

3/24/22 Thursday

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What is Rosemont Seneca, Hunter Biden's Investment Firm that Funded Ukrainian Biolabs?

Salacious stories have swirled for years about US President Joe Biden's son, Robert Hunter Biden, but they have concealed a deep web of corruption in which Hunter sought to use his father's notoriety to score unscrupulous business deals from Ukraine to Hong Kong.

On Thursday, the Russian Ministry of Defense revealed new information about US-funded biolabs it has [discovered in eastern Ukraine](#) amid the Kremlin's special "neutralization" operation in the nation. According to findings by Russia's Radiation, Chemical and Biological Defense Troops, one company connected to these biolabs and their work was founded by Hunter Biden and Christopher Heinz, the latter the stepson of former US Secretary of State John Kerry.

"Incoming materials have allowed us to trace the scheme of interaction between US government bodies and Ukraine's biolabs. The involvement in the financing of these activities by structures close to the current US leadership, in particular the Rosemont Seneca investment fund managed by Hunter Biden, draws attention to itself," [RCBD Troops chief Igor Kirillov said](#) in a briefing Thursday, noting the fund has at least \$2.4 billion in investment capital.

Rosemont Seneca Partners was founded in 2009 by Biden, Heinz and Heinz's college roommate and fellow financier, Devon Archer, according to the [Financial Times](#). Biden and Heinz were described as company co-owners and Archer as a "managing partner" in a [report to the US Securities and Exchange Commission](#).

The private equity firm was anchored by the Heinz family alternative investment fund, Rosemont Capital, and was formed to "be populated by political loyalists and positioned to [strike profitable deals](#) overseas with foreign governments and officials with whom the US government was negotiating," [according to the 2018 book](#) "Secret Empires: How the American Political Class Hides Corruption and Enriches Family and Friends," by Peter Schweizer.

Some of those deals attracted significant concern as they seemed contrary to US political interests, including in China and Ukraine. In a deal in 2014, Rosemont Seneca raised some \$1.5 billion for a fund launched by Harvest Fund Management and Bohai Industrial Group, a group closely tied to Chinese state-owned enterprises. The resultant group was dubbed Bohai Harvest RST.

This became a problem the following year, when BHR joined the Chinese state-owned defense firm Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC) to [buy anti-vibration automotive parts](#) from American precision-parts manufacturer Henniges - a deal agreed to during the Obama administration. A [US Senate investigation in 2019](#) found a significant conflict of interest in the deal, as anti-vibration technology is considered "dual use," having both civilian and military applications.

Also in 2014, in Ukraine, Archer and later Biden joined the board of the gas firm Burisma Holdings, owned by Ukrainian businessman Mykola Zlochevsky, whom the US State Department described as an "odious oligarch," according to the 2019 Senate probe. This deal,

too, presented conflicts of interest, as the Obama administration - in which Hunter's father, Joe Biden, served as US Vice President and director of its Ukraine policy after the February 2014 coup - was ostensibly sponsoring anti-corruption work by a post-coup government.

In one notable incident that [Joe Biden boasted about years later](#) but which Western media has tried to spin as conspiracy theory, Biden successfully pressured then-Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to fire Viktor Shokin, Ukraine's top prosecutor, who was heading an investigation of Zlochevsky and Burisma. Zlochevsky, meanwhile, was funneling millions to Hunter Biden and Archer for sitting on Burisma's board and for Rosemont Seneca's "consulting services," documents obtained by the Senate probe show.

Rosemont Seneca sought to disguise its investments in Burisma, as did top Obama administration officials, including then-Secretary of State John Kerry - Heinz's stepfather. Heinz attempted to distance himself from Archer's and Hunter's decision to join the Burisma board, writing to Kerry's chief of staff, David Wade, that "based only on Heinz's assurances, that 'Rosemont Seneca was not involved' with Burisma," Heinz told the Senate probe.

"Mr. Heinz strongly warned Mr. Archer that working with Burisma was unacceptable. Mr. Archer stated that he and Hunter Biden intended to pursue the opportunity as individuals, not as part of the firm," Chris Bastardi, a spokesperson for Heinz, [told the Washington Post](#) for a 2019 story. According to the paper, Heinz pulled out of Rosemont as a result of his partners' decision. "The lack of judgment in this matter was a major catalyst for Mr. Heinz ending his business relationships with Mr. Archer and Mr. Biden," Bastardi suggested.

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Chinese FM Wang Yi Makes First Visit to Taliban-Ruled Kabul in Unannounced Stopover

Amid a tour of central and southern Asia this week, Chinese Foreign Minister and State Councillor Wang Yi stopped in Kabul, Afghanistan - his first trip to the country since the Taliban* took power last August.

Wang's trip was not announced by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, and spokesperson [Wang Wenbin told reporters](#) on Thursday morning that "if there is any information on that, we will release it in a timely manner."

Instead, the notice came from the Taliban, with Ahmad Yasir, a high-ranking government official, [tweeting Wang's arrival](#). A video he retweeted showed Wang being greeted off the plane by Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, and their two delegations sitting around a table, reportedly discussing issues.

Eight months earlier, Kabul's main airport was the site of a drama watched by the entire globe as US troops struggled to evacuate their last remaining forces, along with tens of thousands of refugees, their puppet government having already collapsed amid the Taliban offensive. The humiliating situation capped off a failed 20-year occupation war and "reconstruction" effort that has been said to have cost the US trillions of dollars.

While many nations have hesitated to recognize the Islamist group as Afghanistan's government, [Beijing had no such scruples](#), making deals with the Taliban even before their

victory was complete. Wang had [previously met with Taliban officials](#) in Tianjin in July and then in Doha in October.

According to their terms, the group would have to renounce its support for the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and stop letting the ETIM use Afghan territory to stage terrorist attacks inside China. Another Islamist group with ties to Al-Qaeda**, ETIM seeks to [separate China's Xinjiang](#) Autonomous Region into an independent state and has dispatched fighters to both Afghanistan and Syria's Idlib region.

In exchange, the Taliban would get help from Beijing rebuilding Afghanistan. While some Chinese businesses have returned, [the going is slow](#) and investment falls far short of the hundreds of billions in aid and subsidies the US and various international aid groups sent to Afghanistan prior to the Taliban takeover. [According to a recent report](#) by UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator Ramiz Alakbarov, 95% of the Afghan population is without adequate food, and the Afghan Ministry of [Public Health reported recently](#) that 13,700 Afghan newborns have died from malnutrition and hunger-related diseases since the start of 2022.

When the Taliban initially came to power in 1996, it was treated as an international pariah, and economic malaise in the impoverished central Asian country intensified. However, the second time around, regional powers have [looked to help stabilize](#) Taliban rule and have sought moderate it to respect rights for women and ethnic minorities and end its support for terrorist groups.

On Tuesday, [Wang met with his Pakistani](#) counterpart, Shah Mahmood Qureshi and reiterated that the Taliban government should be “sternly fighting against any forms of terrorism.” Later this month, Beijing will host a meeting of foreign ministers representing Afghanistan’s neighbors, to discuss the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan.

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Texas AG Who Deemed Trans Youth Healthcare ‘Child Abuse’ Says School District’s ‘Pride Week’ Illegal

The Republican attorney general of Texas, Ken Paxton, was recently censured on Twitter after attacking US Assistant Secretary for Health Rachel Levine for being transgender. Twitter declined to remove the post, however, arousing additional outrage.

Paxton is back in the news amid the struggle for LGBTQ rights in the Lone Star State, telling a school district on Tuesday that its “Pride Week” events are in violation of Texas law.

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) in the state’s capital city is hosting events from March 21-26 “to highlight the district’s commitment to creating a safe, supportive and inclusive environment,” [according to its website](#), which notes the scheduling “aligns with the National LGBT Health Awareness Week.”

“Each campus will receive an inspiration guide of suggested activities for PRIDE Week.

Campuses are encouraged to plan activities that engage, educate and inspire,” the website says, laying out a rough daily schedule of events about LGBTQ history, a “know your rights” lesson, and events to encourage the celebration of differences and self-expression.

