target of 2 percent. Although Bullard wants the current zero to 0.25% rate to be raised to 1% by July 1, most of the other Fed officials - including Chairman Jerome Powell - have called for moderation.

"The root cause was the excessive creation of money by the Federal Reserve, encouraged by then-President [Donald] Trump in the early months of 2020. It was the Fed's doing but Trump encouraged it," former merchant banker and financial analyst Martin Hutchinson told Sputnik.

"Biden did not cause it, but over the past year he has poured fuel on the fire by throwing money into so many non-productive programs."

The money supply increased by 25% in three months but takes about two years for the effect of those policies to work its way through the system, he added. In fact, Hutchinson added, real inflation figures are actually now at an 8% to 9% level.

"It [inflation] is probably going to hit double digits. It might go down to 6% by the end of the year but it is much more likely to remain at its current level," he said.

Independent Institute Center for Peace & Liberty Director Ivan Eland agreed that inflation levels were unlikely to ease up in the foreseeable future because of a political unwillingness to tackle the root causes of the problem.

"Inflation is now fairly robust. There is an easy economic cure, but it is usually politically difficult. Governments need to reduce spending to reduce budget deficits and need to tighten the money supply," Eland told Sputnik.
Trends Journal publisher and financial analyst Gerald Celente said for over a decade the US Fed, and the European Central Banks, kept selling their "fairy tale" that when inflation hit above 2 percent, they would raise interest rates.

In fact, the last time the US Fed lifted rates from where they are now, at near zero, was in 2015, when inflation was running below its 2% target range, Celente told Sputnik. And now, despite the consumer price index in the United States spiking to the highest in 39 years, the US has seen not one rate hike by the Fed banksters, he observed.

EUROPE’S FAILURES

Meanwhile, the European Central Bank has come under fire in recent weeks for failing to take action on interest rates as the region suffers from record inflation.

Celente pointed out that EU leaders faced very similar inflationary pressures and, like their US counterparts, had sought to deny the existence of the problem.

"On the inflation front it is lies, damn lies and statistics. For nearly a year, the US and EU central bank heads kept claiming that inflation was ‘temporary’ and later, as inflation kept rising, they said it was ‘transitory,’” he said.

On both sides of the Atlantic the top national bankers and financial decision-makers knew better, but found it politically expedient not to face up to the problem, Celente stated.

"They knew inflation was real but publicly dismissed the hard inflation data to keep their unprecedented cheap money pumping schemes going to artificially boost the diving equity markets and sinking economies when governments launched the Covid war in 2020," he said.

"Their scheme worked."

The European Central Bank (ECB) rates are still in negative territory at minus 0.5% - despite the annual rate of Eurozone consumer price inflation hitting 5 percent in 2021 - which Celente said is the highest on record and more than double the ECB’s target.

DEPRESSION, PROTESTS COMING

Inflationary pressures with zero interest rate levels, the analysts also warned, were likely to lead to depression, which would intensify angry popular protests.

"When interest rates rise to the levels we forecast, economies will sharply decline," Celente warned. "With the lower and middle classes getting much poorer across the globe and the billionaires getting trillions of dollars richer, anti-establishment movements will accelerate."

The new unrest would not be limited to either a few Western European nations or the United States, but would sweep the world, he added.

"It will be the new world disorder as millions take to the streets to protest at the lack of basic living standards, government corruption, crime and violence," Celente said.

Hutchinson agreed that the inflationary crisis was bound to be followed by social disruption and anger, generated by the policies of the central banks.

But in many countries, and certainly in the United States, left of center and populist governments eager to appease the poor would continue with policies that penalized the middle classes leading to further anger from elements that were usually the pillars of stability in society, Hutchinson said.

"Of course it will lead to popular protests," Hutchinson predicted. "But they will come from propertied people who are not the voters the Democrats care about anyway."
WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Der Spiegel's report of a secret 1991 document in which Western diplomats committed to never expand NATO eastward is decisive proof that the United States must acknowledge at once, CIA analyst Ray McGovern told Sputnik. Der Spiegel in the report said the document came from the British national archive. The discovery comes as US officials - including Secretary of State Antony Blinken - have repeatedly claimed that NATO has an "open door" policy. "If you ask me, there is no further proof needed," McGovern told Sputnik. "If Blinken does not tell the truth on known, documented, historical facts, he cannot be trusted on anything."
Spiegel said the new document proves that Russian grievances with NATO are justified. One of Russia's top demands in security negotiations with the US is that NATO agrees not to expand to the east and specifically promise that Ukraine will never join the alliance.
McGovern explained that then-Secretary of State James Baker accepted the crucial formulation of the no expansion pledge from veteran German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher. Not just once, but on three separate occasions, Baker expressed that same "not one inch eastward" formula with then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in February 1990, the former CIA analyst said.
The document comes from the meeting of the political directors of the US, UK, French and German foreign ministries in Bonn on March 6, 1991. The diplomats discussed issues pertaining to the security of Poland and other Eastern European countries. They agreed that NATO's expansion eastward was "unacceptable," according to the report.
US political scientist Joshua Shifrinson discovered the document, which was originally classified as "secret."

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Russia may emerge from the Ukraine crisis with its global standing enhanced relative to the US given the evident major shift towards a multipolar world, analysts told Sputnik. The United States and its Western allies continue to repeatedly claim Moscow is preparing to invade Ukraine after US intelligence failed to predict that Russia would earlier this week. On Friday, President Joe Biden said he was "convinced" Russian President Vladimir Putin has already made a decision to invade. Biden claimed that Russian troops would attack Ukraine in the coming weeks or days and would target Kiev.
Moscow has refuted these Western allegations while saying that NATO's military activities near Russia's border are seen as a national security threat.

US CREDIBILITY QUESTIONED

Meanwhile, tensions are rising between Moscow and Kiev over the rising violence in eastern Ukraine, where local authorities are planning to evacuate about 700,000 residents. The head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), Denis Pushilin, said the situation in Donbas was heading toward a full-scale war.

"In general the major wins are with Russia and we are seeing a major shift occurring to a multi-polar world," Eurasia Center Vice President Earl Rasmussen told Sputnik. "The recent events I think made Ukraine, the European Union (EU) and Russia question the credibility of the United States and the so-called intelligence agencies."

Rasmussen said Washington's relations with both Russia and China worsened during the crisis while Moscow and Beijing grew closer. The US ties with some European partners also took a hit over sanctions targeting Russia. However, he added, Moscow's relations with many EU member states grew worse as well.

"Germany and many in Europe realize that if the United States desired sanctions occurred they would suffer more of an adverse economic impact than Russia," Rasmussen said. "I am sure they [Ukrainians] know by now that they are only a pawn or tool and have no real say. Nor does the United States really care what may or may not happen to them."

Rasmussen said, meanwhile, the US and its allies neglected Russia's security concerns, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken and NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg.

"We saw Blinken talking about diplomacy yet not really addressing Russia's valid security concerns while sending weapons and deploying military to nearby NATO states," he said.

The Western media, he added, were complicit in broadcasting accusations and false information to assist in flaming the fears of people in the US, Ukraine and throughout Europe.

"We are still waiting for the invasion as we have seen multiple projected dates come and go... perhaps MI6 and the CIA should have taken a look and obtained more accurate information," he said.

Major Western European nations clearly expressed their intention to distance themselves from wild US over-reactions, Rasmussen pointed out.

"We see numerous EU and NATO member states clearly say that they would not support the sanctions nor would they provide military or lethal weapons if a conflict broke out," he said.

Perhaps an even greater benefit for Russia, he added, is that EU countries independently engaged Moscow in discussing how to move forward on security and economic areas.

"Russia I think benefited, in that they finally after years of attempting had the US and NATO at least notice their concerns," he said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov definitely appeared to be "the adults in the room," Rasmussen added.

"We are fortunate that we had some experienced people managing things in Russia, otherwise with the amateurs from the West, things easily could have escalated and the losers would have been Ukraine and Europe," he said.

ECONOMIC GAINS/LOSSES

California State University Political Science Professor Beau Grosscup, however, said the US industrial-military complex would seek to harvest short term gains from the crisis.
"Yes, war and the preparation for war, always make money for those designated as key, strategic industries and materials. In times of investment insecurity in the private sector, government Treasuries are considered safe, thus funding US government Treasury [bonds]," Grosscup told Sputnik.

Rasmussen said the US gained in some areas – including dollars, bonds, liquefied natural gas (LNG) and weapons sales.

American University in Moscow President Professor Edward Lozansky also acknowledged these trends. But he also warned that eventually such profits would be swallowed up in the event of any catastrophic war.

