Giammattei Proclaims Guatemala "Pro-Life Capital' With Law Punishing Abortion, Same-Sex Marriage

After the US sponsored right-wing militias fighting left-wing governments or groups across Central America in the 1980s, those nations became some of the world’s most dangerous for LGBTQ people and other marginalized groups, helping to fuel migrant caravans north toward the US.

The Guatemalan Congress approved a harsh new law on Tuesday, prescribing stiff prison sentences for women who receive abortions, gays and lesbians who marry, and teachers who give instruction about sexual diversity.

The Life and Family Protection Law says that women who "have induced their own abortion or given their consent to another person to carry it out" will be punished with up to 25 years in prison - a sentence that is not commutable, according to Guatemalan daily Prensa Libre.

The bill also introduced a change to the Civil Code to expressly prohibit same-sex marriages in Guatemala and prohibits teaching anyone except for parents teaching children and young adults about sexual diversity.

"Public and private educational entities are prohibited from promoting, in childhood and adolescence, policies or programs related to sexual diversity and gender ideology, or teaching as normal sexual behaviors other than heterosexuality, or that are incompatible with biological aspects and genetics of the human being," the law reads.

In the US, a similar convergence of anti-abortion laws, anti-LGBTQ rights laws, and laws restricting childrens' access to information about LGBTQ identities are being pushed by the same groups of conservatives lawmakers.

The law was proposed by the Vision With Values (Viva) party, a small, far-right party with 7 seats in the legislature, but was approved by a large majority of lawmakers.

President Alejandro Giammattei is a conservative whose policies closely align with US interests. On Wednesday, Giammattei decreed Guatemala to be the "Ibero-American Pro-Life Capital" and promised his administration would protect life in its “five stages” from conception until death.

Jordan Rodas, Guatemala’s human rights ombudsman, denounced the law, telling reporters outside Congress on Tuesday that "it violates human rights, it violates the international agreements ratified by Guatemala, it is a setback to freedoms."

"We are going to file an action of unconstitutionality so that this (law) has no effect," Rodas added.

Walter Felix, a legislator from the left-wing Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, called the law "absolutely discriminatory," saying it "incites hate."

"The human rights of significant parts of the population are being violated," Felix said.

Violent Legacy of US-Backed Civil War
Violence against women and LGBTQ people, as well as other marginalized groups like indigenous tribes, is high in Guatemala. In March 2021, New York-based NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported on the systematic persecution of LGBTQ Guatemalans, noting the government’s inaction against deadly violence by public security agents, gangs, and members of the public, as well as victims’ own family members.

Similar dangers imperil indigenous Mayans, who were subjected to genocide by US-backed militias and security forces during the 40-year-long civil war that ended in the 1990s. While a peace treaty purported to end the fighting in 1996, the assassinations have continued and a right-wing, US-aligned government has continued to rule, creating special economic zones with “maquila” factories where US companies can base their factories with little fear of interference in their labor practices.

The attacks have driven huge numbers of Guatemalans into exile, fleeing northward toward the United States in migrant caravans joined by Hondurans and Salvadorans, whose right-wing governments have been similarly hostile toward women, LGBTQ people and indigenous people. In April 2021, US Vice President Kamala Harris spoke with Giammattei about the “root causes of immigration,” which she noted as including poverty, the lack of economic opportunity, corruption, lack of good governance, and “violence against women, Indigenous people, LGBTQ people, and Afro-descendants.” However, two months later, she told a crowd in Guatemala City “do not come” to the US border.

Instead, Harris and the government of Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez-Obrador have pressed Giammattei to step up border security with Mexico and to stop migrant caravans traveling from the country and from El Salvador and Honduras before they cross into Mexico. Guatemala’s territory straddles the Central American isthmus.

California County Rejects ExxonMobil Bid to Restart Offshore Oil Wells Blamed for 2015 Disaster

California’s Santa Barbara County has rejected a plan by petroleum giant ExxonMobil to restart three offshore oil platforms that were turned off after a catastrophic oil spill in 2015. Santa Barbara County’s Board of Supervisors voted 3-2 on Tuesday to reject a proposal by ExxonMobil to set up interim trucking routes to transport crude oil from the platforms, allowing them to restart production. The plan would have allowed 24,800 oil truck trips per year along Highway 101, a coastal route, and Route 166, a hazardous inland route that cuts across numerous mountain ranges.

“We disagree with the decision, which disregards our employees, contractors and countless others working in California’s oil and gas industry who depend on these jobs to support their families,” ExxonMobil said in a statement. “ExxonMobil has met all of the requirements for issuance of the permit, which has gone through extensive environmental review and public comment.”
The pipeline that previously carried oil from the platforms ruptured on May 19, 2015, spilling 140,000 gallons of crude oil onto land and sea near Refugio State Beach, causing major ecological damage in an ecologically sensitive area and costing the state $74 million. However, even that impact paled in comparison to the massive 1969 blowout of an offshore well during drilling, which at the time was the largest ever in US waters.

According to a recent report in the Santa Barbara Independent, there are 23 out-of-date oil platforms off the Santa Barbara coast, eight of which are set to be decommissioned in the next decade. The process will involve plugging the wells and removing the oil infrastructure, including the pipelines and cables that connect them to shore.

“Recent oil tanker truck accidents and offshore oil spills show how dangerous ExxonMobil’s proposal to restart its offshore oil platforms and truck crude oil along scenic and perilous county highways is,” Linda Krop, chief counsel of the Environmental Defense Center, said in a Tuesday press release by nonprofit conservation organization Biological Diversity.

“Our research revealed that there have been eight serious accidents involving tanker trucks along the route in the last several years, resulting in deaths, oil spills, injuries, fires and road closures,” Krop added. “We applaud the board’s vote against ExxonMobil’s project, which puts the safety of our communities, climate and coastlines first.”

The news comes as a bitter fight over US oil production has resumed following US President Joe Biden’s decision to ban oil imports from Russia as part of his administration’s response to Moscow’s launching of a special military operation in Ukraine.

The threat of sanctions have driven the price of crude oil up in international markets over the past two weeks, and US gasoline prices have hit their highest point in 15 years. With the US already facing its worst inflation in 40 years thanks to higher shipping costs created by the COVID-19 pandemic, investors are expecting the situation to become even worse.

Challenged by a journalist about increasing domestic oil production on Monday, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said that under Biden, US oil production had reached “record numbers” and that 9,000 oil drilling permits were not being used, rejecting claims his administration was barring new drilling projects from starting. Biden has promised to begin the process of reducing US use of fossil fuels, including petroleum, in an effort to curb the effects of human-induced climate change. On his first day in office, Biden ordered a halt to drilling projects on sensitive US federal lands.

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Donor’s Plane Carrying Trump Makes Emergency Landing After Engine Died Over Gulf of Mexico - Report

Earlier this week, former US President Donald Trump suggested the US repaint its F-22 Raptor fighter jets in Chinese livery and use them to covertly bomb Russian forces in Ukraine.

A plane carrying the former US leader was forced to make an emergency landing on Saturday evening following an engine failure, Politico reported on Wednesday, citing “two people familiar with the matter.”
Earlier that day in The Big Easy, Trump had delivered a speech to a Republican National Committee-hosted donor retreat in which he suggested the US Air Force repaint its stealthy F-22 Raptor fighters to look like Chinese People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) jets and "bomb the s**** out of Russia."

“And then we say, China did it, we didn’t do it, China did it, and then they start fighting with each other and we sit back and watch,” Trump said to laughter in the hall.

After, Trump used a donor’s Dassault Falcon 900 business jet to return to Palm Beach, Florida, and his Mar-a-Lago resort.

According to the report, one of the three engines on the jet failed between 20 and 30 minutes after taking off from New Orleans Lakefront Airport. The aircraft was at about 28,000 feet and over the Gulf of Mexico when the engine died, but the aircraft safely returned to the airport, where the RNC procured a jet from a different donor and sent the 45th president on his way.

According to the Washington Post, the plane’s tail number was linked to a Utah-based company that is the trustee for more than 1,400 planes, meaning the donor’s identity could not be verified. The aircraft was also carrying Secret Service personnel and members of Trump’s staff. The French-built jet can carry a maximum of 19 passengers in addition to its two pilots.