In a Tuesday letter to AISD superintendent Stephanie Elizalde, however, Paxton characterized the event as “a week-long instructional effort in human sexuality without parental consent.” “Or, worse, your district is cynically pushing a week-long indoctrination of your students that not only fails to obtain parental consent, but subtly cuts parents out of the loop,” he complained. “Either way, you are breaking state law.”

A new state law passed last year made Texas [just one of five US states](#) with an “opt-in” requirement for students by their parents for all sex education. Further, teachers are required to [promote abstinence](#) over all other forms of contraception, and the Texas State Board of Education [rejected proposals](#) to include lessons for LGBTQ people.

Elizalde quickly replied, [tweeting at Paxton that](#) “I want all our LGBTQIA+ students to know that we are proud of them and that we will protect them against political attacks.”

AISD spokesperson Jason Stanford [told The Washington Post](#) that Paxton, a Republican, was motivated by a desire to appear more conservative than George P. Bush, [who has challenged him](#) in upcoming Republican Primary elections in May.

“This is not a parental rights issue,” Stanford noted. “This is a ‘Ken Paxton trying to score political points’ issue.”

The spokesperson added that the district would react by “doubling down” on its pro-LGBTQ events.

Last month, Paxton, who has been under an indictment since 2015 for [securities fraud](#) from activities he engaged in prior to taking office, penned a personal opinion stating that healthcare given to transgender children that affirms their gender identity is “child abuse”. Republican [Governor Greg Abbott subsequently directed](#) the state’s Department of Family and Protective Services to begin investigating parents of trans kids. Trans people and their families fear the probes will lead to trans children being taken from their families and forced to detransition, causing many to [label the policy a “genocide.”](#)

A Texas judge [recently ordered the practice halted](#) and subsequent challenges to the injunction by Paxton’s office have been rebuffed by the courts.

A wave of bills have been introduced by members of the Republican party into state legislatures in recent years targeting the rights of LGBTQ youth, and a majority of these GOP-sponsored bills have focused specifically on transgender youth. These bills variously seek to ban trans girls from girls’ bathrooms and sports teams and to bar access to affirming healthcare such as hormone blockers or replacement therapy. According to the national LGBTQ rights advocacy group Human Rights Campaign, [more than 160 such bills](#) have been introduced by Republican lawmakers into state legislatures in this year alone.

One recently passed GOP-led bill in Florida has drawn particular ire. Dubbed the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, the measure would stop teachers for kindergarten and grades 1-3 from discussing gender identities and same-sex marriages, including their own or their students. [Students have protested](#) against the bill, US President Joe Biden has spoken out against it, and corporate media giant [Disney has denounced](#) it.

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UK Police Arrest Seven Over Lapsus\$ Hacks Linked to 16-Year-Old Oxford Resident

By - Evan Craighead

Cybercriminal collective Lapsus\$ has taken responsibility for a plethora of security breaches in the tech sector, including a February leak of a US chipmaker's proprietary information and recent cyberattacks against Microsoft and Okta, a San Francisco-based identity and access management company.

Seven individuals, including teenagers, have been arrested by City of London Police in connection with a probe into Lapsus\$, the group which took responsibility for cyberattacks targeting Microsoft and Okta earlier this week.

"Seven people between the ages of 16 and 21 have been arrested in connection with this investigation and have all been released under investigation," Detective Inspector Michael O'Sullivan said [in a statement to Reuters](#).

No names accompanied the City of London Police statement. As of this article's publication, none of those arrested have been formally charged.

The recent cyber attacks committed by Lapsus\$ appear to be motivated by money and infamy, as the cybercriminals publicly taunt and extort companies after exploiting security vulnerabilities. While the cybercriminal collective was not named in O'Sullivan's statement, [Bloomberg reported that a 16-year-old Oxford boy linked to the group](#) was among those arrested. Rival hackers and researchers have estimated that the teen amassed the equivalent of \$14 million (£10.6 million) in cryptocurrencies prior to his arrest.

The teen, who attends an Oxford-based special education school, was known to spend a lot of time on his computer, but his alleged cybercrimes were unknown even to his family, according to the boy's father.

"I had never heard about any of this until recently," [the father told the BBC](#). He's never talked about any hacking, but he is very good on computers and spends a lot of time on the computer. I always thought he was playing games."

At least one other member of the group is believed to be a teenager in Brazil, or another part of South America.

Microsoft, Okta, and NVIDIA Confirm Security Breaches Committed by Lapsus\$ Hackers
Microsoft Security teams confirmed a data breach by Lapsus\$ this week, detailing in a blog that it learned that the collective, dubbed 'DEV-0537' by trackers, has been targeting organizations through its own employees and commonly employs a "pure extortion and destruction model" without the release of ransomware payloads.

"DEV-0537 advertised that they wanted to buy credentials for their targets to entice employees or contractors to take part in its operation," [Microsoft said in a March 22 release](#). "For a fee, the willing accomplice must provide their credentials and approve the MFA prompt or have the user install AnyDesk or other remote management software on a corporate workstation allowing the actor to take control of an authenticated system."

No customer code or data was observed to be within [the source code Lapsus\\$ weaponized against Microsoft](#), according to the company.

While Lapsus\$ began targeting cryptocurrency accounts, the recent attacks tracked by Microsoft and other researchers have been primarily focused on organizations in telecommunications, higher education, and South America-based government organizations.

Okta, which provides identity and access management services to more than 15,000 organizations, revealed in a Tuesday release that it was investigating a possible cyberattack by Lapsus\$ that potentially impacted what it claimed were some 366 customers.

The announcement came after the San Francisco-based company saw its shares decline around 11% after the Lapsus\$ Telegram account posted internal information allegedly obtained during the breach. The group said they were focusing “ONLY on Okta customers.”

Okta claims the breach may be related to a previously unreported incident in January that it said was contained.

Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang has also touched on his company’s experience with the cybercriminal collective, telling attendees of the GPU Technology Conference that the late February hack was a “wake-up call” to adopt a “zero trust” security posture.

Within a “zero trust” framework, all users—including those within the organization’s network—are required to be authenticated, authorized, and consistently validated prior to being granted access. The ‘never trust, always verify’ measure is intended to bolster security against malware and other cybersecurity threats.

“Fortunately, we didn’t lose any customer information and any sensitive information,” [Huang told Yahoo Finance](#). “They got access to source code, which of course we don’t like, but nothing that is harmful to us.”

Huang acknowledged that the process of multi-factor authentication may be burdensome, but it is necessary given the current security solutions available.

“But long term, we have to make it possible for our data center to literally be completely wide open, completely exposed, and yet be completely secure,” the Nvidia CEO said.

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Jan. 6 Panel to Seek Criminal Prosecution for Trump Advisers Peter Navarro, Dan Scavino
By - Evan Craighead

The House Select Committee probing the US Capitol riot previously issued subpoenas calling for testimony from Trump-era trade adviser Peter Navarro and former White House Deputy Chief of Staff for Communications Dan Scavino. Navarro, who received the writ last month, panned the 9-member panel as “terrorists” conducting a “partisan witch hunt.”

A vote will be held on Monday to decide whether former trade adviser Peter Navarro and longtime Trump aide Dan Scavino should be recommended for criminal contempt of Congress after refusing to appear before the House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the US Capitol.

The vote is scheduled to take place at approximately 7:30 p.m., local time, according to the 9-member panel comprised of seven Democrats and two Republicans.

Navarro has been increasingly vocal in his complaint against the probe, most recently dubbing it an “unprecedented partisan assault on executive privilege” - a defense that is regularly referenced by former US President Donald Trump, despite judicial disagreement.

“If President Trump waives the privilege, I would be happy to testify,” Navarro claimed. “It is premature for the committee to pursue criminal charges against an individual of the highest rank within the White House for whom executive privilege undeniably applies.”

The Trump-era trade adviser’s recent memoir claims that he and former White House strategist Steve Bannon, who had since left his administration role, assisted in coordinating the “Green Bay Sweep” - a 2020 plan to halt the certification of Electoral College votes that also appeared to implicate Rep. Paul Gosar (R-AZ) and Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX).

