

3/23/22 Wednesday

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Ex-US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright Has Died

Former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has passed away at the age of 84, her family announced on Wednesday.

"We are heartbroken to announce that Dr. Madeleine K. Albright, 64th US Secretary of State and the first woman to hold that position, passed away earlier today," read a statement from her family. "The cause was cancer. She was surrounded by family and friends. We have lost a loving mother, grandmother, sister, aunt and friend."

Born to Jewish parents in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in 1937, her name was Marie Jana Korbelová until it was legally changed in her youth. Her parents converted to Roman Catholicism when she was very young and she later said she did not know she was Jewish until her late 50s. Her father, Josef Korbel, was a Czech diplomat until resigning in 1948 following the communist takeover.

Albright's family emigrated to the United States and she became a naturalized US citizen in 1957. She later studied and taught at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, and made her leap into politics in 1978, when she was recruited as the National Security Council's liaison to Congress by US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, her former teacher at Georgetown.

Albright was appointed US Ambassador to the United Nations in 1993 by US President Bill Clinton, and in 1997 she became the first female Secretary of State in Clinton's second presidential term. After leaving office, she founded the Albright Group, a company that advised clients on international policy and global markets, and in 2012 was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom by US President Barack Obama.

In a 1996 interview with CBS, [Albright defended](#) the Clinton administration's economic sanctions against Iraq, saying that the deaths of 600,000 Iraqi children under the age of 5 was "worth it."

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Twitter Reacts to Madeleine Albright's Passing With Sorrow And Joy

At news of the death of former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright on Wednesday, social media erupted in either mourning or celebration, depending on the political persuasion of the user.

Albright's family announced on Wednesday that the diplomat had died of cancer at the age of 84. Although she played many high-level roles in the US diplomatic sphere between the 1970s and 2000s, she is most well-remembered for being US Ambassador to the United Nations and

US Secretary of State under then-US President Bill Clinton. She was the first woman to hold the latter position.

Many on Twitter looked to her political record during this period while remembering her, and did so with disdain while others did so with admiration.

Celebrities who knew Albright personally posted photos with her, recalling their friendship, including tennis champion Billie Jean King and singer Barbara Streisand.

Former US President George W. Bush, who took office as Clinton and his administration left, said in a statement that he respected “her love of country and public service” and that he was “grateful” to call Albright a friend.

Others, however, had few nice things to say about the late diplomat.

One of the moments in Albright’s career most commonly recalled by her critics was from a 1996 interview with CBS journalist Leslie Stahl, who asked Albright about reports that nearly 600,000 Iraqi children under the age of 5 had died due to US economic sanctions against Saddam Hussein’s government.

Some criticized her in her role as a prominent feminist figure, noting that while she was the first woman to serve as the country’s chief diplomat, women were also the victims of the many wars the US waged while she was in office.

Others called her “[a cold blooded killer](#)” and noted that she had gone “[from being a refugee](#) to creating millions of them.”

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Photos: Iran Markets Weapons at Doha DIMDEX Show After End of UN Arms Embargo
[2 hours ago](#)

In October 2020, a United Nations arms embargo against Iran expired, per the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) deal, and Tehran once again became legally able to buy and sell military-grade weapons on the global market. However, due to its long isolation, the country has now developed numerous innovations on its own.

At the Doha International Maritime Defense Exhibition and Conference (DIMDEX) hosted by the Qatari government this week, a delegation from the Islamic Republic of Iran revealed new weapons to sell on the international market, including an export version of its Bavar 373 air defense missile system.

A battery of the [air defense system includes](#) up to six truck-mounted transporter-erector-launcher (TEL), phased array radar, a tracking radar, and a combat control post. Each TEL carries two Sayyad-4 anti-air missiles, which can take down air targets 260 kilometers away at altitudes up to 27 kilometers. The export version has been dubbed the AD-200 and is advertised as being [similar to Russia’s top-level S-400](#) system, which Iran considered buying in the past.

A functioning missile battery wasn’t dragged across the Persian Gulf to the show, however, as instead a model illustrating the systems was displayed.

Other weapons spotted at the show included mock-ups of the CM-90 Nasr-1 anti-ship missile and an air-launched version, the CM-35.

The Iranian display also included a variety of machine guns mounted on tripods, which were viewed by potential buyers, including Qatari Maj. Gen. Salem al-Nabet, chief of staff of the Qatari military.

[According to Reuters](#), the display was overseen by leaders from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a paramilitary group that was designated a terrorist organization by the US in 2019, despite having no proven ties to any terrorist attack. [Last week, Axios reported](#) that the Biden administration was considering revoking the designation as part of the deal to revive the JCPOA.

Numerous other countries sent delegations and even warships to Doha for the DIMDEX show, [including the US](#), which was perhaps unironically positioned next to the Iranian display. One US item on display was the MQ-9 Reaper drone, which in January 2019 was used to assassinate the commander of the IRGC's Quds Force, Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, during a peace visit to Baghdad, Iraq.

The Qatari monarchy is one of the rare countries that balances relations between the US and Iran, both hosting a large US military base and sharing the [North Dome/South Pars](#) gas condensate field, the world's largest, with Iran underneath the Persian Gulf. Iran and Qatar grew closer during a [four-year Arab boycott](#) of the emirate organized by Saudi Arabia, which was reportedly motivated, in part, by Doha's growing closeness to Tehran.

Last month, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi paid a visit to Doha and Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, and the two states [signed 14 agreements](#) on topics relating to economics, investment, tourism, and media cooperation.

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Taiwan's Army Considers Extending Conscription Time, Adding Asymmetric Warfare Training

The de facto defense ministry of Taiwan is considering extending the duration of mandatory military service in the self-governing island's defense force after having shortened it several years ago.

Appearing before the Taiwanese Legislative Yuan on Wednesday, Defense Minister Qiu Guozheng told lawmakers that four months of compulsory military service was not enough to meet the island's defense needs, and that alternative forms of service would not help, according to the [Central News Agency](#).

"We must consider the enemy situation and our defensive operations in terms of military strength," [he said, suggesting](#) that the mainland People's Republic of China posed an increased threat to the self-governing island. It was unclear if he said so because of increased Chinese military drills near the island in recent years or because of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, which [many analysts have suggested](#) could be a prelude to an invasion of Taiwan. Qui didn't say how long he anticipated extending compulsory service, but that whatever changes were made would not take effect for at least a year. Presently, the island's regular

combat troops are composed solely of volunteers, but all men of military age are required to undergo four months of military training and become reservists.

In a separate [statement on Wednesday](#), the office of Taiwanese President Cai Yingwen (Tsai Ing-Wen) said the government wanted to reform the training conscripts receive as well, to include more “asymmetric warfare.” Also called irregular war or guerrilla war, asymmetric war is typically waged by resistance or rebel movements against larger, uniformed military forces using hit-and-run style attacks, ambushes, and guerrilla tactics.

Last week, Mara Karlin, US assistant secretary of defense for strategy, plans and capabilities, [told a US Senate committee](#) that successful Ukrainian resistance to Russian military forces over the last month showed why making Taiwan “as prickly as possible” was an important strategic focus.

The government in Taiwan is all that remains of the old Republic of China, which was defeated on the mainland in 1949 by communist forces, who then established the PRC in Beijing. Both governments claim to be the rightful government of China, which includes the island of Taiwan, but over the years, all but a handful of countries have switched their recognitions from Taipei to Beijing. Although [the US did so in 1979](#), it has continued to support Taipei informally, including by [selling them weapons](#) and providing defense training.

Cai’s proposals were met with criticism by some in her own Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), including legislator Lin Zhuoshui (Lin Cho-shui), who called the president’s defense improvement proposal “lukewarm.”

That said, the idea seems to be popular on the island: a recent phone survey by the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation released on Wednesday showed that 75.9% of respondents over the age of 19 thought mandatory military service should be extended to one year, [according to Taipei Times](#).

Correspondingly, about 78% of respondents said Taiwan’s military could deter a Chinese invasion on its own and 59.7% feared that’s how events would unfold, anticipating that the United States would not intervene.

Conscription began in 1951 after the government imposed martial law, which lasted until 1987 and was used to kill tens of thousands of communists and communist sympathizers, and to persecute many more. In 2017, service was shortened from one year to just four month, plus reserve status. The shift came amid warming relations with the mainland. However, as the administration of US President Donald Trump gave Cai’s pro-independence government increasing support, tensions with the mainland grew.

Three years later, the influential US publication [Foreign Policy blasted](#) the changes as having “hollowed out” Taiwan’s military, noting Taipei’s admission that it didn’t have the staff on payroll to fill all its necessary positions.

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Microsoft Confirms LAPSUS\$ Hacking Group Given ‘Limited Access’ During Strike

In 2021, the Biden administration issued a new security guidance meant to combat the effects of cyberattacks after several industries came under ransomware attacks that year. The measures included keeping backups offline, testing incident response plans, hiring third party “pen testers” to test security and segmenting networks, among other efforts.

Microsoft has confirmed that it is investigating a breach of its internal servers by the hacking group known as LAPSUS\$, which the tech giant described as one that “doesn’t seem to cover its tracks.”

The company detailed in a late Tuesday [release](#) that the hacking group had compromised a “single account,” while also indicating that Microsoft had been tracking the group’s activity for several weeks.

“Our cybersecurity response teams quickly engaged to remediate the compromised account and prevent further activity. Microsoft does not rely on the secrecy of code as a security measure and viewing source code does not lead to elevation of risk,” reads a blog post issued by Microsoft.

“Our team was already investigating the compromised account based on threat intelligence when the actor publicly disclosed their intrusion. This public disclosure escalated our action allowing our team to intervene and interrupt the actor mid-operation, limiting broader impact.” The public disclosure referenced by Microsoft is the group’s earlier move to share an image on its Telegram account that showed it had gained access to a Microsoft Azure DevOps account, a collaborative developer platform Microsoft employees use.

The screenshot shows access to “Bing_UX,” “Bing-Source,” “Bing-STC-SV” and “Cortana,” among others. Potentially indicating that the user gained access to other Microsoft projects as well, the image also showed sections for “mscomdev,” “microsoft” and “msblox.”

According to Vice, the image [was quickly deleted](#) by one of the group’s Telegram administrators, with the promise to repost it soon.

LAPSUS\$ is a relative newcomer to the hacking group scene. It first made waves in December 2021 when it breached the servers of several Brazilian and Portuguese companies, as well as the Ministry of Health of Brazil.

However, in 2022, the group made bigger headlines by leaking data from tech giants Nvidia, Samsung and possibly Ubisoft.

According to reports, the group usually asks for payment in exchange for not leaking data, usually in the form of bitcoin. However, in the case of the Nvidia hack, the group demanded that Nvidia open-source its video drivers to make it easier to mine cryptocurrencies like Ethereum using the company’s 30-series of video cards.

Nvidia intentionally limited the cards’ cryptocurrency mining capabilities in hopes of driving down the costs for gamers and other users. At the time, cryptocurrency miners were blamed for increasing video card prices, as miners were buying the cards in bulk for mining farms.

Unlike many hacking extortion groups, LAPSUS\$ does not incorporate ransomware. Instead, they blackmail companies with the threat of public exposure.

Ransomware is a technique used to extort businesses and individuals. Files on a server are cryptographically locked by the group which then demands payment, usually in the form of cryptocurrency, in order to unlock the files. Oftentimes the demand comes with a timer after which the price will either increase or the files will be deleted or leaked.

Ransomware has some drawbacks as the cryptographic keys to unlock the files have to be stored somewhere, and giving them to the victim opens up the possibility of being tracked. Keys can also be stored on other hacked websites but if that website's owner finds the breach before the victim pays the ransom, the keys could be lost forever, effectively making paying the ransom less attractive since there is no guarantee of success.

In a March 10 Telegram post, LAPSUS\$ stated that it is recruiting rogue employees, specifically pointing to IBM, Apple and Microsoft. They say they aren't interested in data troves but instead want employee usernames and passwords to access company networks.

"TO NOTE: WE ARE NOT LOOKING FOR DATA, WE ARE LOOKING FOR THE EMPLOYEE TO PROVIDE US A VPN OR CITRIX TO THE NETWORK, or some anydesk," according to the post.

The latest comes years after Microsoft [suffered a leak](#) in 2020 that resulted in the source code for Windows XP and other early software being posted on 4chan.org.

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Crypto.com Lands Sponsorship Deal With FIFA World Cup

Sports and cryptocurrencies have a long history of sponsorships, and this announcement marks the largest yet.

Crypto.com will now be the exclusive cryptocurrency trading platform sponsor for FIFA's World Cup Tournament 2022, set in Qatar starting in November.

The cost and length of the sponsorship has not been revealed but comes after a string of high-profile advertising deals by the cryptocurrency exchange. Crypto.com recently bought the naming rights to the home of the Los Angeles Lakers and the Los Angeles Clippers, formerly known as the Staples Center, now known as the Crypto.com Arena. That deal cost an estimated \$700 million, [according to the Financial Times](#).

In a press release posted on FIFA's website, Crypto.com says that it is the world's fastest-growing cryptocurrency platform and boasts over 10 million customers.

"Crypto.com has already demonstrated a commitment to supporting top-tier teams and leagues, major events and iconic venues across the world, and there is no platform bigger, or with a greater reach and cultural impact, than FIFA's global platform of football," Kay Madati, FIFA's chief commercial officer said in the same press release.

As a result of the sponsorship, the Crypto.com brand will be visible inside and outside of the arena. Crypto.com will also be running contests for users to win tickets to matches during the tournament as well as selling branded merchandise.

