US General Watching China ‘Like a Hawk’ for Taiwan Invasion, Says ‘Haven’t Seen Anything So Far’

The head of the US Pacific Air Forces on Thursday said that his surveillance assets were watching Chinese President Xi Jinping “like a hawk” for signs that the People’s Liberation Army is preparing to invade Taiwan.

“I haven’t seen anything so far, but that doesn’t mean they haven’t talked about it internally and doesn’t mean that they won’t try something,” Gen. Kenneth Wilsbach said at the Air Force Association’s annual conference, according to Air Force Times.

Since Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine last week, speculation has increased that China could make a similar move against Taiwan. Beijing regards the autonomous island as a Chinese province in rebellion, and sees US aid to the government in Taipei as a meddling in China’s internal affairs.

The US agreed with that notion in principle when it normalized relations with Beijing in 1979, but has continued to openly but informally funnel military aid to Taiwan, as well as provide the island nation with diplomatic support in international affairs. Just a handful of nations recognize the Republic of China government in Taiwan as the legitimate government of all of China - nearly all are small states firmly in the US orbit.

Beijing continues to assert that Taiwan is destined to reunite with mainland China, but prefers that it be done peacefully. Jinping’s government proposed a “one country, two systems” approach akin to Hong Kong, a former British colony that London returned to Beijing in 1997.

Under the system, local autonomy is preserved in a “special administrative region” to accommodate the conversion of Hong Kong’s capitalist system toward Chinese socialism, but certain overarching national laws also apply, such as those for national security.

China has long accused the US of encouraging separatist forces in Taiwan, especially through the increasingly close relationship with the government of the pro-independence president of the island, Tsai Ing-wen, since she took office in 2016. Beijing has warned that if Taiwan declares itself an independent country, it would mean war.

The US and Taiwan have accused China of planning to invade Taiwan for more than a year, after Taipei began scrambling fighter jets in response to Chinese aircraft flying through a broad area of international airspace that Taipei claims as its “air defense identification zone (ADIZ).” Such zones have no basis in international law, but Chinese aircraft flights are commonly reported in Western media as “violations of Taiwanese airspace,” making it seem as if the PLA is banging at the metaphorical gates. One such flight on February 24, the day Russia’s special military operation began in Ukraine, aroused particular anxiety, but turned out to be as uneventful as the previous flights.

While China has given no indication that it will soon move against Taiwan, the US seems intent on provoking a reaction. Earlier this week, a delegation of more than half a dozen former top US
security officials traveled to Taiwan to meet with Tsai and other senior Taiwanese figures, and the following day, former CIA director and former US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, arrived for his own visit.

On Friday, Pompeo posted a series of tweets calling for US President Joe Biden to recognize Taiwan as an independent state, calling it a “political, diplomatic and sovereignty reality.” “It is my view that the US government should immediately take necessary, and long-overdue, steps to do the right and obvious thing, that is to offer the Republic of China (Taiwan) America’s diplomatic recognition as a free and sovereign country,” the Trump-appointed diplomat said. “This isn’t about Taiwan’s future independence, it’s about recognizing an unmistakable already existent reality. That reality is, as many of your past & present leaders have made clear, there’s no need for Taiwan to declare independence because it’s already an independent country.” Asked about Pompeo’s comments at a Friday presser, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin described him as a “former politician with bankrupt credibility. His lunatic remarks will lead nowhere.”

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US Supreme Court Says FBI Can Invoke ‘State Secrets’ to Evade Scrutiny of Post-9/11 Mosque Spying

The US Supreme Court has ruled that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the US domestic intelligence service and principal federal law enforcement agency, is not required to divulge “state secrets,” even to a judge whose court is weighing a case about them. The “state secret” is why the FBI chose several mosques in Orange County, California, a densely populated suburban area southeast of Los Angeles, in the months and years after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. It was called Operation Flex: the FBI sent more than 15,000 undercover informants into mosques across the United States “to determine whether particular individuals were involved in the recruitment and training of individuals in the United States or overseas for possible terrorist activity,” as the bureau has described it. Those agents collected vast amounts of electronic data, including recorded conversations, and compiled long lists of names and phone numbers. That surveillance was authorized by a purpose-made court established by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA). The secretive courts are supposedly intended to safeguard the constitutional protections of Americans against undue surveillance, but operate almost with impunity. Ironically, they were created in the aftermath of several embarrassing revelations in the 1970s about overreaches by the extensive US surveillance apparatus.

One of those informants, Craig Monteilh, was sent into Orange County’s Muslim community in 2006 to spy on worshippers and help the FBI identify those who might become radicalized. After Monteilh began talking to adherents in the mosque about violent jihad, community members quickly reported him to the FBI. Two years later, following a falling out with the FBI, Monteilh called a press conference and blew the whistle on Operation Flex.
Three community members then brought a lawsuit against the FBI alleging the operation was “dragnet surveillance” unfairly targeting the American Muslim community. A federal judge in 2012 used the state secrets privilege, a principle established by the high court in 1953 to block the release of information damaging to national security - although the establishing incident was ironically revealed to have been a lie. In 2019, an appeals court reversed the 2012 decision, directing the court to review the evidence, including so-called state secrets. However, the decision was then appealed by the Trump administration, with the Supreme Court hearing their arguments in November.

“We have never suggested that an assertion of the state secrets privilege can be defeated by showing that the evidence was unlawfully obtained,” US Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito wrote in the court’s unanimous Friday decision.

“The absence of any statutory reference to the state secrets privilege is strong evidence that the availability of the privilege was not altered in any way,” he said. “Regardless of whether the state secrets privilege is rooted only in the common law (as respondents argue) or also in the Constitution (as the Government argues), the privilege should not be held to have been abrogated or limited unless Congress has at least used clear statutory language.”

In other words, when Congress passed FISA in 1978, it didn’t explicitly modify the state secrets privilege, so the FBI can refuse to show evidence to anyone, even to a federal judge. Alito, however, called their ruling “narrow” and bounced the case back down to a California court to establish a proper interpretation of the statute.

Pocket Rocket? German Feminists Demand Vulva-Shaped Spaceship to Challenge Phallic-Shaped Designs

In many scientific fields, a higher percentage of women participated in the Soviet Union in the 1960s than did in the United States, even today. One of those was Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space and the 12th human overall. The fictional film character Austin Powers made an extensive gag about it, and the fact hasn’t eluded the legions of social media users watching recent rocket launches: there’s no denying that rocket designs in recent years have a definite phallic shape. One feminist group has taken up a bold new mission: to get the European Space Agency (ESA) to design a space rocket with a shape evoking that other type of human genitalia: the vulva. According to Wer Braucht Feminismus? (Who Needs Feminism?) the group behind a Change.org petition, the purpose of the effort is to “make a statement for female empowerment.”

“We want to restore gender equality to the cosmos,” they said.

As of December 2021, just 72 of the 596 humans who have been into space have been women. The purpose of the design isn’t just to promote diversity, however, it’s also very efficient.
"The spaceship's shape is surprisingly aerodynamic, creating way less drag than when the vehicle punches through the Earth’s atmosphere," Dr. Lucia Hartmann, the rocket’s inventor, said in a statement accompanying the petition.

"Due to this optimized V-shape, it guarantees maximum fuel efficiency with an exterior made of reinforced carbon which enables it to withstand the most extreme temperatures," she added.

According to Daniel Rampsacher, a propulsion engineer at NASA's Goddard Space Center outside Washington, DC, the reason most rockets are the shape they are is mostly that it’s a proven design.

"Everything in our industry is more or less based on heritage," he told Slate in July 2021, when one particularly suggestive rocket owned by Jeff Bezos’ Blue Origin blasted off. "It's like, 'Well, what have we used in the past? What can we leverage? How can we reduce risk or reduce cost?'"

Wer Braucht Feminismus’s Twitter account, WHAT IS FEMINISM today, has mostly featured photos of women describing why feminism is important. As part of their recent campaign, they included an image with a quote by Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova, who, in addition to being the first woman in space, has been a staunch advocate of women in science.

"A bird cannot fly with one wing only. Human space flight cannot develop any further without the active participation of women," the quote reads. The Soviet Union made great strides toward gender equality, with more women not just studying in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, but achieving advanced degrees and powerful positions, than is seen even in the United States in the modern day.

Tereshkova flew into space on the Vostok 6 mission on June 16, 1963, spending three days in orbit. She later joined the leadership of the ruling Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and after the USSR was dissolved in 1991, she became a lawmaker. She was most recently elected to the Russian State Duma in 2016.

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US National Archives Hands Over More Trump Documents to House January 6 Panel

Former US President Donald Trump has been fighting a slowly losing battle to keep his presidential files out of the hands of a Democrat-led congressional probe into the events of January 6, 2021, when his supporters stormed the Capitol Building following a rally he hosted.

"Yesterday, the Select Committee received additional production of records from the National Archives," a House of Representatives Select Committee aide told Reuters on Friday. "This included records that the former President attempted to keep hidden behind claims of privilege."

The document in question was the White House visitor logs. Two weeks prior, US President Joe Biden ordered the National Archives to hand over the dossier, which chief archivist David Ferriero affirmed he would do, barring a court order to the contrary.

The exact scope or contents of the logs is unclear, as is the ultimate purpose behind the House Select Committee seeking them, except perhaps to verify if certain suspect persons visited the
presidential mansion in the time leading up to the January 6 insurrection. Dana Remus, the Biden White House’s chief legal counsel, only described the sought-after files as “entries in visitor logs showing appointment information for individuals who were processed to enter the White House complex, including on Jan. 6, 2021.”