“It was a perfect plan. And it all predicated on peace and calm on Capitol Hill,” Navarro told the Daily Beast. “We didn’t even need any protesters, because we had over 100 congressmen committed to it.”

While Navarro received the panel’s subpoena last month, Scavino was among the first wave of subpoenas issued by the committee in September 2021. The disparity in dates may signal that the committee is losing faith in more individuals coming forward.

Scavino, a longtime ally and former social media manager of Trump, has been less vocal and more litigious about his opposition to the panel’s subpoena.

In January, Scavino filed a lawsuit against Verizon in an attempt to block the transmission of phone records to the House Select Committee--a move that came after US District Judge Beryl A. Howell blocked Scavino's initial request to use a pseudonym in the filing. The former White House Deputy Chief of Staff for Communications' relationship with the former US president dates back to when he was Trump's golf caddy.

The 9-member panel lacks the authority to directly charge individuals with crimes, but is permitted to submit a recommendation of potential offenses to the full House of Representatives, where lawmakers vote on whether to refer the charge to the US Department of Justice.

With more than 90 public subpoenas issued, the committee has approved criminal contempt referrals for Steve Bannon, [ex-DOJ official Jeffrey Clark](#) and former White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows.

However, the DoJ has only pursued charges against Bannon, who was [indicted by a federal grand jury on two counts of contempt of Congress on November 12](#). One charge related to his refusal to appear for deposition, while the second offense is tied to the ex-White House strategist's refusal to produce relevant documents.

Bannon, who has been a private citizen since his 2017 exit from the White House, pleaded not guilty. However, Navarro's recent memoir may further implicate the strategist.

Each count carries jail time, ranging from a minimum of 30 days to a maximum of one year behind bars, as well as a fine of \$100 to \$100,000. Bannon is set to appear before US District Judge Carl Nichols on July 18.

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Pentagon Official: New Strategy to Deem Russia 'Acute Threat' as Fallout Will Leave Nation 'Weaker'

By - Evan Craighead

As theories on the possible use of chemical and biological weapons in Ukraine are tossed around, the US has reportedly assembled a team of national security officials to lay out a contingency plan for such an occurrence. A second "strategy team" has been assembled for "a longer-term examination of major geo-political shifts", per the White House.

US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl proclaimed on Thursday that the international repercussions taken against Moscow amid the conflict in Ukraine will have a significant negative impact on how Russia is perceived as a world power.

"I think with a high degree of certainty that Russia will emerge from Ukraine weaker than it went into the conflict. Militarily weaker, economically weaker, politically and geopolitically weaker, and more isolated," Kahl said.

Additionally, a forthcoming US defense strategy document will declare Russia an "acute threat", the senior Pentagon official disclosed, adding that Russia is posed to no longer be viewed as a long-term systemic challenge for the country--unlike China.

The official's comments followed a Reuters report in which an anonymous US official claimed that Russia's precision-guided missiles were suffering a failure rate as high as 60%. No further evidence or substantiating documents were provided by the source.

Moments later, Kahl declared that Russian forces will likely begin relying on so-called dumb bombs and artillery as precision-guided munitions are running low.

The senior Pentagon official also speculated that he does not believe that Russian President Vladimir Putin is seeking out a conflict with NATO forces.

[As Republican lawmakers in the US call for Washington](#) to provide Kiev with anti-tank munitions, air defence systems, MiG-29s, and other aircraft; Moscow has argued that Western nations are fuelling the conflict in Ukraine and endangering Europe via the influx of advanced weaponry and foreign mercenaries.

Anatoly Antonov, Russia's ambassador to the US, has called on Western nations to consider the long-term repercussions of their actions, as weaponry deployed to foreign countries has historically fallen into unintended hands.

"Now, in pursuit of financial gain, the defence industry sector companies have completely lost their moral guidelines and are ready to earn money on blood," the Russian diplomat said. "We urge the sponsors of the Kiev regime to stop encouraging bloodshed in Ukraine and seriously think about the consequences of their activities."

The UN General Assembly on Thursday moved to adopt a resolution drafted by Ukraine and its allies that demands protection of civilians, medical personnel, aid workers, hospitals, journalists and other civilian infrastructure. It also called for the end of sieges in areas such as Mariupol. The resolution, which mirrors the text within a General Assembly document, was submitted after a Russia-drafted humanitarian resolution for a negotiated ceasefire failed to gain the necessary votes in the UN Security Council.

Russia and China were the sole countries to vote in favour of the resolution, while the 13 other countries abstained.

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Meghan Markle's New Spotify Podcast 'Archetypes' to Hit Airwaves This Summer

By - Mary Manley

The Duchess of Sussex has signed a reported \$24 million deal with Spotify for her podcast 'Archetypes' in which she will investigate "labels that try to hold women back". The podcast will be hosted by Markle and include guests who are historians, experts, and women who have knowledge or experience with typecasting.

The podcast debut begins with a soundbite collage made up of sexist slang terms and phrases used in the media, which is followed by Markle noting: "This is how we talk about women, the words that raise our girls, and how the media reflects women back to us. But where do these stereotypes come from? And how do they keep showing up and defining our lives?"

"I'm Meghan and this is 'Archetypes'; the podcast where we dissect, explore, and subvert the labels that try to hold women back," announces the Duchess of Sussex in her podcast's Wednesday preview.

The podcast series is produced by Spotify and Archewell Audio, the latter the Duchess and Duke of Sussex's production company.

Markle has had plenty of experience when it comes to being stereotyped. When the UK's beloved Prince Harry announced his bride-to-be was an American woman of color, British media went insane with [racist](#) coverage of the new royal in a vain attempt to paint her as the odd one out. The Daily [Mail](#) published an hit piece in 2016 titled, "Harry's girl is (almost) straight outta Compton," while the Daily Star released a piece of yellow journalism during that same year titled, "Harry to marry into gangster royalty?"

It became clear that Markle's introduction into the British royal family wouldn't highlight her upbringing, which includes a [campaign](#) she ran when she was 11 to change a television commercial she realized was sexist. The UK tabloid media obsessed over her race, and dissected her family, including a major breach of privacy in which The [Mail](#) published a handwritten letter she wrote to her father. Markle later successfully sued the company.

In 2021, Harry and Meghan sat down with Oprah Winfrey for a bombshell interview in which they revealed that they received no support from other members of the royal family during the brutal media coverage in the British press.

"No one from my family said anything over those three years," Harry [said](#). The coverage "was bringing out a part of people that was racist," Meghan noted.

A spokesperson for Archewell Audio has confirmed that the podcast will become available this summer. Spotify and Archewell have said that Markle's podcast will be a candid investigation into the history of stereotypes against women, with the [Duchess](#) acting as an executive producer as well as Archewell's Ben Browning, and Rebecca Sananes.

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Poll: 71% of Republican Voters Say They're Voting 'Against Biden' This Year

By - Mary Manley

A poll released on Thursday revealed that a majority of Republicans would vote "against President Biden" in the upcoming midterms. The Pew Research Center found that 71% of registered Republican and Republican-leaning voters who were surveyed say they would vote against the president, with 46% of Democrat voters casting a vote "for" Biden.

Only 2% of [Republican](#) voters said they would vote "for Biden" this fall during the congressional midterms, while 26% said the president wasn't much of a factor, and a massive 71% of Republicans said they would vote "against" Biden. For 38% of all voters, the president is "not much of a factor".

Only 6% of Democratic voters say they would vote "against" Biden, while 46% said they would vote "for" Biden, and 47% said the president is "not much of a factor" in their decision making process.

The results of the study suggest that when members of a party control the executive branch they tend to worry less about the outcome of congressional elections. It also demonstrates that the president is currently inspiring more Republicans to vote than Democrats, with a significant number of Democrats (47%) appearing to be indifferent toward the current US president, while a majority (71%) of Republican voters see the president as an issue.