Sports sponsorships have been a major part of crypto's history. The first major instance [was in 2014](#) when Dogecoin users pooled \$55,000 to sponsor NASCAR driver Josh Wise for the GEICO 400 at Alabama's Talladega Superspeedway.

Also in 2014, cryptocurrency payment processor Bitpay bought the naming rights to the St. Petersburg College Bowl, opting to call it "The Bitcoin Bowl" rather than the "Bitpay Bowl" in a

purported attempt to promote the entire industry. Bitcoin was accepted as a payment method for tickets and inside the stadium.

More recently, Coinbase and FTX bought Superbowl ads in 2022. The Super Bowl was watched by over 112 million people, [a significant increase](#) over the previous year.

As popular as the Super Bowl is in the US, it doesn't hold a candle to the World Cup, potentially making the Crypto.com World Cup deal the biggest cryptocurrency sponsorship yet. According to FIFA, the 2018 final match was its largest to date, with [1.12 billion viewers](#) tuning in at some point during the contest.

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New Book Suggests Tensions, Frustrations Between Biden and Harris

US President Joe Biden's communications director, Kate Bedingfield, blamed US Vice President Kamala Harris for tension within the administration, according to a new book from New York Times reporters Alex Burns and Jonathan Martin.

The book, "This Will Not Pass: Trump, Biden and the Battle for America's Future" is set to be released in May but Politico's Playbook newsletter [is already publishing](#) some of the juicier quotes.

According to the book, allies to the Vice President were becoming increasingly frustrated with the portfolio of issues she was tasked to tackle, observing she was not set up for success. This created tension within the administration that Bedingfield blamed directly on Harris.

"In private, Bedingfield had taken to noting that the vice presidency was not the first time in Harris's political career that she had fallen short of sky-high expectations: Her Senate office had been messy and her presidential campaign had been a fiasco. Perhaps, she suggested, the problem was not the vice president's staff."

Harris did not win any delegates during her 2020 presidential campaign.

In response, Bedingfield denied the book's account in an email to Politico "The fact that no one working on this book bothered to call to fact check this unattributed claim tells you what you need to know[.]" Bedingfield also called Harris a "force in this administration."

Harris was tasked with shoring up voting rights for Americans, an issue she asked to tackle. However, she reportedly grew frustrated with an apparent lack of support from the Biden administration as the bill languished in the Senate.

"How was she supposed to communicate clearly about voting-rights legislation, Harris asked West Wing aides, when the president would not even say that he supported changing the Senate rules to open the path for a bill?"

Martin and Burns also write that the US first lady, Jill Biden, was not happy with the choice of Harris as Joe's running mate. "Speaking in confidence with a close adviser to her husband's campaign, the future first lady posed a pointed question. There are millions of people in the United States, she began. Why, she asked, do we have to choose the one who attacked Joe?"

In what ended up being the peak of Harris' presidential campaign, she made headlines during the second democratic presidential primary debate by verbally attacking Biden over his history of working with segregationists.

"It was hurtful to hear you talk about the reputations of two United States Senators who built their reputations and career on the segregation of race in this country and it was not only that, but you also worked with them to oppose bussing," Harris said, addressing Biden onstage, adding that "there was also a little girl in California who was part of the second class to integrate her public school and she was bussed to school every day and that little girl was me."

The moment went viral but did not have a major impact on her campaign, according to [polls at the time](#).

A spokesperson for the first lady issued the same statement it has for similar reporting on the 2020 campaign, according to Politico "Many books will be written on the 2020 campaign, with countless retellings of events — some accurate, some inaccurate. The first lady and her team do not plan to comment on any of them."

Among other allegations in the book is that Biden threatened to fire staffers over negative stories being leaked in the press after reports from unnamed sources suggested that the Harris office was dysfunctional.

"This Will Not Pass: Trump, Biden and the Battle for America's Future" is set for release on May 3rd.

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US Has Reportedly Transferred 'Significant Amount' of Patriot Interceptors to Saudi Arabia

Since the start of the Biden administration, ties between Saudi Arabia and the US have grown increasingly strained, splintering more after the announcement that the US government would no longer support the Saudi-led military operation in Yemen against the Houthi movement. The United States has sent a "significant" amount of Patriot interceptors - designed to shoot down incoming missiles - to Saudi Arabia over the past few weeks in a bid to resupply Riyadh's defense munitions amid ongoing confrontations with the armed Houthi political opposition faction in Yemen, a Wall Street Journal [report](#) has detailed.

According to the WSJ, the Patriot Interceptors are not being sent directly to Saudi Arabia from the United States. Instead, they are being moved from nearby stockpiles of other Gulf states who will receive approval, as required by United States law.

Riyadh had been asking for a resupply since late 2021, which has contributed to the strain on the two nations' relationship. Biden administration officials stressed that the delay was not intentional but was because of high demand for the interceptors from other US allies as well as a required vetting process.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby has refused to confirm the transfer of Patriot Interceptors but [stressed the importance](#) of Saudi Arabia's security to the United States' interests in the area.

"We're in constant discussions with the Saudis about this, about this threat environment, and always looking for ways to continue to help them defend themselves, but I've got nothing to say with respect to that press report," the official said Monday.

The Biden administration has been working with Saudi Arabia to strengthen their defenses against aerial attacks from Houthi forces inside of Yemen, the poorest nation in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has been dealing with an increase in Houthi rocket and drone attacks, numbering 400 last year, a source familiar with the situation told The Hill.

Houthi rockets recently hit oil production and water desalination plants owned by Aramco, the Saudi state-owned petrochemical company. The attack caused a fire at one facility and slowed oil production in another.

To date, the United States has sent Saudi Arabia over \$100 billion in weapons over the past ten years. They have also sent arms to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) who are also fighting alongside Riyadh against the Houthi faction in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia is one the largest oil producing nations in the world and this attempt to mend relations between Washington and Riyadh comes as crude oil prices have skyrocketed.

The current Yemeni civil war erupted in 2014 and, [according to UNICEF](#), "remains one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world, with around 23.7 million people in need of assistance[.]" According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the conflict has [killed nearly a quarter million people](#) and over 50% of the Yemeni population faces food insecurities.

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US State Department: Iran Nuclear Deal 'Neither Imminent Nor is It Certain'

The US Department of State has indicated that a deal with Iran over its nuclear program is not a foregone conclusion.

US State Department spokesman Ned Price [told](#) reporters during a Monday briefing that a nuclear agreement with Iran is not imminent but that the Biden administration is prepared to make "difficult decisions" in order to revive the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) aimed at keeping nuclear weapons out of the hands of Iran.

"I want to be clear that an agreement is neither imminent nor is it certain," Price underscored. According to France 24, [Price told journalists](#) that the State Department cannot provide specifics on what hurdles remain as the department does not negotiate in public, but noted that "we are prepared to make difficult decisions to return Iran's nuclear program to its JCPOA limits[.]" Price relayed to reporters that Washington wants Tehran to commit to verifiable limits on its nuclear program, and that the department is equally preparing for scenarios with and without a reinstatement of the JCPOA.

It is believed that Iran wants economic guarantees in case another administration goes back on a potential nuclear deal, as former US President Donald Trump had done in 2018 after claiming that Iran had broken stipulations under the Obama-era agreement.

Iran has further indicated that it also wants its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) removed from the US foreign terrorist organization (FTO) list, according to sources. The IRGC was designated as an FTO in 2019, marking the first time a state entity was added to the list. Ongoing Vienna talks aimed at restoring the 2015 nuclear agreement had been going well until earlier this month as diplomats from multiple countries estimated that a deal could have been reached within days. However, talks broke down over the timing and extent to which sanctions on Iran would be lifted.

Escalating tensions with Russia over the Kremlin's special military operation in Ukraine has affected negotiations. Moscow asked for assurance that its trade with Iran will not be affected by sanctions the US imposed on Russia due to the special military operation in Ukraine. Russia envoy Mikhail Ulyanov stressed however, that Moscow did not cause the talks to break down, adding, "There are others that need to settle their issues among themselves."

The United States left the JCPOA deal in 2018 when Trump pulled out and reinstated strict sanctions, fulfilling a 2016 campaign promise. The decision was criticized by European nations, Iran and Russia but was commended by Israel and Saudi Arabia, longtime rivals of the Tehran government.

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Sri Lankan Debt Crisis Causes Paper Shortages, Nation Forced to Cancel School Exams

Sri Lanka has canceled school exams for two thirds of its students after running out of paper and ink.

The south Asian nation is in the midst of its worst financial crisis since gaining independence in 1948. Shortages of food, medicine and fuel have affected the 22 million residents of Sri Lanka and now two thirds of the country's 4.5 million students may be unable to take tests to determine if they can move onto the next grade. The Department of Education of the Western Province stated it was unable to import paper and ink due to a lack of cash.

Tests have been postponed indefinitely.

Sri Lanka has seen its foreign currency reserves fall more than 70% over the past two years. It currently has \$2.36 billion in reserves while \$4 billion in debt payments are due by the end of this year.

Protests gripped Sri Lanka's capital city of Colombo earlier this month. Protesters and members of Sri Lanka's opposition party have [called on the government to step down](#) due to their bungling of the debt crisis.

Tax cuts in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic decimating the tourism and remittance industries have been cited as the largest causes of the crisis. Opposition party member Harsha de Silva also blamed the country's "overnight" ban on chemical fertilizers, which led to protests from farmers. The ban has been reversed.

The government has announced that it will seek a bailout from the IMF. It also recently secured a \$1 billion line of credit from India to bring in food, fuel and pharmaceuticals to the cash-strapped country.

Sri Lankan finance minister Basil Rajapaksa in December 2021 [assured parliament](#) that the government would not default on its loans or ask for an IMF bailout.

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Privacy Advocates Sound Alarm Over Georgia Police Drone Use in 911 Responses

If you call 911, do not be alarmed if a flying robot shows up at your door instead of an officer, as more law enforcement are using drones to respond to emergency calls, new findings by Axios have revealed.

In late 2020, the Georgia's Brookhaven Police Department revealed their drone program to the public. Since then, [drone use has expanded](#) to more police departments around the nation. Drones enable police to assess a situation before sending actual human officers. This, police argue, is safer for both law enforcement officials and a potential suspect.

"The use of that type of technology, with a drone, not only makes the apprehension of violent criminals safer for the police department and the officers involved in the operation, it makes it safer for the suspect as well as residing neighbors," Lt. Pete Malecki said in a [video showcasing a drone](#) assisting officers in the arrest of Antonio Demetrice Rhynes, who was accused of murdering actor Thomas Jefferson Byrd in October 2020.

According to the Atlas of Surveillance, a joint project between the Electronic Frontier Foundation and the University of Nevada, [1,172 police departments](#) nationwide are using drones in some capacity.

Before the launch of the Brookhaven program, police reached out to the Georgia chapter of the ACLU for advice on how to use drones in a responsible manner. Despite the consultation, the ACLU has concerns about law enforcement using unmanned surveillance devices.

"Uniform rules should be enacted to ensure that we can enjoy the benefits of this new technology without bringing us closer to a 'surveillance society' in which our every move is monitored, tracked, recorded, and scrutinized by the government," the ALCU states on their website.

The preeminent US civil rights organization also recommends strict usage limits, destruction of image files that do not contain evidence of a crime, policies dictated by public representatives rather than by police departments and the banning of drones outfitted with lethal or non-lethal weapons.

Drones have also been used by police to observe multiple protests against racism and police violence throughout 2020. The New York Police Department was also accused of attempting to intimidate racial justice activist Derrick Ingram by flying drones by his apartment window.

"When police fly drones over a crowd of protestors, they chill free speech and political expression through fear of reprisal and retribution from police," according to the EFF. "Police could easily apply face surveillance technology to footage collected by a surveillance drone that passed over a crowd, creating a preliminary list of everyone that attended that day's protest."

While drones may be used to apprehend suspects, as they were in the Rhynes case, there are still concerns about how they may affect the general privacy and civil rights of residents across the nation.

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Cannabis Industry Lobbies DC for Banking Access to Reduce Robberies

Over 20 CEOs from the industry's largest cannabis-based companies arrived at Congress last week to push for the passage of the Secure and Fair Enforcement (SAFE) Banking Act. The [act would enable](#) federal banks to work with marijuana dispensaries in states where it is legal, without fear of reprisal from regulators. Marijuana remains illegal according to federal law although it's medical use is legal in 38 states.

There has been an uptick in robberies at marijuana dispensaries in recent months. Without access to banking services, some marijuana dispensaries have been forced to remain cash-only, making them a target for crime.

On Friday, a dispensary robbery in western Washington [turned fatal](#) after a worker was shot. Last Wednesday, another dispensary robbery resulted in two arrests and a third suspect killed after police said he opened fire on a Seattle SWAT team.

The SAFE Act has passed the House of Representatives six times, with every Democrat and over half of Republicans voting yea. But the SAFE Act has stalled in the Senate due to democratic leadership preferring a bill that also ends marijuana's status as a schedule 1 drug on the federal level; and some marijuana advocates agree.

"[W]e cannot prioritize banking services while cannabis continues to be used as justification for police violence against [POC] communities," said Kassandra Frederique, the executive director of the Drug Policy Alliance (DPA) in [a statement](#) on the organization's website.

Instead, the DPA is advocating that Congress pass the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act. That act, which has also previously passed the House, decriminalizes marijuana at the federal level and establishes a process to expunge marijuana-related convictions. Senate Majority Leader (D-NY) Chuck Schumer has also been pushing his own bill, the Cannabis Administration and Opportunity Act which aims to legalize and tax marijuana on the federal level, among other things.