Trump has sought to block delivery of the files to the committee under the aegis of “executive privilege,” but a series of court rulings, including by the US Supreme Court, have slowly chipped away at that defense.

In late January, the US Department of Justice said it would give the committee four of the over 700 pages it has sought, because they were not covered by Trump’s claims. It’s unclear if those files have already been handed over. However, in early February, the National Archives and Records Administration revealed that it had retrieved 15 boxes of records from Trump’s resort in Mar-a-Lago, Florida, out of which Trump had run much of his four years in office.

The House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6 Attack on the US Capitol has been gathering information for months on the planning and execution of the so-called Stop the Steal rally on January 6, 2021, hosted by Trump outside the White House, which preceded the assault on the Capitol.

At the rally, Trump urged his supporters to prevent the Democrats from “stealing” the November 2020 election, baselessly insisting his electoral loss to Biden had been achieved by fraud. Thousands of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol, where Congress was certifying the election results, sacking the building and sending lawmakers fleeing to safety. The rioters ultimately failed at their goal, and were cleared from the legislative building by police and National Guard, who garrisoned the city afterward with an unprecedented number of troops.

Five people died in the attack, including a US Capitol Police officer and a woman shot by a USCP officer outside the House chamber while she was attempting to break through the door. The officer was cleared of any wrongdoing in the incident.

More than 725 people have been charged with taking part, or playing a role, in the riot. Many of those subpoenaed by the Select Committee for documents or testimony have refused to cooperate. Some of those have been held in contempt of Congress, including Trump’s ex-chief adviser and former Breitbart editor Steve Bannon, and Trump’s chief of staff at the time, Mark Meadows.

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Russia Media Watchdog Limits Twitter Access as Booking.com Delists Russian Lodgings Amid Hostilities
By - Evan Craighead

 Earlier Friday, Roskomnadzor, the Russian Service for Supervision of Communications, announced that it would begin prohibiting the country’s access to Facebook due to the social media platform’s discrimination against Russian outlets, including RIA Novosti, Sputnik, and Russia Today.
As Moscow continues its special operation to demilitarize and ‘de-Nazify’ Ukraine, Russia’s media watchdog is concurrently attempting to defend itself against the discriminatory practices of both Twitter and Booking.com.

Per Roskomnadzor, access to the social media platform has been limited, and the online lodging marketplace is no longer offering patrons the opportunity to book accommodations within Russia.

The developments follow Russia’s decision to block access to Facebook, which notably joined Instagram in prohibiting Russia Today and Sputnik from reaching those in the European Union. At least 26 cases of Facebook’s discriminatory practices have been observed since October 2020, the watchdog declared.

Moscow initially announced that it would partially block Facebook, citing a violation of the “rights and freedoms of Russian nationals.”

Travelers attempting to plan a future excursion to Russia have also been sidelined by Booking.com, which is now refusing to offer listings based in Russia.

“0 properties are available in and around this destination,” returned a Friday search for Moscow, Russia.

Meanwhile, a search for Ukraine or a specific city, such as the capital of Kiev, is accompanied by the following disclaimer: “This location is currently experiencing an armed conflict which may pose an increased risk to customers’ and local communities’ safety and human rights. To make an informed decision about your stay, review any travel guidelines for this area provided by your government.”

The message urged potential travelers to book with a free cancellation option, as future conditions are unknown.

Nevertheless, those planning a trip can still book via a number of lodging aggregators, including Ostrovok, Tutu.ru, Yandex and other platforms, expert Alexei Volkov told RIA Novosti.

Volkov argued that Russian platforms now have room to grow in the market, as Booking.com accounted for some 35% to 40% of bookings, which made it the largest lodging marketplace in the country.

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By - Evan Craighead

Harkening back to the 44 B.C. assassination of Julius Caesar and the attempted assassination of Adolf Hitler in 1944, GOP Sen. Lindsey Graham stunned netizens and caused US officials to scramble on Thursday as he suggested to Fox News and social media that the “Russian people” must “fix” the situation in Ukraine by assassinating their president.

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham on Friday doubled down on his threatening rhetoric against Russian President Vladimir Putin, reiterating to Fox News that Russians must “rise up and take [Putin] down.”
The high-ranking conservative Republican politician proclaimed that Putin, who he dubbed a war criminal, and his Russian military leadership should be jailed for "stealing" Russia from its citizens and carrying out war crimes on its behalf.

The 66-year-old GOP senator also took aim at Russia’s ambassador to the US, Anatoly Antonov, who called the senator’s messaging "criminal," as well as "outrageous and unacceptable."

"That is not the position of the United States government and certainly not a statement you’d hear come from the mouth of anybody working in this administration," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday, responding to questions regarding Graham’s viral tweets.

On Thursday, Graham called on Russians to “step up to the plate” and channel their inner Brutus, referring to one of the many Roman politicians who killed Caesar.

The Republican lawmaker also floated that someone within the ranks of the Russian armed forces could be a “more successful Colonel Stauffenberg,” referring to the German military officer executed by the Nazis following a failed attempt to assassinate Hitler via a briefcase bomb.

The US senator’s calls for political assassination continued in a follow-up post, claiming Russian nationals must “fix” the situation, or face eternal darkness and “abject poverty” while being “isolated from the rest of the world.”

Despite pleas from netizens, Twitter has yet to remove Graham’s remarks.

It did not take long before the Russian Embassy in the US demanded a “strong condemnation of the criminal statements of this American,” whose Russophobic assertions come contrary to Washington’s claims that the US is a “guiding star” for morality and mankind.

Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov contextualized Graham’s remarks as part of the “hysterical Russophobic fit” that has been adopted by some Americans.

"These days, not everyone can keep a sound mind,” said Peskov. “Unfortunately, many people go mad.”

Both Republican and Democratic members of the US Congress were quick to speak out against the incendiary implications and international ramifications of Graham’s remarks.

“Seriously, wtf?” tweeted Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN). "I really wish our members of Congress would cool it and regulate their remarks as the administration works to avoid WWIII."

"Use massive economic sanctions; BOYCOTT Russian oil & gas; and provide military aid so the Ukrainians can defend themselves,” tweeted Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) “But we should not be calling for the assassination of heads of state.”

Even Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), herself recently censured for dangerous rhetoric, referred to her congressional colleague’s statements as “irresponsible, dangerous & unhinged.”

“Americans don’t want war,” Greene asserted in a denouncement of “warmongering politicians trying to tweet tough by demanding assassinations.”

Netizens and congressional colleagues repeatedly highlighted that Graham, who has spent nearly two decades in a Senate seat he is now struggling to keep, should recognize the weight of such a violent threat.
The Russian president has maintained that Russian forces will not occupy Ukraine, while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has observed that a "full-scale invasion" appears to have been ordered by Moscow.

Amid a buildup of Western and European sanctions leveled in retaliation against Moscow, the Kremlin revealed in a Friday announcement that its media watchdog has ordered limits on Facebook and Twitter.

Additionally, online lodging marketplace Booking.com is no longer offering patrons the opportunity to book accommodations within Russia.

By - Evan Craighead

US Vice President Kamala Harris is set to meet with the leadership in Poland and Romania next week as part of a pro-Ukraine effort to extend support to NATO and its eastern flank-allied countries dealing with the burgeoning rise in refugees fleeing violence amid the situation between forces mobilized by Kiev and Moscow.

Meghan McCain, who recently left daytime cable television for the DailyMail, went viral for several hours on Friday after openly casting doubt on the seriousness and foreign policy capabilities of Vice President Kamala Harris, who the White House selected to lead a support mission next week.

The trip spans from March 9 through March 11, and is slated to include stops in the cities of Warsaw, Poland, and Bucharest, Romania, per a White House release.

"Please for the love of God, send a serious person instead," McCain tweeted, quoting an article on the vice president's upcoming mission.

McCain also took aim at Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL), of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, for his alleged inaction regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ), a senator from McCain's home state.

McCain circled back to Harris hours later, asserting that her criticism was rooted in her respect for the office of the vice presidency.

"I believe given the gravity of what is going on in Ukraine, a more capable diplomat should be sent to negotiate," McCain added.

Despite her position, Harris has encountered opposition from several members of Congress who expressed doubts about her ability to "demonstrate the strength and unity of the NATO Alliance and US support for NATO's eastern flank allies in the face of Russian aggression," as the White House readout detailed.

"Kamala Harris has not succeeded in any of the tasks that have been assigned to her," tweeted Rep. Andy Biggs (R-AZ). "Why are we sending her to Europe again next week?"

Lance Gooden (R-TX) railed against both Harris and Biden, declaring that the US president will be "hiding in his basement" over the weekend while Ukraine grapples with conflict.
“Kamala Harris would be the last person I’d send back to Europe,” he tweeted hours later. Harris’ planned trip and associated Republican skepticism comes within the same week she received backlash for her polarizing “layman’s terms” breakdown of the ongoing situation in Ukraine.

“Ukraine is a country in Europe. It exists next to another country called Russia. Russia is a bigger country. Russia decided to invade a smaller country called Ukraine. So basically that’s wrong,” Harris said during a radio interview with “The Morning Hustle,” which has a predominantly Black American audience.