"Nothing is new. For some war is good and brings money, for others it brings misery and death. With the almighty dollar, the war is especially good, since it provides a refuge for those who get scared," Lozansky told Sputnik.

However US leaders and defense contractors were now risking a global conflagration that would destroy them all, Lozansky cautioned.

"The only difference this time is that if World War III starts, America no longer will have the advantage of watching it from a distance and all the money in the world might end up useless," he said.

Former Canadian diplomat Patrick Armstrong told Sputnik the US also saw economic losses as Washington appeared growingly incompetent.

"The Dow has taken a hit because of all the war rumors and Washington looks less competent with every ‘invasion date’ that Putin misses," Armstrong said.

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US Must Admit NATO Vowed Not to Expand in Face of New Evidence - Ex-CIA Analyst

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UPDATE - Biden on Whether Zelenskyy Should Travel to Munich: 'That's His Decision'
(Update with changes in headline, paras 1.2; details in para 3)
WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said whether or not Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy should travel to Munich on Saturday is a judgment for Zelenskyy himself to make, according to the White House press pool.
"That's a judgment for him to make and a termination as to whether or not - I've spoken with Zelenskyy a dozen times, maybe more, I don't know, and in the pursuit of a diplomatic solution, it may not be - it may be the wise choice. That's his decision," Biden said on Friday as quoted by the press pool.
The White House press pool sent out a transcript clarifying Biden's response when asked if it it is wise for Zelenskyy to leave Ukraine if an invasion is allegedly imminent.
Zelenskyy is scheduled to meet with US Vice President Kamala Harris on Saturday to discuss US economic and security assistance to Ukraine.
Russia has repeatedly denied having plans to attack any country, including Ukraine, or escalating the situation there. Moscow has also said the fears of an invasion in Ukraine are used as a pretext for advancing NATO's military presence further eastward in Europe. Moscow has warned that NATO's plans to expand further eastward pose a direct threat to its national security.
Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the ongoing turmoil is being deliberately promoted by the West to cover Kiev sabotaging the Minsk agreements.

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US Supreme Court to Hear Biden Argument to End Trump-Era Remain in Mexico Policy - Filing
WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court agreed to hear the Biden administration's argument to rescind the Trump-era Remain in Mexico policy, a court filing revealed.
"The petition for a writ of certiorari is granted," the court filing revealed on Friday. "The case will be set for argument in the second week of the April 2022 argument session."
In August, a US federal court in the state of Texas ordered the Biden administration to restart the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), otherwise known as the "Remain in Mexico" policy, on December 6. The decision came after the US Supreme Court rejected the Biden administration's initial attempt to end the program.

The Biden administration again asked the Supreme Court in late December to review its argument to end the policy.

More than 60,000 asylum-seeking migrants were returned to Mexico when the Trump administration rolled out the MPP program. Migrant shelters on the Mexican side of the border became overwhelmed and migrants themselves faced extortion or were kidnapped by criminal gangs.

However, the policy helped deter the influx of migrants arriving at the US southern border. The Biden administration has seen record setting numbers on the number of illegal crossings into the United States from Mexico.

More than 1.5 million undocumented migrants crossed into the United States unlawfully from Mexico in fiscal year 2021, according to US Customs and Border Protection.

Biden Says Wise for Zelenskyy to Attend Munich Conference to Seek Ukraine Crisis Solution

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said it would be wise for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to attend the Munich Security Conference on Saturday in order to seek a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis.

"That's a judgment for him to make," Biden said on Friday when asked if he thinks it is wise for Zelenskyy to leave Ukraine amid a possible military escalation in the region. "In the pursuit of a diplomatic solution, maybe it will be the wise choice but it's his decision."

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US Court Orders Oath Keepers Leader Held Until Trial for 'Sedition' in Capitol Riot
WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US Judge Amit Mehta ordered the leader of the right-wing group Oath Keepers, Stewart Rhodes, to be held in jail while he awaits his trial for alleged sedition for his role in the January 6 Capitol riot.

Mehta on Friday ordered Rhodes to be held in jail in Texas pending a trial because he determined there are no release conditions that would minimize Rhodes' dangerousness. Mehta also said he is concerned that keeping Rhodes in a jail in Washington, DC, will leave him too close to his alleged co-conspirators.

Law enforcement arrested Rhodes in January after an indictment charged him and his co-defendants with allegedly conspiring through a variety of manners and means - including organizing into teams that were prepared and willing to use force - to prevent the certification of the 2020 US presidential election results on January 6.

The seditious conspiracy charges carry a statutory maximum penalty of 20 years in prison should the defendants be found guilty of the alleged crimes.

The indictment alleges that the Oath Keepers led by Rhodes is a loosely organized collection of individuals that focuses on recruiting military, law enforcement and first-responder personnel, some of whom have militia associations.

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ANALYSIS - Russia Could Emerge Stronger From Ukraine Crisis Amid Shift to Multi-Polar World

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Russia may emerge from the Ukraine crisis with its global standing enhanced relative to the US given the evident major shift towards a multipolar world, analysts told Sputnik.

The United States and its Western allies continue to repeatedly claim Moscow is preparing to invade Ukraine after US intelligence failed to predict that Russia would earlier this week.

On Friday, President Joe Biden said he was "convinced" Russian President Vladimir Putin has already made a decision to invade. Biden claimed that Russian troops would attack Ukraine in the coming weeks or days and would target Kiev.

Moscow has refuted these Western allegations while saying that NATO's military activities near Russia's border are seen as a national security threat.

US CREDIBILITY QUESTIONED

Meanwhile, tensions are rising between Moscow and Kiev over the rising violence in eastern Ukraine, where local authorities are planning to evacuate about 700,000 residents. The head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), Denis Pushilin, said the situation in Donbas was heading toward a full-scale war.

"In general the major wins are with Russia and we are seeing a major shift occurring to a multi-polar world," Eurasia Center Vice President Earl Rasmussen told Sputnik. "The recent events I think made Ukraine, the European Union (EU) and Russia question the credibility of the United States and the so-called intelligence agencies."

Rasmussen said Washington's relations with both Russia and China worsened during the crisis while Moscow and Beijing grew closer. The US ties with some European partners also took a hit.
over sanctions targeting Russia. However, he added, Moscow's relations with many EU member states grew worse as well.

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ECONOMIC GAINS/LOSSES

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US Capitol Police Says Preparing for Possible Trucker Protest on Day of State of Union

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The US Capitol Police (USCP) said it is bolstering security to prepare for a possible trucker-led protest that may take place during President Joe Biden's State of the Union Address on March 1.
"Law enforcement agencies across the National Capital Region are aware of plans for a series of truck convoys arriving in Washington, DC around the time of the State of the USCP said in a press release on Friday. "The USCP is closely coordinating with local, state and federal law enforcement agencies, including DC's Metropolitan Police Department, the United States Park Police, the United States Secret Service and other allied agencies to include the DC National Guard."
Earlier on Friday, the Washington Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) told Sputnik that a permit application has not yet been submitted for the demonstration.
The participants of the protest are expected to demonstrate against coronavirus-related mandates.
The group organizing the demonstration, which now goes under the name Follow the Convoy, did not immediately respond to Sputnik for comment.
Canada has experienced a wave of trucker-led protests, which began in mid-January when tens of thousands of truckers and other Canadians converged on Ottawa to demand the government scrap the COVID-19 vaccine mandates.
Truckers also blocked an international bridge on the Canada-US border for several days, which stopped billions of dollars in trade from passing through for a period of several days.

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Biden Says Not Too Late to Return to Negotiating Table to De-Escalate Ukraine Crisis

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WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said it is not too late to negotiate a resolution to the Ukraine crisis.
"Russia can still choose diplomacy, it is not too late to de-escalate and return to the negotiating table," Biden said during a press conference on Friday.
Russia has repeatedly conveyed it is ready to engage in meaningful dialogue to resolve security concerns in Eastern Europe, including NATO's expansion towards the East near Russia's borders. Moscow said it is not satisfied with the response the West has provided on Russia's security proposals.

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UPDATE: Russia Urges UN to Launch Arbitration on US Visa Denials - Deputy Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - Russia urges the United Nations to launch an arbitration process with the United States to resolve the problem of not issuing visas to Russian diplomats intending to come to the organization's headquarters in New York, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin told reporters.
"We need to move toward the path of the arbitration process [under the US-UN Headquarters Agreement]. We would want the issue to move in that direction because we need results. We need to have the normal functioning of Russian and other countries' diplomatic missions that work in New York in the UN system," Vershinin said on Friday.
Earlier this month, Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy told Sputnik that UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres does not rule out launching the arbitration procedure to resolve the issue of the United States failing on numerous occasions to grant visas to diplomats at the UN headquarters building in New York.