In 2018, 65% of registered Republicans said it “really mattered” who controlled Congress, while 67% of registered Democrats said the same.

Election security has also become a polarizing issue.

In the aftermath of former US President Donald Trump’s unfounded “stolen election” tirades which resulted in his “stop the steal” campaigns and the deadly January 6 2021 [insurrection](#) - which is currently under investigation - the study found that 76% of Democrats are very confident/somewhat confident that the congressional elections this November will be conducted fairly and accurately, compared to 47% of Republicans.

The poll also surveyed top voter issues, with 78% of all poll participants saying that the economy was their top issue. Only 14% of Republican voters believe the earth's climate is “very important” in their voting, while 64% of Democrats who answered the questionnaire believe it to be important. Only 14% of Republicans in the poll consider race and ethnicity a top priority, as opposed to 54% of Democrat voters who agree that it is a top priority.

Only 46% of Democrats believe COVID-19 is a very important issue, and just 19% of Republican voters agree with that sentiment.

The poll surveyed 10,441 people, including 9,021 registered voters, between March 7, 2022 and March 13, 2022.

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Sandra Bullock and Channing Tatum Reveal They First Met After Their Daughters Clashed in Preschool

By - Mary Manley

Film stars Sandra Bullock and Channing Tatum recently revealed that the first time they met each other was in the “principal’s office” because their daughters were “butting heads” in preschool.

During a Wednesday sit-down [interview](#) with host James Corden of ‘The Late Late Show’, Tatum explained, “We have two very, very strong-willed little girls, you know, that at that young age were very much buttin’ heads.” With Bullock saying she wondered if she needed to call Tatum or his now ex-wife Jenna Dewan to resolve the girls’ differences.

Bullock’s daughter Laila, now 10, and Tatum’s daughter Everly, now 8, apparently resolved their differences after the principal challenged them to see who could be the nicest to the other.

Bullock explains that the girls took the challenge set by the principal to heart as the two began performing sweet favors for each other, such as “bringing each other little Dixie cups of water.”

Tatum admitted that he was excited to meet Bullock after only seeing her in passing at the Oscars, “Oh my God, oh my God, there’s Sandra Bullock!” recounted the 41 year-old.

"And I saw him in 'Magic Mike'," responded Bullock, prompting the audience to holler and cheer. 'Magic Mike' of course, is the 2012 film about a young group of male strippers, which is loosely based on Tatum's own experiences as an 18 year-old stripper in Tampa, Florida.

"You didn't go, 'Oh my God, oh my god'?" joked Tatum.

"Oh I went, 'Oh my God,'" answered Bullock, "but it was in a different way."

Earlier this month, Bullock told The New York Times that their daughters had become close in the Dominican Republic while she and Tatum over a three-month period filmed 'The Lost City', which also stars actor Daniel Radcliffe.

"That's the reason we did this film, so they could have one long, COVID-safe play date," the 57 year-old actress told the Times. "We even brought motorbikes down there. All we cared about is that Everly and Laila were just having the time of their lives."

'The Lost City' is an action-comedy coming out on [Friday](#) in which Bullock plays a romance novelist who is kidnapped by an eccentric billionaire (played by Radcliffe), and Tatum is a cover model who takes it upon himself to rescue her.

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Almost 100 Areas Within US Are Set to Break Record High Temperatures This Weekend
By - Mary Manley

The western United States is expected to break records this weekend with heat that will prompt residents to break out shorts and sunglasses. The early season heat wave comes at a time when the west is already experiencing a major drought.

Temperatures in the west, including areas across [California](#), are expected to heat up with a record breaking 10 to 20 degrees above what is average for these states.

"This is definitely earlier than we typically see," Sierra Littlefield, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Sacramento, told CNN. "We've already set records and will again today until the heat builds and moves west of us."

California, the Great Basin, and the Intermountain West are expected to get hit particularly hard by the rising temperatures this Saturday.

"We're forecasting a high of 89 [degrees Fahrenheit] on Friday and 91 on Saturday, which would break a daily record for both days," said Matt Woods, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Las Vegas. "And if we reach 92 we will break the all-time March high." The last time this area reached 92 degrees Fahrenheit was in 2004.

Woods warns that, despite Las Vegas' typical warm weather, these record-breaking temperatures are going to begin to overwhelm residents.

"People are used to 60 and 70 [degrees], and we're forecasting our first 80-degree day of the year and now we're talking 90," he said. "Folks may be a bit overwhelmed."

The oppressive heat began to descend as early as Tuesday this week. In California's San Jose temperatures rose to 85 degrees, breaking its 83-degree record in 1915. In Santa Rosa, the heat jumped to 86 degrees, meeting its record of the same temperature set in 1926. Over

yonder in the Salinas area, the temperature climbed to 85 degrees, outpacing its record high of 78 degrees in 1931.

Record-breaking temperatures will also hit [Utah](#) this weekend, just a week after it snowed across a majority of the state. The Beehive State's previous record was set 127 years ago and is expected to be shattered on Sunday with a temperature of 78 degrees. The last time it was nearly that hot was in 1895 at 76 degrees.

The record high temperatures will be a shock for those in Utah, who usually experience one of their peak ski seasons in the month of March.

"March is one of our peak months, considered high season and traditionally some of our greatest snowfalls occur here in Alta, Utah," [said](#) Clara Eddy with Alta Lodge. "We're not happy about the high heat but do not believe it'll keep folks from coming. It'll be a bit icy but northern slopes should fare better."

Much of this region is ordinarily covered in snow that begins to melt and run off, creating jaw-dropping waterfalls and mountain rivers which feed and nourish local vegetation and wildlife. But this year? That's going to be a different story.

The heat will further impact areas of the US, like California, which is suffering from a persistent drought.

In late February the federal [government](#) told California farmers, who are responsible for growing a quarter of the food Americans eat, that they wouldn't be getting any additional water to help feed their crop during California's "megadrought."

A megadrought is characterized as a drought that persists for two decades or longer. California is in its 22nd year, meaning the state has been experiencing its worst megadrought in 1,200 years.

"These events have rarely been seen and were once considered a worst-case scenario in modern times," [said](#) Park Williams, a climate scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles.

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US Lawmaker Claims Trump Asked Him to Remove Biden, Hold Special Presidential Election

Earlier Wednesday, tensions between former US President Donald Trump and the Rep. Mo Brooks (R-AL) grew uneasy after the one-term commander-in-chief opted to rescind his endorsement of the politician over his remarks regarding the 2020 presidential election. Brooks is currently running as a candidate for the Alabama Senate.

Mo Brooks, a Republican representative from Alabama, claimed on Wednesday that former US President Donald Trump asked him to remove Biden from office, reinstate Trump and hold a special presidential election.

Brooks detailed that he refused the former president, telling him that such measures are illegal and unconstitutional, which brought the “ire” of Trump, according to a prepared statement by Brooks.

The alleged coup attempt is separate from the January 6, 2021, riots in which thousands of Trump supporters stormed the US Capitol building in an attempt to prevent the certification of the 2020 presidential election.

Rather, Brooks [said in an interview](#) with NBC News, the request came months later because Trump wanted to be reinstated on September 1, 2021, over seven months after Biden was inaugurated as the 47th president of the United States.

Earlier Wednesday, Trump rescinded his endorsement of Brooks in the GOP primary to replace retiring Sen. Richard Shelby (R-AL). Trump cited a Brooks speech at a Trump rally in August 2021 in Cullman, Alabama in which the lawmaker called on Republicans to focus on 2022 and 2024, rather than obsess over Trump’s loss in the 2020 election. Brooks’ comments were booed by the crowd.

Far from being an anti-Trumper, however, Brooks was one of 147 Republican lawmakers who voted against certifying the 2020 election results in some states. Brooks also gave a speech at Trump’s January 6 ‘Stop the Steal’ rally that took place outside of the White House shortly before the riot.

Regardless of Brooks’ feelings on the integrity of the election, he says he told Trump that January 6 was the “final contest” of the election and now that the results have been certified, there is little he or Republicans can do.

