Ethiopia’s Abiy Says Will Not ‘Rule Out Possibility’ of Negotiation With TPLF
By - Morgan Artyukhina

A key requirement for peace as laid out by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is for the
Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) to recognize the legitimacy of his government. So far,
the group has postured as an equal state actor to Addis Ababa instead of as a militant group in
rebellion, so talks have not begun.

Speaking before the Ethiopian parliament on Tuesday, Abiy said that talks with the TPLF to end
the 15-month-long armed conflict were still possible, despite its designation as a terrorist group.
“There has been no negotiation yet. This does not rule out the possibility of discussions.
Negotiation is a method of identifying problem-solving options. We have been betrayed while
making efforts to rebuild, acknowledging that the region is a part of our country,” Abiy said,
according to the Twitter account for his office.

“Negotiation is the upcoming all-inclusive national consultation. The Commissioners of the
newly constituted National Dialogue Commission have simply been given the task of coming up
with proposals; the Ethiopian people will make the final decisions,” he added.

Abiy also addressed the recent pardoning of several political prisoners, saying they had been
released “for three reasons: to bring lasting peace, taking into consideration the overall situation
of the prisoners, and to consolidate our victory.”

“In a war, there is no such thing as a total triumph. When one party wins a combat while the
other party is momentarily defeated, this is known as temporary victory. In turn, the defeated
party would resurrect and assault,” he said. “As a result, true triumph necessitates victory in the
realm of peace. This decision has greatly helped Ethiopia. We must not compromise on
decisions for the lasting good of the country.”

The TPLF ruled Ethiopia for 27 years before Abiy came to power in 2018 and set about
reorganizing Ethiopian politics to reduce the party’s domineering position. In response, the
group rebelled, attacking Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) in the northern Tigray state
in November 2020. The 15-month-long war has created a massive humanitarian crisis parallel to a climate change-driven drought across the Horn of Africa, and large parts of
neighboring Amhara and Afar states were destroyed, pillaged, looted, or otherwise brutalized by
a TPLF occupation that ended in December.

Most recently, the TPLF launched a new attack into Afar, which locals say is aimed at Eritrean
refugees and not an alleged Eritrean-backed militia. A refugee camp came under attack by
unknown gunmen in a TPLF-controlled part of Afar earlier this month, according to the UN High
Commissioner on Refugees.

Abiy’s office formed the National Dialogue Commission in late December, when the TPLF was
forced back into Tigray. However, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Dina Mufti said at the time that
it was “a dialogue among the citizens but not a negotiation. TPLF is a designated terrorist
organization by the House of Peoples’ Representatives and the Ethiopian government won’t sit for negotiation with this organization."

The terms for peace laid out by Abiy in November included the TPLF withdrawing from Amhara and Afar, ceasing its attacks on Ethiopian and Eritrean forces, and recognizing Abiy’s government as the legitimate government of all of Ethiopia. However, since its pullback, the TPLF has appealed to the United Nations for help in maintaining a ceasefire and other measures, such as humanitarian aid, but refused any similar appeal to Addis Ababa.

Simon Tesfamariam, executive director of the New Africa Institute, told Radio Sputnik’s By Any Means Necessary in December that since 1976, the TPLF had conceived of Tigrayans as fundamentally separate from other Ethiopian ethnic groups and sought to create an independent Greater Tigray state “which would expand its territories to the sea, meaning compromising Eritrean sovereignty, and then also into the interior of Ethiopia, taking lands - ancestral lands - of other peoples.”

The Federal Parliamentary Assembly, Ethiopia’s parliament, announced on Monday the appointment of the 11-member commission from more than 600 candidates. It has been tasked with presenting proposals for ending the conflict with the TPLF, as well as simmering tensions with other ethnic groups in the country. The OLF-Shene, a split of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) that refused a 2018 peace deal, supports the TPLF and is accused of carrying out attacks against Amhara civilians and Amhara Special Forces.

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Biden Orders Sanctions Against Nord Stream 2 AG, Corporate Officers

By - Morgan Artyukhina

US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he considered the Russian recognition of two breakaway republics in the Donets River basin and dispatching of peacekeepers there to be the beginning of a "Russian invasion of Ukraine" and issued a series of sanctions targeting Russian financial institutions.

Berlin announced on Tuesday it would halt the Nord Stream 2 liquified natural gas pipeline, which would have brought gas from Russia to Western Europe via Germany, in response to Moscow’s recognition of the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics in the Donbass region the day prior.

"Today, I have directed my administration to impose sanctions on Nord Stream 2 AG and its corporate officers," Biden said in a Wednesday news release. "These steps are another piece of our initial tranche of sanctions in response to Russia’s actions in Ukraine. As I have made clear, we will not hesitate to take further steps if Russia continues to escalate."

The US Treasury said it was issuing a general license authorizing a "wind down" time for transactions with the company through March 2, and added CEO Matthias Warnig to its sanctions list.

Other parts of this "first tranche" of sanctions included a ban on trading Russia’s sovereign debt and sanctions against two Russian state development banks.
"This has been diplomatic kabuki theater by the Russians," US State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters about the crisis in Ukraine. He said the US remains open to diplomacy and negotiations, but that the Russians needed to demonstrate they are serious. So far, the US has ignored Russian articulations of their security concerns in Eastern Europe, including the eastward expansion of NATO and stationing of dangerous weapons in the region.

The decision to sanction Nord Stream 2 is a reversal of the waiver Biden issued last year, which blocked impending sanctions and infuriated US Republicans opposed to the pipeline. US Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), who has blocked progress on the approval of Biden's diplomatic nominees in protest of the president's waiver, hailed his reversal.

"President Biden made the right decision today. Allowing Putin's Nord Stream 2 to come online would have created multiple, cascading, and acute security crises for the United States and our European allies for generations to come," Cruz said in a Wednesday news release. "Today's announcement is critical to preventing such scenarios."

The $11 billion pipeline would have doubled the delivery of Russian gas to Germany.

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‘China is Gonna be Next’: Trump Claims Xi Ready to Seize Taiwan After Moscow’s Donbass Recognition
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Despite Washington's formal recognition of Taiwan as a Chinese province, US President Joe Biden has postured as willing to defend Taiwan from Chinese attack. However, the US has no contractual obligation to do so, and many have raised questions about whether the US could defend Taiwan - or would even try.

In a radio interview on Tuesday, former US President Donald Trump predicted that following Russia's Monday recognition of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, which the US has characterized as a land grab, Chinese President Xi Jinping will attempt to make a move on Taiwan.

He made the comments Tuesday on “The Clay Travis and Buck Sexton Show,” where he told the hosts “this would never have happened if we were there.”

“I think he sees this opportunity," Trump claimed of Putin. "I knew that he always wanted Ukraine. I used to talk to him about it. I said, 'You can't do it. You're not gonna do it.' But I could see that he wanted it … By the way, China is gonna be next. You know, China is gonna -”

"You think they're gonna go after Taiwan?" Clay asked him.

"Oh, absolutely. Not with me, they wouldn't have," he replied.

"But you think with Biden they'll try him?" Clay then asked.

"Oh, yeah. They're waiting until after the Olympics. Now the Olympics [have] ended, and look at your stopwatch, right? No, he wants that just like - It's almost like twin sisters right here because you have one that wants Taiwan, I think, equally badly. Somebody said, 'Who wants it more?' I think probably equally badly. But, no, Putin would have never done it, and Xi would have never done it. And also, North Korea has not acted up for four years," Trump said.
Speaking on **Tuesday, Biden claimed** Putin's recognition of the Donbass republics and sending of peacekeepers to the region was "the beginning of a Russian invasion of Ukraine." He used the development to claim that months of vague warnings about an invasion were true, and to justify issuing economic sanctions targeting Russian financial institutions. Putin said in a **lengthy Monday speech** justifying the "long overdue decision" that the 2015 Minsk agreement intended to pave a path to peace in eastern Ukraine was a dead letter and there was no longer a way out of the violence that would preserve Ukraine's territorial integrity. However, another **longstanding request** of the Donbass republics - to be annexed by the Russian Federation - has continued to be ignored.

By contrast, Taiwan is a territory controlled by the former Chinese government that Beijing has always maintained is an integral part of China. In 1949, the communist Red Army triumphed in the civil war, conquering the entire mainland and establishing the People's Republic of China in Beijing; but the old Republic of China government survived on Taiwan, where the Red Army could not invade, and has persisted ever since. All but a handful of small nations have switched their recognition of the Chinese government from Taipei to Beijing, including the US in 1979, but Washington has continued to funnel weapons and other support to Taiwan in an open but informal fashion.

China has **condemned US support** for Taiwan, calling it a violation of the three joint communiqués underpinning the US-China diplomatic relationship and an intervention in internal Chinese affairs.

"No one should underestimate the Chinese people's staunch determination, firm will, and strong ability to defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity," Xi said in October. "The historical task of the complete reunification of the motherland must be fulfilled, and will definitely be fulfilled."

Xi went on to say that he anticipates such a reunion would happen under the framework of "one country, two systems," used to incorporate the former British colony of Hong Kong into China as a special autonomous region.

Similar to Russia vis-a-vis Ukraine, the US has accused China of threatening an invasion of Taiwan because of regular flights of Chinese aircraft through Taiwan's expansive and self-declared air defense identification zone (ADIZ) and Chinese naval drills in the seas surrounding Taiwan.

On Tuesday, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar objected to similar comparisons between Ukraine and Taiwan, saying that problems in the Indo-Pacific region are "quite unique."

"You can take the view that everything in the world is connected. But...different problems have different histories, context, and players," Jaishankar said at the Paris-based French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), adding that "transposing issues of one theater to another can be misleading."

"Both are products of very complex histories of that particular region. In the case of Ukraine, a lot of it derives from post-Soviet politics, the expansion of NATO, the dynamics between Russia and Europe, and Russia and the West broadly," the Indian minister said.

"I think, in the case of Taiwan, it is a product of what happened in Chinese history and what happened the way the Cold War and other developments played out in Asia," he added.
New Delhi is locked in its own territorial dispute with Islamabad over the Kashmir region, which the two sides have roughly split in half but all of which is claimed by both sides. There are regular ceasefire violations along the fortified Line of Control that several times have flared up into full-blown wars between the two nuclear powers.

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Zelensky: Ukraine Ready for Talks With Russia in Various Formats
By - Morgan Artyukhina

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky made a fresh appeal to Moscow on Thursday morning for dialogue to resolve the simmering crisis in the region. In a video posted on Telegram in which he spoke in both Ukrainian and his native Russian language, Zelensky claimed that Russia has approved an offensive against Ukraine. He asserted that Ukraine does not and will not pose a threat to Russia and that it does not want any type of war with Moscow, including a cold or "hot" war, or a hybrid war.

"Today, I requested a phone conversation with the president of the Russian Federation. The result is silence. However, the silence must be in Donbas," Zelensky said.

On Wednesday, Kiev requested an urgent meeting of the United Nations Security Council on the topic of the Donbass, where on Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin recognized the independence of two breakaway republics from Ukraine. The Russophone-majority region, situated between Ukraine and Russia, has been the site of eight years of war after the Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics declared independence from Kiev, following an attempt to reduce the status of the Russian language as a national language of Ukraine.

Putin said the Minsk Protocol for peace in the region, agreed to in 2015 by Russia, Ukraine and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), had failed, thanks to Kiev's intransigence. Russia agreed in the deal that the Donbass was a part of Ukraine, but without a path to peace, Putin said he felt compelled to intervene and stop the fighting, dispatching peacekeepers to the republics following their recognition. Ukrainian Army shelling has grown increasingly intense in recent days, with DPR head Denis Pushilin organizing the evacuation of 700,000 residents into western Russia.

On Thursday, Pushilin's government said Ukraine was escalating the situation against the will of the Donbass republics.

"No one wants war, especially us, because we know what it is," Edward Basurin, a spokesperson for the DPR People's Militia, told RIA Novosti. "Therefore, we will try, as we said, [to leave Ukraine] by peaceful means. But everything can change."

Zelensky was elected in 2019 on a platform of peace in the Donbass, a change of policy from five years of war. On Tuesday, an opposition party in the Verkhovna Rada called for Zelensky's resignation, saying he has failed in his promise and lost the Donbass.