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Russia Very Concerned Civilians in Donbas Enduring Risks, Shelling Must Stop - Vershinin

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - Russia is extremely concerned by the worsening of the situation in the Donbas and the fact that civilians there are subjected to suffering and risk to life, and believes the shelling must stop, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin told reporters on Friday.
"The latest reports from the ground in Eastern Ukraine are very concerning to us. We are extremely worried that the civilian population of that part of Ukraine is enduring such sufferings, such risks. The indiscriminate shelling is not acceptable and result in the destruction of civilian infrastructure and people's homes. This is unacceptable and it should be stopped," Vershinin said.
The Russian Deputy Foreign Minister noted that the UN Security Council held a meeting on the Minsk Agreements on Thursday that allowed Russia to express its position on the situation in Ukraine in a restrained tone devoid of hysteria. Vershinin added that implementing of the Minsk agreements is the key to resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

"The settlement should be done in the way it is agreed upon by the UN Security Council resolution. We believe that based on that, tensions could lowered," he said. Russia firmly denies having any intention to escalate the situation in Ukraine and claims that rising fears of an invasion in Ukraine are used as a pretext for advancing NATO's military presence further eastward in Europe. Russia has repeatedly warned that NATO's plans to expand further eastward pose a direct threat to its national security. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the ongoing turmoil is being deliberately promoted by the West to cover Kiev sabotaging the Minsk agreements.

Biden Says Does Not Believe Putin is Considering Using Nuclear Weapons

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin is not contemplating the use of nuclear weapons, US President Joe Biden said during remarks on the Ukraine-Russia situation.

"I don't think [Putin] is remotely contemplating using nuclear weapons, but I think he is focused on trying to convince the world that he has the ability to change the dynamics in Europe in a way that he cannot," Biden said on Friday when asked about how his administration's views on the Russian nuclear exercises set to take place over the weekend.

Biden Believes Russia to Attack Ukraine in Coming Weeks, Target Kiev

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Russia has plans to attack Ukraine in the coming weeks or even days and to target the country's capital Kiev, US President Joe Biden said during his remarks on the situation around Ukraine.

"We have reasons to believe the Russian forces are planning to, intend to attack Ukraine in the coming weeks, in the coming days. We believe that they will target Ukraine's capital Kiev, a city of 2.8 million innocent people," Biden said on Friday.
Biden Says Convinced Putin Has Made Decision to Invade Ukraine

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden during remarks on the Russia-Ukraine situation said that he believes Russian President Vladimir Putin has made a decision to invade Ukraine.

"As of this moment, I'm convinced he's made a decision. We have reason to believe that," Biden said on Friday when asked by a reporter whether he believes Putin has made a decision. Russia has repeatedly denied accusations that they intend to launch an invasion of Ukraine or any other country, while also expressing their own concerns about NATO activity in Eastern Europe.

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Biden Reiterates US Not Going to Send Troops to Fight in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States will not be sending its troops to fight in Ukraine if Russia "invades", but will continue to support the Ukrainian people, US President Joe Biden said during his remarks on the situation around Ukraine.

"We also will not send troops in to fight in Ukraine, but we will continue to support the Ukrainian people," Biden said on Friday. "The United States and our allies and partners will support the Ukrainian people. We will hold Russia accountable for its actions."

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Biden Says US Has Seen Reports of Major Uptick in Violations of Ceasefire in Donbas

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said there has been a major reported uptick in violations of the ceasefire in the Donbas region.

"Over the last few days we've seen reports of a major uptick in violations of the ceasefire by Russian-backed fighters attempting to provoke Ukraine in the Donbas," Biden said during a press conference on Friday. Moreover, Biden said there is no evidence indicating Ukraine is planning to conduct an offensive.

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Biden, Transatlantic Leaders Vow to Continue Pursuing Diplomacy on Ukraine - White House
WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden spoke by telephone with Transatlantic leaders and pledged to continue pursuing diplomacy to de-escalate tensions between Russia and Ukraine, the White House said in a readout of the call. "They pledged to continue pursuing diplomacy to de-escalate tensions while ensuring readiness to impose swift, coordinated economic costs on Russia should it choose further conflict," the White House said on Friday.

Participants in the call included Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, among others, the White House said.

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Wife of US Navy Engineer Pleads Guilty to Conspiring to Leak Secrets - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The wife of a Navy nuclear engineer and a Maryland resident pleaded guilty to conspiring to provide restricted data about the design of US nuclear-powered warships to a foreign nation, the Justice Department said.

"Diana Toebbe, 46, of Annapolis, was arrested on Oct. 9, 2021, for knowingly and voluntarily joining a conspiracy with her husband, Jonathan Toebbe, to communicate restricted data to a foreign nation," the Justice Department said in a press release on Friday. "During the course of the conspiracy, Diana Toebbe served as a lookout while her husband serviced three 'dead-drops.'"

On February 14, Toebbe’s husband Jonathan pleaded guilty to the same offense.

Justice Department officials said at the time of the arrest, Jonathan Toebbe worked as a nuclear engineer at the Department of the Navy and was assigned to the Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program. He held an active security clearance that gave him access to restricted data related to the design, manufacture or utilization of atomic weapons.

Diana Toebbe pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to communicate restricted data, which carries a maximum statutory penalty of up to life in prison, a $100,000 fine and supervised release lasting no longer than five years.

However, as a result of the plea agreement, she will serve a sentence of not more than three years in federal prison.

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US Believes Russian Cyber Actors Likely Targeted Ukrainian Government - Senior Official (Updates with details, background in paras 4-10)

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration believes Russian cyber actors recently targeted Ukrainian government entities, including the country’s defense ministry,
Deputy National Security Adviser for Cyber and Emerging Technology Anne Neuberger said on Friday.
"The US government believes that Russian cyber actors likely have targeted the Ukrainian government, including the military and critical infrastructure networks to collect intelligence and prepositioned to conduct disruptive cyber activities," Neuberger said during a press briefing.
Neuberger said the United States has shared intelligence with Ukraine and its European partners about the cyber activity. The United States also believes Russia is behind the recent cyberattack against major banks in Ukraine, she added.
Neuberger explained that the United States has technical information allegedly showing that Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff, or GRU, was transmitting high volumes of communication to Ukraine based IP addresses and domains.
Russia has repeatedly denied accusations it is involved in malicious cyber activity against the United States or its European partners. In addition, Moscow has helped crack down on cyber criminal groups that conducted cyber attacks against the United States from inside Russia.
Biden administration officials have met with Polish, NATO, French, German and Baltic countries' officials to prepare contingency response plans against any potential disruptive malicious cyber activity, Neuberger said.
The situation regarding Ukraine has worsened over the past several months after the United States and its NATO allies accused Russia of a troop build-up near the border with Ukraine in preparation for an invasion.
Russia has repeatedly denied the accusations, saying it does not plan to attack any country, including Ukraine, but reserves the right to move troops within its sovereign territory. Russia has also pointed to NATO's military activities near Russia's borders and warned the alliance's plans to expand further eastward pose a direct threat to its national security.
Neuberger said there are currently no specific or credible cyber threats to the US mainland but the US government has been preparing since November for potential geopolitical contingencies that may arise.
The United States and its European partners have been working to bolster Ukraine's cyber defenses, she added.

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Biden Discusses Tensions in Ukraine With Transatlantic Leaders - White House

WASHINGTON, February 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden spoke by telephone with the leaders of Transatlantic countries about the tensions in Ukraine, the White House said on Friday.
"The call with Transatlantic leaders ended at 15:33 p.m. EST (08.33 PM GMT)," the White House said.
Biden is scheduled to make a statement on Ukraine shortly hereafter, the White House added.
Western government have urged their citizens to leave Ukraine and evacuate non-essential diplomatic personnel amid allegations that Russia is preparing to invade Ukraine.
Russia has repeatedly said it does not plan to attack any country, including Ukraine, but reserves the right to move troops on its sovereign territory as it sees fit.

Moscow has also said NATO's activities as well as plans to expand further eastward pose a direct threat to Russia's national security.

Earlier on Friday, the authorities of the two breakaway republics in the Donbas began evacuating civilians after the Ukrainian military shelled their territory with artillery and mortars in preparation for launching an offensive.

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US Resumes Imports of Mexican Avocados After Ban Over Threat to American Inspector

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has resumed imports of avocados from Mexico's Michoacan state, slightly over a week after banning the product following a threat received by its plant safety inspector in the Central American country.

"The US Department of Agriculture's Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has determined it will immediately resume its avocado inspection program in Michoacan," US Ambassador to Mexico Ken Salazar said on Friday.

The US had paused its inspection program of avocados in Michoacan on February 11 after an American inspector of the product was verbally threatened in the state known for its drug gangs.