NORML, the oldest and largest cannabis legalization organization in the country, has advocated for all three bills in the past.

Support for the legalization of cannabis has never been higher. According to a recent Pew Research Center poll, [91% of Americans](#) believe marijuana should be legal for either medical or recreational use, with almost two thirds (59%) of Americans supporting full recreational legalization.

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Dow Plummets 448 Points as Oil Prices Surge Amid Concerns Over Inflation, Supply Shortages
By - Evan Craighead

Billionaire investor Carl Icahn earlier this week warned that the American economy could be headed toward a "recession, or even worse" amid continued US and global support of Kiev following the initiation of the Kremlin's special military operation in Ukraine.

At close on Wednesday, the Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped some 448.96 points (1.3%), while the S&P 500 declined around 1.2% and the Nasdaq Composite fell approximately 1.3%. The dips come days after Jerome Powell, chairman of the US Federal Reserve System, said the government's central bank was prepared to increase interest rates by half-percentage-point increments, to reel in inflation.

While Tuesday's market close did not appear to reflect a potential rise in interest rates, indexes slumped on Wednesday after observing a rise in the price of Brent crude, a waterborne crude oil used as the international benchmark for much of the world's oil.

Brent crude rose \$6.12 a barrel (5.3%) to \$121.60, amounting to the third-highest settlement value of the year, according to the Wall Street Journal. Overall, Brent crude has surged 56% in 2022.

West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude, the US oil benchmark, also saw a 5% gain, amounting to almost \$115 a barrel.

"It's very difficult to try to gauge how the higher interest rates will impact inflation, the economy and earnings growth, and then you add on top of it a war that's constraining oil," Jack Ablin, chief investment officer for investment firm Cresset Capital, told CNBC.

As energy stocks rallied, Hess and Diamondback Energy were the top gainers at the S&P 500's close, respectively rising 4.6% and 3.9%.

While the S&P 500 has recouped some losses since the beginning of the Kremlin's special military operation in Ukraine, fears of a possible economic downturn remain, particularly as yields on long-term US government bonds slip below yields on short-term bonds. The rare occurrence, known as an "inversion," similarly sounded alarms for financial experts in 2018.

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Texas Driver in Critical Condition After Crash Triggered Natural Gas Pipeline Explosion, Evacuations

By - Evan Craighead

Residents within a one-mile radius of a natural gas pipeline in Mansfield, Texas, were evacuated from their homes early Wednesday morning after a vehicle crashed into an above-ground station, rupturing the line and triggering a massive fire.

The Mansfield Fire Department confirmed on Wednesday that the motorist who crashed into a natural gas pipeline operated by Atmos Energy sustained severe burns and was critically injured upon airlift to Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, Texas.

Officials noted the explosion occurred around 1:00 a.m. CDT, near an Exxon station at the intersection of Highways 287 and 360.

All lanes of Highway 287 were shut down until approximately 5:00 a.m. CDT.

Raw footage uploaded by WFAA showed the massive flames roaring as emergency responders arrived at the scene. Flames were visible from approximately 20 miles away.

Those within the vicinity were ordered to evacuate their residences and take temporary refuge in Annette Perry Elementary school, or the parking lot of a nearby hospital.

"My wife actually woke me up. As soon as I opened my eyes, I saw just bright orange in the room and a vibrating of the house. I could feel the house shaking," Zachery Hagerty told NBC 5. "I looked out the window and saw flames about 40 or 50 feet in the air. It was very, very disturbing to see it this close to the house."

His wife, Whitney, caught video of the blaze from their backyard, prior to being evacuated.

Firefighters reportedly went door-to-door to inform residents of the potential danger.

Those evacuated were able to return by 4:00 a.m. CDT, per the Mansfield Fire Department.

Repairs have been made to the above-ground station, which temporarily shut off natural gas lines to homes, according to Atmos Energy. The Dallas-based company manages proprietary pipeline and storage assets, including one of the largest intrastate natural gas networks in Texas.

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Fauci: BA.2 Cases to Rise But Subvariant is Less of a Public Health Threat Than Prior Strains
By - Evan Craighead

Researchers have recently discovered that the Omicron BA.2 subvariant—representing 34% of COVID-19 infections to undergo sequencing—is around 80% more transmissible than the primary Omicron variant. Although long-term consequences of the disease remain unknown, scientists appear less concerned about the subvariant circulating.

Unlike prior variants, the newly identified BA.2 subvariant is not likely to impact Americans and their day-to-day lives in the same way as prior mutations, according to remarks from Dr.

Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the chief medical advisor to the US president.

"When you look at the [Omicron BA.2] cases, they do not appear to be more severe, and they do not appear to evade immune responses—either from vaccines or prior infections," Fauci said during a recent appearance on ABC's 'This Week.'

"The bottom line is we'll likely see an uptick in cases, as we've seen in the European countries, particularly the UK."

He noted that US case trends generally lag approximately two weeks behind that of the UK, where BA.2 already represents more than 50% of all new infections logged.

According to data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the 7-day average for positive COVID-19 cases in the US saw a 16.6% drop, falling from 36,010 to 30,040

infections reported. This number may be higher due to the expanded use and availability of at-home COVID-19 tests.

PCR test data for the week ending in March 19 showed that the BA.2 subvariant has become the dominant variant among COVID-19 cases, according to records published by US-based pharmacy operator Walgreens. This excludes at-home antigen tests.

During the same interview, Fauci noted that he has no intention of retiring until he is "sure we are really out of this," referring to the unpredictability of COVID-19 and its mutations.

"We are still in this. We have a ways to go. We clearly are going in the right direction and hope we stay that way," he said.

Many experts project the number of COVID-19 cases, including the BA.2 subvariant, to wane as the US progresses through spring and into summer.

Ali Mokdad, an epidemiologist at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, told CNBC that, unlike UK residents and those in many European nations, Americans did not have highly-restrictive measures in place during the Omicron outbreak, which led to the contagious variant's rapid spread.

In addition to a perceived immunity boost for those vaccinated and/or infected, there is not a dramatic change in public health guidance in the US, whereas those in many parts of Europe are just now rolling back mitigation measures.

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'We're Moving On': Jamaica PM Holness Informs Prince William, Kate That Island Will Break From UK

By - Evan Craighead

Jamaica was recognized as an English colony following a 1655 takeover from Spain, and was formally named a British colony from 1707 until 1962, when it became independent. Amid the country's 60th year of independence, Jamaican officials have noted that the government is in the process of examining the process of becoming a republic.

Jamaican Prime Minister Andrew Holness got straight to the point during a Wednesday courtesy call with Prince William and Kate, Duchess of Cambridge, who are presently touring Caribbean countries.

"There are issues here which as you would know are unresolved," Holness pointed out during a press photoshoot.

"But Jamaica is as you would see a country that is very proud ... and we're moving on," Jamaica's prime minister added. "And we intend ... to fulfill our true ambition of being an independent, fully developed and prosperous country."

Jamaica's move would make it the second Caribbean island to sever relations with the UK Royals, as the island country of Barbados stopped pledging allegiance to the Queen back in November 2021.

The Jamaican government has also called on Britain to acknowledge its role in the enslavement of some 600,000 Africans who were inhumanely packed onto ships and transported to sugarcane and banana plantations owned by British enslavers.

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'Stop Being So Ignorant': Spielberg Under Fire After Referring to 'Squid Game' Actors as 'Unknown'

By - Mary Manley

Steven Spielberg, the critically-acclaimed American director known for movies like Jaws, Jurassic Park, E.T. and the Indiana Jones film franchise, has found himself at the center of some major online backlash for calling Netflix's 'Squid Game' actors "unknown".

"A long time ago it was domestic stars that brought the audience into movies," Spielberg reportedly said. "Today, it's interesting, unknown people can star in entire miniseries, can be in movies.

"Squid Game comes along and changes the math entirely for all of us," he added, giving maybe, too much credit to Netflix's co-CEO and chief content officer Ted Sarandos. "Thank you, Ted." According to [Deadline](#), Spielberg made the comments at a PGA Awards panel on March 19. But the backhanded compliment the iconic American director, 75, paid towards the actors of the wildly popular 2021 South Korean production, 'Squid Game', has earned him some impressive backlash on social media.

'Squid Game' fans were quick to point out that the show's actors are some of South Korea's most well-known stars, [including](#) O Yeong-su who began acting in 1967. Actor Park Hae-soo has also become a household name in South Korea for the popular TV show drama 'Prison Playbook' (2017).

The show's lead actor, Lee [Jung-jae](#), is also a well-known actor, producer and businessperson in South Korean pop culture. He is known for acting in such Korean films as 'An Affair' (1998), 'The Last Witness' (2001), 'Typhoon' (2005), 'The Thieves' (2012) and 'The Face Reader' (2013).

"Americans always think the world doesn't exist outside of America. They think everyone worships us when in reality they laugh at us. Actors, singers, politicians, scientists, doctors, lawyers, CEOs all exist in other countries. Stop being so ignorant," [tweeted](#) one user.

"Another day, another American thinking the world revolves around them," [tweeted](#) another. Spielberg is one of America's most successful directors and is said to have a net worth of \$8 billion. His much-promoted recent film remake of the mid-20th century classic 'West Side [Story](#)' (2021) is up for seven nominations this year at the Oscars. In the wake of streaming services like Netflix and Hulu, the 'West Side Story' redo reportedly raked in some \$74.6 million at the box office.

Netflix's 'Squid [Game](#)' shocked and engrossed viewers with 1.65 billion hours streamed within the first 28 days of its premiere, more than any show released by Netflix to date.

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'We Can't Endure This Anymore': Weekend Mass Shootings Sound Alarm for Rising US Gun Crimes

By - Mary Manley

A mass shooting is characterized as a single event in which four or more people are killed or injured by firearms. This weekend in the United States there were at least nine reported mass shootings that left eight people dead and 60 injured.

While the United States faces inflation, a housing [crisis](#), climate [change](#), and the COVID-19 pandemic, there's another mess the nation must address: a rise in gun violence.

At an annual car show on Saturday in Dumas, Arkansas, a gunfight left 27 people injured and one dead. That same day, in [Norfolk](#), Virginia, an argument over a spilled drink outside a pizzeria sparked a shooting that left three people injured and two dead, including a 25 year-old newspaper reporter who was an uninvolved bystander.

On Saturday, in Fayetteville, North Carolina, three people were killed and three others were wounded in a shooting at a hotel 10 miles south of Fort [Bragg](#). In Miami Beach, a vacation hotspot where spring breakers have traditionally been free to rampage, a curfew has been imposed as well as a declaration of a state of emergency made by officials there after two [weekend](#) shootings.

"We can't endure this anymore, we just simply can't," said Dan Gelber, the Miami Beach mayor. "This isn't your father's, your mother's spring break. This is something totally different."

The following day, on Sunday morning at around 12:50 a.m., at least four people were reported injured in a shooting in downtown Austin, Texas, during the city's South by Southwest (SXSW) festival. On Friday, in New Iberia, Louisiana, five people were injured, including an infant, as a result of a drive-by shooting.

During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, gun violence in the United States increased by 30%. In a scientific [report](#) published in 2019, researchers found that among many other issues, unemployment and social distancing had resulted in an increase of "risk-taking" behaviors, including gun violence.

"We were not surprised that the gun violence rates were higher during the pandemic," [said](#) the study's lead author, Dr. Paddy Ssentongo, who is an assistant professor with the Center for Neural Engineering at Pennsylvania State University. "But we were surprised by the large magnitude of the increase."

Researchers of the study also learned that there was an estimated 41% increase in the sales of handguns which was reported in March 2020 as compared to March 2019 due to an unsubstantiated public fear that guns would be in "short supply".

In the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Garen J. Wintemute, a researcher on gun violence at the University of California, says he is worried that Americans are starting to see others they have disagreements with as "the enemy".

"We have lowered the bar, the threshold of insult or affront or whatever, that's necessary for violence to seem legitimate," he said.

The study found that between January 1, 2019, and March 31, 2021, at least 93,000 combined injuries and deaths, including suicides, occurred through the use of guns.

The surge in mass shootings is an ominous prelude for this upcoming summer season, when the nation typically faces its highest rates of violent crime.

“When picnics and outside events like this car show, when all that happens, that’s a kickoff” to a period of violence, said Mark Bryant, founder of the Gun Violence Archive, a nonprofit organization that collects data on shootings. “And I’m just afraid the kickoff was this weekend.” New York [City](#) has also suffered as a result of an increase in gun-related crime. A reported 29 people were shot last weekend, including two customers at a bar in Queens, a metro rider in Brooklyn, and a person killed during an argument in the Bronx.

On January 24, when NYC Mayor Eric Adams first took office, he set out a goal to end gun violence in the city which he called a “Blueprint to End Gun [Violence](#)”, calling for harsher penalties of gun-related offenses and revising the state’s 2020 bail reform laws.

“I say this over and over again,” Adams said at a news conference on Monday, “we need help from Washington, we need help on the state level. We need help. But with or without that help, we’re going to make our city a safe city.”

States controlled by Republicans have less and looser gun laws. The governor of Indiana, Eric [Holcomb](#) (R-IN), signed a bill which eliminates the need to have a license to carry a handgun in the state, despite opposition from the head of the state police force, whom he appointed, citing public safety concerns. Earlier this year, Ohio and Alabama passed similar laws.

In late [January](#), a study published by Everytown for Gun Safety, a nonprofit advocating for stronger common-sense gun laws, showed that states with lenient gun laws have strikingly higher rates of gun-related deaths. Mississippi, for instance, has the weakest gun laws in the country (according to the January study) and has the highest rate of gun fatalities, currently detailed at 28.6 deaths per 100,000 residents.