Harris’ previous international trip was to the Munich Security Conference, an event in which she spoke with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. She has also been in contact with various Eastern European leaders as of late, including Romanian Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă and Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

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Tweet & Delete: Patricia Arquette Gets Schooled for Demanding Russia’s Removal From NATO
By - Evan Craighead

Acronyms are not a strength for Academy Award-winning actress Patricia Arquette, who, in a since-deleted tweet, demanded Russia be removed from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) over claims that Moscow’s army at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant laid explosives around the facility in an attempt to “blackmail the whole of Europe.”

Some time passed on Friday before Arquette realized she was being verbally dragged through the grass by thousands of netizens who were less-than-amused by her error.

“I’m dyslexic. It’s in my bio and has been for years,” she proclaimed — although a quick look at her profile showed that to be another falsehood.

“A couple 14-hour work days laters and I flipped NATO and UN,” she claimed after deleting the initial tweet. “You will live.”

An overwhelming number of Twitter users used the alleged lapse as an opportunity to dunk on the self-proclaimed “troublemaker,” who reportedly has a history of instructing others to do “rudimentary research” before tweeting.

“So your agent finally explained NATO to you,” quipped Twitter user @Monices_Pieces. “That’s why you pay them the big bucks.”

Others went above and beyond to defend Arquette, including user Stacey (@YoRosesYo), who elected to overshare in an apparent effort to ease any social media anxiety.

“I called a student Robert for four years and that wasn’t even the poor kid’s name,” Stacey tweeted.

Supporters also claimed that Arquette, who refers to herself as an activist, should not be held to a higher standard than news hosts like Fox News’ Tucker Carlson and war hawk US politicians calling for violence.
“Some folks’ll really hold someone on Twitter to account more than an actual politician,” tweeted user SHANE REACTION.

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham has emerged as a prime example of a US politician whose violent rhetoric could have resulted in additional loss of human life.

Initially calling on Russian nations to “fix” their ongoing military conflict with Ukraine by eliminating Putin, Graham appeared to walk back his aggression in a monotone Friday morning appearance on Fox News. The broadcast was less than 24 hours after Graham floated a political assassination.

The Kremlin, as well as Washington, including Republicans and Democrats in Congress, quickly held the longtime senator and career politician accountable for his reckless comment.

Netizens were also quick to tell Graham that US officials should shy away from such comments, given Washington’s failures and the civilian losses associated with their own destabilization of foreign countries.

Hunting Iguanas in Florida Backyards Become New Tourist Attraction to Contain Invasive Reptile

If you’re the kind of person who dreams of pointing an air rifle at a large iguana and pulling the trigger, here is your chance. The invasive species has been ravaging Florida gardens to eat flowers, vegetables, and fruit trees. The pesky creatures have even been reported to tear out wiring, causing loss of internet, as well as power outages.

Green iguanas are taking over South Florida in large numbers, crawling over residents’ seawalls, fences, and leaving feces in their pools, backyards, porches and driveways. Close to 9,000 have been reported in South Florida, but since they’re difficult to track, that number is thought to be much higher.

The species, native to Central and South America as well as the Caribbean, can reach sexual maturity at 18 months and lay an average of 40 eggs a year.

Hunting Iguanas LLC will assist people in hunting an exotic prize, with one couple in Florida paying $500 for four hours of guided iguana shooting in Broward County.

“We have people come from all over the United States, all over,” said Gene Parker, company owner. “And their comment is, this is a sport and a hunt we never even dreamed of. I’ve got guys that’s hunted every animal in North America.”

If not used correctly, air rifles won’t immediately kill an iguana, and inexperienced shooters often subject the creatures to a cruel and lingering death, a scenario that could lead to the hunter being brought up on charges of animal cruelty.

“These air-rifle hunts inflict stunning levels of cruelty on iguanas,” said Barbara J. King, an author and anthropology professor at William and Mary University.

The practice of killing iguanas with an air rifle “should offend any person, including any hunter, who cares about animals. It’s because of us humans, through the pet trade, that these iguanas now roam through Florida and it’s up to us to find non-cruel, better yet non-lethal, ways to solve the problem,” she said.

Hunting green iguanas, like all nonnative species, is legal, as long as it is done humanely. Since the species has been reported by some as being a 'nightmare', many are glad enough to be rid of them, even if that means killing them. One Florida resident reported finding an iguana in her toilet.
Trapper Mike Kimmel, nicknamed “The Python Cowboy”, who removes both invasive Burmese pythons and green iguanas from homes, says he gets many calls from concerned homeowners and HOA communities. "Their home is under attack, they feel. They have these huge lizards that can be aggressive hanging all around their backyard and their front yard, sometimes on their porch and patio," says Kimmel. "They leave droppings everywhere and their feces contain salmonella so it’s a health issue."

“They compete with our native wildlife and vegetation. More now than ever it’s a really big problem.” Kimmel added, saying that the state hasn’t experienced a ‘cold snap’ in years, which causes iguanas to fall from trees as the cold essentially paralyzes them, making it much easier to remove them and euthanize them.

Once Kimmel traps and kills his iguanas, he says the skin can be used like any other leather for wallets and other products. The best meat of the iguana, he claims, is in the larger males’ cheeks. But some of the smaller ones he captures alive.

“Anything I live capture, and I’m legally able to, I always try to rehome it or turn it into a pet, or use it for education, whatever I can, euthanization is always the last option,” he said, holding an iguana he had just captured. “When they reach a certain size, when they’re adults, they won’t eat in captivity, they’ll starve themselves to death,” he said, adding that at that point euthanization becomes the only option for the species.

Thomas Portuallo, owner of Fort Lauderdale’s Iguana Control, declared his belief that there are “hundreds of thousands” of the creatures roaming the state. He says his company humanely exterminates green iguanas, using precharged pneumatic pistols which deliver a single shot to a lizard head.

“We don’t shoot to injure, we shoot with intent to kill,” Portuallo says. “My men are well-trained. We follow all laws in every municipality we work.”

Homeowners who don’t want blood on their hands or an animal cruelty lawsuits can control the backyard beasts by looking for their burrows, usually found by seawalls, and collapsing those holes. Portuallo adds that green iguanas love to eat hibiscus and bougainvillea, so removing those from one’s yard and adding crotons, ixora, or oleander, which they don’t care for, might let the pesky creatures know that they aren’t welcome.

DNA Tests Reveal Traces of Endangered Shark in Various Pet Food Brands

A study has revealed that several brands of cat and dog food show signs of endangered shark DNA. The endangered species is often obliquely listed as “ocean fish” as well as other code names on the ingredients label, so pet owners are oblivious as to whether they’re feeding their pets the meat of an endangered marine animal.

“The majority of pet owners are likely lovers of nature, and we think most would be alarmed to discover that they could be unknowingly contributing to the overfishing of shark populations,” said study authors, Ben Wainwright and Ian French, of Yale-NUS College.

The word “shark”, is not specifically written on any pet food ingredient label. Instead, companies label the illegal ingredient “ocean fish”, “white bait” or “white fish”, while some companies didn’t indicate any fish as an ingredient. Of the samples tested in the study, 31% contained shark DNA. The study did not mention brands by name.

The study, published Friday in the open science platform Frontiers in Marine Science, says that the global demand for shark fins, liver oil, and meat has caused a serious decline in the animal’s
population. Shark populations have decreased by 71% since 1970, according to widely-accepted research.

Declining shark populations have a devastating effect on the environment and the ecosystems the shark inhabits. As an apex predator, changing the distribution of their prey causes a decline in coral reefs and seagrass beds. Taking a shark out of its ecosystem also affects fisheries, causing groupers to thrive in their absence and gobble up surrounding herbivores.

The most commonly identified species in pet food included blue shark, silky shark, and whitetip reef shark, according to the study.

It is not illegal to mislabel shark as an ingredient on a product label, and the misleading practice is reportedly common. Shark liver oil, referred to as squalene, is used in an array of cosmetic products, including anti-aging creams, lotions, deodorants, hair conditioners, makeup, sunscreen, and facial cleansers.

Shark fin is a highly-prized meat in some cultures, but the rest of the shark's carcass is of a much lower value in the meat market, making it a cheap source of protein to be used elsewhere, such as for dog and cat chow.

In 2019, researchers at the University of Exeter discovered sharks were being sold by fish and chip shops in the UK. The shops were using generic names, in this case “husk”, “rock”, “flake” and “rock salmon”. The ingredients turned out to be spiny dogfish, an endangered shark species.

Until 2011, it was illegal to catch spiny dogfish in the EU, but has since been allowed to be sold as bycatch.

“It’s almost impossible for consumers to know what they are buying,” said Catherine Hobbs of the University of Exeter, and first author of the study. “People might think they’re getting a sustainably sourced product when they’re actually buying a threatened species.

“There are also health issues,” added Hobbs. “Knowing what species you are buying could be important in terms of allergies, toxins, mercury content and the growing concern over microplastics in the marine food chain.”

Replacement for Air Force One Faces Over a Year in Delays

Breaking Defense reported Friday that Boeing estimates the VC-25B program is running 17 months behind schedule. Boeing's VC-25B is a military version of their 747-8 commercial airliner, but modified for use as a United States Air Force One.

That estimate may change depending on negotiations between the US Air Force and Boeing, but the negotiations alone could take almost two months for the two agencies to finalize a new schedule, according to Darlene Costello, the principal deputy assistant secretary of Air Force Acquisition.

“We continue to work closely with the Air Force on a new approved schedule baseline,” Boeing spokeswoman Didi VanNierop said in a statement.