The US, Australia and European Union introduced new sanctions against Russia on Tuesday following Putin's decision, claiming the move was the beginning of the invasion they had been claiming for months was imminent.
Moscow has denied any intent to invade Ukraine, but told NATO that its security concerns must be taken into account in the alliance's behavior. A proposal introduced by the Kremlin in December called for NATO to end its eastward expansion and write off Ukraine as a potential future member, as well as cease stationing offensive weapons along its so-called "eastern frontier," a ring of former Soviet republics and former Soviet allies who joined NATO in the last 30 years, after socialism was overthrown in Central and Eastern Europe.

So far, NATO has rejected the membership question, which Moscow considers primary.

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'Women Were Disposable': Ex-Playboy Employees Allege They Were Sexually Assaulted in Docu-Series
By - Mary Manley

The A&E docu-series "Secrets of Playboy" revealed in an episode aired on Monday that two former employees of Playboy were sexually assaulted because the magazine condoned an environment of misogyny and sexual harassment.

P.J. Masten worked as a corporate Bunny Mother from 1975 to 1982. Bunny Mothers were responsible for acting as mentors and supervising Playboy Bunnies. In an episode titled "The Corporate Game," Masten recalls a top-ranking executive raping her.

"He started kissing me, and he started grabbing me," Masten said. "This was a big executive, and I said, 'Please don't do this.' And he said, 'Why do you think you came to work in corporate? You have to play the game if you want to do anything in corporate.' I was not an active participant. He just did what he had to do and turned around... raped me and walked out," says Masten in a terrifying recollection of her time at Playboy.

Masten says she was transferred to a corporate office located in Chicago. "It was a male dominated atmosphere where someone could fondle you, someone could grab you..." She says that the general manager, who was appointed to the location, had control "over everyone of us, and he didn't know what bunnies were."

Masten recalls the underqualified general manager at the Chicago location asking Playboy Bunnies sexually inappropriate questions, as well as touching them without consent, as it was a part of the 'Mad Men era' which Playboy encouraged, she says.

"We didn't have a voice, women were disposable," says Masten.

Miki Garcia was another employee of Playboy who became a victim of sexual assault. Garcia says she was raped twice by a prominent actor at an auto show event where she was employed as a Playmate to sign autographs. She says she didn't come forward with the allegation because she didn't want to be perceived as a "whiner."

"I didn't want to become a problem to Playboy," Garcia said. "I didn't want them to perceive me as a whiner or a person that couldn't handle the job. And so the tough part of me kicked in. I knew this is the way it was going to go and that was it."

Garcia says she worked to gain power in the company so that "no woman had to put up with that kind of behavior from any man just because she had a rabbit head logo on her."
Garcia was the first female director of promotions, working for Playboy between 1973 and 1982, and used her power to make sure her rapist would never work with Playboy again. "So, when my rapist ordered up a Playmate for a job, I simply instructed my secretary to tell him to never call again, never," she said. "He would never, never, ever get a model from Playboy. Never."

On the show's website, A&E writes that "Secrets of Playboy" explores the "hidden truths behind the fable and philosophy of the Playboy empire through a modern-day lens." The show is said to investigate sexual abuse, drug abuse, and bestiality within the Playboy world. The show has new episodes available every Monday.

In a separate episode, former Playboy bunny Holly Madison, 42, said that her time at Playboy Mansion was "cult-like."

"The reason I think the mansion was very cult-like looking back on it is because we were all kind of gaslit and expected to think of Hef as, like, this really good guy," Madison explained. "And you started to feel like: 'Oh he's not what they say in the media, he's just a nice man.'"

Madison, who dated Hefner from 2001 to 2008, explains that there was a curfew rule, as well as an allowance rule for the women in the house. Hefner, who passed away in 2017, even told Madison to quit her waitress job because he didn't want her to have a backup plan in case they broke up.

Prior to the series' premiere, the Playboy company released an open letter condemning the actions of the company under Hefner's power.

"First and foremost, we want to say: we trust and validate women and their stories, and we strongly support the individuals who have come forward to share their experiences," the letter began. "As a brand with sex positivity at its core, we believe safety, security and accountability are paramount, and anything less is inexcusable."

"Today's Playboy is not Hugh Hefner's Playboy," the letter said.

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Archaeologists Discover Ritual Hunt Site in Jordan From 7,000 BCE

By - Mary Manley

A team of French and Jordanian archaeologists made an exciting discovery on Tuesday when they unearthed a ritual hunting site that is roughly 9,000 years old. The team found over 250 artifacts that have led them to believe neolithic humans' hunting strategies were much more advanced than previously thought.

"This is a unique site where large quantities of gazelles were hunted in complex rituals. It has no rival in the world from the Stone Age," said Wael Abu-Azizeh, the co-director of the South Eastern Badia Archaeological Project (SEBAP). The crew has been working on the site since 2013.

The archaeologists found traps made for hunting gazelles, made up of long converging stone walls meant to trap the gazelles so that they could be killed more easily.
These structures are referred to as “desert kites”, or mass traps, and though there are many found throughout deserts in the Middle East and southwest Asia. Archaeologists say these are the oldest, largest, and best preserved.

“The site is unique, first because of its preservation state,” said Abu-Azizeh. “It's 9,000 years old and everything was almost intact.”

Also found on the site were two carved standing stones both with images of human-like figures. One of which is accompanied by the neolithic hunters' interpretation of their desert kite, as well as an altar, hearth, and marine shells.

Researchers are saying the shrine sheds “an entire new light on the symbolism, artistic expression, as well as spiritual culture of these hitherto unknown Neolithic populations.”

Because of the site’s circular hut-like dwellings and large quantities of gazelle remains, the archaeologists believe that these Jordanian hunters from the Stone Age were not only hunting for their own needs, but were also trading with neighboring settlements.

"They attest to the rise of extremely sophisticated mass hunting strategies, unexpected in such an early time frame," said SEBAP of the desert kites.

Jordan’s other historical treasures include Petra, believed to have been built in 312 BCE, making it one of the oldest cities in history, and was first discovered in 1812 by those in the West.

Jerash, which is an ancient Roman city in Jordan, is also one of those significant gems that causes quite a spectacle for visitors. The major tourist attraction was first settled by humans between 7,500 and 5,500 BCE, and was founded as a Hellenistic city sometime in the 2nd century BCE.

The well-preserved Roman and Byzantine ruins are a major tourist attraction. Over 300,000 tourists visited the site in 2018, while more than one million people visited Petra in 2019.

Tourism Minister Nayef al Fayez says that Tuesday’s discoveries are a spectacular addition to these heavily trafficked, ancient sites.

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Undercover Reporter Finds Metaverse App Exposes Children to Grooming and Sexual Abuse
By - Mary Manley

An investigation conducted by an undercover BBC News reporter found that when posing as a 13 year-old girl, she was exposed to grooming, sexual material, racist insults, and rape threats in Facebook’s new “metaverse.”

Andy Burrows, who is the head of online child safety policy at National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), said the probe found what he believes to be “a toxic combination of risks”.

Those risks posed to children include being exposed to avatars simulating sex, being shown sex toys, condoms, orgies, sexual harassment both verbally and physically, strip clubs, and rape threats. In the metaverse, children are free to mingle with adults. One adult male user told what he believed to be a 13 year-old user that she could “get naked and do unspeakable things.”
"It's children being exposed to entirely inappropriate, really incredibly harmful experiences," said Burrows. "This is a product that is dangerous by design, because of oversight and neglect. We are seeing products rolled out without any suggestion that safety has been considered."

"It felt horrible as if it was really happening to me," said Jess Sherwood, the researcher who posed as the 13 year-old. Grown men asked Sherwood why she “wasn't in school” and encouraged her to engage in virtual sex acts.

"VRChat definitely felt more like an adult's playground than a child's. A lot of the rooms were overtly sexualised in pink neon, similar to what you might see in the red light district in Amsterdam or in the more seedy parts of London's Soho at night. Inside, sex toys were on display," wrote Sherwood of her undercover experience.

VRChat is not one of Meta’s products, but is available to consumers in their app store. VRChat does not check the identity of its users, as was apparent to Sherwood when she successfully posed as a 13-year-old.

A safety campaigner who remains anonymous for safety reasons has spent months investigating the VRChat. He told the BBC that he has spoken to children who say they were groomed on the platform and forced to act out sexual movements in real life, in order to simulate sex acts virtually.

But Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg is enthusiastic about his company’s new venture in artificial intelligence. The Facebook founder has sunk billions of dollars into developing the company’s Oculus Quest headset. First introduced to the market in 2019, the virtual reality headset has been rebranded as the Meta Quest headset and costs between $300 and $400. Meta says they are still adjusting safety improvements and figuring out how users interact in these spaces. It appears as though the only solution the company offers is “blocking” other users, but as Sherwood discovered, there are rooms filled with several individuals engaging in behavior unsuitable for children.

In the meantime, children’s charity groups are advising parents to monitor their child’s use of all VR headsets and devices related to the technology.

Dame Rachel de Souza, who is the Children’s Commissioner for England, has criticized Meta for what she believes to be a failure in regards to their safety measures. Reportedly horrified by what she saw, de Souza asks: “Are you telling me that Mark Zuckerberg, with all his fantastic engineers and ability to create this, can't keep children safe?”

The UK’s government is working to push through the Online Safety Bill, which is designed to prevent the spread of illegal content like child abuse, terrorist content, racist abuse, and other hate crimes, as well as protect children from grooming channels. The bill is expected to be presented to the UK Parliament in March of 2022.

Monika Bickert, who is Head of Product Policy and Counterterrorism for Facebook, has vied for government collaboration with tech giants like Facebook. Bickert says that she believes tech companies need regulation, and the responsibility of doing so should not fall solely on the shoulders of the tech companies, saying “businesses like ours should not be making these decisions on our own.”

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Texas Governor Abbott Directs Protective Services to Label Parents of Transgender Kids ‘Abusers’

2 hours ago
By - Mary Manley

Texas Governor Greg Abbott has ordered the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services to investigate transgender children’s gender-affirming health care, which the governor has labeled as “abusive.” This comes just months after legislation SB 8 allowed public citizens to sue abortion providers should they perform the procedure.

Governor Abbott wrote in a letter on Tuesday confirming the Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton’s opinion that a “number of so-called ‘sex change’ procedures” will be considered child abuse under Texas law.

The Texas governor then directed the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services to “conduct a prompt and thorough investigation of any reported instances of these abusive procedures in the State of Texas.”

The letter from Abbott follows Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton’s opinion from Monday that the gender-affirming medical care should be considered child abuse under law, and while an opinion from an attorney does not immediately result in any changes to a law, it may affect how the law is enforced.

It is worth noting that hormone treatments for children are not typically considered until the child is at least 16 years old, and gender reassignment surgery is most often only considered for those aged 18 and older.

Paxton issued the opinion as a second attempt to persecute transgender youth and their families after the Texas legislature shot down Senator Charles Perry’s bill last year, which wanted to make transgender health care a felony.

Texas Senate Bill 1646 proposed that parents who support their transgender children should be sentenced to prison anywhere from two to ten years, while their child is put in foster care. Brian Klosterboer, who is staff attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas said of SB 1646, which is now dead, that it was “part of a pattern of discrimination that Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick and others have tried to use trans Texans as a punching bag.”

Klosterboer says Paxton’s opinion from Monday, as well as Abbott’s Tuesday letter, “cannot change Texas law nor usurp the constitutional rights of Texas families.”

“But they spread fear and misinformation and could spur false reporting of child abuse at a time when DFPS is already facing a crisis in our state’s foster care system,” Klosterboer stated. “The law is clear that parents, guardians, and doctors can provide transgender youth with treatment in accordance with prevailing standards of care. Any parent or guardian who loves and supports their child and is taking them to a licensed health care provider is not engaging in child abuse.”

In a move which eerily mirrors the Texas Heartbeat Act, Governor Abbott is also calling on those he considers “licensed professionals,” as well as public citizens, to report parents of transgender children to state authorities if they believe the child is receiving gender-affirming care. He added that the state law will penalize those who fail to report transgender youth health care as criminals.
LGBTQ advocates are saying the dramatic move by both Abbott and Paxton are political distractions. Adri Perez, a strategist for LGBTQ equality at the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, says Paxton is trying to distract from scandals swirling around his campaign. Those include his trial for a 2015 indictment on charges of securities fraud, and a criminal investigation conducted by the FBI that alleges the attorney general is guilty of crimes involving bribery and abuse of office.

"There’s no court in Texas or the entire country that has ever found that gender-affirming care can constitute child abuse,” Perez said.