Virginia-Pilot newspaper reporter and former CNN news assistant Sierra Jenkins was killed as the result of an argument outside of Chicho’s Pizza Backstage in downtown Norfolk, mentioned earlier in this article.

Virginia-Pilot editor-in-chief, Kris Worrell, said of the 25 year-old, “[She] was a bright and talented woman with so much promise. Her passion for journalism was undeniable and our community is better because of her reporting. She brought both energy and empathy to her work as an education reporter.”

“To have the life of such a talented young person cut short is devastating,” Worrell added. “Our thoughts are with Sierra’s family and all those who knew and loved her. We are absolutely heartbroken.”

Advocates for common-sense gun laws in the US increasingly suggest that the expression of grief and dismay surrounding gun deaths is no longer enough.

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Some Great White Sharks Befriend Each Other to Pull in Larger Meals, Study Reveals
By - Mary Manley

The social lives of great white sharks may be more complex than researchers previously thought. After tracking six of these large predators off the coast of Guadalupe Island in Mexico, researchers discovered the ocean's apex predator actually has a softer side.

Thus far, marine biologists have experienced some difficulty in [studying](#) the social foraging of sharks, with less focus on the social associations these predators share. Researchers with the Florida International University were able to make a significant advance in this area by studying great white sharks using cameras and telemetry receivers to observe social behaviors.

The study found that these sharks, which range from 11 to 16 feet long (males are typically smaller, females are larger) were able to form "non-random social associations and may remain in proximity to each other to take advantage of pinniped kills."

Lead author of the study, Dr. Yannis Papastamatiou, added that these friendships are not long-lived. "Most associations were short. But there were sharks where we found considerably longer associations, much more likely to be social associations."

"Seventy minutes is a long time to be swimming around with another white shark," he adds.

Great whites are formidable predators, with a jaw size that can reach a length of 36 inches, or 92 centimeters. Depending on their size, they can exert a force with their jaws that ranges anywhere from 0.3 tonnes to 1.8 [tonnes](#). The great white shark has no known rival, aside from the killer whale, and of course, [humans](#).

"We showed sharks may form some strong associations, over a few days, with some individuals," says Papastamatiou. "But there is a lot of variation between sharks in terms of how social they may be and how they behave."

"Sharks may stay in proximity of other individuals in case those individuals are successful in killing large prey," he adds.

The researchers tracked three males and three females of the species and learned that they preferred to befriend others of the same sex. Some sharks too, proved to be better at socializing than others. One shark made at least 12 friends within 30 hours of its tracking.

Another shark showed itself to be more reclusive than its gregarious counterpart, only making two friends within a span of five days.

Some sharks socialized depending on the time of day as well as the depth of their hunting.

Guadalupe is an area teeming with the predators favorite food: tuna and seals. The clear water in this region also made it easier to track the mysterious animals.

One question still stumps researchers however. Papastamatiou wants to know the reason great whites feel the need to socialize.

"We still don't know. But it is likely they may stay in proximity of other individuals in case those individuals are successful in killing large prey," he [says](#). "They aren't working together but being social could be a way to share information."

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Tired of Carrying Around Your License? iPhone Users in Arizona Can Now Go Digital With Apple Wallet

By - Mary Manley

Apple announced on Wednesday that iPhone owners in Arizona will be able to upload their driver's licenses, as well as state IDs, into the Apple Wallet app. And while this new feature will enable consumers to pass TSA checkpoints, it won't be accepted in the event of a traffic stop. Apple has a plan to make users' lives digital in every way - that includes all those pesky cards you may have overflowing your real leather wallet, that one that won't fit into the back pocket of your pants. The Apple Wallet stores users' credit and debit cards, transit passes and boarding passes, as well as other important documents and information to their phones.

Now, Apple plans to take that goal one step further by adding an iPhone user's driver's license or state ID to the app. And while customers may be glad to get through the TSA checkpoints in Sky Harbor International [Airport](#) without having to fiddle through their wallet or purse, they will not be able to use them at regular traffic stops.

The trillion-dollar tech behemoth has plans to expand their new app feature beyond the state of Arizona, with states like Colorado, Hawaii, Mississippi, Ohio, Georgia, Maryland, Connecticut and Puerto Rico on the horizon. The introduction of the feature comes after two years of research and development, according to reports.

To use this feature, Arizona residents will be able to tap the "+" button in the Wallet app, then add the driver's license feature which will then prompt them to upload their physical driver's license and take a selfie as proof, with additional anti-fraud steps asking the user to complete a series of facial movements during the set-up process.

Similar to Apple Pay, which allows people to pay for items simply by tapping their phones, users will not have to unlock their phones to use their digital ID. The TSA reader will scan a person's face and capture their image, similar to how TSA agents look at a person's face to verify their identity.

The [feature](#) will not be available to view by bartenders though, so if you forgot your wallet at home you may have no luck getting a gin fizz at the neighborhood juke joint or a pint of beer at the local brewery.

While the divide between analog and digital continues to blur, Apple must still answer to state governments to get this feature up and running nationwide. The feature will not be available for use in federal buildings.

Apple will also face questions concerning their digital ID technology, as well as what data will be made available to state governments.

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US Sanctions on 48 Russian Companies Will Have Deep, Long-Lasting Effect - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - US sanctions on 48 Russian companies will have a deep and long-lasting effect on the country's defense-industrial base and its supply chain, the Department of Treasury said on Thursday.

"By cutting off 48 companies from western technological and financial resources, today's action will have a deep and long-lasting effect on Russia's defense-industrial base and its supply chain," the statement said.

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US Sanctions Russian Businessman Timchenko, His Companies Volga Group, Transoil - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) – The United States has sanctioned Russian businessman Gennady Timchenko, his family and his companies Volga Group and Transoil, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"We are targeting multiple Russian elites to include their properties and family members," Blinken said in a statement. "As a result, Gennady Nikolayevich Timchenko, the owner of OOO Volga Group, will also be re-designated along with OOO Transoil, which Timchenko owns." Blinken added that Timchenko's wife, Elena Petrovna Timchenko, and their daughter, Natalya Browning, have also been designated along with Ksenia Gennadevna Frank, a board member of OOO Transoil and her spouse Gleb Sergeevich Frank.

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G7, EU Announce Initiative to Share Information, Coordinate on Evasion of Russia Sanctions
WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The leaders of G7 and EU nations have rolled out an initiative to share data and coordinate on evasion of anti-Russia sanctions, the US Treasury announced on Thursday.

"Establishment of an initiative focused on sanctions evasions. G7 leaders and the European Union today announced an initiative to share information about and coordinate responses related to evasive measures intended to undercut the effectiveness and impact of our joint sanctions actions," the Treasury said. "Together, we will not allow sanctions evasion or backfilling. As part of this effort, we will also engage other governments on adopting sanctions similar to those already imposed by the G7 and other partners."

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US Sanctions Dozens of Russian Defense Companies, 328 Members of State Duma - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on dozens of Russian defense companies and on the 328 members of the Russian State Duma in response

to the special military operation in Ukraine, the US Department of the Treasury said on Thursday.

"Today, in its latest action to impose severe costs on the Russian Federation for its illegal, unwarranted, and baseless war against Ukraine, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is designating key enablers of the invasion. This includes dozens of Russian defense companies, 328 members of the Russian State Duma, and the head of Russia's largest financial institution," the Treasury Department said in a press release. In addition to designating 328 members of the State Duma today, OFAC is also designating the State Duma itself, the release said.

The sanctioned defense enterprises in Russia include Tactical Missiles Corporation JSC, Joint Stock Company NPO High Precision Systems, NPK Tekhmash OAO, Joint Stock Company Russian Helicopters and Joint Stock Company Kronshtadt.

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US State Dept. Sanctions Members of Board of Russia's Sovcombank – Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) – The US Department of State is imposing sanctions against 17 members of the board of Russia's Sovcombank, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

The Department of State is targeting elites close to Putin, along with their property, holdings, and family members. Today, the Department has designated: Dmitry Vladimirovich Gusev, Mikhail Lvovich Kuchment, Anatoly Alexandrovich Bravverman, Ilya Borisovich Brodskiy, Aleksey Leonidovich Fisun, Dmitry Vladimirovich Khotimskiy, Sergey Vladimirovich Khotimskiy, Mikhail Vasilyevich Klyukin, Mikhail Olegovich Avtukhov, Albert Alexandrovich Boris, Dmitry Vladimirovich Beryshnikov, Elena Alexandrovna Cherstvova, Sergey Nikolaevich Bondarovich, Oleg Alexandrovich Mashtalyar, Alexey Valeryevich Panferov, Irina Nikoalyevna Kashina, and Joel Raymon Lautier," the statement read.

These individuals are each being designated for being or having been a leader, official, senior executive officer, or member of the board of directors of Sovcombank, the statement added.

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Biden Says NATO to Develop Plans for Additional Forces, Capabilities to Strengthen Defense

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in a statement on Thursday that NATO will develop plans for additional forces and capabilities to enhance the alliance's defenses and it will adopt a new Strategic Concept.

"Between now and the NATO summit in June, we will develop plans for additional forces and capabilities to strengthen NATO's defenses," Biden said. "We will adopt an updated Strategic

Concept to ensure NATO is ready to meet any challenge in the new and more dangerous security environment.”

Biden's statement comes following on the Extraordinary NATO Summit.

“We had the privilege of hearing directly from President [Volodymyr] Zelenskyy, and we will continue to support him and his government with significant, and increasing, amounts of security assistance to fight Russian aggression and uphold their right to self-defense,” Biden said.

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US Sanctions Russian Helicopters, Tekhmash Group - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has sanctioned Russian Helicopters and Tekhmash group as part of new Ukraine-related sanctions, the Department of Treasury announced on Thursday.

"[The sanctions target] JSC NPO High Precision Systems (High Precision Systems) is a state-owned holding company that develops, produces, modernizes, and repairs weapons and military equipment. Its products are sold to military services worldwide. ... NPK Tekhmash OAO (Tekhmash) is a state-owned holding company that produces and supplies ammunition for the Russian Armed Forces," it added.

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US Treasury Issues Guidance to Prohibit All Transactions With Russian Central Bank's Gold

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) – The US Treasury issued a new guidance on Thursday to make clear that any transactions involving the Russian central bank's gold are prohibited by the existing sanctions.

"Treasury is also issuing a new [guidance on gold transactions] to blunt the Central Bank's ability to deploy international reserves, including gold, to prop up the Russian economy and fund Putin's brutal war. This guidance makes clear that any transaction involving gold related to the Central Bank of the Russian Federation is covered by existing sanctions," the Treasury said in a press release.

The updated guidance prohibits all US persons dealing with gold to engage in any gold-related transaction involving the Russian central bank, the National Wealth Fund, or the Ministry of Finance.

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US Sanctions Chief of Russia's Sberbank - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has sanctioned Herman Gref, the head of Russia's banking giant Sberbank, the Department of Treasury announced on Thursday. "OFAC is designating Herman Gref, the head of Sberbank and a close [Vladimir] Putin associate," the statement said.

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US Sanctions Russia's Tactical Missiles Corporation, Director - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The United States sanctions Russia's Tactical Missiles Corporation (KTRV) and its director, the Department of Treasury announced on Thursday. "TARGETING MAJOR ENTERPRISES OF RUSSIA'S DEFENSE-INDUSTRIAL BASE ... Tactical Missiles Corporation JSC — often abbreviated and transliterated as KTRV — is a large, state-owned Russian defense conglomerate," the statement said. OFAC is also designating KTRV General Director Boris Obnosov. "As KTRV's General Director, Obnosov is the head of the enterprise and has represented its products," the statement said.

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US Urges DPRK to Refrain From 'Provocations,' Engage in Diplomacy After Missile Launch

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The United States calls on North Korea to abstain from provocations and engage in diplomacy following its latest missile launch, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Thursday.

"We stand with the international community to call on the DPRK to refrain from further provocations and engage in sustained and substantive dialogue," Price said. "Our commitment to the defense of the Republic of Korea and Japan remains ironclad. We have been and will continue to coordinate closely with our allies and partners to address the threats posed by the DPRK, and to advance our shared objective of the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

According to the Japanese Defense Ministry, a suspected ballistic missile launched by North Korea earlier on Thursday was in the air for 71 minutes, covering a distance of 1,100 kilometers (684 miles) and reaching a maximum flight altitude of more than 6,000 kilometers, which suggests that it is a new type of intercontinental ballistic missile.

"The United States condemns the DPRK's ballistic missile launch," Price said. "Like the DPRK's other escalatory tests this year, including at least two intercontinental ballistic missiles, this launch is a clear violation of multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions, and

demonstrates the threat the DPRK's unlawful weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs pose to the DPRK's neighbors and the region as a whole."

If confirmed, it will be North Korea's eleventh launch this year and the longest-range missile launch since November 2017, according to the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff.

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US Expected to Announce Plans to Accept Up to 100,000 Ukrainian Refugees - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is set to announce plans to accept up to 100,000 Ukrainian refugees to the country, US media reported on Thursday.

The Biden administration is expected to unveil the plans later on Thursday, NBC News reported, citing a source familiar with the plan.

Washington will allow their entry via various pathways, including the US Refugee Admissions Program, non-immigrant and immigrant visas, and will focus in those who have family members in the country, according to the report.

Additional details are expected to be released in the coming weeks, the news outlet said.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian provocations. In response to Russia's operation, Western countries have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow.