“President Trump asked me to rescind the 2020 elections, immediately remove Joe Biden from the White House, immediately put President Trump back in the White House, and hold a new special election for the presidency,” Brooks said in his statement. “As a lawyer, I’ve repeatedly advised President Trump that January 6 was the final election contest verdict and neither the US Constitution nor the US Code permit what President Trump asks. Period.”

There is no precedent or legal justification for a special election for a presidency.

It is unclear how Trump expected Brooks to remove Biden from the White House. Brooks says it never got that far, as he told Trump that it was “legally impossible”.

Trump has not yet responded to Brooks’ allegations.

Once the frontrunner, Brooks has fallen in his bid to replace Shelby as rivals Mike Durant and Katie Britt are holding [a commanding lead](#) over the politician. Brooks is placing a distant third at 16%, according to a Republican polling and analytics firm Cygnal Poll.

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South Dakota Hotel Owner Tries to Ban Native Americans, Staff Quits

The owner of a hotel and bar in Rapid City, South Dakota, in a Facebook post, called for a ban on Native Americans from her establishments, which resulted in the entire bar, and many in the hotel, staff to quit. The post brought widespread condemnation from activists, the mayor of Rapid City, and local business.

On March 19, a shooting occurred at the Grand Gateway Hotel, seriously injuring one. The hotel owner, Connie Uhre, responded to the violence by posting on Facebook that Native Americans customers will no longer be welcome at the hotel or its adjacent bar.

“We will no longer allow any Native American on property. Or in Cheers Sports Bar. Natives killing Natives.”

Police have arrested Quincy Bear Robe, 19, in connection to the crime.

The post was quickly [shared and condemned](#) by Rapid City Mayor Steve Allender, adding to the growing attention.

In response, the entire staff of Uhre’s Cheers Sports bar, and some of the hotel staff, quit. The bar’s regular DJ pledged to never set foot in the place again, according to South Dakota Public Broadcasting (SDPB).

Multiple organizations, including the city government, the Oglala Sioux Tribe president, the Rapid City and the Pennington County Police Departments, as well as many business organizations have signed a letter condemning the ban and demanding that Uhre apologize for her comments.

“[S]uch racist and hateful statements as expressed by a few individuals only reinforces long-standing feelings of distrust and threatens the relationship of the Rapid City community with its Native American residents and visitors”, the statement reads. “We are calling upon the Uhre family to publicly address and denounce their statements and begin making amends to the community, especially the Native American people.”

Additionally, the NDN Collective, the American Indian Movement and the Cheyenne Grassroots Collective are [planning a protest](#) against the hotel and bar. The NDN Collective also says they will file a federal civil rights lawsuit against Uhre and her businesses “for its racist and discriminatory treatment of Native people.”

In response to the backlash, Uhre, in an email thread that included employees and hotel co-owners, doubled-down on her decree to ban Native Americans at the hotel. That thread was widely shared on social media and has since been verified by SDPB.

“I really do not want to allow Natives on property” the post reads “they kill each other, walk around with guns. We need new leadership in Rapid City! [...] The problem is we do not know the nice ones from the bad natives... so we just have to say no to them!!”

In an email to SDPB, Nick Uhre, hotel manager and son of the owner, partially walked back his mother’s comments, stating that “Natives are welcome at the Grand Gateway Hotel, always have been, always will.” He stressed, however, that he feels some of the blame falls on Allender for sharing the post on Twitter.

“Steve Allender has incited violence and he’s put a target on my back, my family’s back, my staff’s back, my guests back” Nick’s email to SDPB stated, while also suggesting that the mayor’s comments were an impeachable offense.

Nick and Connie Uhre have posted on social media in the past, blaming city officials and the non-profit MacAuthor Foundation for a rise of violence in the city.

Any ban by a business, group or entity in the United States that is based on race is in violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

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Infamous Caribbean 'Epstein Island' Up for \$125M Sale - Report

Jeffery Epstein's private islands can be yours for the price of \$125 million, according to the Wall Street Journal. The two chunks of land in the US Virgin Islands gained infamy after the late disgraced financier was accused of using the islands to facilitate sex trafficking of minors for the rich and powerful.

Epstein was found dead in his prison cell in 2019, before he could stand trial. His death was ruled a suicide.

The two islands, Little St. James and Great St. James total 230 acres. Little St. James, the smaller of the two, contains a main residence, four guest villas, two pools, three beaches, a private dock and a tiki hut.

Great St. James island is largely untouched, only including a few small structures and a marine reserve. Epstein purchased Little St. James Island for \$7.95 million in 1996 and Great St. James in 2016 for \$22.5 million.

In 2020, US Virgin Islands officials alleged that [Epstein continued to use the island](#) to traffic underage girls – as young as eleven years old – until 2018. A lawsuit filed by the US Virgin Islands against the Epstein estate is ongoing. An attorney for the estate told The Journal that the proceeds from the sale will be used to satisfy that and other lawsuits, along with tax obligations and other creditors and claimants.

Roughly \$121 million has already gone to Epstein's victims through the Epstein Victims' Compensation Program, an attorney for the Epstein estate [told the Journal](#).

A May 6th hearing is scheduled in the US Virgin Islands lawsuit.

In December 2021, Epstein's former girlfriend and confidant, Ghislaine Maxwell, was found guilty of sex trafficking and other charges in relation to her work with Epstein. She faces up to 40 years in prison, and sentencing is set for June 28th.

During her trial, Epstein's former pilot, Lawrence Visoski, [testified that](#) he saw several politicians, including former Presidents Bill Clinton and Donald Trump, as well as Prince Andrew, on Epstein's plane, though he did not see any wrongdoing.

Epstein owned multiple properties across the nation, many of which have already been sold.

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Constant Construction, a Landmark Destroyed: Bill Gates' New San Diego Home is Angering Neighbors

Spectacularly lavish is apparently not enough for multi-billionaire Bill Gates, he needs a summer bachelor pad to be completely custom as well.

The New York Post is reporting that Gates has demolished and is rebuilding the \$43 million oceanfront property in the San Diego County city of Del Mar, California and neighbors [are telling The Post](#) that the noise has become a nuisance.

"They make a lot of noise, my baby can't sleep," a neighbor told The Post. "It's become a real hindrance on the whole neighborhood." "It's been a nuisance," another neighbor reportedly said. Bill and his ex-wife, Melinda French Gates, purchased the home in 2020, three months before they announced their divorce. Purchased from Madeleine Pickens, the ex-wife of Texas oil tycoon T. Boone Pickens, the property was in "pristine" condition, according to a local real estate agent who talked to The Post.

Prior to leveling the structures on the property, it was a 5800 sq ft, six bedroom, 3.5 bath house with a four-car garage, oceanfront deck, a glass tile swimming pool, a jacuzzi and a two-bedroom guest house.

According to a Homes and Gardens article published shortly after the former couple [purchased the house](#), it was a "treasured landmark" in Del Mar.

Gates has a current estimated worth of \$134 billion and that wealth is what helped him to get construction going. Obtaining building permits is "nearly impossible" and takes a long time in normal circumstances, according to The Post, citing local officials.

Neighbors also told The Post that construction has been going around the clock, but local ordinances limit construction to 7am to 7pm Monday through Friday and 9am to 7pm on Saturday and Sunday, [according to](#) the city of Del Mar's website.

In an odd twist, Gates has denied owning the property through a spokesperson speaking to The Post, "[Gates] does not own this property and he has never been there." Multiple outlets, including the Wall Street Journal, Forbes and Business Insider all reported on Gates purchasing the home. Neighbors and insiders have also told The Post that Gates has visited the property at least twice in the last few months.

The property will reportedly serve as Gates' "summer bachelor pad" once completed.

Construction is planned through August but those who have seen the property have doubts. It appears to have a long way to go, according to photos published by The Post.

Neighbors hoping to get relief from the construction noise may be disheartened to hear that Gates' \$123 million Washington state mansion took seven years to build and renovate.