The White House condemned the move by Abbott. “Conservative officials in Texas and other states across the country should stop inserting themselves into health care decisions that create needless tension between pediatricians and their patients. No parent should face the agony of a politician standing in the way of accessing life-saving care for their child,” the deputy principal press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement on Wednesday.

Advocates of LGBTQ rights who condemned the governor’s efforts as fear-mongering and riddled with misinformation, note that several medical organizations, including the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychological Association, all say that gender-affirming care is a medical necessity for transgender youth based on decades of research.

Research by the American Psychological Association shows that transgender youth who are unable to undergo gender-affirming health care are subject to higher rates of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, self-injurious behaviors, suicidality, substance use, homelessness and eating disorders.

This is not Texas’ first attack on transgender children, either. In October 2021, the Texas House approved a bill which targeted transgender student-athletes. House Bill 25 makes it so that transgender student-athletes would have to compete on sports teams that correspond with the sex on their birth certificate.

"Excluding transgender students from participating in sports with their peers violates the Constitution and puts already vulnerable youth at serious risk of mental and emotional harm," Adri Perez said in response to HB 25.

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**Rosneft Not Expected to Be Target of New US Sanctions Against Russia - Reports**

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Russian energy giant Rosneft is not expected to be a target of the new US sanctions package after Moscow started a special military operation in Ukraine, Politico reported on Thursday citing sources.

As the Biden administration prepares to announce a new package of sanctions against Russia, Rosneft will not be on the list of sanctioned companies, the report quoted two sources familiar with the discussions on sanctions.

The main focus of the new US sanctions package will be on Russia's financial institutions, the report said.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has failed to supply proper cost estimates for the maintenance and upkeep of its new fleet of Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) for close-to-land and amphibious support operations, the Government Accountability Office said in a report on Thursday.

"The Navy’s operating and support (O&S) cost estimates for the LCS do not account for the cost implications of its revised maintenance approach," the report said. "Specifically, the Navy has not assessed the cost implications of its revised maintenance approach, and thus lacks a clear picture of its impact on O&S costs."

Some of the actual operating and support cost data are also incomplete and inaccurate because the Navy has not updated its cost estimates to reflect its revised operational and sustainment concepts and has not incorporated actual cost data into some of its estimates, the report said.

"Without complete information on the cost of implementing the revised operational and sustainment concepts, and the use of actual cost data, the Navy will not be able to analyze the differences between estimates and actual costs - important elements for identifying and mitigating critical risks to the LCS," the report added.

The Navy estimates it will cost more than $60 billion to operate and support the 35 LCS it plans to build, including the 17 ships it has already delivered, according to the report.
US Weighs Proposals to Disrupt Internet Across Russia, Shut Off Electrical Power - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering the option to disrupt internet connectivity across Russia, shut off the country's electrical power and tamper with railroad switches, NBC News reported on Thursday.

Sources familiar with the matter said President Joe Biden has been presented with a range of cyberattack options available to use against Russia but no final decision has been made, the report said.

In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from ongoing attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

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US Business Community Supports Measures Against Russia Following Operation in Ukraine-CEO

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The US business community supports that actions the Biden administration, Congress and US allies are taking to respond to Russia's military operation in Ukraine, US Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Suzanne Clark said on Thursday.

"The business community will continue to support the administration, Congress and our allies to ensure a swift and meaningful response to Russia's aggression," Clark said in a press release.

In the early hours on Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

The Biden administration said it will announce a new set of sanctions against Russia on Thursday afternoon. President Joe Biden announced sanctions earlier this week against Russia's sovereign debt, Russian elites and their families as well as against two major banks.

In addition, the US government also sanctioned the Nord Stream 2 AG pipeline operator and its corporate officers.

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Biden Says G7 Agreed to Move Forward With 'Devastating Sanctions' on Russia Over Ukraine
WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Group of Seven (G7) countries have agreed to impose "devastating sanctions" against Russia following Moscow's decision to begin a military operation in Ukraine, US President Joe Biden said on Thursday. "This morning, I met with my G7 counterparts to discuss President [Vladimir] Putin's unjustified attack on Ukraine and we agreed to move forward on devastating packages of sanctions and other economic measures to hold Russia to account," Biden said via Twitter. The G7 is a political forum comprising Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States.

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UN Security Council Plans to Vote on Resolution on Ukraine Friday - Source
(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-7)
UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council is expected to vote on a resolution prepared by Western countries regarding the situation in Ukraine on Friday, a diplomatic source in the United Nations told Sputnik. "It is expected tomorrow," the source said on Thursday.
Earlier in the day, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the UN Security Council the United States will deliver a resolution after Russia began a special military operation to protect Donbas.
The draft resolution condemns in the strongest possible terms Russia's alleged aggression against Ukraine in violation of Article 2, paragraph 4 of the UN Charter, the source said. Article 2 requires all UN member states to refrain from the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of another state.
The draft also "decides that the Russian Federation shall immediately cease its use of force" and "immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw" all its forces from Ukraine.
In the early hours of Thursday, Russia launched a special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend from Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow has said it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

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Whelan's Family Hopes Ukraine Tensions Will Not Impede US-Russia Discussions of His Case
WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The family of American citizen Paul Whelan, who is serving a 16 year jail sentence for espionage in Russia, hopes that Moscow and Washington will continue contact regarding his case despite the current situation in Ukraine, his brother David Whelan told Sputnik on Thursday.
On Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared the start of a military operation after the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk asked for help in countering aggression from Ukrainian forces. The Russian Defense Ministry says that Ukrainian civilians are not in danger, with the operation targeting military infrastructure only. US President Joe Biden is scheduled to announce more sanctions later in the day, on top of those imposed for Moscow's recognition of the two Russian-speaking republics as independent.

"The US and Russian Federation governments have always been able to discuss multiple issues: cybersecurity, nuclear weapons, and so on. To that extent, they have always discussed other things while also discussing Paul's case," David Whelan said. However, he did not rule out that the current situation may make those discussions more difficult. In addition, the family is concerned that sanctions against Russia could impede their ability to support Paul, for example, the transfer of money from the US to his prison account or phone card. They still hope the situation would not reach that point, his brother said. Asked about updates concerning his brother's case, David Whelan noted that Paul has been able to speak with his parents by phone.

Whelan, who holds American, British, Canadian and Irish citizenship, is serving a sentence in Russia after a Moscow court sentenced him to 16 years in prison in June 2020 on charges of espionage. He denies the charges, but did not challenge the verdict in hopes of being part of a prisoner exchange between the two countries.

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US Littoral Combat Ships Unproven to Operate in Planned Environment - Report

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The new US Navy fleet of Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) may be unable to carry out their missions as they still have not been adequately tested and have key equipment and defense systems failings, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Thursday.

"The Navy hasn't demonstrated that this type of ship can perform its intended missions," the report said. "For example, operational testing found challenges in the ship's defenses. ... Also, some key equipment has failed, and the Navy is behind schedule in developing capabilities such as mine countermeasures."

The Navy is taking steps to address these and other issues, but it still does not have a comprehensive plan to resolve them, the report said.

Until these problems are comprehensively addressed "the LCS will remain at risk of being unable to operate in its intended environment," the report said.

Operational testing has found several significant challenges, including the ships' ability to defend themselves if attacked and failure rates of mission-essential equipment, the report added.

The Navy estimates it will cost over $60 billion to operate and support the 35 LCS it plans to build, including the 17 it has already delivered, according to the report.
Biden's Remarks on Ukraine Moved to 18:30 GMT - White House

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has moved the time of his remarks on the Russia-Ukraine situation to 1:30 p.m. EST (18:30 GMT), the White House said on Thursday in a pool report.

The White House earlier said that the president will deliver his speech at 12:30 p.m. EST.

Biden during his remarks is expected to roll out more sanctions against Russia, cutting the country off from advanced technology and restricting large Russian financial entities, according to a CNN report.

US Transportation Safety Agency Launches Probe Into Faulty Brakes in Honda Vehicles

WASHINGTON, February 23, (Sputnik) - An investigation has been launched into late model Honda CR-V and Honda Accord vehicles after users lodged 278 complaints about defective emergency braking systems, the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) said in a statement on Thursday.

"The complaints allege braking incidents, some with large speed changes, occurring with nothing obstructing the vehicle’s path of travel. Of the 278 complaints, 6 allege a collision with minor injuries," the statement said.

The NHTSA explained its Office of Defects Investigation received 107 complaints about Honda Accord and 171 complaints about Honda CR-V breaking systems problems as well as several Early Warning Reports alleging inadvertent activation of the collision mitigation braking system in 2017-2019 Honda CR-V and 2018-2019 Honda Accord vehicles.

The problem could potentially affect the automatic emergency braking systems on more than 1.7 million newer model Honda vehicles that can cause them to stop for no reason. Automatic emergency braking systems can avoid crashes or slow down a vehicle if a driver is distracted or impaired while approaching an object. The systems can avert crashes or diminish their severity by applying the brakes for a driver.

NHTSA said the probe will determine the number of vehicles affected and the extent of the problem. Depending on what the investigators will find, the NHTSA may suggest issuing a recall of the vehicles.

Honda issued a statement saying it is cooperating with the NHTSA investigation and is conducting its own review. Consumers who experience any problems should contact their dealership, Honda added.
UNSC Plans to Vote on Resolution on Ukraine Friday - Source

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council is expected to vote on a resolution prepared by Western countries in response to the situation in Ukraine on February 25, a diplomatic source in the UN told Sputnik on Thursday.

"It is expected tomorrow," the source said.

Earlier, US Envoy to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the Security Council that Washington will deliver to the UN Security Council a resolution after Russia began a military operation to protect Donbas.

Major Russian Icon to Be Sent to Europe for 1st Time Since Pandemic - Metropolitan

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The major Christian Orthodox relic of the Russian diaspora - the Kursk Root icon of the Mother of God - will leave North America on the way to Europe for the first time since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, but plans to send it to Russia remain uncertain, Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) Synod of Bishops Vice President Mark (Arndt) told Sputnik.

"During the Great Lent, which begins on March 7 for Russian Orthodox Christians, the Kursk icon will visit ROCOR’s Western European Diocese, then it will return to the Synod in New York for the Holy Week and Easter. After Easter, the icon will visit Germany," Mark, who is Metropolitan of Berlin and Germany, said.

The hierarch noted that ROCOR usually brings the Kursk icon, which is one of the oldest relics of the Orthodox church, back to Russia every year upon the request of the Kursk diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church.

However, Metropolitan Mark added that this year the Metropolitan of Kursk did not make such a request.

"I think the situation there is precarious now, including the events that are taking place nearby, in Ukraine," he said.

The icon dates back to 1295 when a hunter from the city of Rylsk near Kursk came across it at a root of a tree. Legend has it that the hunter picked up the icon and a spring of pure water gushed from the place where it lay upon. The hunter built a chapel near the site.

After the Act of Canonical Communion was signed in 2007, ROCOR and the Moscow Patriarchate agreed that the icon would be sent every September to Russia, including to the city of Kursk.
Christians have attributed numerous miracles to the icon. In the 14th century, the Tartars -
descendants of the turkic tribes called Bulgars - came to raid the Kursk region and cut the icon
in two, but the two halves grew together only leaving a small trace that is still observable.
Many Russian saints, including St. Seraphim of Sarov and St. John of Shanghai and San
Francisco, prayed in front of the Kursk icon.
In 1920, the icon was taken out of Russia as many Christians fled the country following the 1917
Bolshevik revolution. The icon was then moved to different places, including in Serbia and
Germany, and was finally taken to the United States.

US Companies in Ukraine Have Contingency Plans - Business Council

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – American companies in Ukraine have contingency
plans and are waiting for more specific actions from the West as Russia begins a military
operation, US-Ukraine Business Council (USUBC) President and CEO Morgan Williams told
Sputnik on Thursday.
"All businesses have contingency/crisis plans. We have seen some of those. We know those
were to be further implemented from what has already been done," Williams said.
Some US companies have decided to suspend operations in areas near the borders of Russia
and Belarus, top non-Ukrainian personnel have left the country, and some Ukrainian employees
have been moved to the country’s western regions, he added.
Williams noted that USUBC would like to see more concrete action from the US and the EU.
On Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of
the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Under new treaties, Moscow pledged to ensure the
security of the two Russian-speaking republics. On Thursday, Putin declared the start of a
military operation after the two republics asked for help in countering aggression from Ukrainian
forces.
The move has elicited condemnation from Western leaders and the start of still more sanctions.
The Russian Defense Ministry says that Ukrainian civilians are not in danger, with the operation
targeting military infrastructure only.