According to the UN refugee agency, over 3.6 million Ukrainians have already left the country for neighboring nations since the start of the Russian military operation.

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Biden Discusses Ukraine With NATO Chief Ahead of Extraordinary Summit

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden met with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Brussels to discuss Ukraine ahead of the alliance's extraordinary summit, the White House said on Thursday.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. met today with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ahead of the extraordinary NATO Summit to address Russia's unprovoked and unjustified invasion of Ukraine," the White House said in a readout of the meeting.

The officials discussed "the unity and strength of the alliance and NATO's ongoing efforts to deter and defend against any aggression, and they welcomed the support of Allies for the government and people of Ukraine," it added.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian

provocations. In response to Russia's operation, Western countries have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow. According to the UN refugee agency, over 3.6 million Ukrainians have already left the country for neighboring nations since the start of the Russian military operation.

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US, NATO Allies in Talks to Send Anti-Ship Missiles to Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The United States and NATO allies are currently discussing the possibility of sending anti-ship missiles to Ukraine, the Financial Times reported on Thursday.

"We have started consulting with allies on providing anti-ship missiles to Ukraine," the US official said, as cited by the Times, adding that, "there may be some technical challenges with making it happen."

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RPT: PREVIEW - Biden, US Allies Kick-Off Meetings in Europe to Coordinate Actions Against Russia

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is set to begin a series of meetings with NATO allies and partners in Brussels and Warsaw to coordinate more security assistance to Kiev and additional sanctions against Russia over its military operation in Ukraine. The trip comes amid intense fighting between Russian and Ukraine forces over Mariupol, where thousands of people are being evacuated amid a worsening humanitarian crisis one month into the special military operation launched by Moscow.

On Thursday, Biden will attend an extraordinary NATO summit on Ukraine and meet with G7 leaders, according to the White House. He will also attend a European Council summit and hold a bilateral meeting with European Council President Charles Michel, before ending his trip in Warsaw on Saturday where he will discuss humanitarian issues with his Polish counterpart.

MILITARY RESPONSE

The US continues to claim Russia is planning to use chemical weapons in Ukraine, although Moscow said its entire arsenal was destroyed in 2017. Biden made the same allegation before departing for Europe on Wednesday.

"I think it's a real threat," Biden said when asked whether he is concerned with the threat of chemical warfare at the moment.

Moscow, for its part, accused the US of having biolabs across Ukraine, which the Biden administration has denied.

The White House said Biden will deliver remarks at the extraordinary NATO summit at alliance headquarters on Thursday and "discuss ongoing deterrence and defense efforts in response to Russia's unprovoked and unjustified attack on Ukraine."

According to CNN, the Pentagon provided Biden with several options for the deployment of more US troops in Eastern Europe, something that may be discussed at the emergency NATO summit, where he will be joined by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said Biden while in Europe will not only coordinate the next phase of military aid to Ukraine but will raise the question of China's involvement in the conflict.

A bipartisan group of US senators ahead of the summit gave Biden a five-point proposal to deliver to NATO, which includes calls for members to increase defense spending commitments, bolster presence on the alliance's eastern flank, and consider increased engagement in the Balkans.

SANCTIONS AND HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT

New sanctions on Russia and joint action to reduce European dependence on Russian energy are expected to be announced by Biden and other leaders during the meetings, according to the White House.

However, US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm told Sky News right before the trip that Biden will not ask European partners to abandon Russian energy supplies because it is something they "simply cannot do."

During the European Council Summit at the Europa building, Biden will discuss transatlantic efforts "to impose economic costs on Russia, provide humanitarian support to those affected by the violence, and address other challenges related to the conflict," the White House said in a statement.

The United States will also announce a package of sanctions designations on Thursday, Sullivan said, targeting Russian political figures and "oligarchs."

The Wall Street Journal reported earlier this week, citing American officials, that the sanctions could also target 300 members of the Russian State Duma. The report said the sanctions will be announced in coordination with the European Union and members of the G7.

In addition to the crisis in Ukraine, Biden may discuss the Iran nuclear deal with allies while he is in Europe, US officials have said.

Biden will then travel to Poland on March 25, where he will meet with counterpart Andrzej Duda and other Polish government officials. Biden and Duda will discuss the US and Polish responses to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, US officials have said.

Approximately 1.8 million people have fled from Ukraine to Poland since the beginning of the military operation, Polish State Secretary Maciej Wasik said earlier in March.

Russia says that the military operation is intended to demilitarize and de-nazify Ukraine in protection of the self-declared Donbas republics.

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RPT - Trump's Social Media Platform 'Truth Social' Largely Defunct Because of Inaction - Expert

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump's social media company Truth Social struggled to stay relevant after its debut launch in late February due to a series of issues that have yet to be fixed but mostly because of his lack of engagement on the platform itself, Florida University social media professor Andrew Selepak told Sputnik.

Trump was expected to use Truth Social to engage with the public as he had done on Twitter, but so far he has only made one post since mid-February that says "Get Ready!"

"So from the get go, there was a problem with not being able to actually get on the platform, create an account, and then this account was kind of advertised as this space where Donald Trump was going to have a voice on social media and then [he] didn't use it," Selepak said.

The Daily Beast reported that Truth Social averaged 300,000 visits per day in early March. Truth Social was the number one product on Apple's app store when it launched on February 21 to February 23, but its ranking dropped to the 173rd most popular app as of March 12, according to web analytics service SimilarWeb.

"I think one of the first things that happened was that the rollout had so many issues, the day it was available was Presidents Day and people who tried to create accounts, it basically didn't allow them," Selepak said. "To have a big rollout like that and for it to not work doesn't look good."

Trump has been out of the public spotlight for the most part since he left office except for a few media appearances and rallies.

"I really thought this was going to be his way to sort of speak directly to not only supporters but detractors, and that this was going to lead to a lot of media coverage and a lot of interest in the platform to see what he's going to say, especially by a lot of media people, and it just hasn't happened and it's been very surprising," Selepak said.

Trump announced his plan to develop a competitive social media service last October, which had received substantial media coverage in the United States.

The former US president, who was banned from the social media platform Twitter after the January 6 Capitol riot, promised that his new social network would fight Big Tech censorship and protect the right of free speech and expression in the United States.

However, the terms of service on Truth Social states that users' posts should not contain profanity, or abusive or racist, language" and posts should also "not contain discriminatory references based on religion, race, gender, national origin, age, marital status, sexual orientation, or disability.

Selepak said there is a misunderstanding of what is allowed under the freedom of speech protection and it does not mean that one can literally say anything, adding that there can be repercussions for free speech.

"There are limitations on freedom of speech when it comes to things like inciting violence, there are copyright and trademark protections," he said.

While Truth Social is only available on Apple, there is still no app available on the Google Play store for Android phones. The platform also does not have a webpage for users to access on an internet browser on their desktop or laptop.

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RPT - Albright's NATO Expansion Policy Paved Road to Ukraine Crisis - Ex-Macedonian Diplomat

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The NATO expansion policy the late Madeleine Albright pursued as the Clinton administration's top diplomat fueled Russian security concerns to a level that forced Moscow to take defensive measures, which helped lead to the crisis in Ukraine, former Macedonian diplomat Risto Nikovski told Sputnik.

Albright, the first female US Secretary of State, passed away from cancer at the age of 84 on Wednesday. Albright was one of the key architects of NATO's 78-day bombing campaign in Yugoslavia, which was launched on March 24, 1999 - exactly 23 years ago.

"The foreign policy that Albright pursued together with Bill Clinton led to the encircling of Russia from all sides by new NATO members," Nikovski said. "That encirclement is de facto the reason for all the problems that started in Ukraine and will continue in Europe in the future as well as in the world."

In December, Russia sent the Biden administration security guarantee proposals in an effort to prevent NATO's further enlargement. However, Moscow said the US largely ignored its most critical demands including a guarantee to never allow Ukraine into NATO.

Moscow, Nikovski added, was forced to undertake the special operation in Ukraine because the legitimate government was toppled with the help of the United States and others.

"New politicians were installed [in Kiev] to lead anti-Russian policies, which led to what we are seeing today," Nikovski said.

Albright's role in US domestic politics was positive, he added, but the world, and particularly the Balkan region, will remember her for her aggressive and "anti-civilizational" policies. The role Albright played in the breaking away of Kosovo from Serbia showed the world that US foreign policy is unscrupulous, Nikovski said.

Years afterward, he added, Albright admitted that the bombing campaign was illegal, but also claimed it was useful.

The former diplomat said Albright's role as US Secretary of State in expanding NATO deserves wholehearted and deep condemnation given that her predecessor, James Baker, told Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not expand an inch eastward after the reunification of Germany.

Nikovski served as Undersecretary in the Macedonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as Ambassador to Russia, Albania, and the United Kingdom before resigning over criticisms of the United States for allegedly interfering in the country's internal affairs.

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Albright moved from Czechoslovakia to the United States in 1948, where she would work as a professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and found the Albright Institute for Global Affairs at Wellesley College in addition to her public service.

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China Gov't. Employee Convicted in Conspiracy to Illegally Obtain US Visas - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - Liu Zhongsan, a Chinese government employee, has been convicted for his involvement in a conspiracy to defraud the United States and for illegally obtaining US visas, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"Liu Zhongsan sought to exploit the J-1 research scholar program - which is intended to allow foreign nationals to conduct research at approved US institutions - for the improper purpose of enabling his conspirators to work for the Chinese Government in the United States, against the rules of the research scholar program," US Attorney Damian Williams said in the release on Wednesday.

Williams said that Lee was part of a plan to illegally secure J-1 research scholar visas for employees of the Chinese government China through an office called the China Association for the International Exchange of Personnel (CAIEP), the release said.

The scheme would allow recipients to work unlawfully for the Chinese government and hide that and to conceal that illicit work from the United States and its agencies, the release said. CAIEP recruited talent for the benefit of the PRC and recruited engineers, scientists, academics and other professionals and experts to work in China, the release added.

The J-1 research scholar program allows foreign nationals to gain entry into the United States for the main purpose of conducting research at a research institution, library, university, museum or corporate research facility.

Liu was convicted of one count of conspiracy to defraud the United States and to commit visa fraud, which carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison, according to the release.

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US Offers Nearly \$3.5Mln to Strengthen Media in Eastern Europe - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is offering nearly \$3.5 million in funding for projects that strengthen media collaboration in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus region, the US Department of State said in a public notice.

"With full awareness of the current situation in Ukraine and the region, the US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) announces an open competition for a regional project that strengthens media collaboration in the Europe and Eurasia region," the notice said on Wednesday.

DRL is seeking proposals that enable media actors to network within their countries and across the region, improve cross-border content production, and produce high-quality and credible content across platforms that counters disinformation, the notice said.

Eligible countries for project participation include but are not limited to Belarus, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Serbia, and Ukraine, the notice added.

DRL is committed to advancing equity and support for underrepresented communities, and programs should seek strategies for integration and inclusion of perspectives based on sex, race, sexual orientation, gender identity and other personal characteristics, according to the notice.

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US Unemployment Could Hit 7-Decade Lows Beneath 3% in 2022 - Federal Reserve Official

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - US unemployment could hit seven-decade lows of beneath 3% this year as the economy continues on its massive recovery track from the two-year long coronavirus pandemic, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis President James Bullard said. "The unemployment rate could fall below 3% this year," Bullard said on Wednesday. "The US economy will continue to grow above trend this year and next, and the labor markets will continue to improve further."

Historical charts on US job statistics displayed by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis shows that the last time the United States experienced an unemployment rate of 3% or below was in 1953.

Joblessness among Americans reached a record high of 14.8% in April 2020, with the loss of some 20 million jobs in the aftermath of the coronavirus breakout. Jobs recovery has, however, been stellar over the past year, with the jobless rate moving down to 3.8%. A jobless rate of 4% or below is regarded by the Federal Reserve as maximum employment.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said last week that the labor market was extremely tight with robust demand and subdued supply. Powell also noted that more than a million positions were filled within the first two months of the year due to robust economic growth. The economy grew 5.7% in 2021, expanding at its fastest pace in four decades, after a 3.5% contraction in 2020 from coronavirus measures disruptions.

Aside from ramping job numbers, 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.

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Trump's Social Media Platform 'Truth Social' Largely Defunct Because of Inaction - Expert

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"So from the get go, there was a problem with not being able to actually get on the platform, create an account, and then this account was kind of advertised as this space where Donald Trump was going to have a voice on social media and then [he] didn't use it," Selepak said.

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State Dept. Confirms US Embassy in Russia Received List of Diplomats to Be Expelled

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The State Department confirmed that the US Embassy in Moscow received a list from the Russian Foreign Ministry of UUS diplomats considered persona non grata.

"We can confirm that the US Embassy received a list of diplomats declared 'persona non grata' from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on March 23," a State Department spokesperson said on Wednesday. "This is Russia's latest unhelpful and unproductive step in our bilateral relationship. We call on the Russia government to end its unjustified expulsions of US diplomats and staff."

The spokesperson said that now is a critical moment for the United States and Russia to have the necessary diplomatic personnel in place to facilitate communication between both governments.

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US Lifts Trump-Era Tariffs on 352 Chinese Products - Trade Representative

(Updates with more details, background in paras 5-9)

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has lifted Trump-era tariffs on 352 Chinese products as part of its new approach to trade with China, the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) said in a statement.

The statement referred to the USTR's previously announced intent to remove the 352 products from a list of 549 products that had been reviewed for exemption from the China Section 301 Investigation for tariffs.