On Friday during a news conference at the Air Force Association's Air Warfare Symposium, Costello noted that the program is officially over a year late. The contract between the Air Force and Boeing is a fixed price of $3.9 billion, and any extra costs to the program will affect Boeing, not the United States government.

Despite the delay, Costello remains hopeful, stating, “What's important is that the program has continued. All along, we've been progressing. We're not waiting for [the new schedule] to get started on the program.”
The delay could have something to do with claims by Boeing that it has lost a reported $318 million on the program due to COVID-19 restrictions and a supplier dispute. Work on the project was halted by COVID-19 because "employee clearance constraints impede our ability to exchange mechanics when quarantines are required," said David Calhoun, the chief executive officer of Boeing in 2021.

The company also reported what they called "performance issues at our supplier", according to Greg Smith, the manufacturer’s chief financial officer. Smith may have been referencing GDC Technics, which Boeing sued last year for allegedly failing to deliver parts for the aircraft’s construction. GDC Technics countersued Boeing, accusing the company of mismanaging work on the VC-25B.

The situation is not helped when the company in question is scandal-ridden. Boeing is responsible for negligence in the manufacture of their 737 Max model, resulting in two separate crashes that killed a total of 346 people.

The first crash, on October 29, 2018, saw Indonesia’s Lion Air Flight 610 nosedive into the Java Sea. The second, on March 10, five months later, saw Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 fly straight into the ground. It was later discovered that the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System, a flight stabilizing program, was at the root of the crashes.

Boeing at first sought to blame the pilots of the first doomed aircraft. The company was later forced to ground the 737 Max jets and pay a total of $2.5 billion in a settlement after it was found that the company had concealed key data from safety regulators.

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Trudeau Says Canada to Sanction 10 Individuals Linked to Russian Operation in Ukraine

TORONTO, March 4 (Sputnik) - Canada will impose sanctions on 10 individuals linked to Russia’s ongoing military operation in Ukraine, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Monday.

"Today, Canada is announcing new sanctions on 10 individuals complicit in this unjustified invasion. This includes former and current senior government officials, oligarchs and supporters of Russian leadership," Trudeau told a news conference in London.

On February 24, Russia launched a special operation in Ukraine in response to calls from the Donetsk and Luhansk people’s republics to defend themselves against intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only and the civilian population is not in danger.

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UN Security Council to Discuss North Korea Missile Launch on Monday – Source
UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) – The UN Security Council will convene on Monday to discuss North Korea's latest missile launch, a source told Sputnik.

The discussion will be held in a closed format at the request of Ireland, the United States, France and the United Kingdom, the source said.

Blinken Says No Decision Yet on Whether US Will Permanently Place Troops in Latvia

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday that no decision has yet been made on possible permanent presence of American troops in Latvia.

"We are on a regular basis reviewing the global posture of our forces to include, of course here in Europe and we have to factor in any developments, any changes and threats and we will do that," Blinken said in Riga. "When it comes to questions such as permanent basing, these questions come up and we'll certainly look to answer them in the context of doing the review of our posture. But just to be very clear, no there is no decision of that kind."

Germany, Netherlands Oppose Granting Ukraine Candidate Status This Week – Reports

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) – Several EU members have expressed their opposition to calls for the bloc to grant Ukraine candidate status this week, Bloomberg reported on Monday, citing diplomatic sources.

Germany, the Netherlands and several other EU nations insist that the EU's executive body should express its opinion about Ukraine's readiness for the membership process, the report said. These countries want to focus on providing practical support to Kiev and helping end the current conflict in Ukraine rather than launching a process that could take many years, it added.

Biden to Talk to Macron, Scholz, Johnson About Ukraine at 15:30 GMT Today - White House

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will hold a video call with the leaders of France, Germany and the United Kingdom at 10:30 a.m. EST (15:30 GMT) on Monday to discuss Russia and Ukraine, the White House said.

"The President will discuss the latest developments regarding Russia and Ukraine in a secure video teleconference with President Macron of France, Chancellor Scholz of Germany, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom," the White House said.
WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - Government officials and stakeholders in the energy market will gather in Houston this week to dive into the challenges facing the world today, including issues related to supply chains, the economic recovery, energy transition and the situation in Ukraine.

Sessions were added to the agenda for CERA Week recently to address issues emerging from the conflict in Ukraine. These sessions will dig into the implications of rising geopolitical tensions and market volatility.

A session titled "Sanctions, Cyber and the Ukraine Crisis" will take place on Tuesday afternoon. BlueVoyant Senior Advisor William Crumm and US-Russia Business Council President Daniel Russell will speak on the topic.

Crumm is a cyber security expert who served 31 years in the National Security Agency and retired in 2013. For about ten years, he responsible for all NSA offensive cyber operations.

US Special Envoy for Climate John Kerry will kick off CERA week on Monday. Exxon Mobil Corporation Chairman Darren Woods, US Energy Department Deputy Secretary David Turk, Saudi Aramco Ahmad al Khowaiter, Shell USA President Gretchen Watkins, Chevron Corporation Chairman of the Board and CEO Mike Wirth will speak as well on the opening day.

On Monday afternoon, a panel of experts will address geopolitical challenges in the world, including with respect to Russia's military operation in Ukraine, which will feature speakers from Harvard think tanks, the Atlantic Council and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

OPEC Secretary General Mohammad Sanusi Barkindo will give remarks Tuesday afternoon on assuring stability in energy markets.

Saudi Aramco President Amin Nasser, ConocoPhillips Chairman Ryan Lance, and BP Chief Executive Officer Bernard Looney will deliver remarks on Tuesday related to the future of the oil and gas industry and the energy transition.

Another session on Tuesday will feature Libyan National Oil Corporation Chairman Mustafa Sanall, who will talk about evolving exploration and production models, and Gazprom Neft's Head of Strategy and Innovation Sergey Vakulenko, who will discuss matters related to energy supply chain.

US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm will give a keynote address on Wednesday related to geopolitics and energy markets.

Egyptian Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources Tarek El Molla will talk Wednesday morning about Egypt forging partnership for the energy transition.

Japanese Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Hagiuda Koichi is scheduled for a panel discussion Wednesday afternoon on Asia's energy transition and the role of gas.
Shell Chief Executive Officer Ben van Beurden will deliver remarks about the strategies for the next decade on energy. Ford CEO James Farley will be part of a discussion on Thursday about the future of electric automobiles.

US Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Chairman Joe Manchin will take part in a discussion on Friday about geopolitics and energy policy.

Carlos Vecchio, who is the Venezuelan opposition’s envoy to the United States, is expected to be present at the conference according to the list of guests.

Other high-level government officials from Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Kazakhstan, Uganda, Argentina, Colombia, Norway, and other nations, will participate in the conference.

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RPT: World Must Not Ignore Racist Aspects of Ukraine Conflict - US Civil Rights Activists

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The world must not overlook credible instances of discrimination against Black students and residents amid the Russia-Ukraine conflict as reports of racism continue to pile up, civil rights activists told Sputnik.

The International Organization of Migration (IOM) this week expressed alarm over the discrimination and racism which third country nationals have been subjected to as they attempt to leave conflict-torn areas of Ukraine.

"People are fleeing a war but still find time to be racist," said Haddy Gassama, national director of Policy and Advocacy for UndocuBlack. "It's so unfortunate, so disappointing but Black people tend to bear the brunt of cruelty."

Last month, the UndocuBlack Network in a statement expressed solidarity with migrants fleeing Ukraine who faced anti-Black discrimination within the interior of the country and ports of entry into neighboring Poland.

Gassama said she has heard that it is not Polish border guards but Ukrainian border patrols doing this. However, Gassama said non-white colleagues are not on board with her in condemning the racism.

"Anytime it comes to Black people’s struggle and trauma, we have to prove ourselves," she added.

Pastor of Victory in Praise Church in Stockton, California, Trena Turner, said Americans cannot have a narrow view of the situation in Ukraine.

"We can't just be myopic about what's going on here. We have to avoid distractions and turn this into a fight of Black bodies globally," Turner said.

According to the UN, the number of refugees who have fled Ukraine since Russia began its military operation in the country last week has reached one million.

A number of foreign students and residents have spoken to journalists and recorded video footage of being turned away from buses and trains and forced to allow white Ukrainians to go ahead of them in line.
Ukraine Border Guard Service spokesman, Andriy Demchenko, told CNN the allegations of segregation at the borders are untrue. The guards, he added, are working under enormous pressure but within the law.

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New Blockchain Real Estate Platform to Launch in Latin America Next Week

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - Blockchain firm DTV is launching a new hybrid Web3 land management platform in San Salvador on March 9 at an event that will draw technology and political leaders from around the world, the company said in a press release. DTV said it is the only company that incorporates a hybrid web3 solution that includes hardware and blockchain software technology for property title management. The event will feature a roundtable discussion with Bitcoin pioneer Nick Spanos and NFT Technologies CEO Mario Nawfal, among others. Former Haiti Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe, Prince Juan de Bagration of Georgia, and UN virtual reality creator Marcus Shingles will be among the guest speakers, the release said. DTV, a global company led by CEO Anton Glotser - with offices in Latin America, Ukraine and Miami - said it currently works with the governments of Honduras and El Salvador and plans to publicly list at $130 million valuation on multiple exchanges around the world in the coming year.