The US imported $3 billion of avocados globally last week, with $2.8 billion of that coming from Mexico, according to the Department of Agriculture.

Michoacan is Mexico's top avocado producing state and the only one currently approved to export to the US.

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Ottawa Police Say Arrested 70 Individuals, Towed 21 Vehicles

TORONTO, February 18 (Sputnik) - The Ottawa Police have arrested 70 individuals and towed 21 vehicles as authorities crack down on trucker protests across the country empowered by the Trudeau government's use of the Emergencies Act, the department said via Twitter.

"DEMONSTRATORS: You must leave. You must cease further unlawful activity and immediately remove your vehicle and/or property from all unlawful protest sites. Anyone within the unlawful protest site may be arrested," the Ottawa Police also said on Friday via Twitter.

The ongoing protests, which initially began in opposition to vaccine mandates for truckers, have evolved into broader demonstrations against the Trudeau government and its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The protests pose an ongoing threat to the country's economy and security, Canadian Justice Minister David Lametti said on Friday.
US National Archives Confirms Trump Had Classified Information at Mar-a-Lago - Letter

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) recovered classified national security information from presidential records kept at former President Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago residence, US Archivist David Ferriero said on Friday.

"NARA has identified items marked as classified national security information within the boxes," Ferriero said in a letter addressed to US House Oversight and Reform Committee Chairwoman Carolyn Maloney.

Ferriero said NARA is currently in the process of inventorying the contents of the boxes. Due to the identification of classified information in the boxes, NARA staff have been in communication with the Department of Justice, he added.

The letter came in response to a request from Maloney to answer a series of questions related to the recovery of 15 boxes of presidential records from Mar-a-Lago.

SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik)

ESCALATION IN DONBAS

* Ukrainian forces have fired artillery and mortar shells at three settlements in Donbas, a spokesman of the Luhansk People's Republic mission to the Joint Centre for Control and Coordination (JCCC) said on Friday.

* Ukrainian sabotage groups which have entered the territory of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) planned to blow up tanks with chlorine, the DRP People's Militia said.

* The evacuation of residents of Donetsk began due to the aggravation of the situation in the Donbas, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the scene.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin instructed the Emergency Situation Ministry to provide assistance to the southern region of Rostov amid an unprecedented influx of refugees coming from eastern Ukraine, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* Ukraine top commander Valerii Zaluzhnyi denied statements that his forces undertook military action in the Donbas and further denied they are planning sabotage in the town of Horlivka.

* Russia is extremely concerned by the aggravation of the situation in Donbas and the fact civilians there are enduring suffering and risks, and called on Ukraine to stop the shelling, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin told reporters.

PROTESTS IN CANADA
* Trucker-led demonstrators opposing COVID-19 vaccine mandates must leave protest sites in Ottawa or face "severe penalties," police warned on Friday.
* The Ottawa police are urging reporters covering the trucker-led protests against COVID-19 vaccine mandate to stay away from law enforcement operations.
* At least 15 people have been arrested and four vehicles removed from the downtown area of Canada’s capital as officers are attempting to clear the streets of peaceful protesters opposing the COVID-19 vaccine mandates, the Ottawa police said.

RUSSIA'S SECURITY GUARANTEES PROPOSALS
* Moscow needs not simple promises from Western states but legally endorsed guarantees that no one’s security will be based on Russia’s security, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin said on Friday.
* Russia expects that negotiations with NATO on security guarantees will continue, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in a statement.
* Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Western countries appear reluctant to take a reasonable grasp of Russia’s proposal of security guarantees in Europe.

PUTIN-LUKASHENKO MEETING
* Russian President Vladimir Putin wished a successful referendum on the constitution in Belarus.
* Lukashenko told Putin that he is satisfied with joint military drills and will participate in them on Saturday.
* A port for transshipment of millions of tons of Belarusian cargo can be built near St. Petersburg, Lukashenko said after a meeting with Putin.

AUSTIN-SHOIGU TALKS
* Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin discussed by telephone issues pertaining to international security, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday.
* Austin in a telephone conversation with Shoigu called for de-escalation and a diplomatic resolution of the Ukraine crisis, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said.

MUNICH SECURITY CONFERENCE
* Germany is ready for a serious dialogue with Russia on European security as it is beneficial for both parties, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said on Friday.
* Baerbock said that countries do their utmost within the Normandy Format, the European Union and NATO to find a peaceful solution to the crisis in Ukraine.

JCPOA TALKS
* A US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Friday that "substantial" progress has been made over the last week in the talks to revive the Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).
* Parties to the Iran nuclear talks "can and should" agree on mutual return to the JCPOA within days if Tehran demonstrates a serious approach, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

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White House Says US Ready to Engage in Diplomacy With Russia, Unclear If Moscow Prepared

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to engage in diplomacy with Russia to address security concerns in Eastern Europe but is unsure if Russia will negotiate in good faith, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday. "We're ready to engage in diplomacy but it's unclear if the Russians are going to sit down in good faith," Psaki said during a press briefing.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov next Wednesday is a sign that the door for diplomacy is still open, she added.

Russia has repeatedly conveyed it is ready to engage in meaningful dialogue to resolve security concerns in Eastern Europe, including NATO's expansion toward the East near Russian borders. Moscow said it is not satisfied with the response the West has provided on Russia's security proposals.

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Cygnus Cargo Craft on Schedule for Planned Cargo Mission to Space Station – NASA

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) – The next resupply mission to the International Space Station (ISS) is on schedule to launch as planned from Wallops Island in the US state of Virginia just after noon EST on Saturday, NASA and Northrop Grumman officials announced.

"NASA and Northrop Grumman [are] targeting 12:40 pm EST [17:40 GMT] Saturday, February 19, for the launch of the company's 17th resupply mission to the International Space Station from NASA's Wallops Flight Facility on Wallops Island, Virginia," the US space agency said in a press release.

Northrop Grumman's Cygnus cargo spacecraft will carry more than 8,300 pounds of research, crew supplies and hardware on an Antares rocket from Virginia Space's Mid-Atlantic Regional Spaceport, NASA said. The Cygnus spacecraft will arrive at the ISS on Monday at about 4:35 a.m. EST, NASA said.

Scientific cargo on the mission will allow the ISS crew to conduct a study that examines the effects of a drug on breast and prostate cancer cells and an investigation from Colgate-Palmolive that will leverage the acceleration of skin aging in microgravity, NASA said.
The spacecraft will also carry 2,900 pounds of crew supplies including avocados, blueberries, pears, frozen treats and a vascular aging experiment, NASA officials said.

"All options remain on the table, but it's probably not going to be the case that you'll see SWIFT in the initial rollout package. We have other severe measures we can take that our allies and partners are ready to take in lockstep with us that don't have the same spillover effects" Singh said during a White House press briefing.

Blinken Accepts Invitation to Meet With Lavrov Next Wednesday - White House

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken accepted Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's offer to have a bilateral engagement about the Ukraine situation on February 23, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"Our Secretary of State has accepted the invitation to have a meeting with [Russian] Foreign Minister Lavrov, or engage with him, next Wednesday," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Biden to Hold Virtual Talks With G7 Leaders on Russia on Thursday - White House

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will participate in virtual discussions with G7 leaders during a meeting on Thursday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"And on Thursday the President will participate in a virtual G7 Leaders Meeting to discuss the ongoing situation with regard to Russia and Ukraine and priorities of the German G7 Presidency this year," Psaki said during a White House press briefing.
Sanctions to Deny Foreign Capital to Russia in Event of Ukraine 'Invasion' - White House

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The West is planning to deprive Russia of access to global financial markets and advanced technologies if Moscow decides to "invade" Ukraine, US Deputy National Security Advisor Daleep Singh said on Friday.
"We're also prepared to impose powerful export controls as part of our response package. Both financial sanctions and export controls deny something to Russia that it needs and can't get from anywhere other than the United States or our allies and partners. Financial sanctions deny foreign capital to Russia, and export controls deny critical technological inputs that Russia needs to diversify its economy," Singh said during a press briefing.
Singh added that US financial sanctions have been designed to impose "overwhelming and immediate" costs on the largest financial institutions and state-owned enterprises in Russia. The Russia sanctions package is being finalized and coordinated with US allies and partners, Singh noted.

US Sanctions Not Designed to Impair Russia's Ability to Supply Energy to World - Official

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The anti-Russia sanctions package being prepared by the United States and its European partners is not designed to impair Russia's ability to provide energy to the world, US Deputy National Security Adviser Daleep Singh said on Friday.
"Our measures are not designed to reduce or impair Russia's ability to supply energy to the world," Singh said during a press briefing.
The Biden administration and its European partners have been working together to ensure there is a stable natural gas supply to Europe, these include additional supply from North Africa, the Middle East, the United States, Asia, and other parts in Europe, Singh said.