"[The] determination was made after careful consideration of the public comments, and in consultation with other US agencies," the statement said on Wednesday.

In a prior release, the USTR described the tariff exclusion process as pursuant to its new approach toward the US-China trade relationship.

The Trump administration imposed tariffs on hundreds of goods from China, which reciprocated with its own measures against US products, during a long-running diplomatic and trade war overseen by President Donald Trump during the better part of his four years in office.

President Joe Biden has had his own rocky relationship with Beijing despite attempts to put trade and diplomatic ties on a better path.

While Biden has undone most of Trump's executive orders on immigration, climate and other matters, he left intact some of his predecessor's original tariffs against China, indicating he might use them to pressure Beijing into making concessions on trade and other issues.

In February, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai reported that getting Beijing to fulfill its commitment to buy more American products under a 2020 US-China trade deal inked by the Trump administration has proven "extremely difficult".

From January 2020 through November 2021, China's total imports of US products covered under the so-called Phase One Trade agreement between the two countries stood at \$221.9 billion, versus a target of \$356.4 billion, data showed.

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Russian Envoy to UN Warns Ukraine Against Using Civilians as Human Shields

UNITED NATIONS, March 23 (Sputnik) - Russia warned Ukraine against using civilians as human shields after the UN Security Council failed to adopt a Russian-drafted humanitarian resolution, Russia's Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said.

"Our draft contains such key elements as a call for establishment of a ceasefire and the establishment of humanitarian pauses for the purposes of the conduct of safe and unhindered evacuation for the civilian population as well as the possibility for safe and unhindered evacuation from Ukraine for all of those who expressed a desire to do so without discrimination on any grounds," Nebenzia told a UN Security Council meeting on Wednesday.

The ambassador also said Russia calls on Ukraine not to attack any critical infrastructure objects nor place heavy military equipment in residential and densely populated areas in order to ensure the protection of humanitarian and medical personnel, the wounded and the ill, and of civilians, as well as ensure humane treatment of detainees,

In addition, Nebenzia said that Russia calls on all parties not to politicize the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine.

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US 'Scheduled' for Artemis Mission Manned Lunar Landing in 2025 - NASA Chief Nelson

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is now on schedule to land its first crewed mission on the surface of the Moon in 53 years in 2025 as part of its Artemis Program, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said.

"We are scheduled for a crewed lander [to land on] on the Moon in 2025," Nelson told a press conference on Wednesday. "As to when the Chinese are going to land [on the Moon], I do not know."

Artemis Program Human Landing Systems Program Manager Lisa Watson-Morgan told the press conference that an earlier uncrewed Artemis flight to the Moon was scheduled for the preceding year of 2024.

"To date, all milestones have been met and we are good to go. We have right now 2024 as our uncrewed demo flight," Watson-Morgan said.

However, a senior NASA officials told a hearing of the US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics held on March 1 that the Artemis 3 manned mission to the Moon would not take place until 2026 and could be as late as 2027.

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China's UN Envoy Says 'Regrettable' Security Council Failed to Agree on Ukraine Resolution

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The failure of the UN Security Council to agree on a Russian-drafted resolution regarding the humanitarianism situation in Ukraine is regrettable, Chinese envoy Zhang Jun said during remarks at the General Assembly.

"It is regrettable that the council was unable to reach the broadest of possible agreements in the end," the envoy said on Wednesday.

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UN Does Not Adopt Russia's Humanitarian Resolution Calling for Negotiated Truce in Ukraine

UNITED NATIONS, March 23 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council did not adopt the humanitarian resolution drafted by Russia calling for a negotiated ceasefire in Ukraine, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the scene.

Russia and China voted in favor of the resolution while 13 other members of the UN Security Council, including the United States, United Kingdom and France - abstained from voting on Russia's draft resolution, and no countries voted against it.

The resolution condemns all violations of international humanitarian law and human rights, including the Geneva Conventions. It also demands respect and protection for all medical and humanitarian personnel exclusively engaged in medical and related duties in Ukraine.

The UN Security Council has recently held a series of discussions about the situation in Ukraine amid Russia's special operation to demilitarize and de-Nazify that country after the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops.

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US, European Astronauts Complete Spacewalk to Boost ISS Temperature Controls - NASA

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - Two astronauts from the United States and the European Space Agency (ESA) have completed their almost seven-hour space walk outside the International Space Station (ISS) to install new hoses to aid temperature regulation on it, NASA announced.

"Expedition 66 Flight Engineers Raja Chari of NASA and Matthias Maurer of ESA concluded their spacewalk at 3:26 p.m. EDT after 6 hours and 54 minutes in preparation for upcoming solar array installation," the US space agency said in its official blog on Wednesday.

Maurer and Chari completed their major objective to install hoses on a radiator beam valve module that routes ammonia through the space station's heat-rejecting radiators to keep systems at the proper temperature, NASA said.

"The crew members also installed a power and data cable on the Columbus module's Bartolomeo science platform, replaced an external camera on the station's truss, and conducted other upgrades to station hardware," NASA added.

Maurer and Chari deferred several secondary tasks including torque resets and cable routing to a future spacewalk, according to NASA.

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US Rules Out Sending More Troops to Eastern Europe in Near Term - White House

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has ruled out sending additional troops to Eastern Europe in the near term amid heightened tensions between NATO and Russia over Moscow's ongoing special operation in Ukraine, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said, according to a White House pool report.

"Sullivan ruled out any new US forces being sent to Eastern Europe in the near term," the pool report said on Wednesday upon Biden's arrival in Brussels, Belgium.

Biden will attend the NATO summit that was organized to discuss the situation in Ukraine, as well as the US-led joint response and possible force posture adjustments.

The United States and other NATO allies have already bolstered their presence in Europe and especially on the alliance's eastern flank ever since the beginning of Russia's special operation in Ukraine.

Biden is also scheduled to visit Warsaw to meet with the Polish leadership and discuss the humanitarian situation in Ukraine given that millions of people have been displaced and many have fled to Poland and to other countries.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik)

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* European politicians are making attempts to disregard the issue of biological laboratories in Ukraine, Konstantin Gavrillov, the head of the Russian delegation at the military security and arms control talks in Vienna, said on Wednesday.

* Russia and Ukraine have held two exchanges of detainees so far, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* Kiev's statements about the need to hold a referendum on the status of the Donbas republics and Crimea aim at delaying the negotiation process between Russia and Ukraine, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

* If NATO sends peacekeepers to Ukraine, there will be a direct clash between the forces of Russia and the alliance, Lavrov said.

* German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy discussed ongoing negotiations between Kiev and Moscow during a phone conversation, the German government said, adding that the sides have agreed to keep in touch.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* A diplomat from the United States has received a note with a list of diplomats who are to be expelled from Russia in response to Washington's similar decision, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday.

* The US embassy in Russia will find it difficult to function if further limits are put on diplomatic personnel, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

* The open lines of US-Russian communication are indispensable, especially during times of heightened tension, Price said.

* The US embassy in Moscow continues to be a locus of communication with Russian counterparts, and Washington does not want it to shut down, Price said.

ENERGY MARKETS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday ordered the Russian government to instruct Gazprom to change existing gas contracts into rubles.

* A high-ranking EU source did not rule out that the EU leaders may discuss Russia's demand to pay for gas in rubles during the upcoming summit on Thursday.

* The Austrian oil giant OMV will continue paying for Russian gas in Euros, OMV CEO Alfred Stern said.

* The price of gas futures in Europe increased by 34% and topped \$1500 amid Putin's statement about payment for gas in rubles, according to the London-based ICE exchange.

* There are no decisions by the German government to impose a de facto embargo on Russian oil, a German economy ministry representative said.

* The German government and European partners will discuss Moscow's decision to request gas payments in rubles, Economy Minister Robert Habeck said.

UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY MEETING ON UKRAINE

* The adoption of West's draft UNGA resolution on Ukraine would hurdle peace efforts and embolden Kiev's negotiators, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Wednesday.

* Russia was ready to support resolution on Ukraine that was drafted by Mexico and France at the UN Security Council until anti-Russia wording was added to it, Nebenzia said.

* Russia began its military operation in Ukraine only after exhausting all attempts to resolve the conflict peacefully, Nebenzia said.

IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL

* All parties of talks on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) are close to reach an agreement on its revival, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Adollahian said on Wednesday.

RUSSIA-POLAND DOIPLOMATIC ROW

- * Russian Ambassador to Warsaw Sergey Andreyev said on Wednesday that he received a note from the Polish foreign ministry demanding the expulsion of 45 Russian diplomats for allegedly engaging in espionage.
- * Poland did not made any decisions to sever diplomatic relations with Russia, Polish Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lukasz Jasina said.
- * Poland's Internal Security Agency (ISA) has compiled a list of 45 Russian diplomats suspected of espionage, and demanded their expulsion, Stanislav Zharin, spokesman for the Polish secret services' coordinating minister, said.
- * The number of Russian diplomats in Poland is less than the number Warsaw wants to expel, Maria Zakharova, the Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman, said.

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PREVIEW - Biden, US Allies Set to Kick-Off Meetings in Europe to Coordinate Actions Against Russia

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is set to begin a series of meetings with NATO allies and partners in Brussels and Warsaw to coordinate more security assistance to Kiev and additional sanctions against Russia over its military operation in Ukraine. The trip comes amid intense fighting between Russian and Ukraine forces over Mariupol, where thousands of people are being evacuated amid a worsening humanitarian crisis one month into the special military operation launched by Moscow. On Thursday, Biden will attend an extraordinary NATO summit on Ukraine and meet with G7 leaders, according to the White House. He will also attend a European Council summit and hold a bilateral meeting with European Council President Charles Michel, before ending his trip in Warsaw on Saturday where he will discuss humanitarian issues with his Polish counterpart.

MILITARY RESPONSE

The US continues to claim Russia is planning to use chemical weapons in Ukraine, although Moscow said its entire arsenal was destroyed in 2017. Biden made the same allegation before departing for Europe on Wednesday.

"I think it's a real threat," Biden said when asked whether he is concerned with the threat of chemical warfare at the moment.

Moscow, for its part, accused the US of having biolabs across Ukraine, which the Biden administration has denied.

The White House said Biden will deliver remarks at the extraordinary NATO summit at alliance headquarters on Thursday and "discuss ongoing deterrence and defense efforts in response to Russia's unprovoked and unjustified attack on Ukraine."

According to CNN, the Pentagon provided Biden with several options for the deployment of more US troops in Eastern Europe, something that may be discussed at the emergency NATO summit, where he will be joined by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said Biden while in Europe will not only coordinate the next phase of military aid to Ukraine but will raise the question of China's involvement in the conflict.

A bipartisan group of US senators ahead of the summit gave Biden a five-point proposal to deliver to NATO, which includes calls for members to increase defense spending commitments, bolster presence on the alliance's eastern flank, and consider increased engagement in the Balkans.

SANCTIONS AND HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT

New sanctions on Russia and joint action to reduce European dependence on Russian energy are expected to be announced by Biden and other leaders during the meetings, according to the White House.

However, US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm told Sky News right before the trip that Biden will not ask European partners to abandon Russian energy supplies because it is something they "simply cannot do."

During the European Council Summit at the Europa building, Biden will discuss transatlantic efforts "to impose economic costs on Russia, provide humanitarian support to those affected by the violence, and address other challenges related to the conflict," the White House said in a statement.

The United States will also announce a package of sanctions designations on Thursday, Sullivan said, targeting Russian political figures and "oligarchs."

The Wall Street Journal reported earlier this week, citing American officials, that the sanctions could also target 300 members of the Russian State Duma. The report said the sanctions will be announced in coordination with the European Union and members of the G7.

In addition to the crisis in Ukraine, Biden may discuss the Iran nuclear deal with allies while he is in Europe, US officials have said.

Biden will then travel to Poland on March 25, where he will meet with counterpart Andrzej Duda and other Polish government officials. Biden and Duda will discuss the US and Polish responses to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, US officials have said.

Approximately 1.8 million people have fled from Ukraine to Poland since the beginning of the military operation, Polish State Secretary Maciej Wasik said earlier in March.

Russia says that the military operation is intended to demilitarize and de-nazify Ukraine in protection of the self-declared Donbas republics.

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NASA Still Expects US Astronaut to Return From ISS 'Without Hitch' - Administrator

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - NASA still expects US astronaut Mark Vande Hei to return to earth smoothly and without incident from the International Space Station (ISS) on March 30 in company with the two Russian cosmonauts he crewed with despite the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, space agency administrator Bill Nelson said on Wednesday.

"It is expected without a hitch that [the] two cosmonauts and Martin Vande Hei will return at the end of this month as planned," Nelson told an audio NASA press conference. "The professional relationship between the astronauts and the cosmonauts continues unaltered."

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US Lifts Trump-Era Tariffs on 352 Chinese Products - Trade Representative

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has lifted Trump-era tariffs on 352 Chinese products as part of its new approach to trade with China, the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) said in a statement on Wednesday.

The statement referred to the USTR's previously announced intent to remove the 352 products from a list of 549 products that had been reviewed for exemption from the China Section 301 Investigation for tariffs.

"[The] determination was made after careful consideration of the public comments, and in consultation with other US agencies," the statement said.

In a prior release, the USTR described the tariff exclusion process as pursuant to its new approach to the US-China trade relationship.

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US Envoy to UN Says Hopes to Achieve Justice in Ukraine in Name of Late Madeleine Albright

UNITED NATIONS, March 23 (Sputnik) - US Envoy to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said she seeks to do justice with respect to Ukraine in memory of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who passed away earlier on Wednesday.