US Rate Hikes May Not Be Altered by Ukraine Crisis, But Wait-and-See Needed- Fed Officials

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Russia-Ukraine crisis might not alter the Federal
Reserve’s planned course of action to increase US interest rates this year, although the central
bank is in “uncharted territory” depending on the fallout from the crisis, senior Federal Reserve
officials said on Thursday.
"We will have to see if [the] Russian incursion changes the arguments for policy normalization," Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond President Tom Barkin said in a live-streamed speech. Barkin's comments came after Russian President Vladimir Putin announced on Wednesday a special military operation to achieve "demilitarization" and "de-Nazification" of Ukraine. The Federal reserve plans to shift from a policy of near-zero interest rates to one where there could be a maximum of seven rate hikes this year, with an increase of a quarter-to-half percentage point in each round. The Federal Reserve should hike rates because "underlying demand is strong; the labor market is tight; [and] Inflation is high and broadening," Barkin said. "I don't think you are going to see much change to the underlying logic. But this is uncharted territory, so we will have to see where the world goes."

Barkin said the Russian economy did not have much impact on the US economy itself, as evidenced by the minimal effect from Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea. But the impact from a disruption in Russia's oil and gas exports could be different, with US energy prices already at seven-year highs, he said.

"The Fed will need to monitor how this affects energy markets and whether or not the conflict escalates," Barkin said. "We'll have to wait and watch if Ukraine's narrative shifts."

Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta President Raphael Bostic also said the Russia-Ukraine crisis needed to be closely watched for its impact on the US economy and how that might affect central bank policy-making.

"We will be closely monitoring events in Ukraine to assess economic and financial consequences," Bostic said.

After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by the COVID-19 measures, the US economy grew 5.7% in 2021. But inflation grew even faster, expanding by 5.8% in the year to December, the most since 1982, according to the Consumer Price Index published by the Commerce Department.

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US Intel Agencies Say Iran-Backed ‘MuddyWater’ Group Conducting Malicious Cyber Activities

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US cyber intelligence authorities issued an advisory against an Iran-backed group alleged to be conducting malicious cyber activities across a range of private and governmental sectors, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) said on Thursday.

"[Intelligence agencies] have observed a group of Iranian government-sponsored advanced persistent threat (APT) actors, known as MuddyWater, conducting cyber espionage and other malicious cyber operations targeting a range of government and private-sector organizations across sectors – including telecommunications, defense, local government, and oil and natural gas – in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America," the advisory said. MuddyWater is a subordinate element within Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security, the advisory said. The group is positioned to provide stolen data and access to both the Iranian government and other malicious cyber actors, the advisory added.

The advisory also provided organizations with observed tactics, techniques and procedures associated with MuddyWater in order to aid them in the identification of malicious activity against sensitive networks. US Cyber Command in January identified and disclosed multiple open-source tools used by the group in networks around the world.

More US Military Assets on Way to Eastern Europe Amid Conflict in Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - More US military assets, including F-35 aircraft and Apache helicopters, are on their way to Estonia, Lithuania and Romania amid Russia’s military operation in Ukraine, CNN reported on Thursday citing a senior US defense official.

At least six F-35 fighter jets will arrive in Estonia, Lithuania and Romania later in the day. Each country will host two aircraft, the report said.

Bad weather conditions have delayed the delivery of the helicopters, but they are still due to arrive at their sites on Thursday.

On Tuesday, President Joe Biden announced his intention to strengthen NATO’s eastern flank in Europe by moving up to eight F-35 jets from Germany, 20 AH-64 helicopters from Germany to the Baltic region and 12 AH-64 helicopters from Greece to Poland.

The movement of the assets came as Russia launched a military operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance to defend themselves from Ukrainian forces. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine and civilians are not in danger. Moscow says that it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.
Canada Authorizes First Domestic Vaccine Against COVID-19 - Health Ministry

TORONTO, February 23 (Sputnik) - Canada has approved Medicago’s vaccine against COVID-19, the first domestic vaccine to receive authorization, the country’s Health Ministry said on Thursday.

"Today, Health Canada authorized Medicago’s Covifenz COVID-19 vaccine for the prevention of COVID-19 in adults 18 to 64 years of age," Health Canada said in a statement. "This is the first authorized COVID-19 vaccine developed by a Canadian-based company, and the first that uses a plant-based protein technology."

Clinical trials show the vaccine to be 71 percent effective against symptomatic infection and fully protects against severe illness, the statement said.

To date, Canada has approved six vaccines against COVID-19, including the ones produced by Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca, Janssen and Novavax.

Russian Orthodox Church Abroad Urges Peace in Ukraine, Never Distinguishes Among Peoples

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCOR) regrets the current situation in Ukraine and urges politicians to resolve it peacefully, Vice President of ROCOR’s Synod of Bishops Metropolitan of Berlin and Germany Mark (Arndt) told Sputnik.

"We treat this situation in Ukraine with great sadness and call on our believers to pray. We also urge those in power to settle down and try to resolve issues through negotiations, and not by military means," the metropolitan said.

The hierarch underscored that many ROCOR parishioners are of Ukrainian heritage, and the church has never made a difference between them and Russians. He also noted that many of the first ROCOR leaders had Ukrainian roots.

"We have never separated Russia and Ukraine, it never even crossed our minds," Mark said. "Such issues began arising only after World War II, particularly in Munich, when a group of Ukrainians founded their own "church." However, he added that this has never been a case within the ROCOR.
The metropolitan expressed regret that a few ROCOR parishioners, particularly those who recently arrived from Ukraine, have joined the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, supported by the Constantinople Patriarchate as opposed to the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Those people made their choice on a nationalist basis, he added.

In a separate statement, European hierarchs of the ROCOR, including Metropolitan Mark, urged politicians and believers to remember ongoing Great Lent when Orthodox Christians should maintain deep prayer.

"Armed conflicts always lead to great suffering of innocent people - especially children and the elderly," the statement read.

The ROCOR unites Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians and other peoples regardless of political systems, it added.

Hierarchs declined to take the role of judges but said they could not agree with what they call the extremely one-sided description of the situation by Western media.

"We fervently prayed and pray for the appeasement of human souls in the lands of Ukraine - for the softening of hearts and for the wisdom of all those who are now directly responsible for the fate of people in Europe, embracing Ukraine, [and] Russia with Belarus," the hierarchs said.

The situation in Donbas has escalated in recent days, with the self-proclaimed Luhansk and Donetsk people's republics (DPR and LPR) reporting increased shelling by the Ukrainian government 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.

On Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the DPR and LPR. Under new treaties, Moscow pledged to ensure the security of the two Russian-speaking republics. On Thursday, Putin declared the start of a military operation after the two republics asked for help in countering aggression from the Ukrainian government forces. The move has elicited condemnation from Western leaders and the start of still more sanctions. The Russian Defense Ministry says that Ukrainian civilians are not in danger, with the operation targeting military infrastructure only.

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UN Relocating Some Staff From Ukraine But All Personnel Safe, Accounted For - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United Nations staff in Ukraine are safe and accounted for, but the organization is nevertheless relocating some personnel from the country after Russia launched a military operation there, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told Sputnik on Thursday.

"All UN staff in Ukraine are safe and accounted for (approx. 1500). We are relocating some personnel and have instructed staff to take necessary precautions. A core group of mission-critical staff remains working in the areas around the line of contact," Dujarric said.
US Jobless Claims Down Last Week, Resuming Downtrend - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims fell last week, resuming their downtrend in a labor market showing steady growth in an economy rebounding from the effects of the coronavirus measures, the US Labor Department said on Thursday.

"In the week ending February 19, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 232,000, a decrease of 17,000 from the previous week's revised level," the Labor Department said in a statement.

Jobless claims rose in the prior week to February 12, the first time in four weeks, posing some concern to policymakers banking on a steady growth of the labor market as the economy continued to pull away from the effects of the pandemic measures.

Economists polled by US media had expected jobless claims to average 235,000 during the week to February 19, just slightly above what the Labor Department reported.

"The data is consistent with a strong employment market," economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on the ForexLive platform.

US unemployment reached a record high of 14.8% in April 2020, following the loss of some 20 million jobs in the aftermath of the coronavirus breakout. Since then, jobs have picked up on most months, with unemployment declining to 3.9% last month, just below the 4% that the Federal Reserve defines as "maximum employment."

Georgieva Says Ukraine Situation Adds Economic Risks, IMF Ready to Help Members

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The situation in Ukraine adds significant economic risks for the world, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stands ready to help members who need it, IMF Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Thursday.

"I am deeply concerned about what is happening in Ukraine and, first & foremost, impact on innocent people. This adds significant economic risk for the region & the world. We are assessing the implications & stand ready to support our members as needed," Georgieva said via Twitter.

Western States at UNSC Discussing Resolution on Ukraine Thursday - UK Envoy
UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - Western countries at the UN Security Council will discuss on Thursday a resolution on Ukraine after Russia announced the start of a military operation, UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations James Kariuki told reporters.

"We get to work with our partners in the UN to bring a resolution which condemns the Russian action. We are discussing the resolution today. I can't tell you the exact timing, but this is an important moment. For member states to stand up," he said.

Earlier, US Envoy to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the Security Council that Washington will present to the UN Security Council a resolution regarding Russia’s decision to launch a special operation to protect Donbas.

EU Discussing Cutting Russia Off From SWIFT Over Military Operation in Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The European Union is discussing the possibility of cutting Russia off from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) system due to the Russia’s military operation in Ukraine, CNN reported on Thursday citing sources in Brussels.

A senior EU diplomat said he believes the economic interest will prevail and Brussels will not cut Russia off from the global SWIFT payment system while “there is a conversation happening,” the report said.

US Stocks Down 2% in Early Trade Thursday, Falling 6th Day in Row on Russia-Ukraine Fears

NEW YORK, February 23 (Sputnik) - US stocks fell about 2% in early trade on Thursday, declining for a sixth day in a row on concerns about the impact on the global economy from Russia’s military operation in Ukraine.

Wall Street’s three major stock indices - the Dow Jones Industrial Average, the S&P 500 and the Nasdaq Composite - were down 2% on the average by 9:45 AM ET (14:45 GMT) after falling as much as 3% at the start of the session.

Russian President Vladimir Putin announced on Wednesday a special military action by Moscow aimed at the “demilitarization” and “de-Nazification” of Ukraine. Investors fear the global economy might be impacted from US and European sanctions on Russia over its actions in Ukraine.

Even prior to the Russia-Ukraine crisis, Wall Street has been falling on concerns about runaway US inflation as the economy recovered strongly from the 2020 coronavirus outbreak.
The Dow Jones Industrial Average index, made up mostly of industrial stocks, was down 2.2% on Thursday and 7.7% for February, aside from a 11.1% decline on the year. The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 US stocks, was down 2% on the day. For February, it was down 7.8%, while for the year, it showed a 12.7% loss. Nasdaq, made of highly-valued tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Nasdaq and Google, led losses, falling 2.1% on the day. It was down 9.7% for the month and 18.4% for 2022.

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Canada Says Will Ensure ‘Severe Sanctions’ on Russia in Coordination With Ukraine, EU
TORONTO, February 23 (Sputnik) – Canada will impose strict sanctions on Russia after President Vladimir Putin approved a special military operation in the Donbas region, Foreign Minister Melanie Joly said on Monday.
"I spoke with... Ukraine’s Foreign Minister, to express Canada’s solidarity with Ukraine and to condemn the invasion by Russia. We will ensure that severe sanctions are imposed," Joly said in a statement via Twitter.
Joly added that Canada and the European Union are working to impose “coordinated sanctions” on Moscow following a discussion with EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell and vowing that Russia “will not go unpunished.”
Earlier in the day, Russia announced a special operation against Ukraine, responding to calls of the Donetsk and Luhansk people’s republics that asked for help in countering aggression of the Ukrainian armed forces. The Russian Defense Ministry later specified that Ukrainian civilians are not in danger, with the operation targeting exclusively military infrastructure.

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Oil Above $100 First Time Since 2014 as Russia Begins Military Operation in Ukraine
WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Crude oil prices rose above $100 a barrel on Thursday for the first time since 2014 as traders priced in the possibility of a disruption to Russian exports of the commodity from Western sanctions due to Moscow’s military operation in Ukraine. Brent, the global benchmark for crude, was at $100.71 a barrel by 9:10 a.m. Eastern US time (14:10 GMT), after an intraday peak at $102.23. The last time Brent traded higher than that was in September 2014. The West Texas Intermediate benchmark for US crude, also known as WTI, hovered at around $99 a barrel, after a session peak at $100.50. Oil prices have been rallying for months since the global economy began recovering from the coronavirus pandemic. But the upward movement gained more impetus since Russian
President Vladimir Putin's announcement on Thursday of a special military action by Moscow aimed at the "demilitarization" and "denazification" of Ukraine.