Gates became a bachelor after he and Melinda French Gates finalized their divorce in May 2021. Gates' affair with a staffer in 2000 and [his friendship](#) with the now-deceased sex trafficker Jeffery Epstein were cited as some of the reasons for their separation.

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Taiwan National Security Bureau Director: China Not Planning Reunification Law

Beijing previously told President Joe Biden that it is "sincere" in seeking a peaceful reunification with Taiwan and is in no rush to take the island. The comments came after the Gen. Mark Milley told Congress China wants the capability to take Taiwan militarily by 2027, though he stopped short of saying China plans to invade by that date.

National Security Bureau (NSB) Director General Chen Ming-tong told Taiwanese lawmakers that he does not believe mainland China is considering a reunification law. Chen believes the move would put too much pressure on Beijing to set a timetable for unification.

The comments come [amid concerns](#) stemming from what is alleged to be a leaked Russian intelligence document stating that Beijing is considering passing a reunification law in the fall. Chen said the document could be considered “cognitive warfare targeting Taiwan” but did not directly blame China or Russia.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is set to hold its 20th annual Congress this fall, and Chinese President Xi Jinping is expected to secure a third five-year term. Chen suggested that a third term for Xi would make it unlikely that China would take action against Taiwan, as the CCP’s goal will be to [maintain stability](#).

A reunification law would be a follow up to the 2005 Anti-Secession law, which stipulates a legal basis by Beijing to take military action against Taipei if it officially announced it had seceded from mainland China.

There have been no official moves indicating that such legislation is in the works, however. When asked, a spokesperson for China’s Taiwan Affairs office did not rule it out, stating it would “carefully listen to, and study opinions and suggestions.”

Chen claims that during Deng Xiaoping’s reign in China, the mainland nation considered similar legislation but decided against it because of a timetable conundrum.

Taiwan is stated by Beijing to be a part of mainland China, however, it has been controlled by a separate government since 1945, after Mao Zedong’s Chinese Communist Party took over the mainland from the Kuomintang government, who fled to Taiwan.

The CCP still considers Taiwan its territory and has consistently stated that it is eager to bring the island under its control. In 2013, Xi told a Taiwanese envoy that reunification could not wait forever.

Reunification is extremely unpopular in Taiwan. A 2021 [National Chenchi University poll](#) found that only 1.4% of Taiwanese people support “unification as soon as possible” and only 6% support “maintain the status quo, move towards unification.” By contrast, the three most popular responses were “maintain the status quo, decide at later date” (28.4%), “maintain the status quo indefinitely” (27.3%) and “maintain the status quo, move towards independence” (25.1%).

Angering Beijing also seems unpopular, with only 6% of respondents selecting “independence as soon as possible.” Declaring independence would be tantamount to secession from Beijing, potentially enabling the CCP to use the 2005 Anti-Secession law to justify military action.

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Joe Biden Says He’d Be ‘Very Fortunate’ to Face Trump Again in 2024 Election

While discussing the Ukraine crisis at a news conference at the NATO headquarters in Brussels, US President Biden raised some eyebrows as he was asked whether he was worried the next administration may undo the work his foreign policy has done to bring the US and its allies closer.

US President Joe Biden admitted during a Thursday conference that he is [not worried](#) about a potential rematch with former US President Donald Trump in the looming 2024 presidential cycle.

Trump was notoriously critical of NATO and the G-7 during his campaign and time as president. He also reversed former US President Barack Obama's signature foreign policy accomplishment - the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which was designed to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons in exchange for lifting strict sanctions.

"[T]he next election, I'd be very fortunate if I had that same man running against me," Biden stated during the press conference.

The comment brings to mind the "pied piper" strategy employed by the 2016 Hillary Clinton campaign, later [revealed by Wikileaks](#).

In an email from Clinton staffers to the Democratic National Committee (DNC) the campaign called for a "pied piper" strategy designed to elevate more extreme candidates, forcing the moderate candidates in the field to take far-right positions. The idea was to make the Republican party as a whole look extremist, causing independent and moderate voters to turn away.

"We need to be elevating the Pied Piper candidates so that they are leaders of the pack and tell the press to [take] them seriously," the document attached to the email stated. Ted Cruz, Donald Trump and Ben Carson were listed as potential "pied piper" candidates.

Unfortunately for Clinton, Trump ended up winning the primary and eventually the presidency, all while introducing his fringe views to the mainstream. Some might say Biden should take note.

Biden likely won't have to employ such a strategy again if he truly wants to face Trump in 2024. A recent [Morning Consult poll](#) found that Trump holds a commanding lead in a potential GOP primary race. Some 47% of Republicans who responded to that poll said Trump would be their preferred choice.

Trump has hinted at a potential 2024 run, but has stated that he would wait until after the 2022 midterm elections before making a decision.

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Over 240,000 Illegal Immigrants Expected to Cross US Southern Border in 30 Days - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - A record-breaking flood of probably more than a quarter-of-a-million illegal immigrants is going to surge across the US border with Mexico in the next 30 to 45 days, CNN reported on Friday.

The US authorities are preparing to apprehend up to 8,000 people per day for a 30-day to 45-day period, meaning they will be requiring holding and guarding facilities for 240,000 to 360,000 people, CNN reported citing Border Patrol Chief Raul Ortiz.

Those figures would be more than double the daily average of the 2019 surge that faced the Trump administration and they would dwarf the rate of refugees fleeing Ukraine, the report said.

US law enforcement authorities have already arrested 940,000 illegals crossing the border in less than six months since the start of the current fiscal year in October 2021, the report added. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has set up a Southwest Border Coordination Center in Washington, DC to coordinate responses to the crisis from the different government agencies dealing with it. Existing facilities are already over capacity in holding illegals, according to the report.

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Biden to Welcome Singapore's Prime Minister to Washington on March 29 - White House

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will welcome Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to Washington on March 29 for discussions on an array of issues, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"On Tuesday March 29th, President Biden will welcome Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore to the White House," Psaki said in a statement.

Biden and Lee will reaffirm the importance of the US-Singapore strategic partnership, review efforts to ensure a free Indo-Pacific region, discuss Russia's ongoing special operation in Ukraine, and address the crisis in Myanmar among other issues, the statement added.

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Ukraine Has Not Directly Reached Out to US About Possible Supply of Tanks - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - Ukraine has not directly reached out to the United States about possible supply of tanks, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"In terms of tanks, the Ukrainians did not specifically come to the US. As far as I understand, on the tanks issues they've gone to some other countries," Sullivan told journalists.

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US Says NATO Must Face Ukraine Crisis, Russia-Belarus Defense Ties With Strength, Resolve

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States and NATO should demonstrate strength and resolve in the face of the Ukraine conflict and growing Russia-Belarus defense relationship, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"The combination of Russia's brutal war in Ukraine and the change in the physical military relationship between Russia and Belarus does mean from the President's perspective that the

United States and NATO need to show strength and resolve in terms of the forces and capabilities postured along the eastern flank," Sullivan said.

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US Still Retains Capacity to Impose Additional Costs on Russia – Sullivan

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States retains the capacity to impose additional costs on Russia, which are not strictly military costs, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"We still retain the capacity to impose additional costs on Russia that are not strictly military costs," Sullivan told journalists.

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Biden Personally Engaging With Other Countries Including Qatar on Gas Supplies - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is personally engaged in talks with other nations including with Qatar on gas supplies, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"The President himself is personally engaged with some other gas suppliers including Qatar who have been able step up," Sullivan said during a press gaggle aboard Air Force 1 as Biden was en route to Poland.

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US Will Talk to G20 Nations, 2022 Host Indonesia on Russia's Removal From Group - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States will have talks with G20 partners and 2022 summit host Indonesia about Russia's removal from the group, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"The President has very clearly expressed that Russia should not be a member in good standing in the G20 given what they've done. He also noted that Indonesia as the chair may have a different view and he offered an alternative which was having Ukraine be able to participate in the G20 meetings this year," Sullivan said. "We will be discussing with the other G20 members including Indonesia, and the President was clear in his remarks that we want to

be respectful of the views of the chair in terms of how to think about us going forward. So, we'll be talking to them, we'll be talking to other partners."