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Musk Calls for 'Immediate' Boost in Oil and Gas Production to Replace Russian Output

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - Tesla Founder Elon Musk called for an immediate increase in oil and gas production around the world because sustainable solutions cannot replace Russian output. "Hate to say it, but we need to increase oil & gas output immediately," Musk wrote on Twitter on Friday. "Extraordinary times demand extraordinary measures." Musk added that although increasing oil and gas production would affect Tesla negatively, sustainable energy solutions cannot react instantaneously to make up for Russian oil and gas exports. Earlier in the day, Bloomberg News reported that the Biden administration is considering imposing a ban on imports of Russian crude oil to the United States. US Senators Joe Manchin proposed a bill that would prohibit the import of Russian crude oil, petroleum, petroleum products, liquefied natural gas (LNG) and coal. Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden, in his State of the Union Address on Wednesday, pledged to enable exports of energy from US reserves with the EU working on to curb energy dependence on Russia, in particular by building LNG terminals and negotiating with alternative suppliers, including Norway.
World Must Not Ignore Racist Aspects of Ukraine Conflict - US Civil Rights Activists

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Ukraine Border Guard Service spokesman, Andriy Demchenko, told CNN the allegations of segregation at the borders are untrue. The guards, he added, are working under enormous pressure but within the law.
WASHINGTON, March 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Finnish President Sauli Niinisto discussed the importance of the NATO open door policy and transatlantic cooperation against Russia, the White House said.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. met today with President of Finland Sauli Niinisto to discuss strengthening bilateral relations and ensuring strong defense and deterrence in northern Europe," the White House said in a press release on Friday. "The leaders also discussed ongoing transatlantic coordination to impose costs on Russia... The Presidents also discussed the importance of NATO's Open Door policy. In addition, they discussed energy security and efforts to address climate change."

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The entire US Senate has been invited to meet Volodymyr Zelenskyy through a virtual conference call on Saturday, NBC News reported, citing sources. The virtual meeting was arranged by the Ukrainian Embassy, the report said on Friday.

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The US-media outlet Bloomberg News said it will temporarily suspend the work of its journalists in Russia after President Vladimir Putin signed into law legislation criminalizing the spread of disinformation about the Russian military, their defamation, as well as calls for sanctions against Russia.

"Bloomberg News will temporarily suspend the work of its journalists inside Russia after President Vladimir Putin signed legislation that criminalizes independent reporting in the country," the media outlet said in a statement on Friday. The corporate-owned outlet CNN and British government-funded outlet BBC made similar announcements earlier in the day.

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WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The World Bank said it is working to provide Ukraine with additional $200 million in financial assistance.

"President Malpass also noted that the World Bank is working to prepare new projects, and restructure existing ones, to provide an additional $200 million in fast-disbursing support by the end of March," the World Bank said in a press release on Friday.

World Bank Submitting Supplemental Loan for Ukraine to Its Board Friday - President

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - World Bank is submitting to its board a $500 million supplemental loan for Ukraine, World Bank President David Malpass said.

"This afternoon, I was glad to speak with President of Ukraine," Malpass said via Twitter on Friday. "We discussed the World Bank's 'FREE Ukraine' $500m[illion] supplemental package that is being submitted to our board today [and] Ukraine’s need for grant funding through our MDTF [multi-donor trust fund]."

Harris to Discuss Russia, Ukraine During Visit to Poland, Romania - White House

WASHINGTON. March 4 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris will visit Poland and Romania March 9-11 to discuss the situation in Ukraine and economic pressure on Russia, White House spokesperson Sabrina Singh said in a statement.

"During her meetings with the leaders of Poland and Romania, the Vice President will advance our close coordination in response to Russia's unprovoked and unjustified invasion of Ukraine," Singh said in the statement on Friday.

Harris will discuss with her Polish and Romanian counterparts the security of Ukraine as well as economic and humanitarian support for the country. They also will focus on imposing severe economic consequences on Russia, the statement said.

"[This] visit will demonstrate the strength and unity of the NATO Alliance and US support for NATO’s eastern flank allies in the face of Russian aggression. It will also highlight our collective efforts to support the people of Ukraine," the statement added.

Harris also plans to discuss the possible ways of supporting Ukraine’s neighbors who will face waves of refugees from Ukraine, according to the statement.
Bipartisan Group of US Senators Urges Biden to Speed Up Tank Sale to Poland - Letter

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan group of US Senators sent a letter to President Joe Biden urging his administration to accelerate the $6 billion sale of 250 Abrams tanks to Poland.

"We commend your administration's recent determination approving the forthcoming foreign military sale (FMS) of 250 M1A2 SEPv3 Abrams Main Battle Tanks and related equipment totaling approximately $6 billion to a critical North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally Poland, and we write to request that you immediately direct the US Departments of State and Defense to take any steps they can to accelerate the FMS execution," the senators said in the letter on Friday.

Signatories of the letter include Senators Tammy Duckworth, James Risch, Richard Durbin, Mike Crapo and Sherrod Brown. The letter was also sent to Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

The lawmakers in the letter also urged Biden to direct the State Department and Defense Department to work proactively with Poland to identify any other equipment Poland needs to meet the threat they believe Russia poses.

The United States must demonstrate that it is ready to help NATO allies decisively meet any threat and show the alliance's strength and unity in response to Russia's ongoing special operation in Ukraine.
TORONTO, March 4 (Sputnik) - The Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) or Radio Canada said in a statement that it has temporarily suspended reporting from the ground in Russia after the authorities introduced a new legislation criminalizing disinformation about the Russian special operation in Ukraine.

"CRC/Radio-Canada is concerned about new legislation passed in Russia, which appears to criminalize independent reporting on the current situation in Ukraine and Russia. In light of this situation and out of concern for the risk to our journalists and staff in Russia, we have temporarily suspended our reporting from the ground in Russia while we get clarity on this legislation," the statement said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a federal law criminalizing the spread of disinformation about the country's armed forces, their defamation, as well as the calls for sanctions against Russia.

From now on, the dissemination of knowingly false reports regarding the Russian armed forces incurs a fine of up to 1.5 million rubles (about $12,000) or prison sentence of up to three years.

Last week, Russia launched a special operation in Ukraine in response to requests from the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics to defend themselves against intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

In response, the West has rolled out comprehensive sanctions against Russia and allocated funds and boosted military assistance to Ukraine, with the US sending additional troops to NATO member states on its eastern flank.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik)

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS
* The United States has a strategic interest in making Russia a less significant supplier of energy on the global scene over the course of time, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.
* US President Joe Biden has no intention to engage directly with Russian President Vladimir Putin at this time, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.
* US Senator Lindsey Graham calling on Russians to "take out" President Vladimir Putin does not reflect the position of the US government, Psaki said.
* The United States is prepared for possible Russian cyberattacks though no incidents have occurred in recent weeks, Psaki said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS
* The UN Security Council's emergency meeting on the recent fire near the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant is another attempt by Kiev and its supporters in the West to ignite artificial
hettery around the events in Ukraine, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Friday.

* Russia is most interested in maintaining general nuclear and physical security in Ukraine, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said.

* The United States is working with Ukrainian authorities and the International Committee of the Red Cross to create humanitarian corridors for the flow of people and aid in Ukraine, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

* The Pentagon is glad that Russia has acknowledged they will use a new de-confliction line with the United States amid the Ukraine crisis, Pentagon spokesperson Jon Kirby said on Friday.

* Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said that NATO, unlike the EU, could not solve anything for Ukraine, and will pay for this weakness.

PUTIN-SCHOLZ TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke by phone with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and said Ukraine has to comply with the requirements on nuclear-free status, demilitarization, denazification, recognition of Crimea and the republics of Luhansk and Donetsk, the Kremlin said on Friday.

* Putin outlined Russia’s fundamental approaches in the context of the special military operation to protect the population of Donbas, the Kremlin press service said.

* Putin called on Scholz to press Ukraine to quickly release and ensure safe evacuation of foreigners, the Kremlin said.

* Putin told Scholz that the West ignores international humanitarian law violations by Ukraine, the Kremlin said.

* Putin warned Scholz about the growing number of foreign mercenaries in Ukraine, including from Albania and Croatia, as well as militants and jihadists from Kosovo, the Kremlin said.

SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The impact of economic sanctions imposed against Russia by the West has already exceeded expectations, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

* Russian gas supplies to the European Union cannot be rejected overnight, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said.

* The Biden administration is considering imposing a ban on imports of Russian crude oil to the United States, Bloomberg reported, citing sources.

* Cogent communications has issued a letter informing Russian companies that the company is terminating internet connections in Russia, the Washington Post reported.

IRAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi said on Friday that he is traveling to Iran to address issues concerning Iran’s nuclear power program.

US SUPREME COURT ON TSARNAEV DEATH PENALTY
* The US Supreme Court on Friday reinstated the death penalty on surviving Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev despite his attempts to have the capital sentence vacated by lower courts.
* President Joe Biden believes that Boston marathon bomber Tsarnaev should be punished, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday commenting on the Supreme Court decision to reinstate the death penalty for him.

SHOIGU-GUTERRES TALKS
* Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu informed UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres in a phone conversation about the reasons for the special operation of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine, the Russian Defense Ministry told reporters on Friday.
* UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres thanked Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in a phone conversation for his assistance in evacuating mission personnel from Ukraine, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

Finnish President Says Hopes to Strengthen Ties Between US, Finland and Nordic Countries

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - Finish President Sauli Niinisto said on Friday that he hopes to strengthen relations between the United States, Finland and other Nordic countries.
"I hope that during this meeting and discussion we can strengthen them more between the United States and Finland and the Nordic countries all together," Niinisto said prior to a meeting with President Joe Biden at the White House.
White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday that the two leaders will talk about the bilateral defense relationship.
Biden and Niinisto are meeting amid the West's concerns over Russia's military operation in Ukraine.
Russia launched an operation in Ukraine last week after the breakaway Donbas republics appealed for help in defending themselves against the Ukrainian military. In response, Western nations have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow.