Biden Ready to Respond to Russian Cyber Activities Against US, Allies - White House

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is ready to respond to potential asymmetric activities from Russia such as cyber attacks on the United States or its allies, Deputy National Security Adviser for Cyber and Emerging Technology Anne Neuberger said on Friday.
"As the President said earlier this week, if Russia attacks the United States or allies through asymmetric activities like disruptive cyber attacks against our companies or critical infrastructure, we are prepared to respond," Neuberger said during remarks at a White House press briefing.

US Believes Russian Cyber Actors Likely Targeted Ukrainian Government - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration believes Russian cyber actors recently targeted Ukrainian government entities, including its defense ministry, Deputy National Security Advisor for Cyber and Emerging Technology Anne Neuberger said on Friday. "The US government believes that Russian cyber actors likely have targeted the Ukrainian government, including the military and critical infrastructure networks to collect intelligence and prepositioned to conduct disruptive cyber activities," Neuberger said during a press briefing. Neuberger said the United States has shared intelligence with Ukraine and its European partners about the cyber activity. The United States also believes Russia is behind the recent cyberattack against major banks in Ukraine, she added.

US Officials Brief US Bank Executives on Potential Russian Hacking Threats - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US officials representing multiple agencies met with big bank executives to brief them on how to defend and respond to potential Russia-backed hacking attempts on financial institutions, CNN reported on Friday, citing five individuals briefed in the meeting.

Conflict in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic has intensified in recent days, with reports of Ukrainian artillery strikes against the breakaway republics.

Russia denies the Western accusations it intends to attack any country, including Ukraine, and claims to have withdrawn some of its troops that were deployed near the border. Moscow has
repeatedly said NATO’s plans to expand further eastward and activities near the Russian border represents a direct threat to Russia’s national security.

Canada to Add Financial Tools to Fight Against Future ‘Illegal’ Protests - Freeland

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The government of Canada is considering adding new financial measures to its toolbox to fight against any future protests Ottawa deems illegal like the ones that have been taking place across the country in opposition to COVID-19 mandates, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland said on Friday.

"We will be putting forward measures to put those [additional] tools permanently in place. The authorities of FINTRAC [The Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Center of Canada], I believe, do need to be expanded to cover crowdsourcing funding and their payment providers. So, that is something that we need to do and we will do and that needs to be in place permanently," Freeland said during a virtual press briefing.

However, Freeland does not believe that some of the extraordinary tools that have been enacted over the last few days, including the sharing of information between law enforcement and financial services, and the requirement of financial services to be reviewing protestors’ accounts proactively, should be in place in ordinary times.

On Monday, the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau invoked the Emergencies Act, which allowed it to grant Canadian financial institutions authorization to temporarily cease providing financial services in instances where the provider suspects that an account is being used to fund the protests.

The declaration has been met with considerable backlash, as multiple civil liberties organizations, including the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, premiers and political parties have decried the decision as government overreach, arguing that the threshold for what serves as a trigger for the act has not been met.

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.
WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) is increasing available resources to prepare for a possible trucker protest that may occur in the coming weeks in the US capital, an MPD spokesperson told Sputnik on Friday.

"The Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) is aware of potential First Amendment activities that may take place in the National Capital Region, including Washington, DC," the spokesperson said. "We have increased available resources, including the activation of our Civil Disturbance Units, in preparation for these activities."

The spokesperson added that at this time, a permit application has not been submitted to the police department to hold a demonstration in the area.

US protesters are expected to demonstrate against coronavirus-related mandates.

MPD is monitoring, assessing and planning accordingly with local, state, and federal partners, the spokesperson said.

The police department told Sputnik earlier this month that the protest was expected around March 1.

The US Capitol Police and the People's Convoy group, which is reportedly organizing the demonstration, did not immediately respond to Sputnik for comment on the protest.

Canada has experienced a wave of trucker protests, which began in mid-January when tens of thousands of truckers and other Canadians converged on Ottawa to demand the government scrap the COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

Truckers also blocked an international bridge on the Canada-US border for several days, which stopped billions of dollars in trade from passing through.

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Biden Signs Bill to Avert Government Shutdown Through March 11 - White House

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed legislation to avert a government shutdown at least until March 11, the White House said on Friday.

"On Friday, February 18, 2022, the President signed into law: H.R. 6617, the 'Further Additional Extending Government Funding Act,' which provides fiscal year 2022 appropriations to Federal agencies through March 11, 2022, for continuing projects and activities of the Federal Government," the White House said in a statement.

Federal spending was set to expire at midnight on Friday but the Senate approved the House-passed stopgap spending bill on Thursday afternoon.

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ANALYSIS - Biden Inflation-Fueling Policies Likely to Intensify Anti-Establishment Protests
WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is pouring fuel on the already raging fires of inflation by throwing money into non-productive programs that will likely accelerate anti-establishment movements, financial analysts told Sputnik.

Inflation in the US has sky-rocketed to a 40-year high of 7.5 percent this year. On Friday, Federal Reserve Bank of New York President John Williams said inflation was too high and he expects the country's central bank to raise the target interest rate in March.

IS BIDEN TO BLAME?

Rising inflation often forces the US central bank to boost interest rates to cool consumer spending. A rate hike makes borrowing money more expensive - impacting everything from credit cards, mortgages, and car loans - while increasing rates on high-yield savings accounts. This combination in the end incentivizes consumers to spend less and save more.

Earlier this week, Federal Reserve official James Bullard called for steep rate hikes to fight inflation growing at 7.5% per year versus the Fed's target of 2 percent. Although Bullard wants the current zero to 0.25% rate to be raised to 1% by July 1, most of the other Fed officials - including Chairman Jerome Powell - have called for moderation.

"The root cause was the excessive creation of money by the Federal Reserve, encouraged by then-President [Donald] Trump in the early months of 2020. It was the Fed's doing but Trump encouraged it," former merchant banker and financial analyst Martin Hutchinson told Sputnik.

"Biden did not cause it, but over the past year he has poured fuel on the fire by throwing money into so many non-productive programs."

The money supply increased by 25% in three months but takes about two years for the effect of those policies to work its way through the system, he added. In fact, Hutchinson added, real inflation figures are actually now at an 8% to 9% level.

"It [inflation] is probably going to hit double digits. It might go down to 6% by the end of the year but it is much more likely to remain at its current level," he said.

Independent Institute Center for Peace & Liberty Director Ivan Eland agreed that inflation levels were unlikely to ease up in the foreseeable future because of a political unwillingness to tackle the root causes of the problem.

"Inflation is now fairly robust. There is an easy economic cure, but it is usually politically difficult. Governments need to reduce spending to reduce budget deficits and need to tighten the money supply," Eland told Sputnik.

Trends Journal publisher and financial analyst Gerald Celente said for over a decade the US Fed, and the European Central Banks, kept selling their "fairy tale" that when inflation hit above 2 percent, they would raise interest rates.

In fact, the last time the US Fed lifted rates from where they are now, at near zero, was in 2015, when inflation was running below its 2% target range, Celente told Sputnik. And now, despite the consumer price index in the United States spiking to the highest in 39 years, the US has seen not one rate hike by the Fed banksters, he observed.

EUROPE'S FAILURES

Meanwhile, the European Central Bank has come under fire in recent weeks for failing to take action on interest rates as the region suffers from record inflation.

Celente pointed out that EU leaders faced very similar inflationary pressures and, like their US counterparts, had sought to deny the existence of the problem.
"On the inflation front it is lies, damn lies and statistics. For nearly a year, the US and EU central bank heads kept claiming that inflation was 'temporary' and later, as inflation kept rising, they said it was 'transitory,'” he said. 

On both sides of the Atlantic the top national bankers and financial decision-makers knew better, but found it politically expedient not to face up to the problem, Celente stated. “They knew inflation was real but publicly dismissed the hard inflation data to keep their unprecedented cheap money pumping schemes going to artificially boost the diving equity markets and sinking economies when governments launched the Covid war in 2020,” he said. “Their scheme worked.”

The European Central Bank (ECB) rates are still in negative territory at minus 0.5% - despite the annual rate of Eurozone consumer price inflation hitting 5 percent in 2021 - which Celente said is the highest on record and more than double the ECB's target.