Russia produces about 10.5 million barrels of crude per day, or roughly 11% of world supply. US and European sanctions on Russia over its actions in Ukraine could limit that supply. Brent crude has rallied 29% since the start of the year and WTI has gained 31%, largely on production cuts by the OPEC+ group of global oil producers aiming to lift prices from the 2020 lows of the pandemic.

Biden Administration Considering Moving More US Troops Further East in Europe – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering sending more American troops already in Europe to countries further east after Russia began a military operation in Ukraine, CNN reported on Thursday, citing an unnamed US official.

Meanwhile, NATO has authorized the supreme allied commander in Europe, US Gen. Tod Wolters, to activate the alliance’s Response Force, the report said.

US Q4 GDP Up 7%, Commerce Dept. Says in 2nd Estimate for Period

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Gross Domestic Product grew by 7% in the final quarter of last year, the Commerce Department said on Thursday in its second estimate for the quarter which came in higher than its previous estimate of 6.9%.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 7.0 percent in the fourth quarter of 2021," the Bureau of Economic Analysis, a unit within the Commerce Department, said in a news release.

The department issues three GDP readings altogether for each quarter. Economists surveyed by US media had projected a 7% reading for the second estimate on the quarter, due to the faster-than-expected growth in inflation since the first estimate.

"The inflation numbers continued to ratchet higher but overall the market has much more to worry about than what was happening 2-5 months ago in the US economy," economist Adam Button said in a post on the ForexLive forum.

After a 3.5% contraction in 2020 GDP forced by the coronavirus crisis, the US economy is thought to have grown by 5.7% for all of 2021. But inflation has been expanding faster, growing by 5.8% in the year to December, its most since 1982, according to the Consumer Price Index published by the Commerce Department.
UN Refugee Agency Urges Ukraine's Neighbors to Keep Borders Open to Possible Refugees

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) on Thursday urged countries neighboring Ukraine to keep their borders open for possible refugees.

"UNHCR is working with governments in neighboring countries, calling on them to keep borders open to those seeking safety and protection. We stand ready to support efforts by all to respond to any situation of forced displacement," UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said in a statement.

The agency has increased operations and capacity in Ukraine and its neighbors, he added. On Thursday morning, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared the start of a military operation after the self-proclaimed republics of Luhansk and Donetsk requested help countering the aggression of the Ukrainian government forces.

The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine, and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

RECAST - Biden to Speak 17:00 GMT About Sanctions on Russia's Advanced Technology, Financial Sector
(Corrects time of Biden's address)
WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will give a speech at noon EST (17:00 GMT) to roll out sanctions against Russia, cutting the country off from advanced technology and placing restrictions on large financial entities, CNN reported on Thursday.

The new sanctions will also target additional members of Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle, the report said.
Biden Convenes National Security Council as Russia Begins Operation in Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden convened a meeting of the National Security Council in the situation room on Thursday morning in the wake of Russia beginning a military operation to protect Donbas, CNN reported.
Biden will later meet with G7 leaders virtually and unveil sanctions against Russia.

All US Diplomats Leave Ukraine, No Plans to Return Anytime Soon – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - All American diplomats have left Ukraine, with no plans to return anytime soon, CNN reported on Thursday, citing a US official familiar with the matter.
After being relocated from Kiev, US diplomats had been working in Lviv over the past few days, while spending nights in Poland.
But after Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the start of a military operation to protect Donbas, the American diplomats did not return to Ukraine. The are no plans for them to go back anytime soon, the official said.
Sputnik has reached out to the State Department for confirmation, but did not receive a response immediately.
On Thursday morning, Russia launched a military operation after the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested assistance in countering the aggression of the Ukrainian government forces. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting the military infrastructure of Ukraine, and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow says it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

Canada’s Trudeau Calls on Russia to Cease Operation in Donbas, Vows ‘Additional Action’

TORONTO, February 23 (Sputnik) – Canada is calling on Moscow to halt its special military operation in Donbas approved by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said.
"Canada calls on Russia to immediately cease all hostile and provocative actions against Ukraine and withdraw all military and proxy forces from the country," Trudeau said in a statement late Wednesday, vowing to take "additional action" against Moscow.

Putin announced earlier the start of a special military operation in Donbas. He said Russia had no plans to occupy Ukrainian territories.

UN Chief Asks Putin to Bring Troops Back to Russia in 'Name of Humanity'

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres called on Russian President Vladimir Putin to call his troops back after initiating a special military operation in Donbas.

"This is the saddest moment in my tenure as Secretary General of the United Nations...," Guterres told reporters Wednesday night after an emergency UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine. "In the present circumstances, I must change my appeal and I must say: President Putin, in the name of humanity, bring your troops back to Russia, do not allow to start in Europe what could be the worst war since the beginning of the century."

Guterres added that he expects consequences against Russia will be meaningful if there is war in Ukraine.

US Will Put Resolution to UN Security Council Over Russian Action in Donbas - US Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States will deliver to the UN Security Council a resolution regarding Russia's decision to launch a special operation in the Donbas region, US Envoy to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the Security Council.

"This is a grave emergency. The council will need to act, and we will put a resolution on the table tomorrow," Thomas-Greenfield said late on Wednesday following the announcement of the Russian special operation in Ukraine.

The special operation is intended to protect people in the Donbas who have been the victim of genocide by the Ukrainian government, Russian UN Envoy Vassily Nebenzia said.

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Russian Military Operation in Donbas Not War - Russian Envoy to UN
WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Russia is conducting a special military operation in Donbas, not a war against Ukraine, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine.

"This isn't called a war, this is called a special military operation in the Donbas," Nebenzia said. Ukraine's ambassador to the UN later called on Nebenzia to state on record that Russian troops would not shell and bomb Ukrainian cities and not move into Ukrainian territory.

United Nations, February 23 (Sputnik) - The aim of the Russian special operation in the Donbas region of Ukraine announced by President Vladimir Putin is to protect people who have been suffering under the Ukrainian government, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia told the UN Security Council.

"During this meeting, the President of Russia, Putin, spoke and said that he made a decision for a special military operation in the Donbas. The aim of this special operation is to protect the people who, for over eight years, have been suffering genocide from the Kiev regime," Nebenzia said late on Wednesday.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said Russian President Vladimir Putin has chosen a premeditated war that will bring a catastrophic loss of life and human suffering.

"President Putin has chosen a premeditated war that will bring a catastrophic loss of life and human suffering," Biden said in a statement Wednesday night.

Earlier, Putin announced the start of a special operation in Donbas, adding that Russia has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Russia is conducting a special military operation in Donbas, not a war against Ukraine, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine.

"This isn't called a war, this is called a special military operation in the Donbas," Nebenzia said. Ukraine's ambassador to the UN later called on Nebenzia to state on record that Russian troops would not shell and bomb Ukrainian cities and not move into Ukrainian territory.

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"This isn't called a war, this is called a special military operation in the Donbas," Nebenzia said. Ukraine's ambassador to the UN later called on Nebenzia to state on record that Russian troops would not shell and bomb Ukrainian cities and not move into Ukrainian territory.
WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he will address the American people on Thursday about further actions by the US and its allies against Russia after Putin ordered to begin a military operation in Donbas.
"Tomorrow, I will meet with my G7 counterparts in the morning and then speak to the American people to announce the further consequences the United States and our Allies and partners will impose on Russia for this needless act of aggression against Ukraine and global peace and security," Biden said late on Wednesday.

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Biden Closely Monitoring Development in Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is closely monitoring the situation in Ukraine, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said after Russian President Vladimir Putin’s announcement on Donbas.
"[Biden] is closely monitoring the developments in Ukraine and he will continue receiving regular updates from Jake Sullivan, his National Security Advisor. He also spoke with his UN Ambassador, Linda Thomas Greenfield before the UNSC meeting this evening," Psakis said via Twitter on Wednesday night.
Earlier in the day, Putin said he ordered to begin a military operation in Donbas.

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China Envoy to UN Says Believes Door to Peaceful Solution to Ukraine Issue Not Fully Shut

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jun said China believes the door to a peaceful solution to the Ukraine issue is not fully shut. "We believe that the door to a peaceful solution to the Ukraine issue is not fully shut," Zhang said on Wednesday during an emergency UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine.
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China Envoy to UN says believes door to peaceful solution to Ukraine issue not fully shut
Sputnik

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French Envoy to UN Calls on Russia to Draw Back on Decision to Recognize DPR, LPR
UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - French Ambassador to the United Nations Nicolas de Riviere during a UN Security Council meeting called on Russia to reverse its decision to recognize the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics and to call its soldiers back. "We call on the Russian Federation to follow this path to draw back on its decision to recognize separatist entities of eastern Ukraine and to call their soldiers back," Riviere said during on Wednesday night.

UN Under Secretary General Says UN Cannot Verify Reports About Ukraine Invasion

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United Nations cannot verify media reports from Wednesday indicating that Russia was allegedly prepared to launch a full invasion against Ukraine, United Nations Under Secretary General Rosemary DiCarlo said during a UN Security Council meeting. "This evening, different media are carrying reports of an ongoing large scale military buildup and on military columns moving towards Ukraine," DiCarlo said on Wednesday night. "The Russian Federation has also reportedly shut airspace to civilian aircraft near the border with Ukraine. The United Nations cannot verify any of these reports." DiCarlo said UN staff will remain in Ukraine to help with humanitarian efforts.

UN Secretary General Calls on Russia Not to Attack Ukraine, Give Peace Chance

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres during an emergency meeting Wednesday night called on Russian President Vladimir Putin to not attack Ukraine and to give peace a chance. "If indeed an operation is being prepared, I have only one thing to say from the bottom of my heart: President Putin, stop your troops from attacking the Ukraine, give peace a chance," Guterres said.

New US Sanctions to Affect Europe, Ukraine More Than Russia - Expert

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The new US sanctions against Russia, imposed in response to Moscow's recognition of the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics
(DPR and LPR), will affect Ukraine and Europe more than Russia itself, US-based Eurasia Center Executive Vice President Earl Rasmussen told Sputnik. The United States and its European allies imposed new sanctions against Russia after President Vladimir Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the DPR and LPR. Under new treaties, Moscow pledged to ensure the security of the two Russian-speaking republics. The sanctions target Russia’s Vnesheconombank (VEB) and the Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company (PSB), the country’s sovereign debt, its elites and their families. “Will the new sanctions impact Russia? Yes, to some degree, but Russia will recover and is fairly sanctions proof following the multiple rounds of sanctions they had already received,” Rasmussen said. However, the European and Ukrainian economies will face more serious consequences, he said. “Energy costs will skyrocket even more. European industry will be slowed and likely not recover for a while,” Rasmussen said, adding that that outcome may well be one of the US objectives to achieve. Rasmussen did not rule out that the situation in Ukraine will deteriorate even more as the time passes, but he noted that it was possible to avoid such a development if NATO would stop expanding eastward and Ukraine implements the Minsk agreements. At the same time, Rasmussen said the global economy will not suffer as much as the Biden administration thinks it will. "US companies may feel the impact. China will likely meet areas vacated by United States and Europe. Tech companies will likely be displaced by China or Russian technology," he said. Russia’s decision to recognize the DPR and LPR comes after a significant deterioration of relations along the line of contact amid interference by the United States and its allies. Russia has repeatedly denied having any intention of invading Ukraine.

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US to Use Russia's Recognition of DPR, LPR to Escalate Ukraine Crisis- Ex-Senate Candidate

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will use Russia’s decision to recognize the independence of the breakaway people’s republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DPR and LNR) as a reason to escalate tensions in Ukraine, former Republican candidate for the US Senate Ibra Taher told Sputnik. "Now [Russian] President [Vladimir] Putin’s announcement to recognize and cooperate with separatist states will be used by the Biden administration as a justification for more escalation," Taher said. Taher also said it was predictable that a Democrat-led US administration would push for an escalation with Russia by using several fronts like Ukraine, Belarus and Syria. The Biden administration’s provocations seeking to initiate war with Russia are a part of the globalist agenda, Taher added.
On Monday, Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the DPR and LPR. Under new treaties, Moscow pledged to ensure the security of the two Russian-speaking republics. Russia’s decision to recognize the DPR and LNR came after the situation on the line of contact between Ukraine and the breakaway republics significantly worsened amid interference by the United States and some of its allies.