Meteorologists Warn ‘Bomb Cyclone’ Ready to Bring March Snow From Colorado to Quebec

As much as one-third of the continental United States could be in for rough weather going into the weekend, as meteorologists warn atmospheric conditions are ripe for a “bomb cyclone.” Spring may be only two weeks away, but Mother Nature has her own plans, and a significant swath of the United States and Canada is likely to get snow beginning on Thursday.

According to AccuWeather, frigid Arctic air is about to collide with warm air from the Gulf of Mexico over the Great Plains. The Jet Stream will continue to ram cold air into this situation and push the storm to the northeast, bringing snow and thunderstorms as far as Canada’s Maritime Provinces by the beginning of next week.

The convergence of forces is expected to create a situation called “explosive cyclogenesis,” in which the atmospheric engine that drives storm creation would go into overdrive, rapidly strengthening into a cyclone with powerful winds and heavy precipitation in just a matter of hours. The storm this dynamic produces is called a “bomb cyclone.”

The National Weather Service has issued Winter Storm Warnings and Winter Weather Advisories stretching from Denver, Colorado, to Kansas City, Missouri, for Thursday, where as many as six inches of snow could fall.

The storm will then bring snow to Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle before striking the Ozark Plateau, the Ohio River valley, and the Appalachian Mountains, where winds will get even stronger, reaching 40 to 60 miles per hour, or roughly tropical storm-strength. The storm’s arrival will see a quick decline in temperatures, falling by several dozen degrees Fahrenheit in a couple of hours, according to the Washington Post.
By Friday night, the storm is expected in New England. The storm’s outer bands could bring damaging winds and rain to the more temperate parts of the East Coast as well, as areas close to the Atlantic coastline are expected to be spared of the coldest weather. By Saturday, snow is expected in the Great Lakes region and on Sunday, the storm could cross into Maine and Quebec.

Big winter storms are by no means unheard of in eastern North America, where Spring’s earliest flowers are already poking out. The 1993 Storm of the Century, which brought destruction and chaos from Cuba to Canada, also formed in mid-March. That cyclonic storm killed 318 people and dumped several feet of snow and ice across the continent.

US Weighs Easing Venezuela Sanctions After Ban on Russian Energy Imports - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to relax economic restrictions on Venezuela after banning the imports of Russian oil and other energy products, but the final decision will depend on the outcome of talks between Caracas and the opposition, Bloomberg reported on Thursday, citing a senior administration official.

Talks about the oil trade are taking place on a broader level and American officials, who visited Venezuela on Saturday, did not commit to any easing of sanctions, the report said.

Over the weekend, a US delegation paid a rare visit to Venezuela to discuss a range of issues, including energy security and the health of Americans detained in the Latin American country, the White House said.

Late Tuesday night, President Joe Biden announced that Venezuela released US citizens Jorge Fernandez and Gustavo Cardenas, who was one of six Citgo executives arrested in the country in 2017.

A senior US administration official told reporters that Venezuela did not offer Washington oil in exchange for Americans detained in the country.

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Schroeder in Moscow to Meet With Putin in Attempt to Broker Peace in Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - Former Chancellor of Germany Gerhard Schroeder is in Moscow to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday in a mediation effort to end the Ukraine conflict, Politico reported on Thursday, citing sources.

Schroeder earlier visited Istanbul for talks with a Ukrainian delegate to peace talks with Russia, the report said.

In recent weeks, Schroeder has come under intense criticism in Germany for his work for Russian companies.

In the summer of 2021, the board of directors of Rosneft re-elected the head of the shareholders' committee of Nord Stream AG, Schroeder, as its chairman.

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US to Allocate Another $50Bln Through WFP for Humanitarian Aid to Ukraine - Harris

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The United States will allocate another $50 billion through the UN World Food Programme to support humanitarian efforts in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, Vice President Kamala Harris said on Thursday.

"Today we are also announcing ... that we will give another $50 billion through the UN World Food Programme to assist with humanitarian aid," she said at a joint press conference with Polish President Andrzej Duda in Warsaw.

In a separate press release, the White House said that "$53 million in new humanitarian assistance" from the US government will support civilians in Ukraine as Russia conducts a military operation in the country.

The assistance includes support to the UN World Food Programme "to provide lifesaving emergency food assistance to meet immediate needs of hundreds of thousands affected by the invasion, including people who are displaced from their homes and who are crossing the border out of Ukraine," it added.

"In addition, it will support WFP’s logistics operations to move assistance into Ukraine, including to people in Kyiv," the statement said.

Harris told Duda that Washington understands the burden the current refugee crisis has put on Poland.

"The United States is absolutely prepared to do what we can and what we must to support Poland in terms of the burden they have taken on," she told Duda.

Harris is currently in Poland and will later travel to Romania to participate in high-level talks about NATO posture adjustments and other steps being coordinated with allies in response to Russia’s operation in Ukraine.

The vice president will discuss with US diplomats the situation in Ukraine and efforts to help Ukrainian refugees heading to Poland. Before leaving Warsaw, Harris will meet with American and Polish troops to express support for their mission to enhance deterrence and protect collective defense, her office said.

Russia began a special military operation in Ukraine on February 24 after the Donbas republics appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian forces. The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only and the civilian population is not in danger. In response, Western nations have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow.

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US Consumer Prices Up 7.9% in Year to February, Biggest Jump in 40 Years - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - US consumer prices were up 7.9% in the year to February, indicating the fastest inflationary growth in four decades, the Labor Department announced on Thursday.
"The all items index rose 7.9 percent for the 12 months ending February," the department said in a news release, referring to the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers. "The 12-month increase has been steadily rising and is now the largest since the period ending January 1982."

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US Has Delivered Patriot Missile Systems to Poland - Harris

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The United States has delivered Patriot missile systems to Poland, Vice President Kamala Harris announced on Thursday. "We have directed Patriot missile systems to Poland this week and today I can announce that we have delivered those Patriot systems to Poland, we do this as a reminder and demonstration of our commitment to Poland," she said during a visit to Warsaw.

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Biden to Discuss Security Cooperation, Migration With Colombia's Duque - US Official

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Colombian President Ivan Duque will meet at the White House on Thursday to discuss security cooperation, migration management in Latin America and Colombia's election, a senior US administration official said. "The two leaders are going to talk about, obviously, where they want the relationship to go from here," the official said during a conference call. "They'll talk, of course about the issues of security cooperation, and efforts to not just implement the 2016 peace accord, but to continuing efforts to combat those dissident groups of the Revolutionary Armed Forces and other transnational criminal actors, but also to protect Colombian elections from outside interference so that Colombians and no one else are the ones that determine the future of the country."

The two leaders will also review cooperation on an approach that was finalized last year on a holistic approach to counter narcotics, which looks at addressing some of the root causes such as demand in the United States, the official said. Biden and Duque will also discuss efforts to promote rural security and development, issues of environmental protection, health security, recovering from the pandemic, preparations for the upcoming Summit of the Americas, and galvanizing a regional response to migration, the official said.

Since the meeting between the two leaders is going to take place two days before Columbia's legislative elections, Biden will talk about the need for there to be free and fair elections. Biden will also make clear that the United States will seek to work with whoever is elected as Colombia's next president. Colombia's presidential election will take place on May 29.
WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - Venezuela did not offer the United States oil in exchange for Americans detained in the country, a senior US administration official told reporters.
Late Tuesday night, President Joe Biden announced that Venezuela released US citizens Jorge Fernandez and Gustavo Cardenas, who was one of six Citgo executives arrested in the country in 2017, after a US delegation held secret talks with President Nicolas Maduro’s government.
"At no point was there an offer of oil in exchange for the detention of Americans. At no point would we do that," the official said. "It would certainly risk Americans that are currently detained and send a signal around the world that the United States is going to bargain oil for people, which frankly is wrong."

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said he spoke with his Ukrainian counterpart Oleksii Reznikov in a phone call about the continued provision of defensive security assistance and the impact of the Russian military operation.
"Today, I spoke with my Ukrainian counterpart Oleksii Reznikov to discuss the continued provision of defensive security assistance & the impacts of Russia’s unprovoked, premeditated war against Ukraine. I commend the heroic Ukrainian efforts & proficiency on the battlefield," Austin said in a statement on Wednesday.