DEPRESSION, PROTESTS COMING

Inflationary pressures with zero interest rate levels, the analysts also warned, were likely to lead to depression, which would intensify angry popular protests. "When interest rates rise to the levels we forecast, economies will sharply decline," Celente warned. "With the lower and middle classes getting much poorer across the globe and the billionaires getting trillions of dollars richer, anti-establishment movements will accelerate." The new unrest would not be limited to either a few Western European nations or the United States, but would sweep the world, he added. "It will be the new world disorder as millions take to the streets to protest at the lack of basic living standards, government corruption, crime and violence," Celente said. Hutchinson agreed that the inflationary crisis was bound to be followed by social disruption and anger, generated by the policies of the central banks. But in many countries, and certainly in the United States, left of center and populist governments eager to appease the poor would continue with policies that penalized the middle classes leading to further anger from elements that were usually the pillars of stability in society, Hutchinson said. "Of course it will lead to popular protests," Hutchinson predicted. "But they will come from propertied people who are not the voters the Democrats care about anyway."

Federal Reserve Must Understand Digital Currencies Before Issuing One - Governor

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States may not yet be ready to issue its own central bank digital currency but it still needs to understand and be ahead of the changes in the global monetary system forced by cryptocurrencies, Federal Reserve Governor Lael Brainard said in a speech on US monetary policy on Friday.

"The financial system is not standing still and neither can we," Brainard said. "The digital financial ecosystem is evolving rapidly and becoming increasingly connected with the traditional financial system. It is prudent for the Board to understand the evolving payment landscape, the
technological advancements and consumer demands driving this evolution, and the consequent policy choices as it seeks to fulfill its congressionally-mandated role to promote a safe, efficient, and inclusive system for US dollar transactions.”

Brainard said officials in many countries were undertaking efforts to understand and adapt to the transformation of the financial system.

“Many jurisdictions are making efforts to ensure statutory and regulatory frameworks apply like rules to like risks, and some jurisdictions are issuing or contemplating issuing central bank currency in digital form,” Brainard said. “If viewed as safe, digital currency could be appealing as a store of value and a means of payment.”

The Federal Reserve said in January that a central bank digital currency, known by its acronym as CBDC, could provide a safe, digital payment option that allows for faster transactions. But it also cited downside risks as it presented a long-awaited study on the matter, without saying it wanted such a payment mode.

The global plan for CBDCs gained momentum last year as central banks around the world began exploring ways to not just avert negative impact on their paper currencies from existing crypto assets like Bitcoin, but also profit from their own digital money.

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US Existing Home Sales Up 5% in January as Rate Hikes Loom - Realtors

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Sales of existing homes in the United States rose 5% month-on-month in January as buyers flocked to a market with record low inventories and all-time high prices in an attempt to beat impending interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve, the National Association of Realtors said on Friday.

"Buyers were likely anticipating further rate increases and locking-in at the low rates, and investors added to overall demand with all-cash offers," Lawrence Yun, chief economist at the realtors' association, said in a statement. "Consequently, housing prices continue to move solidly higher."

Sales of existing homes hit 6.5 million in January, up from 6.18 million in December. Economists polled by US media had forecast a sale of 6.1 million for last month.

"The lower end of homes in the $100,00 to $250,000 range are being squeezed with inventories down 23% year-on-year," economist Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive. "Mortgage rates are rising now and that will eventually hurt demand but in the nearer-term it could be leading to a rush to buy."

Dire housing shortages in the United States since the financial crisis of 2007/2008 and last year’s coronavirus outbreak have led to a scramble among first-time home buyers, triggering record high prices.

To compound the problem, the Federal Reserve is expected to raise interest rates by as many as five to seven times this year to curb inflation growing at its fastest pace in four decades. That has worsened the race among first-time buyers of homes eager to lock in before the rate hikes kick in.
The Commerce Department said the median selling price for a new home in December was $377,700 while the average was $457,300. In November, the median was at $416,900 while the average was $481,700 — both at a record high.


WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - A Massachusetts resident has been arrested for assaulting law enforcement during the January 6, 2021 riot at the US Capitol, the Justice Department said in a statement on Friday.

"Vincent J. Gillespie, of Athol, Massachusetts, is charged in a criminal complaint filed in the District of Columbia with assaulting, resisting, or impeding officers, civil disorder, engaging in physical violence in a restricted building or grounds, and related offenses," the statement said. "He was arrested in Athol, Massachusetts, and will make his initial appearance today in the District of Massachusetts."

The Justice Department said Gillespie was one in a group of protesters in the Lower West Terrace of the US Capitol who were pushing, shoving and yelling at police officers. Gillespie fought through the crowd and made his way to a line of officers defending the West Terrace's exterior door, the statement said.

Gillespie is accused of grabbing a police shield as he approached an officer and used it to ram other police officers while screaming "traitors" and "treason" at them, the release added.

In the 13 months since the events on January 6, the authorities have arrested more than 750 people from nearly all 50 US states for crimes stemming from the riot at the US Capitol.

Canadian Trucker Protests Pose Ongoing Threat to Economy, Security - Justice Minister

TORONTO, February 18 (Sputnik) - Trucker protests happening across Canada pose an ongoing threat to the country's economy and security, Justice Minister David Lametti said on Friday.

"These illegal blockades and occupations have been national in scope and are still hurting Canadians. In places where blockades were cleared, we have already seen attempts to re-establish them. They pose an ongoing threat to our economy and to our security," Lametti said during a press event alongside other Canadian officials.

The Canadian government's goal is to see order restored and the emergency declaration lifted as soon as possible, Lametti added.

The Canadian government has condemned the protests and granted itself additional powers under the Emergencies Act to deal with the demonstrations.
The wave of protests across Canada began in mid-January, with tens of thousands of truckers and other Canadians converging on Ottawa to demand the government scrap the COVID-19 vaccine mandates. The protest has since been joined by numerous other segments of Canadian society and evolved into a mass demonstration against the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Russia Very Concerned Civilians in Donbas Enduring Risks, Shelling Should Stop - Vershinin

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - Russia is extremely concerned by the aggravation of the situation in Donbas and that civilians there are enduring suffering and risks and believes the shelling should stop, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin told reporters on Friday.

"The latest reports from the ground in Eastern Ukraine are very concerning to us. We are extremely worried that the civilian population of that part of Ukraine is enduring such sufferings, such risks. The indiscriminate shellings are not acceptable and result in the destruction of civilian infrastructure and people's homes. This is unacceptable and it should be stopped," Vershinin said.

Russia to Hold Talks With Syrian Top Diplomat, UN Envoy Next Week in Moscow - Vershinin

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Spuntik) - Russia will hold negotiations in Moscow with Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad and UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen next week, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin told reporters on Friday.

"We always advocate that the Syrian political process, which is led and should be led by the Syrians with the support of the United Nations, should continue," Vershinin said.

"In this regard, we intend to have negotiations in Moscow with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Syrian Arab Republic [Faisal] Mekdad and then with UN Special Envoy for Syria [Geir] Pedersen next week," he said.

Russia Urges UN to Launch Arbitration on US Visa Denials - Deputy Foreign Minister
UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - Russia urges the United Nations to launch an arbitration process with the United States to resolve the problem of not issuing visas to Russian diplomats intending to come to the organization’s headquarters in New York, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin told reporters on Friday.

"We need to move toward the path of the arbitration process [under the US-UN Headquarters Agreement]. We would want the issue to move in that direction because we need results. We need to have the normal functioning of Russian and other countries' diplomatic missions that work in New York in the UN system," Vershinin said.

Kerry to Visit Egypt to Launch Bilateral Climate Working Group - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry will visit Egypt on February 20-21 to meet with government officials and launch the inaugural meeting of the bilateral Climate Working Group, US State Department said in a release on Friday.

"Together with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, Secretary Kerry will launch the inaugural meeting of the US-Egypt Climate Working Group, a joint endeavor to advance bilateral and multilateral climate goals ahead of COP27," the release said.

The State Department explained that Kerry will also meet with government counterparts and business representatives to urge continued and increased climate ambition.

In addition, Kerry is scheduled to deliver on Monday an address at American University in Cairo on the future of international climate action ahead of the COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh, the release said.

Moscow Says Wants Guarantees That No One’s Security Will Be Based on Russia’s Security

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - Moscow needs not simple promises from Western states but legally endorsed guarantees that no one’s security will be based on Russia’s security, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin told reporters on Friday.

"Unfortunately, what we need to see today is not simple promises, statements that we have already heard, but legally endorsed guarantees that no one’s security will be based on another state’s security, specifically, Russia’s," Vershinin said.
Federal Reserve to Ban Policymakers, Senior Staff From Having Market Holdings - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve is issuing new rules that ban policymakers and senior staff from holding individual bonds, agency securities, cryptocurrencies, commodities or foreign currencies in order to restore public faith in the confidence in its impartiality and integrity, the US central bank said in a statement on Friday.