"[Albright's] story of fleeing Czechoslovakia as a refugee at a young age and rising in the highest levels of the US government has echoed in my mind amid the current crisis in Ukraine, and I hope to do justice for her memory today," Thomas-Greenfield said during a UN General Assembly session.

Earlier on Wednesday, Albright's family announced in a statement that the 84-year old former Secretary of State passed away after a long fight with cancer.

Albright, a native of Prague, moved to the United States in 1948, where she worked as a professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and founded the Albright Institute for Global Affairs at Wellesley College. Albright also headed the Democratic National Institute non-governmental organization that sought to influence world affairs complementing the work of the US government.

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Biden Arrives in Europe Ahead of NATO Summit, Meetings With Polish Leaders

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden arrived in Belgium to attend the NATO summit in Brussels and attend meetings with the Polish leadership in Warsaw among participating in other events.

Biden will attend a NATO summit to discuss the ongoing Russian special operation in Ukraine, the US-led joint response on sanctions against Russia and the potential military force posture adjustments on the alliance's eastern flank.

The US president will also hold meetings with G7 and European Union leaders on an array of issues, including the situation in Ukraine, China's relationship with Russia and the negotiations on the Iran nuclear agreement.

Biden will then travel to Warsaw to meet with the Polish leadership and discuss the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, which has led to an influx of displaced persons flowing across the border into Poland.

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US \$800M In Security Package for Ukraine to Start Arriving on Thursday - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The next US security package for Ukraine consisting of weapons systems and other military equipment in the amount of \$800 million will begin to arrive in the country on Thursday, a senior US Defense Department official said.

"The first flight of material from the next big tranche of the \$800 million package that the President [Biden] announced, that also should be starting to arrive here, the first flight should be planning to arrive within the next day or so," the official said during a conference call from Brussels on Wednesday.

The official said the last deliveries of the earlier \$350 million worth US security package for Ukraine will be completed in the coming days as well.

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Oil Above \$120 First Time in 2 Weeks on Big US Consumption, Russia Supply Woes

NEW YORK, March 23 (Sputnik) - Crude prices settled at a two-week high of above \$120 a barrel on Wednesday after US government data showed weekly consumption of oil at far

beyond market estimates, while major producer Russia continued to report outages on the Caspian pipeline that played on the nerves of traders.

London-traded Brent, the global benchmark for oil, settled up \$6.12, or 5.3%, at \$121.60.

Supply scares had already pushed Brent prices up by a net 7% in the past two sessions, giving it a week-to-date gain of 13% that would be its biggest since the 20% rally during the week that marked the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine.

US crude's West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, benchmark settled up \$5.66, or 5.2%, at \$114.93. WTI's week-to-date gain was about 9%.

Wednesday's run-up in oil came after data from the US Energy Information Administration about larger-than-expected drawdowns in crude, gasoline and distillate stockpiles.

Stockpiles of US crude oil fell by 2.51 million barrels last week, after a build of 4.35 million reported during the prior week to March 11, the EIA said in its weekly petroleum status report. Analysts polled by US media had expected crude inventories to continue rising in the week to March 18, by some 144,000 barrels on the average.

On the gasoline front, a drawdown of 2.95 million barrels added to the 3.62 million rundown in the week prior. Analysts had forecast a gasoline consumption of 1.99 million barrels on the average for last week. Automobile fuel gasoline is America's most-consumed oil product, seeing drawdowns for seven straight weeks now.

In the case of distillates, the drawdown was 2.07 million barrels versus the previous week's build of 332,000 barrels. Analysts had estimated a distillates drop of 1.39 million barrels during the week to March 18. Distillates, which are refined into diesel for trucks, buses, trains and ships as well as fuel for jets, have been the strongest growth component of the US oil complex for months, seeing virtually non-stop inventory declines since mid-January.

In Russia, Energy Minister Alexander Novak reiterated the caution from a day ago that oil supplies by the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, which ships around 1.2 million barrels per day, may be completely stopped for up to two months due to storm-damaged berths on the Black Sea terminal.

Global crude supply is down by some 3 million barrels per day due to Western sanctions applied on Moscow for its military operation in Ukraine.

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US New Home Sales Down 6% in Year to February as Prices Spike 11% - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - Sales of new homes in the United States fell by 6% in the year to February as supply remained tight while prices climbed almost 11%, the Commerce Department said on Wednesday.

"Sales of new single-family houses in February 2022 were at a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 772,000," the Census Bureau, a unit of the Commerce Department, said in a news release. It added that the sale figure was "2.0 percent below the revised January rate of 788,000 and is 6.2 percent below the February 2021 estimate of 823,000."

The average selling price for a new US home was \$511,000 in February, while the median price was \$400,600, the release said.

The supply of new homes for sale rose between January and February to a 6.3-month supply of units, data separately released by realtors showed. In January, new home inventories were already at the highest level since 2008, according to Rubeela Farooqi, an economist at New York-based High Frequency Economics quoted by MarketWatch.

Dire US housing shortages since the financial crisis of 2007/2008, compounded by last year's coronavirus outbreak, have led to a scramble among buyers, triggering record high prices. To aggravate the mad rush for homes, a string of expected rate hikes by the Federal Reserve this year has worsened the race among first-time buyers eager to lock in before mortgages get costlier. The central bank raised key US lending rates by a quarter percentage point last week in its first pandemic-era hike, and is expected to approve as many as six more increases this year. Mortgage rates climbed past 4% for the first time since May 2019, data from Freddie Mac, the federal home loan mortgage corporation, showed. The 30-year fixed-rate mortgage averaged 4.16% in the week ending March 17, up from 3.85% the week before, according to Freddie Mac data.

Prices of existing homes have fallen from June's median high of nearly \$363,000 to \$357,300 in February. But the combination of higher mortgage rates and tight supply still made it hard for some buyers to compete, realtors said.

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US Embassy in Russia Will Find It Difficult to Operate If More Limits Come - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The US embassy in Russia will find it difficult to function if further limits are put on diplomatic personnel, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"There is not much to give in terms of our ability to continue with the functioning embassy in Moscow ... if there are further personnel limits placed on our embassy in Moscow," Price told journalists at a briefing.

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Open Lines of US-Russia Communication Indispensable - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The open lines of US-Russian communication are indispensable, especially during times of heightened tension, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"Open lines of communication are indispensable, especially during times of heightened tension, especially during times of conflict," Price told journalists at a briefing.

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Former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright Passes Away - Family

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - Former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright passed away from cancer on Wednesday at the age of 84, her family said in a statement.

"We are heartbroken to announce that Dr. Madeleine K. Albright, the 64th U.S. Secretary of State and the first woman to hold that position, passed away earlier today. The cause was cancer," the statement said.

Albright, a native of Prague, moved to the United States in 1948, where she worked as a professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and founded the Albright Institute for Global Affairs at Wellesley College in addition to her public service.

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US Embassy in Moscow Continues to Be Locus of Communication With Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The US embassy in Moscow continues to be a locus of communication with Russian counterparts, and Washington does not want it to shut down, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"Our embassy in Moscow continues to be a locus of coordination and communication with our Russian counterparts. We would not want to see that closed down," Price told journalists at a briefing.

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US to Place Restrictions on Chinese Firms if They Violate Russia Export Controls- Raimondo

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The US government will impose restrictions on Chinese companies if they violate Washington's export controls on selling semiconductors to Russia, Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo said on Wednesday.

"If we find that they are selling chips to Russia, then we can essentially shut them down by denying them use of that software," Raimondo told Reuters.

The United States is "absolutely prepared" to undertake this step, she said.

Raimondo explained that all Chinese semiconductor companies are using US technologies, so transactions with Russia will violate the restrictions that the United States has imposed.

The United States and its allies have imposed comprehensive sanctions and export controls on Russia after Moscow began a special military operation to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine. Russia has drawn a list of unfriendly nations and said it will respond with its own countermeasures.

Russia said it undertook the special operation after the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend them from intensified attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation solely aims to destroy Ukraine's military infrastructure.

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Biden Administration Blaming Spike in US Gas Prices on Putin 'Not Accurate' - Senator

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's claim that Russian President Vladimir Putin is to blame for the increase in gasoline prices in the United States is not accurate since prices were already increasing prior to the conflict in Ukraine, US Senator Rob Portman said on Wednesday.

"For the Biden administration to say this is Vladimir Putin's gas increase, it just isn't accurate," Portman said during a press conference alongside fellow Republican Senators. "Does it contribute? Absolutely it contributes, but the majority of it was already happening and the trajectory was already increasing."

Portman said the United States needs to provide Europe more energy from but it cannot do that if the Biden administration wants to stifle US energy production because of its radical climate agenda.

The export terminals for liquefied natural gas are able to be constructed very quickly and the United States can construct more import terminals in Europe equally quickly, Portman said, adding that the United States needs to flood the region with them.

Several senate Republicans at the press conference pointed out that inflation had been rising, including the increasing prices on gasoline and multiple products, since President Joe Biden came to power in January 2021.

The Republican senators blamed the increase in gasoline prices on Biden and on the Democrats pushing anti-oil and gas rhetoric and practice.

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US Monitoring Russia-Ukraine Peace Talks, Not Playing Active Role - White House

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is monitoring ongoing peace talks between Russia and Ukraine but not directly engaging at the negotiating table, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday.

"We are in very consistent communication with our Ukrainian friends, and President Biden speaks to President Zelenskyy on this issue ... We're actively engaged in monitoring the ongoing diplomacy, but the United States is not directly at the table or directly playing any kind of mediating or brokering role," Sullivan said during a press gaggle aboard Air Force One. Biden will meet with an array of European partners involved in the negotiations, including France and Germany, while in Brussels for a NATO summit on the situation in Ukraine.

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Sullivan Says Announcement Expected Friday Related to EU's Dependence on Russian Energy

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday that an announcement is expected on March 25 after President Joe Biden meets with NATO and European partners in Brussels that will address Europe's dependence on Russian energy.

"A major priority for both the President and his European allies is to reduce the dependence of Europe on Russian gas, full stop, and the practical roadmap for how to do that, what steps have to be taken, what the United States can contribute, what Europe has to do itself," Sullivan said during a press briefing aboard Air Force One. "This has been the subject of intense back and forth over the course of the past few days and weeks. We will have more to say on this subject specifically on Friday, particularly with the European Commission and the European Commission President [Ursula] von der Leyen. So he'll [Biden] discuss it tomorrow."

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Blinken Says US Assessing Whether Russian Military Committed War Crimes in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday that the United States is assessing available information whether the members of Russia's armed forces have committed war crimes in Ukraine.

"Today, I can announce that, based on information currently available, the US government assesses that members of Russia's forces have committed war crimes in Ukraine," he said. Blinken pointed out that the US assessment is based on a careful review of available information from public and intelligence sources.

"As with any alleged crime, a court of law with jurisdiction over the crime is ultimately responsible for determining criminal guilt in specific cases," he said. "The US government will continue to track reports of war crimes and will share information we gather with allies, partners, and international institutions and organizations, as appropriate. We are committed to pursuing accountability using every tool available, including criminal prosecutions."

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NATO Allies to Discuss Security Assistance to Ukraine During Upcoming Summit - White House WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The leaders of the NATO member states, including US President Joe Biden, will discuss during the upcoming summit this week the existing efforts to provide security assistance to Ukraine, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday.

"NATO itself has not as an institution been involved in the coordination or facilitation of security assistance to Ukraine, it's been individual members, individual allies who have done that... So the subject of discussion at the summit, even though institutionally NATO is not engaged in it, how we make sure that we are continuing to support Ukraine in its effort to defend itself, will be a topic of conversation among the leaders while the President is in Brussels," Sullivan said during a press gaggle aboard Air Force One.

The NATO member state leaders will also discuss the alliance's force posture on the eastern flank amid Russia's ongoing special operation in Ukraine, Sullivan added.

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US to Announce Sanctions Thursday Against Russian Political, Business Figures - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The United States on Thursday will announce a new package of sanctions against Russian political figures, businessmen, and entities due to the Russian special military operation in Ukraine, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday.

"The United States will announce a package of sanctions designations tomorrow that relate both to political figures, oligarchs, so individual designations as well as entities," Sullivan said during a press briefing aboard Air Force One.

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SpaceX Boosting Prices for Starlink Satellite System Services Up to 20% - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - Starlink is raising the prices for its products and services, including for its global constellation of thousands of communications mini-satellites, CNBC reported on Wednesday.

SpaceX said the higher prices, some of them 20% above previous ones, were generated by overall inflation, especially the rise in costs of expensive minerals and other materials needed in sophisticated high tech devices, the report said.

SpaceX informed Starlink system users and deposit holders on Tuesday about the major price hikes. The system's baseline monthly service price will rise 11%, to \$110 from \$99 per month, starting on May 21, the report said.

Also, the price of baseline Starlink hardware will go up 20%, to \$549 from \$499 for depositors who are now on the company's waiting list for service, the report added.

Users can cancel their Starlink service without a fee, but will only receive a full refund if they received the hardware in the past 30 days and SpaceX is also offering a partial refund of \$200 for users who cancel within the first year of service, according to the report.

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Zelenskyy Asks Biden Not to Sanction Abramovich to Facilitate Peace Talks - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - Volodymyr Zelenskyy advised US President Joe Biden not to sanction Russian businessman and former politician Roman Abramovich because the move may facilitate peace negotiations, the Wall Street Journal reported on Wednesday.

Zelenskyy told Biden in a recent phone call that Abramovich may prove important as a point of contact with Russia to help negotiate a peace agreement between Moscow and Kiev, the report said.