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan are scheduled to hold a phone call Thursday morning to discuss developments related to Russia and Ukraine, the White House said in a statement.
"The president [Biden] holds a phone call with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey to discuss the latest developments regarding Russia and Ukraine," the release said while noting that the call is scheduled to take place at 10:00 a.m. EST (3:00 p.m. GMT).
Blinken, Kuleba in Call Talk Efforts to Provide More Aid to Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Ukrainian counterpart discussed by telephone their coordinated effort to provide Ukraine with additional security and humanitarian assistance, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today by phone with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba," Price said after the call on Wednesday. "They discussed coordinated efforts to provide additional security assistance and humanitarian support to Ukraine."

Blinken and Kuleba also discussed ongoing diplomatic efforts to stop Russia's military operation, Price said.

UPDATE - US Does Not Operate Any Chemical, Biological Laboratories in Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The United States does not operate any chemical or biological research laboratories in Ukraine and remains in compliance with international weapons conventions, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"The United States does not own or operate any chemical or biological laboratories in Ukraine, it is in full compliance with its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention and Biological Weapons Convention, and it does not develop or possess such weapons anywhere," Price said in the statement on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said in a Senate hearing that Ukraine has biological research facilities that the US government is concerned could fall under Russian control.

Documentation obtained from laboratories in Ukraine on February 24 showed that dangerous pathogens - including anthrax, cholera and the plague - had been destroyed in what could be a cover up of activities in violation of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC), Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

Price called the allegations that the United States is developing chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine "Russian disinformation," and claimed that it is Moscow who maintains such programs in violation of international conventions.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki later in a tweet said the world should be on the lookout for Russia to possibly use chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine or create a false flag operation.

China has also seemingly echoed and endorsed the allegations of biological and chemical laboratories in Ukraine, Psaki added.
Russia has repeatedly denied previous allegations of preparing false flags to justify the military operation in Ukraine.

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Trump Says as President He Told Putin Not to Launch Military Operation in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said while in office he told Russian President Vladimir Putin not to take military action against Ukraine and has not spoken to him since his departure from the White House.
"I talked to Putin. I spoke to him about Ukraine, and I said don't do it," Trump said during an interview with the Full Send Podcast, released on Wednesday, when asked about his relationship with the leader during his time in office. "I haven't spoken to him since."
Trump also said that Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping changed their opinion of the United States and lost respect after the withdrawal from Afghanistan, during which Trump said there was "gross incompetence."
Russia and China were forced to be partners together by the Obama and Biden administrations, Trump also said, adding that "you never want to force them together."
Trump also hinted at a potential second run for public office, saying that "a lot of people are going to be really happy" when asked whether he plans to run again.

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Price called the allegations that the United States is developing chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine "Russian disinformation," and claimed that it is Moscow who maintains such programs in violation of international conventions.

Pelosi Says Pandemic Funding Package Separate From Omnibus Bill, $13.6Bln in Ukraine Aid

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - A $15.6 billion COVID-19 relief package will be advanced separately from the $1.5 omnibus spending bill to fund the federal government and provide assistance to Ukraine, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said during a press briefing.
"We'll have a bipartisan omnibus funding bill that includes $13.6 billion in funding for Ukraine, humanitarian, economic and defense spending, [and] a separate funding package to continue to battle with that coronavirus that we are taking out of the omnibus," Pelosi said on Wednesday. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Tuesday that they are aiming to pass the omnibus bill before the end of the week. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell similarly said that the legislation needs to be passed quickly.
The legislation would fund the US government through September 30, 2022. Current funding is set to run out on Friday at midnight. The bill appropriates $730 billion in nondefense funding and $782 billion for defense.
The House is also working on another piece of legislation to ban the import of Russian energy products and put pressure on Russia at the World Trade Organization, Pelosi said. The bill would prohibit the importation of oil and natural gas from Russia and order the US Trade Representative to use their influence at the WTO to encourage other members to suspend trade concessions with Russia and consider further steps to suspend their WTO participation.

US Charges Ukrainian for Ransomware Attacks Including Against Kaseya - Justice Dept. (Updates with more details in paras 4, 5)
WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The US authorities charged a Ukrainian national for multiple ransomware attacks, including last year's hack of the IT management software firm Kaseya, the Justice Department said in a press release.
"A man charged with conducting ransomware attacks against multiple victims, including the July 2021 attack against Kaseya, made his initial appearance and was arraigned today in the Northern District of Texas," the release said on Wednesday. "According to an August 2021 indictment, Yaroslav Vasinskyi, 22, accessed the internal computer networks of several victim companies and deployed Sodinokibi/REvil ransomware to encrypt the data on the computers of victim companies."
Vasinskyi, a Ukrainian national, was taken into custody in Poland before being extradited to the
US on March 3, the release said.
Vasinskyi was allegedly responsible for the July 2, 2021, ransomware attack against Kaseya
and caused the deployment of malicious Sodinokibi/REvil code throughout a Kaseya product
that caused the firm's production functionality to deploy REvil ransomware to endpoints on its
customer networks, the release added.
After the remote access to Kaseya endpoints was established, the ransomware was executed
on those computers, which resulted in the encryption of data on computers of organizations
around the world that used Kaseya software, according to the release.

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Vasinskyi, a Ukrainian national, was taken into custody in Poland before being extradited to the
US on March 3, the release added.

Wall Street Jumps as Oil Prices Ease, US Tech Stocks Up Most in 1 Year
(Updates with more details n paras 2, 8-9)
NEW YORK, March 9 (Sputnik) - US stocks closed sharply higher on Wednesday as oil markets
fell their most since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, and Wall Street's Big Tech sector
posted its biggest one-day rally in a year on easing worries about inflation fed by runaway
energy prices.
Wall Street's three major stock indexes - the Dow Jones Industrial Average, the S&P 500, and
the Nasdaq Composite - closed up between 2% and nearly 4%. Nasdaq led gains, rising more
than 3.5% for its biggest daily spike since March 2021.
"US stocks are rebounding as Wall Street embraces the exhaustion with the pricing surge
across the commodity complex," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said and
added that crude prices are declining after Volodymyr Zelenskyy signaled he has "cooled down" regarding the question of Ukraine joining NATO.

Oil prices fell double-digits in Wednesday’s trading session, also because representatives for the United Arab Emirates and Iraq expressed willingness to raise their oil output and said they will ask the same of the global oil producing alliance OPEC+.

US stocks have had a rough year, with the spike in oil prices due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict heightening inflation in a nation already reeling from the worst price pressures in four decades. Wednesday’s turnaround in stocks marked the first major rebound in weeks.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, made up mostly of industrial stocks, closed up 2%. For the year though, the Dow was off by 8%.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 US stocks, ended up 2.6%. For the year, it was down about 10%.

The Nasdaq Composite, made of highly-valued tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Nasdaq, and Google, settled up 3.6%. It has lost almost 15% so far for 2022.

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IMF Approves $1.4Bln in Emergency Financing for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The IMF approved $1.4 billion in emergency financing for Ukraine amid the conflict with Russia, the fund said in a statement.

"The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) today approved a disbursement of US$1.4 billion (SDR 1005.9 million) under the Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI) to help meet urgent financing needs and mitigate the economic impact of the war," the release said on Wednesday.

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WarnerMedia Suspends All New Business in Russia - CEO

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - CNN parent company WarnerMedia is pausing all new business in Russia over the situation in Ukraine, CEO Jason Kilar announced in an internal memo obtained by several US media outlets.

"I want to share with each of you a number of decisions we have made with regard to WarnerMedia’s business operations in Russia," Kilar said in a memo distributed to WarnerMedia staff obtained by Variety on Wednesday. "Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, WarnerMedia is pausing all new business in Russia. This includes ceasing broadcast of our channels, halting all new content licensing with Russian entities and pausing our planned theatrical and games releases."
The company has suspended CNN broadcasts in Russia and WarnerMedia's Warner Bros. has already shifted its plans to release "The Batman" in Russia ahead of its planned theatrical release.

Officials at WarnerMedia are following developments closely and any business decisions in the future will be made with that context in mind, Kilar said.

Pentagon Saw Reports of Strike on Mauripol Hospital But Cannot Verify Them - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department has seen reports of a strike on a hospital in Mariupol, Ukraine, but cannot verify them, spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"I've seen those same reports you have, but we are not in a position to be able to independently verify that," Kirby said on Wednesday. "If it is true, and we have no reason to doubt that it is true, we just can't independently verify."

US Deployment of Patriot Missiles to Poland Temporary, Will Return to Germany - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The deployment of Patriot surface-to-air missiles to Poland by the United States is a temporary action and will likely end in the systems' return to Germany, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said.