US Discourages American Citizens From Fighting in Ukraine – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) – The United States discourages American citizens from going to Ukraine to fight Russia and recommends that they focus on contributing to humanitarian organizations working there instead, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Friday.
"This is not the place for Americans to be, in Ukraine, right now," Kirby said during a press briefing when asked to comment on reports about thousands of Americans willing to fight in Ukraine. "[S]hould Americans want to help Ukraine and it's laudable that they do that, the best way to do that is to find ways to contribute to the many non-governmental and humanitarian organizations that are trying to alleviate what has now become a very acute humanitarian crisis in Ukraine."

Last week, Russia launched a special operation in Ukraine in response to calls from the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics to defend themselves against intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only and the civilian population is not in danger.

In response, the West has rolled out still more sanctions against Moscow and moved to boost military assistance to Ukraine, with the US sending additional troops to NATO members on the eastern flank.

White House on Volunteer Fighters: Americans Should Not Travel to Ukraine for Any Reason

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration advises US citizens not to travel to Ukraine for any reason, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday when asked whether the United States would encourage Americans to fight in Ukraine.

"Our guidance continues to be that American citizens should not travel to Ukraine for any reason," Psaki said Shawn asked about the US government's position on volunteer fighters.

On 24 February, Russia began a special operation to demilitarise and de-Nazify Ukraine in responding to requests for help from Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics to defend themselves from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops.

The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow has repeatedly stressed that it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

The United States and its allies have supplied weapons to Ukraine, including Javelin and Stinger missiles.

Biden Has No Intention to Engage Directly With Putin 'At This Moment' - White House

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has no intention to engage directly with Russian President Vladimir Putin at this time, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday.
"President Biden has no intention at this moment of engaging directly with President Putin. He is in the middle of an escalatory war in a sovereign foreign country. This is not a moment for the president of the United States to engage directly with President Putin," Psaki said in a press briefing.

Biden Continues to Think Diplomacy With Russia Possible - White House

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden continues to believe that diplomacy with Russia is possible, and the United States is not advocating for killing the leader of a foreign country, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"The President believes there continues to be a diplomatic path forward that will help resolve what we are seeing on the ground. President Putin has the ability to de-escalate," Psaki told a press briefing.

She added that Washington is not advocating for killing the leader of a foreign country. "This is not the policy of the United States," she stated.

On Thursday, Sen. Lindsey Graham claimed, referring to President Vladimir Putin, that the only way to end the Ukraine crisis is for Russians to "take this guy out."

White House Says Cannot 'Predict' if US Will Provide Ukraine With Jet Fighters

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki on Friday said she has nothing to predict regarding whether the US will provide fighter jets to Ukraine.

"We have provided a range of security and military assistance, including defensive assistance. We recently provided helicopters," Psaki said when asked about the US providing Kiev with jets.

"I don’t have anything in addition to predict on that front."

White House on Graham’s Calls Regarding Putin: It’s Not Position of US Gov’t

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - Sen. Lindsey Graham calling on Russians to "take out" President Vladimir Putin does not reflect the position of the US government, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Friday.
"That is not the position of the United States government and certainly not a statement you’d hear come from the mouth of anybody working in this administration," Psaki told a briefing.

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US Ready for Russian Cyberattacks, Cannot Say Why Russia Did Not Launch Any - White House

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared for possible Russian cyberattacks though no incidents have occurred in recent weeks, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

When asked whether Russia has carried out any offensives on the cyber front against the United States, Psaki said, "In terms of why not yet, I can’t speak to that. But we are certainly prepared if that does happen."

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UN Will Send Staff to Russian Defense Ministry to Ensure Deconfliction Process - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United Nations will send staff members to the Russian Ministry of Defense in Moscow to ensure deconfliction and coordination in Ukraine to provide safe humanitarian assistance, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a news briefing on Friday.

"We will also likely have some staff established in the Russian Ministry of Defense in Moscow to ensure deconfliction and coordination, so this will be an ongoing building process. I think as the conflict continues, and as we we upgrade our delivery of humanitarian aid, that becomes even more important," Dujarric said.

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WH on Tsarnaev Death Penalty Reinstatement: Biden Believes He Should Be 'Punished'

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden believes that Boston marathon bomber Tsarnaev should be punished, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday commenting on the Supreme Court decision to reinstate the death penalty for him.

The US Supreme Court on Friday reinstated the death penalty on surviving Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev despite his attempts to have the capital sentence vacated by lower courts.
"He believes that Tsarnaev should be punished for responsibility in the murder of three innocent people at the marathon, for wounding dozens of others and for his role in killing two police officers for attempting to bring him and his brother to justice," Psaki said.

UN on Graham’s Call to ‘Take Out’ Putin: Vital to Avoid Rhetoric to End Ukraine Crisis

UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United Nations believes it is important for all sides to avoid extreme rhetoric over the Ukraine crisis, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Friday, commenting on US Sen. Lindsey Graham’s calls to assassinate Russian President Vladimir Putin.

On Thursday, Graham claimed he believed the only way to end the crisis is for Russians to "take this guy out," referring to President Putin.

"I think in order to find an end to this conflict, it’s important to avoid rhetoric from any side that we may have," Dujarric told a briefing.

US Has Interest in Making Russia Less Significant Energy Supplier Over Time - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States has a strategic interest in making Russia a less significant supplier of energy on the global scene over the course of time, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"We have a strong interest, we and our allies, in degrading Russia’s status as a leading energy supplier over time. This could be a profound strategic shift," Blinken said during a press event.

However, the US does not have a strategic interest in reducing the global supply of energy at the moment due to the immediate impact of higher prices that would hurt Americans and give Russia more money from the energy it could sell, Blinken also said.

Effect of Economic Sanctions on Russia Already Exceeded All Expectations - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The impact of economic sanctions imposed against Russia by the West has already exceeded expectations, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.
"We’ve had already a dramatic impact far beyond I think what anyone would have expected on Russia," Blinken said during remarks in Belgium. The suffering is likely to get worse before it gets better as long as the Ukraine crisis continues, Blinken added.

Pentagon Says ‘Glad’ Russians Agree to Use New De-Confliction Line

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon is glad that the Russians have acknowledged they will use a new de-confliction line with the United States amid the Ukraine crisis, Pentagon spokesperson Jon Kirby said on Friday. "We’re glad that the Russians have acknowledged that they will use it," Kirby said. It is important to "have a channel at that level to avoid miscalculation," he added, noting that the two countries have done the same before in Syria.

Biden Administration Considers Imposing Ban on US Imports of Russian Crude Oil - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering imposing a ban on imports of Russian crude oil to the United States, Bloomberg reported on Friday, citing sources. Russian oil made 3% of all the crude shipments to the United States in 2021, according to data from the US Energy Information Administration.

US Working With Ukraine, Red Cross to Create Humanitarian Corridors - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is working with Ukrainian authorities and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to create humanitarian corridors for the flow of people and aid in Ukraine, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday. "We are working urgently with the government of Ukraine, the ICRC and others to create humanitarian corridors that will allow civilians to get out of Ukraine’s besieged cities and to allow food, medicine and other vital supplies to get in," Blinken said during a press event.
Facebook to Do Everything It Can to Restore Services in Russia - Meta Executive

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - Facebook will do everything it can to restore service in Russia after the Russian government decided to block access to the social media platform in the country, Meta President of Global Affairs Nick Clegg said on Friday.
“We will continue to do everything we can to restore services so they remain available to people to safely and securely express themselves and organize for action,” Clegg said in a statement.

Trudeau Says Canada Does Not Have Type of Fighter Jets Ukrainian Military Can Fly

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - Canada does not have the types of fighter jets that the Ukrainian military is able to fly, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday when asked whether Canada is willing to provide fighter jets to Ukraine.
"The Ukrainian military is trained up on Soviet-style MIGs and fighter jets that Canada simply does not have,” Trudeau said.
On 24 February, Russia began a special operation to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine, responding to requests for help from the Donetsk and Luhansk people’s republics to defend from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops.
The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow has repeatedly stressed that it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.
In response, the United States, Canada and their allies, including members of the European Union such as Germany, have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia and are providing military aid to Ukraine. The United States has supplied Javelin anti-tank missiles while Germany has supplied stinger missiles, among other equipment.

China Envoy to UN Says Int’l. Community Must Stay 'Cool Headed' About Ukraine Crisis

UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) - Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jun said on Friday that the international community must stay "cool headed" about the Ukraine crisis and adopt an objective approach to create an atmosphere to facilitate talks between Kiev and Moscow.
"The international community should stay cool headed and rational and adopt a responsible, impartial and objective approach to create a sound atmosphere and conditions for direct talks between the parties concerned," Zhang said during a UN Security Council meeting. China encourages Russia and Ukraine to reach a negotiated solution and welcomes dialogue between the parties to set up a humanitarian corridor, Zhang said.