Abramovich, who previously served in Russia's State Duma but is also a citizen of Israel and Portugal, had sanctions drafted by the US government against him earlier this month, the report said.

Abramovich has been doing "all he can to support efforts aimed at restoring peace as soon as possible," a spokesperson for the businessman said in a statement. He is doing so based on requests, including from Ukrainian Jewish groups, the statement added.

US officials have no reason to believe that Abramovich will be particularly helpful in talks between the Ukrainian and Russian governments, with intelligence assessments suggesting otherwise, according to the report.

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US Oil Sees Strong Weekly Draws as Global Supply Stays Tight - Energy Information Agency

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - US oil inventories fell sharply last week, with data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showing stockpiles of fuel products such as gasoline and distillates tumble well beyond forecasts and as global supplies remain tight amid Western sanctions impacting Russia's energy exports.

Stockpiles of US crude oil fell by 2.51 million barrels last week, after a build of 4.35 million reported during the prior week to March 11, the EIA said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report

published Wednesday. Analysts polled by US media had expected crude inventories to continue rising in the week to March 18, by some 144,000 barrels on the average.

With respect to gasoline, a drawdown of 2.95 million barrels added to the 3.62 million run down in the week prior. Analysts had forecast a gasoline consumption of 1.99 million barrels on the average for last week. Gasoline is the United States' most-consumed oil product and drawdowns have been seen for seven straight weeks.

In the case of distillates, the drawdown was 2.07 million barrels versus the previous week's build of 332,000 barrels. Analysts had estimated a distillates drop of 1.39 million barrels during the week to March 18.

Distillates, which are refined into diesel for trucks, buses, trains and ships as well as fuel for jets, have been the strongest growth component of the US oil complex for months, seeing virtually non-stop inventory declines since mid-January.

Analysts said global crude oil supply is down by some 3 million barrels per day due to disruptions caused by Western sanctions applied on Moscow over its military operation in Ukraine.

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Trudeau Says Western States Must Continue Sending Lethal Aid to Ukraine to Counter Russia

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday that the Western countries must continue to send lethal military aid to Ukrainians and impose severe sanctions on Russian President Vladimir Putin and his associates.

"We must all continue to send military equipment and lethal aid to help Ukrainians in their heroic defense, not just of their lands, but of all of the principles that defend ours. And we must continue to impose unprecedented sanctions on Putin and his enablers in Russia and Belarus, increasing the pressure as much as we can," Trudeau said in his address to the European Parliament.

Trudeau called on the European countries to collectively step up to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine, which includes future plans to rebuild Ukraine following the conflict with Russia.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend from intensifying attacks from Ukrainian attacks.

In response to special operation, the United States and its allies have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russian entities and individuals.

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Black-White Wealth Gap in US Housing 'Wider Than Even' - Officials

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - Housing discrimination in the United States is not a thing of the past and the gap in wealth and home ownership equity values between blacks and whites is now wider than ever, senior Biden administration officials said on Wednesday.

"The gap between black and white home owning rates is wider than ever," US Domestic Policy Council Director Susan Rice told a White House briefing.

Today, the median white family holds eight times the wealth of the typical Black family and five times the wealth of the typical Latino family, according to the White House.

"Housing discrimination is not a thing of the past: The home owning disparity is wider today than it was in 1968," Housing and Urban Development Secretary Marcia Fudge said.

To narrow the disparity and address continued issues of unfair racial prejudice in housing appraisals, the Biden administration announced an Action Plan to enhance oversight and accountability of the appraisal industry and commit federal agencies to draft new legislation to modernize its structure, the White House said.

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US Envoy Negotiating Indirectly on IRGC Terror Designation With Tehran - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - US Envoy for Iran Rob Malley negotiated indirectly with Tehran the issue of removing the designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps's (IRGC) designation as a foreign terrorist organization as part of efforts to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Axios said in a report on Wednesday.

Malley in recent weeks negotiated the IRGC terrorist designation indirectly with Iran through European Union Political Director Enrique Mora, with the United States proposing removal of the IRGC from the Foreign Terrorist Organization blacklist in exchange for a public commitment to de-escalate from Tehran, the report said.

However, Iran did not agree with the proposal and suggested instead delivering a private side letter on the matter, the report cited two US sources and one Israeli official as saying.

The Biden administration has since backed off of the proposal due to criticism from US lawmakers over potentially removing the IRGC terror designation, the report added. Israeli authorities have also expressed outrage over the idea.

The inability of the United States and Iran to find a compromise on the issue may lead to the collapse of the nuclear negotiations, the Wall Street Journal also reported on Monday, citing sources involved in the talks.

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China Invites US Transportation Safety Agency to Join Boeing Crash Probe – Buttiegieg

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) – A team from the US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) will be heading to China to join the investigation into a China Eastern Airlines flight which went down in Southern China on March 21, US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg told reporters Wednesday.

"In terms of China, I'm very encouraged that the Chinese Civil Aviation Authority invited the NTSB to participate and be on the ground and of course, the FAA stands ready to support the NTSB in any way that they can," Buttigieg told a press conference.

Chinese authorities say data indicates the Boeing 737-800 – with 123 passengers and nine crew aboard – plummeted from 29,000 feet to 8,000 feet, leveled off and then went into a freefall. The passenger aircraft nosedived into the ground and exploded in flames. The crash was filmed by people who witnessed it. There were no survivors.

According to Chinese officials, the plane took off from Kunming, Yunnan province's capital and was scheduled to land in Guangzhou, a port city northwest of Hong Kong.

The airline has grounded its fleet of Boeing 737-800s. In addition to the NTSB, Chinese officials said teams from the US Federal Aviation Administration, Boeing and CFM International – which made the plane engines – are joining the investigation.

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COVID-19 Response Spokesperson Kirsten Allen to Be US Vice President's New Press Secretary

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - Kirsten Allen, spokesperson for the COVID-19 response at the Department of Health and Human Services, will be Vice President Kamala Harris' new press secretary, Office of the Vice President Communication Director Jamal Simmons said on Wednesday.

"Kirsten brings a unique blend of talents as a communicator, as well as a history with the vice president," Simmons told CNN. "So, we feel very fortunate that we're going to be able to bring together two people, Ernie [Apreza] and Kirsten, who have worked for the Vice President before."

Simmons said he is certain Allen will bring that history as well as loyalty and ability to the job on Vice President Harris' team.

Simmons also said he had informed the staff at the Office of the Vice President that Allen will join the team within several days.

Allen will replace Symone Sanders who resigned from the position last December.

In 2020, Allen served as Deputy National Press Secretary and African American Media Director for Harris' presidential campaign. Prior to that, she also served as communications director on the US House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis and deputy communications director at the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

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Ex-Trump Aide Manafort Removed From Plane Bound for Dubai for Revoked Passport - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - Ex-Trump aide Paul Manafort was pulled off an airplane headed to Dubai from Miami due to his US passport being revoked, a local Fox affiliate reported on Wednesday, citing law enforcement.

Manafort was removed without incident from an Emirates Airline flight at Miami International Airport on Sunday night, Miami-Dade Police Detective Alvaro Zabaleta reportedly said.

Manafort managed former US President Donald Trump's campaign for a portion of the 2016 race, but was removed from the position after dealings with former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich came to light.

Manafort was later convicted on tax and bank fraud charges over allegations that he misled the US government about his foreign lobbying efforts, including hiding millions of dollars from tax authorities. He was pardoned by Trump in December 2020.

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US Extends Measure to Let Citizens Enter Country on Expired Passports - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has extended its temporary measure of allowing American citizens to return to the country on expired passports until the end of June, the Department of State announced on Wednesday.

"U.S. citizens currently abroad whose passports expired on or after January 1, 2020, may be able to use their expired U.S. passport for return travel to the United States until June 30, 2022," the statement said.

The department said that it will encourage citizens to confirm their eligibility for traveling on an expired passport.

"The State Department and the Department of Homeland Security have worked with commercial airlines to extend this temporary measure and facilitate the ability of U.S. citizens to use certain expired passports to return from abroad directly to the United States. This extension will lessen ongoing travel difficulties created by the global COVID-19 pandemic," it said.

However, recently expired US passports cannot be used to travel from the US to an international destination or to travel to a foreign country, the department concluded.

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Biden Will Not Ask Europe to Abandon Russian Energy Supplies - US Energy Secretary

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will not ask European partners to abandon Russian energy supplies amid the ongoing military operation in Ukraine, as it is a thing they "simply cannot do," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm told Sky News.

Biden will take part in NATO and EU summits in Brussels on Thursday.

"The president is not going to be asking Europe to do things that they simply cannot do," Granholm said in an interview.

Earlier in March, Biden announced a US-only ban on Russian oil imports 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.

The United States will not judge other nations in their scramble to be free of Russia's influence, including choices being made about getting fossil fuels supplied by Saudi Arabia despite human rights concerns, the energy secretary added.

Granholm is attending the International Energy Agency (IEA) 2022 Ministerial Meeting in Paris, which she also is chairing, to discuss opportunities to deepen clean energy research, coordinate efforts to secure critical mineral supply chains, and develop policies to use the power of clean energy markets to lift up communities in transition.

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Adoption of West's UNGA Ukraine Resolution Would Hurdle Peace, Embolden Kiev - Nebenzia

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) – The adoption of West's draft UNGA resolution on Ukraine would hurdle peace efforts and embolden Kiev's negotiators, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Wednesday.

"Let me be clear that this scenario will make a resolution to the situation in Ukraine more difficult because it will more likely embolden Ukrainian negotiators and nudge them into maintaining the current unrealistic position, which is not related to the situation on the ground, nor to the need to tackle the root causes [of the conflict]," Nebenzia said during an emergency session of the UN General Assembly.

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Russia Was Ready to Support UNSC's Ukraine Resolution Until Anti-Russian Part Added-
Envoy

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - Russia was ready to support resolution on Ukraine that was drafted by Mexico and France at the UN Security Council until anti-Russia wording was added to it, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Wednesday.

"We were ready to work on it. That was until our Western colleagues insisted on introducing blatantly anti-Russian elements without which the draft was not necessary," Nebenzia said during an emergency session of the UN General Assembly on Ukraine.

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Russia Began Operation in Ukraine Only After Exhausting All Peaceful Efforts – Envoy to UN

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) – Russia began its military operation in Ukraine only after exhausting all attempts to resolve the conflict peacefully, Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Wednesday.

"We took this extremely difficult step [to start a special military operation in Ukraine] after having exhausted all peaceful and diplomatic means of resolving the conflict in Donbas. Only after Kiev unambiguously and on many occasions reaffirmed that it did not intend to fulfill the Minsk agreements as approved by the Security Council resolutions," Nebenzia said during an emergency session of the UN General Assembly on Ukraine.

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Majority of Americans Say Senate Should Confirm Jackson to US Supreme Court - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - Fifty-eight percent of Americans say the Senate should confirm Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson as the first African American woman on the US Supreme Court, a new Gallup poll revealed on Wednesday.

"A majority of Americans support Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson being confirmed to the Supreme Court, with 58% saying the Senate should vote in favor of her historical nomination to the nation's highest court," a release about the poll said.

Gallup released the poll as the confirmation hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee enter their third day. Jackson has been criticized by Republicans for being too lenient during her tenure as a judge on people accused of pedophilia.

Some 80% of Democrats support Jackson's ascension to the US Supreme Court while 55% of Republicans are opposed, the release said.

The poll comes at a time when the public's approval of the US Supreme Court has tumbled. Last July, the high court garnered a 49% approval rating and analysts have said the trust in the high court has continued to decline.

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Family of Convicted Spy Paul Whelan Says Sanctions Will Impact His Ability to Call Home

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The family of US citizen Paul Whelan, who is serving a 16-year sentence in a Moscow prison after being convicted of espionage, expressed concern on Wednesday that cash flow problems caused by the Western sanctions against Russia may impact his ability to communicate.

"We have heard that embassies are experiencing cash flow problems due to the impact on sanctions on money transfers, which we hope will get sorted out. Without this process through the US Embassy, we will be unable to continue to pay for Paul's phone calls home, the Whelan family said in a statement.

Paul's morale remains high, but that may change as the situation develops, the statement also said.

"Already, the United States Postal Service has suspended mail delivery to Russia. The loss of phone calls would sever any ability for Paul to communicate beyond the walls of his hostage takers," the statement added.

In June 2020, the Moscow court sentenced Whelan to a 16-year sentence on charges of espionage. He denies the charges, but did not challenge the verdict in the hope of being part of a prisoner exchange between Russia and the United States.

Paul also holds Canadian, British and Irish citizenship.

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Moderna Says COVID-19 Vaccine Successful in Children 6 Months to Under 6 Years

WASHINGTON, March 23 (Sputnik) - The phase 2/3 study of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine in children six months to under six years has shown successful primary endpoint results, the pharmaceutical company announced on Wednesday.

"Two 25 µg doses of mRNA-1273 in participants six months to under six years met primary endpoint with robust neutralizing antibody titers similar to adults mRNA-1273 was generally well tolerated in this age group," the press release said.

"Although not a primary endpoint, statistically significant vaccine efficacy was observed during the Omicron wave that was consistent with the lower two-dose effectiveness against Omicron seen in adults," the release added.

Moderna is now moving forward with global regulatory submissions for mRNA-1273 for primary vaccination of children six months to under six years of age, according to the release.

Moderna has also initiated a submission to the Food and Drug Administration for emergency use authorization of mRNA-1273 in children six to under twelve years of age. The vaccine is already approved for use in this age group in Europe, Canada and Australia, the company said.