"As for the Patriot missiles, yes, this is a temporary deployment to Poland, given the circumstances that we're in. These Patriot batteries had already been deployed into Germany, and I suspect that at the appropriate time they'll go back there," Kirby said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

Biden Considering Sanctioning Russian Nuclear Agency Rosatom, No Decision Made - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering imposing sanctions on Russia's nuclear agency Rosatom, Bloomberg reported.

The US government has not made a final decision yet on imposing sanctions against Rosatom, the report said on Wednesday.
The White House is currently consulting with the nuclear power industry about the potential impacts such sanctions would have on them, the report said, citing people familiar with the matter.

The White House and State Department did not immediately respond to requests for comment, the report added.

On Tuesday, the Biden administration announced that it was banning US imports of Russian crude oil, coal and other energy products except uranium.

Oil Prices Fall Their Most Since April 2020 as UAE, Iraq Offer More Barrels

NEW YORK, March 9 (Sputnik) - Oil prices fell double digits on Wednesday and their most in a day since April 2020 after the United Arab Emirates and Iraq expressed willingness to raise their oil output and said they will ask the same of the global oil producing alliance OPEC+. Global crude markets also fell after Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he has “cooled down” on the question of his nation joining NATO — one of the main catalysts to the conflict with Russia. Brent, the global benchmark for oil, settled down $16.84, or 13.2%, at $111.14 a barrel. It was its sharpest one-day percentage drop since April 2020.

US crude’s West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, benchmark settled down $15, or 13%, at $108.70. Like Brent, it was also WTI’s biggest one-day percentage slump since April 2020.

The UAE ambassador to Washington, Yousef Al Otaiba, said in a widely-circulated statement to the media that the number two energy producer in the Gulf “favors oil production increases.” The Emirates “will be encouraging OPEC to consider higher production levels,” Otaiba said, referring to the 13-member Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. “The UAE has been a reliable and responsible supplier of energy to global markets for more than 50 years and believes that stability in energy markets is critical to the global economy,” Otaiba added.

His remarks were followed by Iraq’s Oil Minister Ihsan Abdul Jabbar Ismail who said OPEC+ will strive to achieve market balance. “If OPEC+ requires it, we can increase output,” he said, noting that the global oil producers alliance will discuss supply decisions at its next meeting in April.

OPEC has been raising output by only a nominal 400,000 barrels daily for each month since last year through its pact with another 10 oil producers steered by Russia under a combined alliance known as OPEC+. That alliance is still withholding some 5 million barrels of daily supply under pandemic-era production cuts initiated in May 2020.

Biden announced a US-only ban on Russian oil imports on Tuesday in an action aimed at further isolating a country that on its own provides 10% of world supply. Russian oil made up 3% of US consumption last year.

But the UAE-sponsored boost and the Iraqi plans to ask the same of OPEC could be a "game-changer of sorts,” John Kilduff, partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, said.
"This is the music Biden has been wanting to hear from OPEC," Kilduff said. "It could mark a start of the climb down in the oil market, provided we continue seeing de-escalation on the war front too."

Notwithstanding Wednesday’s decline, Brent remains up 44% this year while US crude shows an annual gain of 46%.

US Not Supporting Giving More Aircraft to Ukrainian Air Force - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The United States does not support giving more aircraft to the Ukrainian air force and does not want them in custody, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"We don't support giving Ukraine more fighter aircraft, don't want them in our custody," Kirby told reporters.

Pentagon Chief Spoke to Ukraine Defense Minister by Phone on Wednesday - Kirby

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin spoke with his Ukrainian counterpart by phone on Wednesday, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said.

"Just before coming out here, the Secretary wrapped up a phone call with the Ukrainian Defense Minister, Minister [Oleksii] Reznikov as one of his ongoing series of calls with counterparts," Kirby said. "The call really just concluded so I don't have much context to provide for you there."

SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS
* The United Nations has no information at present to confirm the reports by Russia about the existence of a dozen US bio-laboratories in Ukraine that were allegedly developing biological weapons, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.
* A well-thought-out operation to open humanitarian corridors and evacuate residents on Wednesday did not bring the expected results through the fault of the Kiev authorities, the
humanitarian situation throughout Ukraine continues to deteriorate rapidly, Col. Gen. Mikhail Mizintsev, the head of the Russian Defense Ministry's National Defense Control Center (NDCC), said.
* Kiev allowed nationalists to use weapons against those who attempt to evacuate to Russia, threaten to kill relatives, Mizintsev said.
* About 2 million people from Ukraine have applied for evacuation to Russia, Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

ENERGY MARKETS
* The Biden administration does not plan to restart the Keystone XL oil pipeline amid concerns about rising gasoline prices and volatility in the energy market, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.
* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken confirmed that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will support the United States' efforts to convince OPEC+ countries to increase oil production amid rising energy costs after the cut off of Russian energy supplies.
* The situation with global oil prices is "completely uncertain," yet market participants believe it will not last long, Andrew Kamau, principal secretary in the Kenyan Ministry of Petroleum and Mining, told Sputnik.

GLOBAL ECONOMY TENSIONS
* India hopes current geopolitical tensions will not affect joint projects with Russia, Invest India CEO Deepak Bagla told Sputnik at CERAWeek.
* Ukraine-related sanctions on Russia should avoid harming civilians and it has been the position of the United Nations, UN Secretary General spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.
* The European Union agreed to extend the scope of sanctions against Moscow and Minsk over the situation in Ukraine, the European Commission said.

LAVROV-KULEBA MEETING
* The upcoming meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba, is an important part of the negotiation process between Moscow and Kiev, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday.
* Kuleba called his expectations from the upcoming talks with Lavrov "restrained," noting that he does not have high hopes for them.
* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that he hopes Moscow and Kiev will agree on long-term ceasefire after a meeting between Lavrov and Kuleba in Antalya on Thursday.

BIDEN'S ORDER ON CRYPTOCURRENCY
* US President Joe Biden will sign an executive order that will provide the framework to establish oversight over the use of cryptocurrencies in the United States, the White House said.
* Biden's executive order to establish government oversight over cryptocurrency aims to block Russia's "malicious cyber activities" and promote donations through cryptocurrencies to Ukraine, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.
Pentagon Assesses Transfer of MiG-29 Jets to Ukraine as 'High Risk'

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that the transfer of MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine would be of high risk, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"We assess transfer of MiG to Ukraine [as] high risk," Kirby told reporters.

Plane Carrying Trump Suffered Engine Failure Over Gulf of Mexico on Saturday – Reports

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - A plane carrying former US President Donald Trump had to make an emergency landing in New Orleans, Louisiana, on Saturday after suffering an engine failure over the Gulf of Mexico, The Washington Post reported, citing people in the know. The failure occurred shortly after the plane took off from New Orleans and managed to reach an altitude of about 28,000 feet. The landing took place shortly before 11:00 p.m., the report said. At the time of the incident, Trump was traveling back to his residence at Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Florida from a hotel in New Orleans where he met with some of the Republican party's top donors during a private event, according to the report.

US Clearly Has No Substitute Plan After Banning Russian Oil, May Face Recession - Investor

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration does not have an alternative plan to secure oil supplies after it banned Russian oil and energy imports and may quickly face a recession in the United States, Kyle Shostak, director of the financial services firm Navigator Principal Investors, told Sputnik.

"From a domestic point of view, it is clear that the administration doesn't have a substitute plan to lean on," Shostak said. "The alternatives will be to go to Saudi Arabia and Venezuela and effectively subsidize these political regimes that will use every chance to negotiate their prices from a position of power."
Shostak noted that the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) countries has worked hard to get agreement for oil at the current prices so a potential increase in output as a concession to the United States is far from certain. "Meanwhile, the price per barrel can go to $160 and above. The United States may quickly find itself in a recession, so the question is how long and how far the average US consumer and the US economy can bear the brunt," he said.

Shostak said the decision US President Joe Biden took on banning Russian oil imports - at the level of 672,000 barrels a day - was a difficult one amid a charged political atmosphere. "Clearly, this administration had no intention of doing so, as a week before the US Energy Secretary has specifically argued that such a ban will be a big negative for the US economy. However, the president had no choice as he was forced into this by the Congress."