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RECAST - Austin, UK Counterpart Condemn Russian Recognition of DPR, LPR - Pentagon
(Recasts to modify headline)
WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his UK counterpart Ben Wallace spoke by telephone and condemned Russia’s recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk people’s republics (DPR and LPR), Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said in a readout of the conversation.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke with UK Secretary of State for Defence Ben Wallace today. The leaders condemned Russia’s violation of international law and its international commitments by recognizing the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics as ‘independent’ states,” Kirby said on Wednesday.

Austin and Wallace reaffirmed their commitment to provide security assistance and support Ukraine’s right to defend its sovereign territory, Kirby said. The leaders also committed to continuing their close coordination on the matter, Kirby added.

Russian President Vladimir Putin formally recognized and established relationships with the DPR and LPR on Monday. The decision occurred amid increased tensions between Russia, Ukraine and the West and a significantly deteriorating situation in the Donbas.

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Trucker Convoy Departs California to US Capital to Protest Vaccine Mandates - Organizers
WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - A trucker convoy started its journey from the state of California to the US capital to protest COVID-19 vaccine mandates as well as runaway inflation as a result of the Biden administration policies, according to protest organizers.

The People's Convoy posted video footage on its Facebook page on Wednesday showing truckers leaving California on its way to Washington.

The protest organizers said the convoy will make stops throughout the United States in the next two weeks, skipping major US cities, but it is expected to arrive in Washington on March 5. Media footage on the group's Facebook page shows substantial support from individuals along the road on the first day of the journey.

The US trucker convoy is inspired by the Freedom Convoy in Canada when tens of thousands of truckers descended on the capital Ottawa and key US-Canada cross-border points to
peacefully protest the COVID-19 vaccine mandates. The government invoked emergency powers and forced the end of the protest.

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US Congressman Young Introduces Bill to Ban Russian Seafood Imports - Statement
WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Don Young has introduced legislation to prohibit the import of Russian seafood and seafood products in the United States due to concerns about alleged Russian aggression toward Ukraine, Young's office said in a press release.

"At this very moment, [Russian President] Vladimir Putin and his cronies appear set to fully invade Ukraine. This is not only a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, but it is also an affront to western democracy around the globe," Young said on Wednesday.

Young said Putin uses Russia's economy as a "piggybank" to subvert freedom and the United States must do all it can to ensure his cash flow is as restricted as possible.

"I am proud to introduce legislation to reciprocate Russia's commercial aggression. I continue advocating for widespread sanctions on Russia, and my bill takes needed action to implement restrictions on this specific trade sector," he said.

Earlier this month, US Senators Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan - also representing Alaska - introduced legislation to impose a ban on the importation of all Russian seafood products into the United States in response to Russia's 2014 ban.

Russia imposed an embargo on US products in response to a range of sanctions the United States and its allies implemented after residents of Crimea decided via referendum to rejoin Russia.

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Lloyd, UK Counterpart Condemn Russian Recognition of DPR, LPR - Pentagon
WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his UK counterpart Ben Wallace spoke by telephone and condemned Russia's recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics (DPR and LPR), Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said in a readout of the conversation.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke with UK Secretary of State for Defence Ben Wallace today. The leaders condemned Russia's violation of international law and its international commitments by recognizing the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics as 'independent' states," Kirby said on Wednesday.

Austin and Wallace reaffirmed their commitment to provide security assistance and support Ukraine's right to defend its sovereign territory, Kirby said. The leaders also committed to continuing their close coordination on the matter, Kirby added.
Russian President Vladimir Putin formally recognized and established relationships with the DPR and LPR on Monday. The decision occurred amid increased tensions between Russia, Ukraine and the West and a significantly deteriorating situation in the Donbas.

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US-Russia Space Cooperation Continues Amid Geopolitical Tensions Over Ukraine - Official

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Space cooperation between the United States and Russia continues despite the geopolitical tensions between the two countries over Ukraine, US State Department Director of the Office of Space Affairs Valda Vikmanis Keller said. "This is the one area, despite what’s going on geopolitically. Safe, secure operations and cooperation on the ISS [international space station] continues," Vikmanis Keller said during an event on Wednesday hosted by George Washington University’s Space Policy Institute.

Two NASA astronauts are currently training with Russian cosmonauts while three Russian cosmonauts are training with NASA in the US state of Texas. In addition, five NATO astronauts are set to begin training in Russia next month.

There are currently four Americans, two Russians and a German working inside the International Space Station. The United States is expected to continue to hitch a ride with cosmonauts on Russian rockets launching to the space station.

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Wall Street Down 5th Day in Row in Continued Bleeding Over Ukraine Crisis

NEW YORK, February 23 (Sputnik) - Wall Street fell broadly for a fifth day in a row, as investors continued to worry about the Ukraine crisis and the potential impact and counter-effects of US sanctions on Russia.

"Stocks are going to struggle to find direction until financial markets have a clear answer on whether the Russia-Ukraine crisis will have a diplomatic solution or regional warfare," Edward Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said, as US stocks headed for a second straight month of losses.

Wall Street’s three major indices - Dow Jones Industrial Average, S&P 500 and Nasdaq Composite - closed Wednesday down between 1.4% and 2.6% after an early rebound on the day.

Russia’s parliament on Tuesday approved troops for what was described as “peacekeeping operations” in the two breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk Moscow formally recognized.

US President Joe Biden responded by announcing sanctions on two Russian banks, on Russian elites and their family members, as well as on Russia’s sovereign debt. On Wednesday, Biden
added to those measures by announcing sanctions on the company in charge of building the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

If the United States imposes broader sanctions on Russia, investors fear Moscow could strike back by limiting sales of oil and other energy products to Europe and other parts of the world. Russia produces roughly 11% of the world’s oil supply, or roughly 10.5 million barrels per day, according to the US Energy Information Administration.

At Wednesday’s close on Wall Street, the mostly industrial stocks-based Dow Jones index was down 1.4% on the day and 5.7% for February, aside from a 8.8% decline on the year. The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 US stocks, settled down 1.8% on the day. For February, it was down 6.4%, while for the year, it showed a 11.3% loss.

Nasdaq, made of highly-valued tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Nasdaq and Google, again led losses, finishing Wednesday down 2.6%. It was down 8.4% for the month and 16.7% for 2022.

Two Prosecutors Quit in Probe Against Trump, Raising Doubts About Case - Reports

NEW YORK, February 23 (Sputnik) - Two prosecutors who were leading investigations into former president Donald Trump and his business practices have resigned after the Manhattan District Attorney expressed doubts about the future of the case, the New York Times reported. Carey Dunne and Mark Pomerantz submitted their resignations when Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, who will decide whether to bring charges, indicated he had doubts about moving forward with the case, the report said on Wednesday.

The resignations came after a month-long pause in presentation of evidence by the two prosecutors before a grand jury, the report said. The “stunning development” comes not long after the high-stakes inquiry appeared to be gaining momentum, and throws its future into serious doubt, the report said.

Last week, New York judge Arthur Engoron ruled that Trump and his two adult children could not refuse subpoenas by New York Attorney General Letitia James to question them over her probe into whether the Trump Organization had illegally inflated the value of its assets to obtain loans beyond merit. Aside from the Manhattan District Attorney, James is conducting her own investigations into Trump, with legal experts saying the two probes could eventually merge. Prior to Judge Engoron’s ruling, the accounting firm Mazars told Trump in a letter that it could no longer back financial statements prepared for the Trump Organization. The Mazars letter was used by James to back her argument that Trump’s private businesses had engaged in “fraudulent or misleading” practices in the valuation of its assets.

Trump has repeatedly said the New York Attorney General has been engaging in a politically-motivated witch hunt against him and his family.
Ukraine Requests Urgent UNSC Meeting After DPR, LPR Sought Military Assistance - Kuleba

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The government of Ukraine has requested an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council after the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics (DPR and LPR) requested military assistance from Russia, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said. "Ukraine has requested an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council due to the appeal by Russian occupation administrations in Donetsk and Luhansk to Russia with a request to provide them with military assistance, which is a further escalation of the security situation," Kuleba said via Twitter on Wednesday.

Trudeau Revokes Use of Emergencies Act, Says Situation No Longer Constitutes Emergency

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau revoked the use of the Emergencies Act that was imposed in response to the recent peaceful protests against the COVID-19 vaccine mandates. "Today, after careful consideration, we are ready to confirm that the situation is no longer an emergency. Therefore, the federal government will be ending the use of the Emergencies Act," Trudeau told reporters. Trudeau expressed confidence that using existing laws and bylaws will be enough to maintain control over the situation and keep people safe. He also promised to monitor possible developments and provide immediate assistance to local authorities if and when needed. However, Trudeau did not insist that the situation is absolutely calm and devoid of alleged threats. "Let’s be very clear: the threat continues. We do see social media activity or people who continue to be focused on protesting, and perhaps, illegal protesting," he said. “But the acute emergency is now over.” Law enforcement officers and safety experts have reassured the government that the tools available to police would be sufficient to deal with further emergencies, Trudeau added. The wave of protests across Canada began in mid-January, with tens of thousands of truckers and other Canadians converged peacefully on Ottawa to seek the government to scrap the COVID-19 vaccine mandates. The protest eventually united large swaths of Canadian society and evolved into a demonstration against the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The Ottawa leg of the protests were routed by law enforcement over the weekend after the Trudeau government granted itself sweeping new powers through invocation of the previously unused Emergencies Act.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The former President of the New York Police Department’s Sergeants Benevolent Association has been charged with stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars from the organization through the use of fake expense reports, the US Justice Department said.

"Edward D. Mullins, the former President of the Sergeants Benevolent Association ("SBA"), the union that represents all current and former Sergeants of the New York City Police Department, was charged with one count of wire fraud in connection with a scheme to steal hundreds of thousands of dollars from the SBA, through the submission of fraudulent expense reports," the Justice Department said in a news release on Wednesday.

For nearly two decades, from around 2002 to October 2021, Mullins was entrusted to look after the welfare of SBA's membership as its president, but was instead perpetrating a scheme to steal from the union and its members, the release said.

The fraud committed by Mullins included using his personal credit card to pay for meals at high-end restaurants and purchasing luxury personal items, and then submitting false and inflated expense reports to the SBA, seeking reimbursement for those bills as legitimate SBA expenditures, the release said.

"Altogether, Mullins was reimbursed for over $1 million in expenses from the SBA, the majority of which was fraudulently obtained," the release added.

Mullins surrendered to the FBI in Manhattan on Wednesday morning and was brought before US Magistrate Judge Gabriel Gorenstein, according to the release.

Biden Not Considering Meeting With Putin Right Now - White House

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is not considering meeting with President Vladimir Putin or having other type of engagement with the Russian leader at the moment, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

"No, we're not considering a meeting with President Putin or engagement with him right now," Psaki said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

US Not Going to Be in War With Russia Over Ukraine - White House
WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States will not engage in a war with Russia and will not deploy troops to fight in Ukraine, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said during a press briefing.

"We are not going to be in a war with Russia or putting military troops on the ground in Ukraine fighting Russia," Psaki said on Wednesday.

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US Ready to Release More Oil From Reserves Amid Ukraine Crisis – White House

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – The United States is ready to release more oil from the national strategic reserve to minimize a possible impact of anti-Russia sanctions on the global energy market amid the crisis in Ukraine, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said during a press briefing.

"The option of releasing more oil from US strategic reserve is certainly on the table," Psaki said on Wednesday when asked what measures the Biden administration is considering to minimize the consequences of sanctions on Russia.

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White House Says Sees No Immediate, Specific Threat of Cyberattack in US

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The US government does not see any threats of cyberattacks against the United States, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said during a press briefing.

"There is no current threat as it relates to cyber here [against the United States]," Psaki said on Wednesday. "There's still no immediate, specific threat."

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White House Says US in Contact With Ukraine About Latest Cyberattack Against Govt., Banks

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is in contact with Ukraine about the latest cyberattack against banks and government websites, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.