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Biden to Deliver 'Significant Speech' on Ukraine in Poland on Saturday - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will deliver a "significant speech" on Ukraine in Poland on Saturday, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday. "He [Biden] will give a major address tomorrow on Ukraine. It will be a significant speech," Sullivan told journalists.

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US Has No Intention of Using Chemical Weapons Under Any Circumstances - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has no intention of using chemical weapons under any circumstances, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday. "US has no intention of using chemical weapons under any circumstances," Sullivan told a briefing.

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RPT - 'No Realistic Way' for EU to Replace Russian Gas Despite US Help - Ex-Texas Oil Regulator

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The European Union has no realistic path to replace all of the Russian natural gas it needs even if the US boosts exports or other states divert shipments, former Texas industry regulator Ryan Sitton told Sputnik.

The EU and US are poised to announce a new energy partnership that envisions Europe acquiring more liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the United States to reduce dependence on Russia. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the EU's plan "to break free from Russian fossil fuels," will be unveiled together with US President Joe Biden on Friday. "There's no way to just completely remove Russian gas from the European market - it makes up far too large of a portion of the amount of gas that they use," Sitton, a former member of the Texas Railroad Commission, the oil regulator in the United States' top oil-producing state, said. "Western countries could decide to direct their gas to Europe and that will supplant some of the Russian gas but, practically speaking, there's not a realistic way to replace all of it."

Although the US can export more and Australia, which is sending a lot of gas to China, could ship more to Europe right now, it will likely not be sufficient, Sitton added.

Center for LNG and the Natural Gas Supply Association spokesperson Daphne Magnuson told Sputnik on Thursday that the United States is increasing its capacity to export more LNG to the EU after the Energy Department recently approved several pending permits with more approvals coming. Last week, the US authorized LNG exports from two current operating export facilities in the states of Louisiana and Texas.

Earlier in March, Biden announced a US-only ban on Russian oil imports although the United States imports much less oil from Russia than European states, which have been leery of imposing similar restrictions.

Before Biden departed for Europe this week, Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm told Sky News the US would not ask Europe to fully abandon Russian energy supplies.

IMPACT OF RUBLE PAYMENTS ON ENERGY PRICES

Earlier this week, Russian President Vladimir Putin instructed Gazprom to change existing gas contracts into rubles in response to the EU, US, and Japan blocking Russia from accessing euros, dollars and yen.

The announcement caused the Russian currency to climb against the dollar while global gas prices jumped. Meanwhile, International Energy Agency chief Fatih Birol described Putin's order as a "security threat."

However, Sitton said Moscow's demand for European countries to purchase Russian gas in rubles should not have a massive impact on energy prices.

"It just introduces another complexity, which in general, all those complexities do add cost and they add price because the more people are unsure, the higher the prices," he said.

Sitton predicts the price of Russian crude oil might actually go down a little bit while they slightly increase elsewhere.

"I think his [Putin's] logic is while he may lose a little bit more in the price of oil, his price of oil is dropping dramatically anyway, because there's just not as many buyers for it on the market. But he's going to pump up the price of his ruble, he's going to try to make it up in terms of the value of his currency," Sitton said.

Natural gas prices were surging on the European market late last year, spurred by growing energy demand amid an economic recovery after months of lockdowns, as well as a limited supply.

This has prompted the EU authorities to reinforce efforts toward ensuring the bloc's energy security, the need for which has become even more pressing during the conflict with Russia, the EU's main energy supplier, over the latter's special military operation in Ukraine.

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US New Strategy Will Describe Russia as 'Acute,' But Not Long-Term Threat - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon in a new strategy will characterize Russia as an acute threat that poses no long-term challenge, Reuters reported citing a US defense official.

The official also said Russia will emerge weaker after the Ukraine conflict, according to the report on Thursday.

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Meta Not Reliable Partner in Combating Use of Information by Terrorists - UN Adviser

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The tech company Meta (banned in Russia) and its social media platforms Facebook and Instagram are not reliable partners in the effort to counter the use of online information technology by terrorists, Russian UN advisor Oleg Mikhailov told a UN Security Council meeting.

"We must admit that sometimes private companies move over to the side of evil. Notably, the company Meta Platforms lifted restrictions against calls for violence and murder against Russians on its social media sites Facebook and Instagram," Mikhailov said on Thursday. "In this respect, the aforementioned company can in no way be considered a reliable and responsible partner when it comes to countering the use of information and communication technology for the purpose of terrorism."

The statement comes following Meta's decision earlier in March to allow calls of violence against Russians, including President Vladimir Putin, on its platforms in light of the country's military operation in Ukraine.

However, a Meta spokesperson said the company will still not allow credible calls for violence against Russian citizens.

The decision resulted in Meta's designation as "extremist" by a Moscow court - a decision condemned by the United States.

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US Charges 4 Russian Nationals Over Attempt to Hack Global Energy Sector - Justice Dept.
(Updates with details in paras 4-8)

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US prosecutors charged four Russian government employees accused of attempting to hack the networks of hundreds of companies that are part of the global energy sector, the US Department of Justice said.

"The Department of Justice unsealed two indictments today charging four defendants, all Russian nationals who worked for the Russian government, with attempting, supporting and conducting computer intrusions that together, in two separate conspiracies, targeted the global energy sector between 2012 and 2018," the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

In total, these hacking campaigns targeted thousands of computers at hundreds of companies and organizations in about 135 countries, the release said.

The release said one of the cases involves Evgeny Viktorovich Gladkikh, 36, who is a computer programmer employed by an institute affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Defense.

Gladkikh is charged with one count of conspiracy to cause damage to an energy facility, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison, one count of attempt to cause damage to an energy facility, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison, and one count of conspiracy to commit computer fraud, which carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison. The second case, the release said, involves FSB hackers Pavel Aleksandrovich Akulov, 36, Mikhail Mikhailovich Gavrilov, 42, and Marat Valeryevich Tyukov, 39, who were members of a Center 16 operational unit known among cybersecurity researchers as "Dragonfly," "Berzerk Bear," "Energetic Bear," and "Crouching Yeti."

Akulov, Gavrilov and Tyukov are charged with conspiracy to cause damage to the property of an energy facility and commit computer fraud and abuse, which carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison, and conspiracy to commit wire fraud, which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison.

Akulov and Gavrilov are also charged with substantive counts of wire fraud and computer fraud related to unlawfully obtaining information from computers and causing damage to computers, which carry maximum sentences ranging from five to 20 years in prison, and they are also charged with three counts of aggravated identity theft, each of which carry a minimum sentence of two years.

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US Indicts Chief of Mexico's Cartel del Golfo on Drug Charges - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The head of the Cartel del Golfo drug cartel Jose Alfredo Cardenas-Martinez has been indicted on a number of charges related to possession and distribution of illicit drugs, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"Cardenas-Martinez is charged in an international conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute meth, cocaine and fentanyl," the release said on Thursday. "The indictment also alleges he possessed with intent to distribute 50 grams or more of meth, five kilograms of cocaine and 400 grams or more of fentanyl. As head of the CDG, Cardenas-Martinez allegedly coordinated the shipment of narcotics to the United States for illegal sale across the country."

US attorneys said that as head of the cartel, Cardenas-Martinez coordinated the shipment of narcotics to the United States, the release said. He has been involved in a conspiracy to transport cocaine, methamphetamines to the United States between 2015 through 2021, the release added.

Cardenas-Martinez is in custody in Mexico awaiting resolution of a US government extradition request, according to the release.

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US Sanctions Firms, Individuals in Russia, China, N. Korea for Alleged Arms Proliferation

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States sanctioned six entities based in China, Russia, and North Korea for allegedly being involved in proliferation activities, the US Department of State said.

"The United States today announced sanctions on five entities and individuals located in Russia and the DPRK and one entity in the People's Republic of China (PRC) for proliferation activities under the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act (INKSNA)," the State Department said in a press release on Thursday.