Shostak continued to say that the brutal reality of the modern-day energy market lies in the fact of being deeply interdependent. "There will be a buyer for the ready-to-be-delivered product that everyone needs," he said. "The Russian suppliers will re-route tankers of the US-bound volume, albeit not without some initial logistic challenges, to the Asian markets, starving for oil even before the conflict had started, where the end-takers will gladly buy it. The current energy prices are well above what the Russian budget was planning on."

Shostak said he believes the net effect of the new situation on the Russian economy will probably be very small. "The share of Russian oil import to the US is overall small (7-8%) and was declining anyway. No natural gas is being purchased from Russia," he said. "Even if substantially discounted, it will still sell at the levels, sufficient to satisfy the Russian state budget, balanced at $69 per barrel in 2021, and make ends meet. Iran was able to do the same for years and survived, China and others countries are buying the Iranian output daily."

Shostak underscored that the European countries are most likely to keep buying Russian oil. "Worth reminding that while the war is in its worst stage, Russian gas keeps flowing to European offtakers through the Ukrainian energy system," he said. "Europe does not seem to be rushing to cut Russian supplies. All plans to replace them are facing enormous logistical, economic and political challenges, at best solved long-term, and should be viewed broadly as the shift to green energy."

Shostak also said uranium has been specifically excluded from the US ban as the United States has a significant uranium dependency on Russia, which provides for over 20% of its domestic demand.

The price of gasoline in the United States has broken another record in the past two days, according to data published by the American Automotive Association (AAA) on Wednesday. The average price of gasoline in the United States increased by eight cents overnight, from $4.17 to $4.25 after the US government announced a ban on Russian energy imports a day earlier.

The United States and its allies have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia in response to its special military operation in Ukraine. The sanctions have slowed but not entirely eliminated the ability of Russian exporters of oil and gas to transact deals that require world financial networks and especially US dollars.
Russia provides 10% of the world's crude oil needs and 40% of Europe's gas requirements. The United States, however, buys a limited amount of Russian oil, taking 20% of the 10.5 million barrels per day exported by Russia in 2021.

Biden Considering Sanctioning Russian Nuclear Agency Rosatom, No Decision Made - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering imposing sanctions on Russian nuclear agency Rosatom, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday. The report said that the US government has not made a final decision yet.

US Has No Plans to Reauthorize Keystone XL Pipeline Amid Energy Concerns - White House

(Update adds background in paras 3-6, adds to headline)
WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration does not plan to restart the Keystone XL oil pipeline amid concerns about rising gasoline prices and volatility in the energy market, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday. "There is no plans for that and it would not address any of the problems we're having currently," Psaki said during a press briefing when asked about possibly reauthorizing the Keystone XL pipeline.

Keystone is an oil pipeline system that moves Alberta crude oil from the Canadian town of Hardisty to refineries and tank farms in the US states of Illinois, Oklahoma and Texas. The first three phases of the system are currently operational, however, the construction of the fourth phase, better known as Keystone XL, was planned to transport oil to the US state of Nebraska. On Monday, Albertan Prime Minister Jason Kenney said the US and Canada could discuss shipping nearly 1 million barrels of oil through the Keystone XL pipeline should it be reapproved.

Biden signed an executive order in January to rescind the Keystone XL construction permit granted in 2019 by former President Donald Trump.

On Wednesday, Biden announced a ban on Russian oil imports over the situation in Ukraine.

First Pig Heart Transplant Patient Dies 2 Months After Surgery - Medical Center
Washington, March 9 (Sputnik) - David Bennett, the first person to undergo a pig heart transplant surgery, has died two months after the landmark experiment, the University of Maryland Medical Center said on Wednesday. "We are devastated by the loss of Mr. Bennett. He proved to be a brave and noble patient who fought all the way to the end," Dr. Bartley Griffith, who performed the transplant surgery, said in a statement.

Griffith said Bennett had become known by millions of people around the world for his courage and steadfast will to live.

Bennett, 57, was a resident of Hagerstown, Maryland. He was selected for the pig heart transplant procedure due to being ineligible for a regular heart transplant while being on life-support and bedridden.

Despite only living for two months, Griffin and the medical team said the history-making procedure afforded "valuable insights that will hopefully inform transplant surgeons to improve outcomes and potentially provide lifesaving benefits to future patients."

The January 7 pig heart transplant surgery was undertaken after the US Food and Drug Administration provided emergency authorization for the procedure to take place.

India’s Investment Agency Hopes Geopolitical Tensions Will Not Affect Projects With Russia

HOUSTON, March 9 (Sputnik) – India hopes current geopolitical tensions will not affect joint projects with Russia, Invest India CEO Deepak Bagla told Sputnik at CERAWeek.

"Time will tell. But one thing I should tell – that strong relationships and rationality business should take it forward. Everybody is on the side of peace. For business this is critical. We all hope to that. I'm sure everyone does," Bagla said when asked whether the current tensions around Ukraine may jeopardize India-Russia projects.

Bagla added that Indian-Russian investment cooperation dates years back and there have been multiple cross relationships and investment projects.

Wall Street Rebounds as Oil Prices Ease, US Tech Stocks Up Most in 1 Year

NEW YORK, March 9 (Sputnik) - US stocks rebounded on Wednesday as oil markets fell their most since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, with Wall Street's Big Tech sector posting its biggest one-day rally in a year on easing worries about inflation fed by runaway energy prices. Wall Street's three major stock indexes - the Dow Jones Industrial Average, the S&P 500, and the Nasdaq Composite - were up between 2% and nearly 4%. Nasdaq led gains, rising more than 3.5% for its biggest daily spike since March 2021.
"US stocks are rebounding as Wall Street embraces the exhaustion with the pricing surge across the commodity complex," said Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA. "Crude prices are declining after Ukraine President [Volodymyr] Zelenskyy signaled he has 'cooled down' regarding the question of Ukraine joining NATO."

Oil prices fell double-digits in Wednesday’s trading session, also because representatives for the United Arab Emirates and Iraq expressed willingness to raise their oil output and said they will ask the same of the global oil producing alliance OPEC+.

US stocks have had a rough year, with the spike in oil prices due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict heightening inflation in a nation already reeling from the worst price pressures in four decades. Wednesday’s turnaround in stocks marked the first major rebound in weeks.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, made up mostly of industrial stocks, was up 2.2%. For the year though, the Dow was off by 8%.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 US stocks, rose 2.7%. For the year, it was down about 10%.

The Nasdaq Composite, made of highly-valued tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Nasdaq, and Google, jumped 3.6%. It has lost almost 15 percent so far for 2022.

US Has No Plans to Reauthorize Keystone XL Pipeline - White House

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration does not plan to restart the Keystone XL oil pipeline amid concerns about rising gasoline prices and volatility in the energy market, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"There is no plans for that and it would not address any of the problems we’re having currently," Psaki said during a press briefing when asked about possibly reauthorizing the Keystone XL pipeline.

US Expects to See High Inflation Figures Released on Thursday - White House

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The United States expects to see high inflation numbers when data for February is released on Thursday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said at a news briefing.

"We certainly assess that we expect to see a high headline inflation in tomorrow’s February inflation data," Psaki said on Wednesday.

The increase in the cost of energy has been a key reason for the rise in costs, Psaki said, linking the rise to Russia’s buildup of forces and subsequent military operation in Ukraine.
US to React Should Russia Seize Assets of Departing Western Firms - White House

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The United States will respond should Russia seize the assets of Western companies leaving the country, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"[O]n the potential seizing of private sector assets in Russia... if they were to take those actions, I'm certain there would be steps we would take. But nothing has happened at this point in time," Psaki said during a press briefing.

US Continues to Engage on JCPOA, Believes Russia Shares Common Interest - White House

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to engage with partners in the efforts to revive the Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and believes Russia shares a common interest to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"[O]ur team, we're continuing to engage with Iran deal partners including Russia on Iran nuclear negotiations, we believe Russia shares a common interest in ensuring Iran never acquires a nuclear weapon," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Pentagon in Contact With NATO on Challenges of Supplying Aircraft to Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley and other senior US defense officials are consulting with Kiev and NATO countries about Poland's proposal to send MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"Secretary Austin, Chairman Milley and members of our defense department are in touch with Ukrainian counterparts NATO counterparts, discussing what are clearly logistical challenges here," Psaki said during a press conference.