"We have not attributed today’s activity," Psaki said on Wednesday when asked if the United States believes Russia is responsible for the cyberattack. "We do consider it, as I think some of my NSC colleagues said, to be consistent with the type of activity Russia would carry out in a
bid to destabilize Ukraine. "We are in conversation with Ukraine regarding this cyber-related [incident], including as recently as today, and we're going to move with urgency to assess the nature and extent of this, what steps need to be taken, and therefore a response."

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Black Americans Face More Income Insecurity Than Americans Overall – Poll

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - African Americans face higher levels of economic insecurity than Americans overall, with the issue aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic and financial and unemployment challenges, according to a Pew Research Foundation poll out Wednesday.

"The survey also finds Black Americans are less secure in their finances than Americans overall: 60% of Black Americans say their household finances meet basic needs with at least a little left over for extras, compared with 71% of all Americans. Similarly, while 36% of Black Americans have a three-month emergency fund, 54% of all Americans say they have one. Similar gaps between the groups exist across all major demographic subgroups," the pollster said.

Seventy percent of black adults with incomes in the upper bracket say they have an emergency or rainy day fund to cover three months of expenses, which is more than three times the share (21%) of black adults with lower incomes who say the same. As for black adults with middle incomes, fewer than half (44%) have an emergency fund.

Twenty-four percent of black adults with a high school diploma or less say they have a three-month emergency fund, and a little over a third of black adults with some college experience say the same. Lastly, the gap between those with at least a college degree is smaller: 53% of black adults with a bachelor's degree and 57% with a post-graduate degree say they have an emergency fund.

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US Has Not Seen Indications That Active Military Channels With Russia 'Closed' - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department has not seen any signs that active military channels of communication with Russian counterparts have been shut down, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said during a press briefing.

"I would point to conversations that we read out in just recent days. Secretary [Lloyd Austin] spoke with Minister Shoigu just a few days ago. Chairman Milley has had many conversations with General Gerasimov, his counterpart," Kirby said on Wednesday. "And we have seen no indication that those lines of communication between those two leaders are closed."

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US Concerned by Creation of Alternative World Order by Russia, China - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned by the creation of an alternative world order by the Russia and China, US Secretary of State Ned Price said during a press briefing.

"I think what gives us concern... is this growing partnership between Russia and the PRC [People’s Republic of China], and I say it's concerning because we talk about a rules-based international order that has been at the crux of seven-plus decades of unprecedented levels of stability, or security, or prosperity," Price said on Wednesday. "It is true, we think, that Russia and the PRC also want a world order.”

Price said Russia and China appear to be developing the vision of a new world order together, but immediately emphasized its likely shortcomings.

"This is an order that is, and would be, profoundly illiberal, an order that stands in contrast to the system that countries around the world - including, by the way, Russia and in some ways the PRC - have built over the last seven decades," he said.

Price also said the engagement between Russia and China is reflective of the division of the world between democracies and autocracies - an issue President Joe Biden has frequently talked about.

Earlier in February, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin urged the Western countries to cease escalating tensions with respect to the development of relations between Russia and China.

On February 4, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited China, where he held talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The two leaders focused discussions on deepening bilateral relations and economic cooperation, and signed a package of documents alongside a joint Russia-China statement on the international relations ushering in a new era.

In the joint statement, Russia and China expressed a shared perspective on nuclear non-proliferation, arms control and denounced further NATO enlargement.

White House Says Does Not Know What Reports About Russian Full-Scale 'Invasion' Based On

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration does not know what media reports warning of a full-scale “invasion” by Russia against Ukraine are based on, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"We don't know what that's based on," Psaki told a press briefing when asked about new media reports saying that the United States shared new intelligence with Ukraine warning about a full-scale invasion by Russia at any moment.
SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS
* Ukraine’s parliament on Wednesday approved the declaration of a state of emergency in the country for 30 days, except for the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk regions, starting on February 23 at 22:00 GMT.
* Security of the Mariupol city in the Kiev-controlled Donbas region will be strengthened, the office of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said.
* The Ukrainian crisis may lead to the worst refugee crisis in the world today, with some 5 million people possibly displaced, the US ambassador to the United Nations told the UN General Assembly.
* Ukraine is not planning a military offensive in Donbas, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba told the UN General Assembly.

TENSION IN THE DONBAS
* Kiev would be willing to talk to the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) but can not do it because of pressure from radicals, DPR head Denis Pushilin told the SolovyovLive show on YouTube on Wednesday.
* A soldier of the Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) was killed after shelling from the Ukrainian side, the LPR mission to the Joint Center for Control and Coordination of the ceasefire regime said.
* At least 96,000 people have been already evacuated from the Donbas region to Russia, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia told the UN General Assembly.
* The Ukrainian armed forces are evicting civilians from their houses in the Zolote town and the Popasna city in Donbas to settle their military personnel, spokesman for the LPR people’s militia Ivan Filiponenko said.

NORD STREAM 2
* US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he has directed his administration to impose sanctions on Nord Stream 2 AG pipeline constructor and operator and on its corporate officers.
* A German fund, created to protect Nord Stream 2 from possible US sanctions, has withdrawn its support for the project, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern former Minister-President Erwin Sellering said.
* Russian Ambassador to Berlin Sergey Nechaev said he regrets the decision of the German authorities on the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project and expressed hope that it is temporary, as the project is essential for Europe’s energy security.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA
* German business calls on the European Union to take "proportional" measures against Russia in response to the recognition of the Donbas republics, Michael Harms, the executive director of the German Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations, said on Wednesday.
* The European Union officially adopted a package of sanctions against Russia over the recognition of self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk.
* Moscow will respond with strong measures to the US sanctions, and they will be sensitive to Washington, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
* The European Union’s new package of sanctions against Russia over the situation in eastern Ukraine will also target the media sector, the European External Action Service (EEAS) said.

PUTIN-ERDOGAN TALKS
* Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday discussed the development of long-term legal security guarantees for Russia over phone, the Kremlin said.
* Putin and Erdogan exchanged views on Moscow recognizing the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk during a phone conversation, the Kremlin said.
* Erdogan told Putin during a phone conversation that a military conflict in Ukraine serves no one’s interest, the Turkish president’s administration said.

UK REVIEWS RT LICENCE
* UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Wednesday said that his government has requested the Office of Communications (Ofcom) to review the RT’s licence following Moscow’s decision to recognize the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.
* If the United Kingdom makes moves against Russian media, Moscow will surely impose response measures, Maria Zakharova, the Russian Foreign Ministry’s spokeswoman, said.
* UK’s media regulator Ofcom has always recognized RT’s right to broadcast in the country and has not detected any code violations for four years, RT’s deputy editor-in-chief Anna Belkina told Sputnik.

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Pentagon Says No Expectation of Greater Permanent Troop Presence on NATO Eastern Flank

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States military does not expect at this time to establish a greater permanent troop presence on NATO’s eastern flank amid heightened tensions with Russia, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday. "There is no expectation at this time that we’re going to move to more permanent basing on NATO’s eastern flank. What we’re talking about now are short-term, temporary, rotational redeployments," Kirby said during a press briefing.
US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Tuesday ordered 800 troops and 20 AH-64 helicopters to the Baltic region amid increasing tensions between Russia and Ukraine. The US is also sending
eight F-35 jets from Germany to NATO's eastern flank and 12 Apache helicopters from Greece to Poland.

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US Adds Nord Stream 2 AG, Matthias Warnig to Sanctions List - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has added the Nord Stream 2 AG project company and its Managing Director Matthias Warnig to its sanctions list, the US Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

"The following individual has been added to OFAC's SDN [Office's of Foreign Assets Control Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List] Warnig, Matthias," the Treasury Department said in a statement. "The following entity has been added to OFAC's SDN List: Nord Stream 2 AG."

OFAC also authorized the wind down of transactions involving Nord Stream 2 AG through March 2.

US Not in Position to Attribute Latest Cyberattacks on Ukrainian Websites - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department is not in a position to attribute latest cyber attacks on Ukrainian websites, Pentagon Spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"I don’t think we are in a position to attribute these cyber disruptions," Kirby told a press briefing. "Again not in a position right now to attribute them to anyone entity. I would just say again this is of a piece of a Russian playbook, which is to disrupt in cyberspace."

US Communicates to Pakistan Its Position on Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration informed Pakistan about its position on the situation in Ukraine, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"We've communicated to Pakistan our position regarding Russia's further renewed invasion of Ukraine and we have briefed them on our efforts to pursue diplomacy over war," Price said
during a press briefing when asked about Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's scheduled meeting with Russians President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.
Price said the United States is aware of the trip and underscored that so-called responsible countries should object to Russia's actions.
The United States views its partnership with Ukraine as critical to US interests, Price added.
Putin and Khan will discuss bilateral relations and the situation in South Asia during their scheduled meeting on February 24, according to the Kremlin.
On Monday, Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the breakaway people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Under new treaties, Moscow pledged to ensure the security of the two Russian-speaking republics.
Russia's decision came after the situation on the line of contact between Ukraine and the breakaway republics significantly worsened.

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FBI Agent Pleads Guilty to Las Vegas Casino Gambling With US Funds – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - An FBI special agent has entered a guilty plea to a charge of gambling with US government funds in a Las Vegas casino, the Department of Justice announced on Wednesday.
"Scott Carpenter, 40, of New York, pleaded guilty to one count of conversion of government money," the press release stated. "At sentencing, Carpenter faces a statutory maximum penalty of one year in prison, supervised release and restitution."
According to court documents, in July 2017, Carpenter, then an FBI special agent in New York City and three other FBI agents traveled to Las Vegas to conduct an undercover operation. After the conclusion of the operation, Carpenter went to a casino’s high limit room, where he gambled on blackjack with $13,500 in government money, the Justice Department said.

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Texas Man Admits to Hate Attack on Asian Family, Stabbing 6-Year-Old Boy – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - A Texas man entered three guilty pleas in a federal court to attacking an Asian family out shopping and stabbing their six-year-old son in the head with intent to kill because he believed they were responsible for the pandemic, the Department of Justice said on Wednesday.
"The Justice Department announced today that Jose Gomez III, 21, of Midland, Texas, pleaded guilty to three counts of committing a hate crime for attacking an Asian family he believed was responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic because he believed them to be Chinese," the release said.
According to documents filed in connection with the plea, Gomez entered a Sam’s Club Warehouse in Midland, Texas, behind an Asian family with young children on March 14, 2020. Gomez first punched the father then attacked his young son with an eight inch steak knife, the release said.

"Gomez slashed open the face of RC, the then-six-year-old child. The blade entered millimeters from RC’s right eye, split his right ear and wrapped around to the back of his skull. Gomez also stabbed a Sam’s Club employee who intervened to stop Gomez from further assaulting the Asian family," the release said.

Gomez admitted after his attack that he had attempted to kill the 6-year-old child and had attacked the store employee because he was preventing him from killing the boy. Gomez faces a maximum sentence of life in prison and for each offense, a $250,000 fine, the release said.

Difficult Issues Remain Unresolved, Little Time Remaining for JCPOA Deal - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Little time remains to reach a deal between the United States and Iran on a return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) due to a number of unresolved issues between the parties, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"There has been significant progress and we are close to a possible deal, but at the same time, a number of very difficult issues remain unresolved. What we know is that there is very little time remaining to reach a deal, to resolve these remaining issues, given the pace of Iran’s nuclear advances," Price said during a press briefing.

However, if Iran shows seriousness of purpose during diplomatic engagements in Vienna, a deal could be reached in a matter of days, Price added.

State Dept. on Nord Stream 2: No Sanctions Are Permanent, They Designed to Deter War

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Sanctions are specifically designed to change behavior, they are not permanent, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday, while commenting on whether the latest Nord Stream 2 sanctions are permanent.

"There is no sanction in any responsible sanctions program around the world that is permanent," Price stated. "This is not a policy to be purely punitive, this is a policy to change behavior, in this case this is a policy to deter a further Russian invasion of Ukraine, to deter a war, a bloody costly devastating war that would take place on European soil and would constitute the greatest threat to peace and security since the conclusion of World War 2, certainly since the end of the Cold War."
State Dept. Says Up To Ukraine to Decide on Whether to Keep Diplomatic Ties With Russia

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - It is up to Kiev to decide whether it wants to maintain diplomatic relations with Moscow, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"That is a decision for the Ukrainian government to make," Price told a press briefing, when asked whether Ukraine should continue diplomatic relations with Russia.

On Tuesday, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that Kiev is considering cutting off diplomatic relations with Moscow, after the latter recognized the breakaway republics of Donbas as independent.