"Under the new rules, senior Federal Reserve officials are prohibited from purchasing individual stocks or sector funds; holding investments in individual bonds, agency securities, cryptocurrencies, commodities, or foreign currencies; entering into derivatives contracts; and engaging in short sales or purchasing securities on margin," the statement said.

The Federal Reserve explained in the statement that the rules "aim to support public confidence in the impartiality and integrity of the Committee's work by guarding against even the appearance of any conflict of interest."

The central bank made the ruling after media reported last year that some of its senior officials were involved in financial markets' trading that could be influenced at least indirectly by their policy decisions. Former Federal Reserve Vice-Chairman Richard Clarida was one of those implicated in the scandal and resigned in January.

A Federal Reserve probe in late 2021 found that none of its officials violated its policies on securities trading or US regulations.

Despite the probe and Clarida's resignation, public criticism about the apparent conflict of interest among the central bank's top officials has persisted.

The Federal Reserve said in Friday's statement that its officials will be required to provide 45 days of non-retractable notice for purchases and sales of securities, obtain prior approval for such transactions and hold investments for at least one year.

In addition, Federal Reserve officials will be required to provide 45 days' non-retractable notice for purchases and sales of securities, obtain prior approval for such transactions, and hold investments for at least one year.

"Purchases and sales also will be prohibited during periods of heightened financial market stress," the statement said. "These new rules supplement existing rules that prohibit Federal Reserve officials from holding bank stocks and Treasury securities and from engaging in financial transactions during a blackout period around FOMC meetings."

Officials covered by the new rules will have 12 months from the effective date of the rules, which come into force on May 1, to dispose of all impermissible holdings. Going forward, newly covered officials will have six months to dispose of all impermissible holdings.
WASHINGTON, February (Sputnik) - US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy said on Friday that he, his 5-year-old son and his wife have tested positive for COVID-19.

"My 5 year old son, my wife Alice, and I have all tested positive for COVID-19. Our son has a runny nose and low grade fever but is otherwise eating, drinking, playing with his sister, and watching his favorite cartoons," Murthy wrote on Twitter. "My four year old daughter who tested positive first is doing ok. Fevers are starting to improve."

The top US doctor said he and his wife are experiencing mild symptoms. His spouse has a headache and fatigue, while he is dealing with muscle aches, chills, and sore throat.

The official described the fact that they and their son are vaccinated and boosted as "one major source of peace of mind" for them, as it has kept them out of hospital.

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US Inflation 'Way Too High' But Reasons for Optimism Persist It Will Fall- Federal Reserve

NEW YORK, February 18 (Sputnik) - Inflation in the United States is "way too high" but there are some reasons for optimism that it will fall, Federal Reserve Bank of New York President John Williams said on Friday.

"We have seen inflation rise to a level that's far too high," Williams said in a live-streamed speech, referring to the 7.5% inflation rate that is the highest in 40 years. "I am confident we will achieve a sustained, strong economy and inflation at our 2 percent longer-run goal."

The US economy grew by 5.7 percent in 2021, the fastest rate since 1984, from the 3.5% contraction in 2020 caused by the coronavirus pandemic measures.

However, inflation grew even faster, with the Consumer Price Index expanding 7% in the year to December, the highest rate since 1982.

The Federal Reserve's preferred inflation indicator, the Personal Consumption Expenditures Price Index, which excludes volatile food and energy prices, expanded by 5.8% in the year to January - also its fastest in four decades.

The Federal Reserve slashed interest rates to almost zero after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. The central banks is expected to resort to a series of rate hikes this year to counter inflation.

Williams concurred with other Federal Reserve senior officials that the first post-pandemic interest rate hike should be undertaken in March at the forthcoming meeting of the US central bank's policy-making committee known as the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC).

"Ten years ago, the FOMC set a longer-run goal of 2 percent inflation - that is, prices rising 2 percent per year on average," Williams said. "From 2012 through 2020, inflation averaged below this 2 percent goal. But the inflation rate started rising sharply in 2021. I expect it will be appropriate to raise the target range at our upcoming meeting in March."

Wall Street bank Goldman Sachs said earlier that it expects the Federal Reserve to institute seven quarter-percentage point rate hikes this year. The central bank has seven policy meetings.
scheduled between March and December, meaning it could raise rates every time it meets this year.

Some Federal Reserve officials, like James Bullard, have also called for steep interest rate hikes to better curb inflation. Bullard wants the interest rate to be raised to 1% by July 1, meaning the Federal Reserve will have to increase rates by more than a quarter percentage point at least one time over its next three meetings.

UN Keeps Operating in E. Ukraine, Staff Remain in Place Despite Escalation - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - United Nations staff continue to operate in eastern Ukraine, and there has been no change in the posture since the breakaway republics of Donbas announced the evacuation of civilians to Russia, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Friday. “Our staff continues to operate in eastern Ukraine. Along with other humanitarian partners, we have national and international staff. As of right now, there’s no change in the posture of our staff, ... as in many places around the world UN staff stands and delivers,” Dujarric told a press briefing.

The United Nations has no way of independently verifying reports of escalation in the region but calls for de-escalation and restraint.

Judge Sentences Ex-Minnesota Cop Who Shot Daunte Wright Sentenced to 24 Months

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Hennepin County Judge Regina Chu on Friday sentenced former Minnesota police officer Kimberly Potter, found guilty of manslaughter for shooting dead Daunte Wright, to 24 months of which she will serve 16 months in prison and eight on supervised release.

“It is the sentence and judgment of this court that you shall be committed to the custody of the commissioner of corrections for a period of 24 months,” Chu said. “You shall serve two-thirds of that time, or 16 months, in prison and a third on supervised release, assuming no disciplinary offenses or conditional release violations.”

Chu said Potter will be credited for 58 days she already served but will be fined $1,000 by the court. In addition, Chu said Potter is prohibited from using or possessing any firearms, ammunition or explosives.

Potter and a trainee officer pulled Wright over on April 11, 2021 for an expired registration tags and a rearview mirror violation. After making initial contact, the officers learned that Wright had an arrest warrant for a weapons violation and protective order against him, and subsequently tried to arrest Wright with the assistance of their supervisor who arrived at the scene.
Potter shot and killed Wright after he resisted arrest and attempted to re-enter his vehicle. Potter, who can be heard on a video of the incident yelling "taser, taser, taser" before firing the first shot, maintains that use of the handgun was an accident.

Chu said it was one of the saddest cases she has seen in her career as a judge. Potter has demonstrated remorse and does not pose a risk of future criminal activity, Chu added.

UN Chief Notes Russia 'Concentrating' Troops Near Ukraine, Still Believes War Won't Happen

UNITED NATIONS, February 18 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the opening of the Munich Security Conference on Friday noted the "concentration" of Russian troops along Ukraine's border and voiced concerns over mounting tensions, but still expressed belief that a military conflict in Europe would not happen, spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

"The Secretary-General noted the concentration of Russian forces around Ukraine, said he was deeply concerned about the heightened tensions and increased speculation about a military conflict in Europe. Mr. Guterres said he still thinks it will not happen and that if it did, it would be catastrophic. Yet, there is no alternative to diplomacy, it is high time to seriously de-escalate," Dujarric told a briefing.

Guterres also said the United Nations continues operations in Ukraine, including its humanitarian efforts in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, according to Dujarric.

Ottawa Police Say Arrested 15 People, Towed 4 Vehicles From Downtown Amid Protests

TORONTO, February 18 (Sputnik) - At least 15 people have been arrested and four vehicles removed from the downtown area of Canada's capital as officers are attempting to clear the streets of peaceful protesters opposing the COVID-19 vaccine mandates, the Ottawa police said on Friday.

Officers cleared Nicholas Street in the city center and currently continue their operations on Rideau Street, the police said in a tweet.

Earlier on Friday, the police urged trucker-led protesters opposing the COVID-19 vaccine mandates to leave the protest sites in Ottawa or face "severe penalties."

The Canadian government has condemned the protests as "illega" and an "occupation," granting itself additional powers under the Emergencies Act to deal with the demonstrations. The wave of protests across Canada began in mid-January, with tens of thousands of truckers and other Canadians converging peacefully on Ottawa to demand the government scrap the COVID-19 vaccine mandates. The protest has since been joined by numerous other segments.
of Canadian society and evolved into a mass demonstration against the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

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US Sees Evacuation, Explosions in Donbas as ‘False Flag Operation’ - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States views the evacuation of civilians from Donbas to Russia and recent blasts in the region as a "false flag operation" and "disinformation" by Moscow, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik. Earlier on Friday, Ukraine's breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk urged civilians to evacuate to Russia given a surge in shellings. Later, a car explosion occurred a few dozen meters from a government building in Donetsk.