Psaki said the ongoing talks address issues related to how the allies could get combat jets to Ukraine in a way that will not escalate the conflict with Russia.
UN Has No Information to Confirm Russia’s Reports of US Biolabs in Ukraine - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 9 (Sputnik) - The United Nations at present has no information to confirm the reports by Russia about the existence of a dozen US bio-laboratories in Ukraine that were allegedly developing biological weapons, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"We have at this point no information to confirm these reports or these allegations about these kinds of labs," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Blinken Says Offer of Humanitarian Corridors From Ukraine Into Russia, Belarus ‘Absurd’

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The Kremlin’s idea to create humanitarian corridors from Ukraine into Russia and Belarus is absurd, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated on Wednesday.

"The Kremlin’s proposals to create humanitarian corridors leading into Russian and Belarus are absurd. It’s offensive to suggest the Ukrainian people should seek refuge from the very government that has demonstrated such disregard for their lives," Blinken claimed at a joint news briefing alongside UK counterpart Elizabeth Truss.

Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk on Wednesday confirmed the opening of humanitarian corridors from Ukrainian cities including Mariupol, Zaporizhzhia and Sumy.

Vereshchuk said that evacuation of Ukrainian people to Russia is "unacceptable."

Russian President Vladimir Putin and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on Wednesday in a phone conversation also discussed humanitarian issues related to Ukraine, including efforts to organize corridors, the Kremlin said in a statement.

Russia says it is ready to provide humanitarian corridors from Ukraine into Russia through Belarus in agreement with Ukrainian authorities. The Russian Defense Ministry has accused the Ukrainian side of disrupting efforts to open humanitarian corridors.

US House Bill Banning Russian Energy Imports Would Not Alter Normal Trade Relations Status

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - Proposed US House legislation to ban Russian energy imports and seek to suspend the country’s participation in the World Trade Organization (WTO)
excludes a proposal to revoke permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) status with the United States, according to text of the bill received by Congress on Wednesday. H.R. 6968, if passed, would prohibit the importation of oil and natural gas from Russia starting 45 days after enactment. It would also order the US Trade Representative to use their influence at the WTO to encourage other members to suspend trade concessions with Russia and consider further steps to suspend their WTO participation.

Lawmakers had also previously proposed revoking Russia and Belarus’s PNTR status, which would allow the US to increase tariffs on their imports above standard World Trade Organization levels. However, the proposal did not make it into the current legislation text.

Te head of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Economic Cooperation Department, Dmitry Birichevsky, told Sputnik Russia is ready to challenge any restrictions and defend its interests at the WTO.

Sanctions on Russia Should Avoid Harming Civilians - Guterres Office

UNITED NATIONS, March 9 (Sputnik) – Ukraine-related sanctions on Russia should avoid harming civilians and it has been the position of the United Nations, UN Secretary General spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"[O]ur principal position has always been that sanctions [on Russia] should avoid harming civilians and that's been our position," Dujarric told a press briefing when asked whether sanctions on Russia will hinder COVID-19 vaccine deliveries overseas.

Cryptocurrency Exchange BitMEX Co-Founder Pleads Guilty to Money Laundering - Justice Dept.

Washington, March 9 (Sputnik) - Samuel Reed, one of three co-founders of the cryptocurrency exchange BitMEX, has pleaded guilty to violating the Bank Secrecy Act by failing to establish, implement or maintain an anti-money laundering program, the US Justice Department said in a press release Wednesday.

"Samuel Reed has now joined his co-founders, Arthur Hayes and Benjamin Delo, in admitting that they caused BitMEX to commit criminal violations of the anti-money laundering laws that govern financial institutions operating in the United States," said US Attorney Damien Williams. Delo and Hayes, the other co-founders of BitMEX, pleaded guilty to the same offense in February of 2022.
Under the terms of a plea agreement, Reed, who served as BitMEX's chief technology officer, agreed to pay a $10 million criminal fine reflecting the substantial profits he derived because of the company’s involvement in US-based trading.

UN Says Held Meetings at Russian Ministries of Defense, Foreign Affairs to Discuss Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - Officials from the United Nations held meetings at the Russian ministries of defense and foreign affairs on Wednesday to discuss humanitarian efforts in Ukraine, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said. "Our humanitarian colleagues, who are in Moscow, held a high-level meeting today with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. Participants agreed to continue strengthening this cooperation for the purpose of facilitating principled and timely humanitarian assistance to all people affected by the crisis in Ukraine," Dujarric told a briefing.

Biden's Cryptocurrency Order Aims to Block Russia's 'Malicious Cyber Activities' - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden’s executive order to establish government oversight over cryptocurrency aims to block Russia’s "malicious cyber activities" and promote donations through cryptocurrencies to Ukraine, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday. "There have been numerous ransomware incidents using cryptocurrencies that have originated in Russia, as have other malicious cyber activities," Blinken said in a statement. "On the other hand, people from around the world have responded to Ukraine’s request for assistance by making direct donations through cryptocurrencies. Today’s EO [executive order] is designed to block the former and promote the latter." Blinken added that American embassies and missions around the world are ready to partner with the private sector and international bodies to support the development and use of digital asset technology in ways aligned with US values.

Blinken Says 'Absolutely Sure' Russia Will Suffer Strategic Defeat in Ukraine
WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday that he is confident Russia will suffer a strategic defeat in Ukraine despite making possible tactical gains.

"Ultimately, I'm absolutely convinced that Putin will fail and Russia will suffer a strategic defeat no matter what short term tactical gains it may make in Ukraine," Blinken said.

On February 24, Russia began a special operation in Ukraine after the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend themselves from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger. Moscow has repeatedly stressed that it has no plans to occupy Ukraine.

Since the start of the operation, Russian and Ukrainian delegations have met three times in Belarus to discuss a ceasefire and opening humanitarian corridors for the civilian population.

Ex-Ecuadorian President Bucaram Banned From Entry to US Over Corruption - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing an entry ban on Abdala Jaime Bucaram Ortiz, former Ecuadorian president impeached in 1997, over "significant corruption," State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"The United States is designating former Ecuadorian President Abdalá Jaime Bucaram Ortiz, Sr. due to his involvement in significant corruption, including misappropriation of public funds, accepting bribes, and interfering with public processes. During his tenure as the president of Ecuador, Bucaram engaged in multiple corrupt acts, including accepting bribes and stealing public funds. Former President Bucaram has not yet faced accountability for his betrayal of the public trust," the statement said.

The sanctions are also targeting Bucaram's wife Maria Rosa Pulley Vergara, and sons Jacobo Abdala Bucaram Pulley, Abdala Jaime Bucaram Pulley, and Michel Abdala Bucaram Pulley.

"This designation reaffirms the commitment of the United States to combat corruption that undermines the Ecuadorian people's faith in its democratic institutions. We stand with all Ecuadorians in support of democracy and the rule of law and against those who undermine these principles for personal gain," the statement concluded.

In February 1997, the parliament of Ecuador declared Bucaram mentally unfit to run the state and removed him from office. Bucaram fled to Panama and was granted political asylum there.

Blinken Confirms UAE Support to Increase Oil Production From OPEC+ Countries

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken confirmed on Wednesday that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will support the United States' efforts to
convince OPEC+ countries to increase oil production amid rising energy costs after the cut off of Russian energy supplies.

"I think there was just an announcement a short while ago, I'm not sure if it's been made publicly yet about Emirati support for increased production when it comes to OPEC plus, which I think is an important thing to stabilize global energy markets to make sure that there remains an abundant supply of energy around the world," Blinken said during a joint press conference with UK Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss.

Blinken Says US Has a Set of Interests With Venezuela, Including to Ensure Oil Supply

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The United States has a number of interests with regard to Venezuela, including to ensure steady oil supply globally, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday. "We have a set of interests with Venezuela. They include, of course, supporting democratic aspirations of the Venezuelan people. They include securing the release of Americans who were unjustly detained there," Blinken said. "It's also true that we have an interest globally in maintaining a steady supply of energy, including through our diplomatic efforts."

Blinken Says Poland's Proposal to Send MiG-29 Jets to Ukraine Shows 'Complexities'

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - Poland's proposal to send MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine is associated with certain complexities, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday. "The decision about whether to transfer any equipment to our friends in Ukraine is ultimately one that each government will decide for itself and has to make," Blinken said during a press conference. "We're in very close consultation with allies and partners about the ongoing security assistance to Ukraine, because in fact, I think what we're seeing is that Poland's proposal shows that there are some complexities that the issue presents."