Russia’s decision came after the situation on the line of contact between Ukraine and the self-proclaimed republics significantly worsened. Donetsk and Luhansk authorities ordered evacuation of civilians to Russia late last week.

US Aims to Keep Embassy Open in Russia Amid Ukraine Crisis - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States will strive to keep its diplomatic mission open in Russia to be able to better communicate during times of crises, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"We believe in times of conflict, in times of crisis, that the ability to communicate is in some ways even more imperative... It will be our goal to be in a position to maintain diplomatic communication, the ability to convey clearly any messages that we need to send to the Russian Federation. Embassies are an important tool in that," Price told reporters when asked if the US will keep its Moscow embassy open in the event of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

US Forces Hit al-Shabaab Terrorist Targets in Somalia With Airstrikes - AFRICOM

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – US forces have carried out new air strikes against al-Shabaab terrorists (affiliated with the Al-Qaeda terror group, banned in Russia) after they attacked Somali government military units near Duduble in the East African country, Africa Command (AFRICOM) announced on Wednesday.

US forces are authorized to conduct strikes in support of combatant commander-designated partner forces under the 2001 Authorization of Use for Military Force, the release noted.

"A battle-damage assessment is still pending. The command’s initial assessment is that no civilians were injured or killed as a result of this airstrike. The Federal Government of Somalia and US Africa Command forces take great measures to prevent civilian casualties," AFRICOM said.

Violent extremist organizations like al-Shabaab present long-term threats to the United States and regional interests, the release said.

Elon Musk Praises US Justice Dept. Probe on Short-Selling, Lampoons Securities Commission

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Tesla CEO Elon Musk has lauded the US Justice Department for fulfilling his long-called investigation into short-selling of shares in the electric car maker and took a swipe at the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) for not doing the same.

"I am greatly encouraged by the Justice Department investigating short sellers," Musk said in a statement to CNBC on Wednesday. "This is something the SEC should have done, but, curiously, did not."

The Justice Department was investigating two investors who had previously shorted Tesla’s stock, CNBC said. The SEC, meanwhile, has been scrutinizing Tesla and Musk, pitting the regulator into a vicious legal battle with the company and its billionaire chief executive.

Musk has taken his fight with the SEC to the public, calling the regulator the "short-seller enrichment commission."

Persons cannot sell houses and cars they does not own, but one can sell stock one does not own, Must said in January of 2021, adding that shorting is a scam that is legal only for vestigial reasons.

The SEC recently submitted a letter to a US federal judge in response to Musk’s allegations that the agency had "broken promises" and engaged in a "pattern of conduct" amounting to harassment with him, after his settlement over a miscommunication with Tesla shareholders.

In his statement to CNBC, Musk also hit out at investing firms that relied on short selling.

"Too often, sophisticated hedge funds have used short selling and complex derivatives to take advantage of small investors," he said. "They will short a company, conduct a negative publicity campaign to drive the stock price down temporarily and cash out, then do it all over again many times. The term for this, as you may be aware, is 'short & distort.'"

In 2018, Musk famously sent Tesla shares short-seller David Einhorn a box of red satin underwear called "Short Shorts" to mock the hedge fund manager.
However, Musk is known for moving markets himself, often by statements on Twitter. That practice has prompted some investors to call on the SEC to apply even more regulatory oversight on Musk.

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Only 25% of Americans Say US Should Play Major Role in Russia-Ukraine Conflict - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Only about a quarter of Americans say the United States should play a major role in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, a new poll by AP-NORC revealed on Wednesday.

About 26% of US adults say the United States should be deeply engaged in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, with 32% of Democrats and 22% of Republicans supporting the approach, the poll results show.

Some 40% of Americans approve President Joe Biden's foreign policy choices and the United States' relationship with Russia while more than a half (53%) are concerned about Russia's influence around the world, the poll results also show.

Another quarter of Americans said they have no confidence in the US intelligence agencies. Over 4 in 10 have a great deal of confidence in the US military, although it is declining, according to the poll results.

The poll was conducted on February 18-21, 2022 online and via telephone interviews among 1,289 adults. The margin of sampling error is +/- 3.7 percentage points.

Biden Says Directed His Administration to Impose Sanctions on Nord Stream 2 AG
(Adds details, background in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he has directed his administration to impose sanctions on Nord Stream 2 AG pipeline constructor and operator and on its corporate officers.

"Today, I have directed my administration to impose sanctions on Nord Stream 2 AG and its corporate officers," Biden said in a statement.

Biden further said he will not hesitate to take additional steps against Russia if the situation in Ukraine worsens.

The Biden administration had waived these sanctions last year. Biden's decision comes a day after Germany announced that it would halt certification of the pipeline.

The United States and its European allies imposed new sanctions against Russia after President Vladimir Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the breakaway people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Under new treaties, Moscow pledged to ensure the security of the two Russian-speaking republics.
The US sanctions target Russia’s Vnesheconombank, or VEB, and the Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company (PSB), the country’s sovereign debt, its elites and their families. Russia’s decision came after the situation on the line of contact between Ukraine and the breakaway republics significantly worsened.

Three White Supremacists Plead Guilty to Power Grid Attack Plot – Justice Department

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – Three men have entered guilty pleas in a court in Columbus in the US state of Ohio to domestic terrorism crime charges related to plans to attack power grids, the Department of Justice announced on Wednesday.

"Three men pleaded guilty today to crimes related to conspiring to attack power grids throughout the United States in furtherance of racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism advocating for the supremacy of the white race," the press release said.

Christopher Brenner Cook, 20, of Columbus, Ohio; Jonathan Allen Frost, 24, of Katy, Texas and of West Lafayette, Indiana; and Jackson Matthew Sawall, 22, of Oshkosh, Wisconsin each pleaded guilty to one count of conspiring to provide material support to terrorists.

"According to these pleas, three individuals engaged in a disturbing plot to attack our country’s energy infrastructure, damage the economy, and stoke division in our society, all in the name of white supremacy," Assistant Attorney General Matthew Olsen said in the release.

The plan was to attack the substations, or power grids, with powerful rifles. The defendants had conversations about how the possibility of the power being out for many months could cause war, even a race war, and induce the next Great Depression, the Justice Department said.


WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Northrop Grumman has won a more than $340 million contract to develop and manufacture a new deep space radar system for the US Space Force, the company announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"Northrop Grumman Corporation has been awarded a $341 million contract by the US Space Force (USSF) Space Systems Command (SSC) to develop, test and deliver a Deep-Space Advanced Radar Capability (DARC) in support of its Space Domain Awareness mission," the release said.

The initial DARC contract includes the design, development and delivery of a Site 1 system located in the Indo-Pacific region, expected to be completed in 2025. There will be a follow-up construction of two additional sites strategically placed around the world, the release said.
"The DARC program will field a resilient, ground-based radar providing our nation with significantly enhanced space domain awareness for geostationary orbit," the release added. Current ground-based systems operate at night and can be impacted by weather conditions. However, DARC will provide an all-weather, 24/7 capability to monitor the highly dynamic and rapidly evolving geosynchronous orbital environment critical to national and global security, according to the release.

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Blinken, Truss Discuss Cooperation to Put Sanctions on Russia Over Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his UK counterpart, Elizabeth Truss, discussed recent cooperation between the two countries to impose new sanctions on Russia over the Ukraine situation, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.
"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with UK Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss," Price said in a press release. "They discussed the extensive bilateral coordination on developing and executing swift and severe economic measures against Russia."
The United States and its European allies imposed new sanctions against Russia after President Vladimir Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Under new treaties, Moscow pledged to ensure the security of the two Russian-speaking republics.
The US sanctions target Russia’s Vnesheconombank, or VEB, and the Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company (PSB), the country’s sovereign debt, its elites and their families. President Joe Biden vowed that more sanctions will follow if the situation in Ukraine escalates further. Russia’s decision came after the situation on the line of contact between Ukraine and the breakaway republics significantly worsened.

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Biden Says Directed His Administration to Impose Sanctions on Nord Stream 2 AG

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he has directed his administration to impose sanctions on Nord Stream 2 AG pipeline constructor and operator and on its corporate officers.
"Today, I have directed my administration to impose sanctions on Nord Stream 2 AG and its corporate officers," Biden said in a statement.
Ted Cruz Says Will Unblock State Dept. Nominees as Biden Resumes Nord Stream 2 Sanctions

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Senator Ted Cruz announced on Wednesday that he will lift his hold on confirming State Department nominees now that the Biden administration has resumed sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project.

"After the administration granted the waivers, Sen. Cruz committed to using all prerogatives available to him as a US Senator to reverse this decision, including holding certain State Department nominees. After engaging with the administration and following today's announcement, Senator Cruz will lift these holds," Cruz's office said in a statement.

However, neither President Joe Biden nor his administration have made any formal announcements on resuming the sanctions regime on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project.

"Today's announcement should be followed by additional steps inside the Biden administration and in Congress to permanently lock in sanctions," Cruz said in the statement.

Earlier this year, the United States granted a sanctions waiver to Nord Stream 2 AG, the natural gas pipeline operator, while on Tuesday German Chancellor Olaf Scholz instructed the country's economy ministry on Tuesday to take a "necessary administrative step" to suspend the certification of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline operator. Scholz's decision came after Russia recognized the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DPR and LPR).

Cruz, meanwhile, has been engaged in a legislative battle with Democratic senators as he was trying to push a bill that would force the US government to re-impose economic sanctions on the company building Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to Europe.

To get what he wanted, Cruz has blocked the confirmation of at least a dozen Biden nominees for the State Department, including two Assistant Secretaries of State, who were approved by the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Boeing Wins $103Mln Light Attack Helicopter Contract for Thailand's Army - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Boeing has won a contract to build six AH-6 light helicopter gunships for Thailand, the company announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"Boeing has been awarded a $103.7 million contract by the US Department of Defense as part of a foreign military sale for eight AH-6 light attack reconnaissance helicopters to Thailand," the release said.

The deal is a step in the Royal Thai Army's plan to replace its fleet of aging AH-1F Cobras as part of the country's defense modernization efforts, Boeing said. The aircraft will be produced in Mesa, Arizona, with deliveries planned through 2024, the release said.
"From its unmatched power-to-weight ratio to its extensive, integrated digital communications suite, the AH-6 offers superior performance, capability and versatility and will be a force-multiplier for the Royal Thai Army," Boeing Attack Helicopter Programs Business Development Director Jessie Farrington said in the release.

Thailand is Boeing's second international customer for the aircraft and the company has been a trusted partner to Thailand's aviation and defense customers for more than 60 years, the release added.

The AH-6 features an advanced mission computer capable of processing large amounts of data and sharing system information with the rest of the aircraft quickly enhancing safety and situational awareness, enabling faster decision making, reducing pilot workload, according to the release.

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Ukraine’s Kuleba Says Ready for Talks With Lavrov if Russia Chooses Diplomacy Over War

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Wednesday that he is ready to sit down for talks with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov if Russia is willing to change its course on Ukraine and chose diplomacy over war.

"If he is ready to convince President Putin to stop this madness, we are ready to sit down. I’m open," Kuleba told reporters at the United Nations. "If he just reinforces the narratives of President Putin and chooses war to diplomacy, that's his choice. And he will pay for that."

Kuleba said since his appointment as Ukraine’s Foreign Minster in 2020, he had attempted on numerous occasions to arrange a meeting with Lavrov.

"I reached out to speak bilaterally on the phone to him, but he never picks up the phone. He never agreed to meet in the Normandy format. He is talented enough to find all kinds of excuses why he shouldn't show up. So I don't care about him," Kuleba said.

Ukraine, the United States and its allies have accused Russia of deploying additional troops along the Ukrainian border in an alleged preparation for invasion. Russia has repeatedly dismissed these allegations, saying it has no intention of invading Ukraine, while stressing that it has the right to move its troops within its sovereign territory.

Russia has also expressed concerns over NATO military activity near its borders and ongoing military support of Ukraine, including an increase in the number of military advisers in the breakaway Donbas region and increased arms deliveries to Kiev. Russia has said NATO’s plans to expand further eastward pose a direct threat to its national security.

The situation in the Donbas region has escalated in recent days, with the breakaway Donetsk and Luhanski people’s republics (DPR and LPR) ordering general mobilization in anticipation of an offensive by the Ukrainian military. In addition, the local authorities evacuated some 96,000 residents to Russia.

On Monday, Putin signed decrees recognizing the independence of the DPR and LPR as well as agreements on cooperation and assistance with them. The Russian parliament ratified the documents on Tuesday and allowed for the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces there.