Kiev Trying to Ignite Artificial Hysteria With UNSC Session on Zaporizhzhia NPP - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council's emergency meeting on the recent fire near the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant is another attempt by Kiev and its supporters in the West to ignite artificial hysteria around the events in Ukraine, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Friday. Earlier in the day, the UN Security Council gathered for an emergency meeting, requested by the United States and its European allies to address the fire. "Today's meeting is another attempt by the Kiev authorities to kindle artificial hysteria about what is taking place in Ukraine, and they are being assisted in this by their Western backers," Nebenzia said. The Russian Defense Ministry reported a provocation overnight that was intended to accuse Russia of creating a source of radioactive contamination at Zaporizhzhia NPP. While patrolling the area adjacent to the station, Russian forces were attacked by a Ukrainian sabotage unit who opened fire on them from a training complex located outside the NPP. The firing points of the Ukrainian sabotage group were suppressed by return fire. Leaving the building, the sabotage group set it on fire. The fire was put out and the NPP is working as usual, with radiation background at normal level, the Russian military said.

Blinken Meets With NATO Chief to Discuss Support for Ukraine - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in Brussels to discuss support for Ukraine amid the country's conflict with Russia, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday. "Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg today in Brussels on the margins of the NATO Foreign Ministerial. Secretary Blinken and Secretary General Stoltenberg reiterated their strong support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of President Putin's premeditated invasion of a peaceful democratic neighbor," Price said in a statement.
Blinken and Stoltenberg agreed to continue to encourage NATO allies and partners to continue supporting Ukraine to defend against what they termed is Russia's aggression, the statement said.

Last week, Russia launched a special operation in Ukraine in response to calls from the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics to defend themselves against intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and emphasized the civilian population is not in danger.

In response, the United States and its allies have rolled out comprehensive sanctions, including restrictions on the Russian central bank, export control measures, SWIFT financial system cutoff for select banks and the closure of airspace to all Russian flights.

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China encourages Russia, Ukraine to reach negotiated solution, welcomes dialogue and agreement to set up humanitarian corridor - envoy to UN

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Nebenzia Says Russia Most Interested in Maintaining Nuclear, Physical Security in Ukraine

UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) - Russia is most interested in maintaining general nuclear and physical security in Ukraine, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said on Friday.

"We are the most interested in maintaining nuclear and general security in Ukraine, physical and nuclear security, to be properly maintained and ensured in Ukraine," Nebenzia told a UN Security Council meeting.

UN Welcomes Russia-Ukraine Talks, Hopes Agreements to Be Implemented Without Delay

UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) – The United Nations welcomes Russia-Ukraine talks and expresses the hope that all agreements will be implemented without delay, Under Secretary General for Political Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo said on Friday.

"We welcome the reported agreement between the Ukrainian and Russian negotiators during their second round of talks in Belarus yesterday," DiCarlo said in a statement.

The UN understands that the two sides focused on the establishment of humanitarian corridors to allow safe passage for civilians and the delivery of humanitarian assistance, she added. "We hope that this reported agreement is implemented without delay and that a full and unconditional ceasefire is quickly agreed and enacted," DiCarlo noted, adding that the UN urges both sides to continue negotiations and make urgent progress on security, humanitarian and other issues.

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IAEA Chief Says Visiting Tehran to Deal With Issues Concerning Iran Nuclear Power Program

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi said on Friday that he is traveling to Iran to address issues concerning Iran's nuclear power program.

"I'm on my way to Tehran, to deal with another issue, which is of direct interest of the [UN Security] Council, which is the hopefully solution of the outstanding aspects of the nuclear power program in the Islamic Republic of Iran," Grossi said during a UN Security Council meeting.

US Embassies Told to Nix Post Calling 'Attack' on Zaporizhzhia NPP 'War Crime' - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has sent an urgent message to all American embassies telling them to delete and not retweet a post from the embassy in Kiev that called the recent developments near the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant a war crime, CNN reported on Friday.

Earlier in the day, the Russian Defense Ministry said that Ukrainian authorities attempted a provocation overnight by accusing Russia of creating a source of radioactive contamination at Zaporizhzhia NPP. While patrolling the area adjacent to the station, a group of the Russian National Guard was attacked by a Ukrainian sabotage unit who opened fire on them from the windows of several floors of an educational and training complex located outside the NPP. The firing points of the Ukrainian sabotage group were suppressed by return fire. Leaving the building, the sabotage group set it on fire.

The fire was put out and the NPP is working as usual, with radiation background at normal level, the Russian military said. The US embassy in Kiev in a tweet accused Russia of shelling the nuclear plant.

"If you have retweeted it – un-retweet it ASAP," the State Department said in a message, as quoted by CNN.

Trudeau Says Will Visit UK, Germany Next Week to Discuss Ukraine

TORONTO, March 4 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced on Friday that he will visit Europe, including the United Kingdom and Germany, next week for talks about Ukraine.
"Next week I'll be traveling to the United Kingdom, to Latvia, to Germany and Poland to meet with partners and allies," Trudeau said. "Of course, we'll be discussing how to continue to support Ukraine, how to strengthen Democratic values around the world and how to stand up even more for democracy, to stand against Russian aggression and to work hard on combating the kind of disinformation and misinformation that we know is a facet of day-to-day life these days but a particularly strong facet of this conflict, this war in Ukraine."

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IAEA Confirms No Security, Safety Systems Compromised at Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant

UNITED NATIONS, March 4 (Sputnik) - The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirms that the security or safety systems at Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant were not compromised after a projectile hit the facility, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi said on Friday.

"We were able to confirm that no security or safety systems have been compromised, neither the reactors themselves have been hit by this projectile," Grossi said during a UN Security Council meeting.

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Cogent Communications Informs Russian Companies Will End Internet Connections - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - Cogent communications has issued a letter informing Russian companies that the company is terminating internet connections in Russia, the Washington Post reported on Friday.

"In light of the unwarranted and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, Cogent is terminating all of your services effective at 5:00 p.m. GMT on March 4, 2022. The economic sanctions put in place as a result of the invasion and the increasingly uncertain security situation make it impossible for Cogent to continue to provide you with service. All Cogent-provided ports and IP address space will be reclaimed as of the termination date," the report cited the letter as saying.

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US States Sue Biden for Info Related to NSBA Letter Calling Parents 'Terrorists' - Filing

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - A group of US state attorneys general are launching a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit against the Biden administration to force the release of
documents related to a National School Boards Association (NSBA) letter to Biden in which the actions of parents opposed to certain policies were referred to as "domestic terrorism," court documents filed on Friday said.

The lawsuit lists the states of Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Montana, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas and Utah as plaintiffs in the case, and several parts of the Biden administration, including the Department of Education and Biden himself, as defendants.

An October 2021 memorandum from Attorney General Merrick Garland expressed concern about purported threats to school staff by parents who disagreed with aspects of educational policy and curriculum.

Garland testified to Congress that the memorandum was based on a rescinded letter from the NSBA to Biden in which they called on the president to invoke the PATRIOT Act due to threats against school officials that they said "could be the equivalent to a form of domestic terrorism and hate crimes," according to court filings.

"There is no way the NSBA can justify why they referred to concerned parents across the country as 'domestic terrorists' when it is obvious that they are being targeted for their political beliefs," Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton said on Friday in a press release.

The Freedom of Information Act requests made by the plaintiffs seek records from the NSBA and federal officials related to the letter or other discussions between the US government and NSBA.

New York Mayor Says Will End Indoor Vaccine Requirement, Masking for Most School Kids

NEW YORK, March 4 (Sputnik) - New York City will end beginning next week indoor COVID-19 vaccine mandates for restaurants, bars and theaters and will scrap face mask requirements in schools, Mayor Eric Adams said on Friday.

"It's time to open our city and get the economy back up and operating," Adams said in a live-streamed event at Times Square, the heart of New York City. "This is about giving people the flexibility that is needed to... get our economy back on track."

However, Adams said face masks will still be required in all public transportation and healthcare settings regardless of vaccination status.

In addition, children under the age of five, who are not yet eligible for vaccination, must continue to wear masks inside schools. New York City has one million school children while the larger New York State has 2.7 million students, making up the nation's largest school system.

New York City Health Commissioner David Chokshi said on Friday that more than 77% of eligible New Yorkers have been vaccinated against COVID-19 and some 48,000 deaths were likely prevented in the process.
US Not Ready to Forecast NATO Response to Events at Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Plant - Official

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is not ready to forecast NATO's response to the events at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in Ukraine but encourages everyone to act responsibly, US Under Secretary for Nuclear Security Jill Hruby said on Friday. “I do not want to speak for the NATO response at this point of time, but I do say that we are seriously thinking about everything we can bring to the radiation limitation, to make sure we can control things, to encourage everyone to act responsibly at this point,” Hruby told MSNBC.

US Adds 678,000 Jobs in February, Unemployment Rate at 3.8% - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - US employers added 678,000 jobs in February, some 50% higher than economists’ expectations, and the jobless rate moved down to 3.8% from a previous 4%, Labor Department data showed on Friday. “Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 678,000 in February, and the unemployment rate edged down to 3.8 percent,” the department’s Bureau of Labor Statistics said in a news release. An unemployment rate of 4% or below is defined by the Federal Reserve as maximum employment.

The jobs boost surprised economists who, in polling by US media, had forecast a non-farm payrolls growth of just around 423,000 for February, lower than January’s 467,000. "Overall, job gains continue to show strong growth, with the unemployment rate falling as well toward full employment," economist Greg Michalowski noted in a post on the ForexLive forum. The monthly growth or decline in jobs is being closely watched by the Federal Reserve to decide on rate hikes that will be needed this year to contain inflation expanding faster than an economy growing at its quickest pace in four decades.