UK to Bolster Economic Ties With India, Gulf States to Further Isolate Russia - Truss
WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The United Kingdom will strengthen its security and economic ties around the world, including with India and the Persian Gulf states, to further isolate Russia, UK Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss said on Wednesday.
"We will step up our work to build economic and security alliances around the world, including with India and the Gulf nations, to further isolate Russia," Truss said during a joint press conference with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

UAE Backs Oil Production Increase, Will Ask OPEC to Consider Higher Output - Envoy to US

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The United Arab Emirates supports oil production increases and will urge its allies in OPEC to consider them, ambassador to the United States Yousef Al Otaiba said on Wednesday.
"We favour production increases and will be encouraging Opec to consider higher production levels," he said, as quoted by the Financial Times.
Global oil prices have risen about 60% this year, reaching 14-year highs above $130 a barrel recently, on fears of shortages in crude supplies exacerbated by Western sanctions on Russia for its military operation against Ukraine. Russia produces about 10% of global crude supplies. The OPEC group, which comprises 13 members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries led by Saudi Arabia, has been raising oil output only nominally since last year through its pact with another 10 oil producers steered by Russia. The combined alliance is known as OPEC+.

Direct Aerial Conflict With Russia Not to Bring Better Outcome for Ukraine, World- Trudeau

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday Canada agrees with NATO that a direct confrontation with Russia in the skies over Ukraine as a result of imposing a no-fly-zone would benefit neither the Ukrainians nor the world.
"NATO has made the determination and we agree and stand with NATO that direct conflict between NATO planes or fighters and Russia would not bring about a better outcome for Ukrainians, nor would it bring a better outcome especially for the rest of world," Trudeau said when asked whether Canada would support a no-fly-zone over Ukraine.
On Tuesday, Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council Oleksiy Danilov said Kiev could establish a no-fly zone over the country as long as it had NATO weapons. NATO ruled out creating a no-fly zone over Ukraine after Russian President Vladimir Putin warned the alliance of huge consequences if they moved in that directions.
On February 24, Russia launched a special operation in Ukraine after the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend themselves from intensifying attacks from Ukrainian troops. In response, Canada, the United States and their allies imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia.

Biden 'Exceedingly Clear' No US Troops to Fight in Ukraine, Including in Skies - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has been exceedingly clear that no American forces will fight in Ukraine, including in the skies over the country, a senior American defense official said on Wednesday.

"The President has been exceedingly clear there will be no US troops fighting in Ukraine, that includes in the skies over Ukraine," the official said. "Nothing has changed about that policy, no one is looking for an armed conflict with Russia here in the United States."

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Russia's Allegations of US Labs in Ukraine Developing Bioweaponry 'Untrue' - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The Russian narrative that the United States is using its biological laboratories in Ukraine to develop bioweaponry is "untrue," a senior American defense official said on Wednesday.

"The Russian narrative that they've put out there is that the United States is somehow running or facilitating biological weapons labs in Ukraine and that these labs are going to pose a threat to them. This is a piece of the Russian playbook here to claim there are victims to create a false narrative to try to justify their own aggressive actions. It is absurd, it is laughable, it is untrue," the official said during a press briefing.

US Energy Secretary Says No Risk of Radiological Release Due to Chernobyl Power Outage

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The loss of power at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine does not pose a near-term risk of radiological release, US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said on Wednesday.

"[US Energy Department] analysis shows the loss of power does not pose a near-term risk of radiological release," Granholm said via Twitter. "While there is no near-term risk to public health, these latest developments are another example of Russia's extraordinarily reckless and dangerous actions."

Ukraine informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of a loss of power at Chernobyl on Wednesday, the agency said. The IAEA likewise assessed that there is no critical impact on safety.
The US Energy Department will continue to monitor the situation and coordinate with federal and international partners on the matter, Granholm also said.

On February 25, units of the Russian airborne forces took full control over the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in northern Ukraine. Since, the Russian troops and the Ukrainian soldiers of the NPP guard battalion have been jointly securing the power units and the sarcophagus of the plant. However, the Russian Ministry of Defense has issued a warning that Ukrainian forces may conduct a false flag operation involving a radiological event.

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US Ban on Russian Oil 'Political,' Not About Stabilizing Market - Kenyan Minister

HOUSTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The United States ban on Russian energy imports is a political decision that has nothing to do with stabilizing the global market, Kenyan Petroleum and Mining Principal Secretary Andrew Kamau told Sputnik on Wednesday at CERA Week.

"Here are two things you have to think about. One - it is not about stabilizing the market, it's political. And one has to have the political logic behind it. So I think it is an individual issue, country by country. I can't really say if this is a good idea or not, because I'm not in the mind of these people," Kamau said when asked about Russia's oil import ban.

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US Job Openings Down 1.6% in January But Near Record High in Red-Hot Market - Labor Dept

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - US job openings fell 1.6% in January, according to Labor Department data on Wednesday that showed employment opportunities near the previous month's record high as workforce availability broadly lagged demand.

"The number of job openings was little changed at 11.3 million on the last business day of January," the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a unit of the Labor Department, said, referring to the Job Opening and Labor Turnover Summary (JOLTS) report. "Hires and total separations were little changed at 6.5 million and 6.1 million, respectively."

In December, job openings were at a record high of 11.448 million.

Commenting on the data, Business Insider said: "Put simply, millions of Americans aren't working or looking for work just yet. That's left businesses struggling to fill abundant openings as the economy reopens again. There were only 0.6 unemployed people per job opening in January, the same record low seen in December. That means there are nearly two open jobs for every jobless American."

January's JOLTS report showed openings rose the most at durable goods manufacturers that added 85,000 job listings.
Education and health services businesses boasted the most openings, ending January with roughly 2.13 million open roles. Professional and business services followed close behind with about 2.07 million openings. Employment opportunities decreased across several industries with accommodation and food services firms leading the way with a drop of 288,000 openings. Transportation, warehousing and utilities businesses shed 132,000 job listings, and the US federal government saw openings contract by 60,000.

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 February's unemployment rate of 3.8% falling below the 4.0% that the Federal Reserve defines as "maximum employment". President Joe Biden said earlier this month that the US economy had created a record 7.4 million jobs since he took office in January 2021.

Record jobs growth aside, the United States is experiencing one of the greatest transformations of its employment market as COVID-19 measures upended labor supply and work trends, putting employees' demands above those of employers.

High Global Oil Prices Not Expected to Last Long - Kenya's Minister

HOUSTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The situation with global oil prices is "completely uncertain," yet market participants believe it will not last long, Andrew Kamau, principal secretary in the Kenyan Ministry of Petroleum and Mining, told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"I have no idea what the oil prices will be. I'm here just for the last 3 days, and hear everything from 200$ to 130$. Its completely uncertain. But if you look at the market, no one believes the prices to be too high for a long time, but who knows," he said at CERAWeek.

Energy Market Volatility Could Last Up to Four Years - Kenya's Petroleum Ministry

HOUSTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - Energy market volatility while hard to predict could last for three to four more years, Kenyan Petroleum and Mining Principal Secretary Andrew Kamau told Sputnik on Wednesday at CERA Week.

On Tuesday, the Biden administration announced a ban on US oil imports from Russia over the situation in Ukraine.

"In my opinion, it will come off a little bit when the winter ends, but then it will be back in November when we star coming back for winter. I think this situation will only be over in about 3-4 years," he said when asked about the energy market prospects.
Trudeau Says Discussed With Scholz Canadian Energy Supplies to Germany

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday that he had discussed with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz possible energy supplies to Germany.

"We had a long conversation about that this morning ... We know there is a continued need for oil and gas that has been heightened because of conflict with Russia, We also talked about ways we can partner not just in the short and medium term on energy supplies, but also staying focused every step of the way on the transition towards renewables, towards hydrogen, towards cleaner sources of energy," Trudeau said at a joint presser with Scholz.

On Tuesday, President Joe Biden announced the United States would ban Russian oil imports in response to the military operation in Ukraine. On the same day, British Energy Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng said that the United Kingdom would phase out the import of Russian oil by the end of 2022.

On February 24, Russia began a military operation in Ukraine, responding to calls for help from the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in countering the aggression of Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only.

UN Chief Says 'Grave Mistake' to Think COVID-19 Pandemic Ended

UNITED NATIONS, March 9 (Sputnik) - US Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Wednesday warned against thinking that the coronavirus pandemic had as vaccine distribution throughout the world remains "scandalously unequal."