"Announcements like these are further attempts to obscure through lies and disinformation that Russia is the aggressor in this conflict. This type of false flag operation is exactly what Secretary Blinken highlighted in his remarks to the UN Security Council," the spokesperson said.

"It is also cynical and cruel to use human beings as pawns to distract the world from the fact that Russia is building up its forces in preparation for an attack. Russia is the sole instigator of these tensions and is threatening the people of Ukraine. It has put its troops on Ukraine's borders and routinely abuses and violates the rights of the people of Donbas and Crimea," they added.

Russia has repeatedly denied any plans to attack Ukraine.

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US Arrests Pennsylvania Man for Torturing Worker During Project in Iraq - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Pennsylvania resident Ross Roggio has been arrested and charged with torturing a person in Iraq in 2015 after a US grand jury returned an indictment, the Justice Department said in a press release on Friday.

"The grand jury charges that the defendant directed and participated in the systematic torture of an employee over the course of 39 days by Kurdish soldiers in Iraq," US Attorney John Gurganus said in the release.

The grand jury's superseding indictment charges Roggio, 53, with one count of conspiracy to commit torture and one substantive count of torture, the release said.

The Justice Department explained in the release that Roggio was managing a weapons project in 2015 to build a factory and produce weapons in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. One of Roggio's employees raised concerns about the project and Roggio had Kurdish soldiers abduct the employee to prevent him from interfering, the release said.

Roggio suffocated the victim with a belt, threatened to cut off his finger and ordered Kurdish soldiers to visit severe physical and mental pain on the victim, the release also said.
During the time the victim was detained at a Kurdish military compound, Roggio oversaw several interrogation sessions where he directed Kurdish soldiers to torture the victim, suffocate, tase and beat him, the release added.

Roggio was charged previously with illegally exporting weapons parts to Iraq. If convicted, Roggio faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison for each of the torture charges and a maximum total statutory penalty of 705 years in prison for the remaining 37 counts, according to the release.

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Harris, Baltic Leaders Discuss Possible Changes to US-NATO Force Posture - White House

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris and the leaders of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia discussed possible changes to the US-NATO force posture in Eastern Europe should the Ukraine situation escalate, the White House said on Friday.

"Vice President Kamala Harris met today with President Egils Levits of Latvia, President Gitanas Nauseda of Lithuania, and Prime Minister Kaja Kallas of Estonia in Munich, Germany," the White House said in a press release. "The leaders discussed their readiness for a swift Transatlantic response should Russia further invade Ukraine, including through adjustments to US and NATO force posture, and implementation of financial sanctions and export controls."

Tensions around Ukraine escalated in recent months, with the United States and the European Union raising concerns over alleged Russian military buildup at the Ukrainian border, and NATO urging allies to boost their military support for Kiev. Moscow, in turn, has repeatedly dismissed allegations of intending to invade its neighbor, pointing out that NATO’s military activity near Russian borders poses a threat to its national security while hampering efforts toward peaceful resolution in Ukraine.

Harris and the Baltic leaders also discussed efforts to strengthen NATO’s deterrence and collective defense, the release said.

Harris is scheduled on Saturday to have bilateral meetings with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

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Civil Liberties Association Accuses Ottawa Police of Threatening Media During Protest

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The Ottawa police should not threaten journalists who exercise their right and professional obligation to cover the anti-COVID-19 vaccine mandate protests in Canada, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA) said on Friday.
Ottawa police told reporters earlier on Friday to stay away from law enforcement operations against truckers and other Canadians protesting the government-imposed vaccine mandates, adding that anyone found there may be subject to arrest.

"Warning journalists about safety risks in the protest zone is reasonable. Threatening them with arrest for doing their jobs is not," CCLA said via Twitter.

Human rights organizations have urged Canadian courts to rule against the authorities imposing "exclusion zones" and other limits on the free press.

The wave of protests across Canada began in mid-January, with tens of thousands of truckers and other Canadians converging peacefully on Ottawa to demand the government scrap the COVID-19 vaccine mandates. The protest has since been joined by numerous other segments of Canadian society and evolved into a demonstration against the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Parties to Iran Talks Can, Should Agree to Return to JCPOA Within Days – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - Parties to the Iran nuclear talks “can and should” agree on mutual return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) within days if Tehran demonstrates a serious approach, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Friday.

"If Iran shows seriousness, we can and should reach an understanding on mutual return to full implementation of the JCPOA within days," the spokesperson said.

US State Dept. to Sputnik: ‘Substantial’ Progress Made in Iran Nuclear Talks Last Week

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - A US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Friday that "substantial" progress has been made over the last week in the talks to revive the Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

"We agree that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, and also that substantial progress has been made in the last week," the State Department spokesperson said in a statement.

Biden to Deliver Remarks on Ukraine Crisis at 21:00 GMT - White House
WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will provide an update on diplomatic efforts to resolve the Ukraine situation at 4:00 p.m. Eastern Time (21:00 GMT) on Friday, the White House said.
"The President gives an update on our continued efforts to pursue deterrence and diplomacy, and Russia's buildup of military troops on the border of Ukraine," the White House said in a press release.
The White House also said Biden's call with major allies to discuss Ukraine will take place at 2:30 p.m. EST.


WASHINGTON, February 18, (Sputnik) - A Tennessee man and his son have been arrested for assaulting law enforcement during the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, the US Justice Department said on Friday.
"Mark WyNick, 51, and his son, Jerry McKane WyNick, 19, both of Charlotte, Tennessee, are charged in a criminal complaint filed in the District of Columbia with assaulting, resisting, or impeding officers, civil disorder, and related offenses," the Justice Department said in a press release.
The authorities arrested the two men in Charlotte, Tennessee, who then made their initial appearances in the US District Court for Middle District of Tennessee.
The authorities said the WyNicks rushed a police line, tried to break the perimeter on the West Front of the Capitol and tussled with officers. The two joined another group of protesters into entering the Capitol. They went inside the building, including in the Senate Wing, the Rotunda, Statuary Hall and the House Wing, for a period of 25 to 30 minutes.
In the 13 months since January 6, more than 750 people from almost all the 50 states have been arrested for crimes related to the Capitol riot.

US, Thailand Agree to Enhance Clean Energy Cooperation to Spur Growth - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The United States and Thailand agreed to strengthen clean energy cooperation to drive economic growth, the two governments said in a joint statement on Friday.
The joint statement released by the State Department after the second US-Thailand Energy Policy Dialogue concluded in Bangkok a day earlier.
"The United States and Thailand agreed to enhance energy cooperation to spur economic growth and sustainable energy development," the joint statement said,
The two countries expressed commitment to strengthen their energy partnership in key areas such as energy security, power development, energy transition, clean energy technologies and energy efficiency. They also emphasized support for constructive engagement between US and Thai private companies in the energy sector.

"Thailand and the United States discussed the future of electric vehicles, solar technology and its supply chains, grid modernization, and next-generation energy innovation technologies. These topics align with the national energy policy of both countries, and will support mutual efforts to address climate change," the joint statement said.

During the policy dialogue, Thailand also signed the Clean Energy Demand Initiative non-binding letter of intent with major companies, the joint statement added.

This initiative will allow the country to increase clean energy investment projects and help achieve shared clean energy goals, according to the joint statement.

Pentagon Declines to Comment on Reports of Evacuation of Donbas Residents to Russia

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon declined to comment on reports of the evacuation of civilians from Ukraine's breakaway region of Donbas to Russia against the backdrop of mounting tensions.

"Thank you for the note. You should reach out to the Ukrainian government about this," the Pentagon told Sputnik in a statement.

The head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, Denis Pushilin, announced earlier on Friday an evacuation of the civilian population to Russia given a surge in shellings in the region in recent days. Luhansk leader Leonid Pasechnik also urged civilians to evacuate to Russia.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that he is unaware of the evacuation of people from Donbas to Russia.

The precarious situation in Donbas has deteriorated recently, with the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and the Ukrainian government accusing each other of violating the ceasefire.

Ottawa Police Urges Reporters to Stay Away From Operations Near Protest Sites

WASHINGTON, February 18 (Sputnik) - The Ottawa police on Friday are urging reporters covering the trucker-led protests against COVID-19 vaccine mandate to stay away from law enforcement operations.
"All media who are attending the area, please keep a distance and stay out of police operations for your safety. Anyone found within areas undergoing enforcement may be subject to arrest," the police said on Twitter.

The police also announced a "media opportunity" later on Friday, but did not provide a specific time.

The wave of protests across Canada began in mid-January, with tens of thousands of truckers and other Canadians converging on Ottawa to demand the government scrap the COVID-19 vaccine mandate. The protest was since joined by numerous disparate groups of the population and evolved into a mass demonstration against the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.