The Fed slashed US interest rates to nearly zero after the coronavirus outbreak in March 2020 and kept them there to enable economic recovery. After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by COVID-19, the US economy expanded by 5.7% in 2021, growing at its fastest pace since 1982.

But inflation grew even more. The Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, a US inflation indicator closely followed by the Fed, rose by 5.8% in the year to December and 6.1% in the 12 months to January. Both readings also indicated the fastest growth since 1982. The Fed’s own tolerance for inflation is a mere 2% per year.

The Fed’s policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, or FOMC, meets another seven times this year, with the March 15-16 meeting being the first in the series. Fed officials, as well
as Wall Street economists, have said the FOMC could authorize a rate hike at every one of those meetings.
Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said on Thursday rates might have to go up by 25 basis points at each FOMC meeting if inflation doesn't cool quickly enough amid surging oil prices and uncertainties from the Russia-Ukraine crisis. Some Fed officials have even suggested hikes of 50 basis points.
Charles Evans, president of the Chicago chapter of the Fed, concurred with Powell that the central bank could be more aggressive with rate hikes if the jobs market showed enough resilience. Aside from keeping inflation manageable, the Fed's other mandate is to ensure a robust labor market.
"If we were to do 25 basis points at each meeting, which may be more than I think is essential, for the year (it would be) 1.75%,” Evans said in an appearance on the CNBC network. “That’s close enough to neutral.”
In Fed speak, a "neutral" policy situation is where rate changes are no longer needed to stimulate or restrain inflation and growth. Economists say the multiplier effect of rate hikes are such that even small increases in rates can have ripple effects that significantly slow down economic activity, limiting the ability of businesses to raise prices.

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WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The robust US jobs growth for February shows the nation is uniquely equipped to deal with inflation, President Joe Biden said on Friday as the Federal Reserve prepared for potentially aggressive rate hikes to contain prices growing the fastest rate in four decades.
“In February, the economy created 678,000 jobs... the unemployment rate ticked down to 3.8%,” Biden said in a White House statement that referred to the latest non-farm payrolls report released by the Labor Department. “Today’s report underscores that the United States is uniquely well positioned to deal with the challenge that inflation has posed across the world as we recover from the pandemic.”
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 COVID-19 breakout. Since then, jobs have picked up in most months, with the current unemployment rate of 3.8% falling below the 4% that the Federal Reserve defines as “maximum employment.”
Biden noted that the US economy had created a record 7.4 million jobs since he took office 14 months ago.
“It's a result of our success [in] combating COVID-19 and moving forward safely” and to “grow the economy from the bottom up and middle out,” Biden said.
The Federal Reserve slashed US interest rates to nearly zero after the coronavirus outbreak in March 2020 and kept them there to enable economic recovery.
After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by the COVID-19 measures, the US economy expanded by 5.7% in 2021 and has been growing at its fastest pace since 1982. However, the rate of inflation grew even more. The Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, a US inflation indicator closely followed by the Federal Reserve, rose by 5.8% in the year to December and 6.1% in the 12 months to January. Both readings also indicated the fastest growth since 1982. The Federal Reserve’s own tolerance for inflation is 2% per year.

The Federal Reserve’s policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, or FOMC, meets seven times between now and December, with the March 15-16 meeting being the first in the series. Federal Reserve officials, as well as Wall Street economists, have said the FOMC could authorize interest rate hike at every one of those meetings.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Thursday that interest rates might have to go up by 25 basis points, or quarter percentage point, at each FOMC meeting if inflation does not cool quickly enough amid surging oil prices and uncertainties caused by the Russia-Ukraine war. Some Federal Reserve officials have even suggested rate hikes of 50 basis points or half a percentage point.

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US Delivered Nearly 70% of $350Mln Military Assistance to Ukraine - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States has delivered nearly 70% of the $350 million military assistance package to Ukraine amid the ongoing conflict there, a senior US Defense Department official said on Friday.

“Today, we are working on the $350 million drawdown package, the largest presidential drawdown package in history. And we have already delivered to the Ukrainians $240 million worth of that package, including some of the most needed capabilities like anti-armor capabilities,” the official said during a press briefing.

The rest of the aid is expected to reach Ukraine within days or weeks but not longer, the official added.

Last week, President Joe Biden tasked the State Department to allocate $600 million for Ukraine, including $350 million for defense purposes - to support the country’s military forces in the conflict with Russia.

Russia launched a special operation in Ukraine last Thursday in response to requests from the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics to defend themselves against intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only and the civilian population is not in danger.

In response, the United States and its allies have rolled out comprehensive sanctions, including restrictions on the Russian central bank, export control measures, SWIFT cutoff for select banks and the closure of airspace to all Russian flights.
US Committed to Doing Everything to Stop Russia's Operation in Ukraine - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is committed to doing its utmost to stop Russia's operation in Ukraine, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"We are committed to doing everything we can to make it stop," Blinken said during his trip to Brussels.

US Supreme Court Reinstates Death Sentence for Boston Marathon Bomber Tsarnaev - Ruling

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court on Friday reinstated the death penalty on surviving Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev despite his attempts to have the capital sentence vacated by lower courts.

"Dzhokhar Tsarnaev committed heinous crimes. The Sixth Amendment nonetheless guaranteed him a fair trial before an impartial jury. He received one. The judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit is reversed," the Supreme Court said in a written opinion.

Tsarnaev attempted to avoid execution by arguing that his brother Tamerlan masterminded the bombing and pressured Dzhokhar to participate using his domineering nature, possible evidence of which he unsuccessfully tried to have included at trial.

A Court of Appeals initially vacated Tsarnaev's capital sentences on the grounds that a lower District Court erred during jury selection by declining to ask about juror's media exposure and excluding the possible evidence concerning Tamerlan's alleged criminal history and personality. The Supreme Court ruled that the District Court did not abuse its discretion in either situation.

The Boston Marathon bombing killed three people and injured hundreds of others. Tamerlan was killed by police while on the run on April 19, 2013, while Dzhokhar was arrested the following day and was sentenced to death by lethal injection in May of 2015.

IMF Chief Says Spoke With Zelenskyy, Pledges Swift Response to Request for Assistance

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) managing director said on Friday she spoke with Volodymyr Zelenskyy and assured him of swift response to Ukraine’s request for emergency financial assistance as Russia conducts a military operation in the country.
"Just spoke with Zelenskyy and expressed my high regard for his fortitude & leadership. The IMF is committed to supporting Ukraine and its people. I assured Zelenskyy of swift response to Ukraine’s request for IMF emergency financial assistance," Kristalina Georgieva wrote on Twitter.

US Can Not Confirm Existence, Use of Cluster Munitions or Thermobaric Weapons in Ukraine

WASHINGTON. March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States can not confirm the existence or the use of cluster munitions or thermobaric weapons in Ukraine, a senior US Defense Department official told reporters on Friday.
"We cannot confirm the existence or the use of cluster munitions inside Ukraine, nor can we confirm the use or existence of thermobaric weapons inside Ukraine," the official said.

US Sanctions Target Russian Oil Sector, 91 Military-Linked Entities - Commerce Dept.
(Adds details in para 5, background in paras 6-7)
WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing export controls against Russia’s oil refining sector and targeting 91 entities across 10 countries that support the Russian military in response to the latter’s operation in Ukraine, the Commerce Department said on Friday.
"The new regulations target Russia’s oil refining sector with new stringent export controls and identify 91 entities that support Russian military activities. These actions will further restrict access to U.S. commodities, software, and technology as part of our ongoing efforts to degrade Russia’s ability to acquire the items it needs to sustain its military aggression," the Commerce Department said in a press release.
The US also added 91 entities in 10 countries to the Commerce Department’s Entity List based upon their involvement in, contributions to, or support of the Russian security services, military and defense sectors, the release said.
"These entities are located in: Russia (81), United Kingdom (3), Estonia (3), Spain (2), Malta (2), Kazakhstan (1), Latvia (1), Belize (1), Singapore (1), and Slovakia (1) (NOTE: Total entries is 96 as some entities operate in multiple countries)," the release added.
Among those sanctioned are Russian Space Systems, Amur Shipbuilding Factory, other shipyards, scientific research institutes and other companies.
Last week, Russia launched a special operation in Ukraine in response to calls from the Donetsk and Luhansk people’s republics to defend themselves against intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only and the civilian population is not in danger.
In response, the US and its allies have rolled out comprehensive sanctions, including restrictions on the Russian central bank, export control measures, SWIFT cutoff for select banks, and closure of airspace to all Russian flights.

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Deconfliction Line With Russia at US EUCOM Used Only in Past Couple of Days - Official

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The deconfliction line between the United States and Russia in Ukraine is an open line that has existed at the European Command (EUCOM) Headquarters and has been used only for the past couple of days, a senior Defense Department official told reporters on Friday.

"The deconfliction line is basically an open phone line and it existed at European Command Headquarters. It's definitely under the purview of Gen. Walters as the European Command commander. It is bilateral," the official said.

The official also said the line is staffed on a daily basis but there are no updates at present as to "how much it's been used or to what degree it's been used."

However, the official reconfirmed that the deconfliction line is "in place" and "the Russians have acknowledged it."

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US Does Not See Any Radioactive Leakage at Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Plant - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, March 4 (Sputnik) - The United States has not seen any radioactive leakage at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, a senior US Defense Department official told reporters on Friday.

"We don't see any radioactive leakage," the official said.