"Thanks to unprecedented public health measures and the extraordinarily rapid development and deployment of vaccines, many parts of the world are bringing the pandemic under control," Guterres said. "But it would be a grave mistake to think the pandemic is over. The distribution of vaccines remains scandalously unequal."

Guterres noted that vaccine manufacturers are producing 1.5 billion vaccine doses per month, but adding that some three billion people have not received their first shot.

"This failure is the direct result of policy and budgetary decisions that prioritize the health of people in wealthy countries over the health of people in poor countries," he said. "This is a moral indictment of our world. It is also a recipe for more variants, more lockdowns and more sorrow and sacrifice in every country. Our world cannot afford a two-tier recovery from COVID-19."

Guterres underscored the need to reach the goal of vaccinating 70 per cent of people in all countries by the middle of 2022.
"Governments and pharmaceutical companies need to work together to multiply the number of countries able to produce tests, vaccines and treatments by sharing licenses and intellectual property, and providing the necessary technological and financial support," he said.

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EU Countries Unlikely to Impose Full Ban on Russian Oil - US Investor

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The European countries are not likely to impose a full-fledged embargo on Russia’s oil and other energy products, but in case they do, it will be of short duration given the pain such a move would cause to the economy, Gary Korolev, CEO of the financial services firm Sovereign Wealth Management, told Sputnik.

"Given the information we have now, I would say the European countries will not place a complete ban on Russian oil and energy, even though they may threaten to do so. However, if they place such an embargo, it will be a short term ban that will end fairly quickly given the pain it will inflict on the economy," Korolev said.

Korolev noted that Russia supplied 27% of the European Union’s oil needs in 2019 and filling in the gap in case of a ban would prove difficult and costly.

"Replacing such a large chunk of imports is not going to be easy and can likely be circumvented," he said.

On Tuesday, US President Joe Biden announced the United States would ban Russian oil imports and other energy products. In addition, US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Congress is considering further sanctions-related legislation in the future.

When asked whether he expects the European Union to follow suit, Korolev said the situation in Europe is fluid and not as clear as the more decisive position of the US government.

"Europe is much more dependent on Russian energy imports, including oil," Korolev said. "The Europeans don’t want to hurt themselves as much as they hurt Russia and so they are trying to find ways to have more targeted sanctions that are effective and minimizing the blowback against their own economies. One can only speculate as to what is going to happen."

Korolev said he believes that one possible scenario is for Russia to sell its oil to non-Western aligned countries at a discount despite the fact it may be negated by the increase in oil prices as a result of the sanctions.

"Non-Western aligned powers like India and China could buy Russian oil at a discount. The exporters from whom China and India were importing prior to the embargo on Russian oil that are not banned by the European Union will sell their oil to Europe. In this case, it seems the impact might not be nearly as crushing to the Russian economy as the European countries would like it to be, while at the same time creating a huge amount of pain for the European consumers," he said.

Korolev also said Western politicians who loudly threatened banning Russia from the SWIFT were quickly pacified when experts explained the traumatic effects to the world economy, including undermining the status of the US dollar as a world reserve currency.
"The move has also encouraged Russia and other non-Western countries to find ways to get around the SWIFT system," Korolev added.
The United States and its allies have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia in response to its special military operation in Ukraine. The sanctions have slowed down but not entirely eliminated the ability of Russian exporters of oil and gas to transact deals that require world financial networks and US dollars.
Russia provides 10% of the world’s crude oil needs and 40% of Europe’s gas requirements. The United States, however, buys a limited amount of Russian oil, purchasing 20% of the 10.5 million barrels per day exported by Russia in 2021.

Biden Embraces Cryptocurrency for ‘All Americans’ After Initial US Fear on Digital Dollar

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has signed an executive order (EO) on cryptocurrencies in a landmark embrace of financial innovation technology for all Americans, the White House said on Wednesday.
"We are clear-eyed that ‘financial innovation’ of the past has too often not benefited working families, while exacerbating inequality and increasing systemic financial risk," the White House said after Biden signed the so-called New Digital Assets Executive Order. "This EO marks an intensification of our efforts to promote responsible innovation in the digital assets space - innovation that works for all Americans, protects our national security interests, and contributes to our economic competitiveness and growth."
The Federal Reserve said in January that a central bank digital currency, or CBDC, could provide the United States with a safe, digital payment option that allows for faster transactions. But it also cited downside risks as it presented a long-awaited study on the matter, without saying if it wanted such a payment mode.
The global plan for CBDCs gained momentum last year as central banks around the world began exploring ways to not just avert negative impact on their paper currencies from existing crypto assets like Bitcoin, but also profit from their own digital money.
US regulatory officials, including Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and New York Attorney General Letitia James, are among those who have advocated strong caution against adopting cryptocurrencies without appropriate due diligence. Yellen has spoken against the extreme volatility in cryptocurrencies, citing Bitcoin’s wild swings up to 14% in a day that could impoverish Americans who aren’t careful.
James has been an active crusader against cryptocurrencies’ abuse of ordinary Americans. In October, she shut down the cryptocurrency trading platform Coinseed after she filed a lawsuit against the company earlier this year. James also secured a recovery of nearly half a billion dollars unlawfully obtained from investors.
The White House sought to allay the lack of cryptocurrency policing with the order signed by Biden.
"Fundamentally, an American approach to digital assets is one that encourages innovation but mitigates the risks to consumers, investors and businesses, broader financial stability, and the environment," it said. "To these ends, the Order identifies the administration's policy priorities, both for cryptocurrencies and any future US central bank digital currency, to help guide the evolution of the digital asset ecosystem in a way that is consistent with our values. Governments alone cannot solve these problems, and definitely not a government that operates in silos."

The White House said Biden's executive order was "the product of months of work" with stakeholders across government, industry, advocacy, academia and international allies and partners to identify actions for responsible innovation in the digital asset ecosystem.

"We remain committed to working with allies, partners, and the broader digital asset community to shape the future of digital asset systems in a manner that is safe, inclusive, and consistent with our democratic values," it said. "As this ecosystem evolves, so too will our approach."

The global cryptocurrency market is expected to surpass $3.47 billion in value by 2030 from $842 million in 2020, according to industry statistics.

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US Gasoline Price Hits Record $4.25 Second Day in Row - Automobile Association

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - The price of gasoline in the United States has broken another record and reached $4.25 per gallon amid the anti-Russia sanctions in response to its military operation in Ukraine, according to data published by the American Automotive Association (AAA) on Wednesday.

The average price of gasoline in the United States increased by eight cents overnight, from $4.17 to $4.25 after the US government announced a ban on Russian energy imports on Tuesday.

This is the second record price increase this week - and the highest recorded average price - after the US gasoline prices reached an all-time high record of $4.17 per gallon on Tuesday. On Monday, the average price for regular gas was $4.065 per gallon, while a week ago it was $3.619.

Eurasia Center Vice President Earl Rasmussen told Sputnik he believes the Biden administration's decision to sanction Russian energy imports will back lash on the United States economy and predicted skyrocketing prices for fuel in the near future.

"I have heard gasoline estimates between $7 and $10 per gallon by the end of the summer. Price of oil may sky rocket to nearly $300 per barrel, maybe more," Rasmussen said. "A point to note is that Russia has yet to announce counter sanctions which will likely be ahead and will not be good. Buckle up for a potential catastrophic global economic collapse."

The United States and its allies have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia in response to its special military operation in Ukraine. The sanctions have slowed but not entirely eliminated the ability of Russian exporters of oil and gas to transact deals that require world financial networks and especially US dollars.
Russia provides 10% of the world's crude oil needs and 40% of Europe's gas requirements. The United States, however, buys a limited amount of Russian oil, taking just 20% of the 10.5 million barrels per day exported by Russia in 2021.

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**Discovery Says Suspending Operations in Russia**

WASHINGTON, March 9 (Sputnik) - Discovery said on Wednesday it is suspending the broadcast of its channels in Russia.
"Discovery has decided to suspend the broadcast of its channels and services in Russia," the company told Variety.
At least 15 brands of Discovery, including HGTV, Animal Planet, TLC and Eurosport, are distributed through Media Alliance, which is a joint alliance with Russia's National Media Group. The decision was made due to concerns over media censorship and Russia's military operation in Ukraine, Variety said, citing sources.
A host of Western media outlets have suspended their Russian operations after President Vladimir Putin signed into law legislation criminalizing the spread of disinformation about the Russian military operation in Ukraine.