The sanctions targeted Russian entities Ardis Group and PFK Profpodshipnik along with Russian individual Igor Aleksandrovich Michurin. It also included sanctions against N. Korean entity Second Academy of Natural Science Foreign Affairs Bureau (SANS FAB) and individual Ri Sung Chol (aka Ri Su'ng-ch'o'l) for allegedly transferring sensitive items to North Korea's missile program, the release added. China's Zhengzhou Nanbei Instrument Equipment was added for allegedly supplying Syria with equipment controlled by the Australia Group chemical and biological weapons nonproliferation regime, according to the release.

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US Extends Deadline for US Companies to Cutoff Russian Seafood by June 23 - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States extended the deadline to enforce the ban on Russian seafood from March 25 to June 23, the Treasury Department said.

"[General License] GL 17A provides such authorization for importing alcoholic beverages or non-industrial diamonds of Russian Federation origin through March 25, 2022 and authorization for importing fish, seafood, and preparations thereof of Russian Federation origin through June 23, 2022," the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

Earlier in March, President Joe Biden announced a ban on US imports of seafood, alcohol and diamonds from Russia over its special operation in Ukraine.

The Treasury Department said the ban does not prohibit US persons from engaging in transactions to sell or re-direct shipments outside the United States that were previously destined for the United States.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after receiving requests from the breakaway Donetsk and Luhank people's republics to help defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry has said the special operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure.

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WTO Rejects Belarus Application to Join, Says Country 'Unfit' for Membership

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - Belarus' application to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) has been rejected after Minsk was deemed unsuitable because of its support for Russia's special operation in Ukraine, the WTO said in a joint statement.

"We condemn Belarus for its complicity in Russia's aggression, which is incompatible with the values and principles of the WTO and of a just rules-based order. For these reasons, we have concluded that Belarus is unfit for WTO membership. We will not further consider its application for accession," the joint statement, undersigned by the United States, United Kingdom and Canada, among ten other states, said on Thursday.

Belarus' application was paused after many Western nations refused to accept the results of the country's 2020 presidential election that saw Alexander Lukashenko re-elected for a sixth term by winning 80 percent of the vote.

The 13 undersigned states and the European Union urged Belarus to return to abide by its international obligations and return to the "rules-based international order."

The WTO's decision comes a day after Russian lower house lawmakers from the A Just Russia - For Truth party and their upper house colleague Olga Epifanova have introduced a bill on Monday that would withdraw Russia from the international body.

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US Offers up to \$10M In for Information on 3 Alleged Russian FSB Agents - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is offering a reward of up to \$10 million for information on three agents of Russia's Federal Security Service who have been allegedly engaged in cyber crimes against energy companies, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"The US Department of State's Rewards for Justice (RFJ) program is now offering a reward for information on Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officers Pavel Aleksandrovich Akulov, Mikhail Mikhailovich Gavrilov and Marat Valeryevich Tyukov for their alleged involvement in computer intrusions, wire fraud, aggravated identity theft, and damage to the property of an energy facility offenses," the release said on Thursday.

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US, EC to Establish Joint Task Force on European Energy Security - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The European Commission (EC) and United States are establishing a joint task force to address Europe's energy security needs and advance so-called green energy, US President Joe Biden and EC President Ursula von der Leyen said in a joint statement.

"In line with this vision, the European Commission and United States will establish a joint Task Force to address the immediate energy security needs of the EU and accelerate the clean energy transition," the joint statement said on Thursday.

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US Offers Up to \$10M In for Information on Alleged Russian Hacker Gladkikh - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The US government is offering a \$10 million reward for information on the alleged Russia-based hacker Evgeny Gladkikh, who has been one of four Russian nationals charged over attempts to hack critical infrastructure in the United States, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"The US Department of State's Rewards for Justice (RFJ) program is offering a reward for information on Russia-based hacker Evgeny Viktorovich Gladkikh," the release said on Thursday. "RFJ... is offering a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to the identification or location of Gladkikh... who, while acting at the direction or under the control of a foreign government, aids or abets a violation of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, which may include participation in malicious cyber activities against US critical infrastructure."

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US, EU Providing \$13.7Bn Over 5 Years to Ensure Global Food Supplies - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is providing more than \$11 billion over the next five years to address global food shortages while the European Union vows to provide \$2.5 billion Euros, US President Joe Biden and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in a joint statement.

"The United States, through Feed the Future and our nutrition commitments, is providing over \$11 billion over the next five years to address food security threats and nutrition across the globe," the joint statement said on Thursday. "For the period 2021-2024, the EU is pledging at least [\$2.75] billion for international cooperation related to nutrition."

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Biden, Von Der Leyen Say Will Support Ukraine Cybersecurity, Combat Virtual Currency Abuse

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States and European Commission (EC) will support Ukrainian cybersecurity and combat abuse of virtual currency, US President Joe Biden and EC President Ursula von der Leyen said in a joint statement.

"We will advance our cooperation on cybersecurity through a variety of actions, from supporting the Government of Ukraine on cyber resilience and cyber defense to aiming to combat the abuse of virtual currency," the joint statement said on Thursday.

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Biden, Von Der Leyen to Support Ukraine on Cyber Defense, Resilience - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen issued a joint statement saying that have committed to advance cybersecurity cooperation, including taking measures to increase cyber resilience, in light of the Russian special operation in Ukraine.

"We are committed to advancing our cybersecurity cooperation, both in response to Russia's illegal further invasion of Ukraine," the statement said on Thursday. "Together, we will enhance our efforts to coordinate cybersecurity assistance and provide Internet access to the governments of Ukraine and Moldova."

Biden and von der Leyen said that in the context of Ukraine and more generally, they will "continue to reinforce responsible state behavior in cyberspace and to work together to increase cyber resilience in the face of destructive, disruptive, and destabilizing cyber activity by both States and non-State actors."

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Biden, Von Der Leyen Pledge to Combat Digital Ways of Evading Russia Sanctions

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in a joint statement pledged deeper collaboration to combat use of digital assets to evade the sanctions on Russia.

"We intend to announce deeper collaboration to combat the illicit use of digital assets, including their potential misuse in evading multilateral sanctions imposed in response to Russia's unprovoked military invasion of Ukraine. Together, we intend to deepen our shared commitment to advance anti-money laundering and countering financing of terrorism for digital assets, consistent with the Financial Action Task Force standards," the joint statement said on Thursday.

The United States and the European Union will expedite and increase sharing of financial intelligence on illicit use of digital assets, according to the statement.

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US Charges 4 Russian Nationals Over Attempt to Hack Global Energy Sector - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US prosecutors charged four Russian government employees accused of attempting to hack the networks of hundreds of companies that are part of the global energy sector, the US Department of Justice said.

"The Department of Justice unsealed two indictments today charging four defendants, all Russian nationals who worked for the Russian government, with attempting, supporting and conducting computer intrusions that together, in two separate conspiracies, targeted the global energy sector between 2012 and 2018," the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

In total, these hacking campaigns targeted thousands of computers at hundreds of companies and organizations in about 135 countries, the release said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) -

NATO SUMMIT

* US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that Russia should be removed from the G20 group of countries and the matter was discussed earlier in the day during the NATO summit.

* NATO is enhancing readiness for chemical, biological and nuclear threats with respect to the situation in Ukraine, the alliance's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.

* The NATO member states leaders have agreed to increase defense spending and strengthen support for Ukraine, according to a statement adopted after the summit.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Russia is creating a humanitarian corridor for the exit of foreign ships from Ukrainian ports starting on Friday, the head of the Russian National Defense Control Center Mikhail Mizintsev said on Thursday.

* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that he will continue talks with presidents of Russia and Ukraine to organize a meeting.

* G7 leaders call on Russian President Vladimir Putin to agree on a ceasefire in Ukraine and withdraw Russian forces, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said.

- * The UN General Assembly adopted a Western-backed resolution on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine on Thursday, with 140 countries voting in favor and five against.
- * Kiev and Moscow exchanged war prisoners on Thursday, Deputy Prime Minister Irina Vereshchuk said.

NORTH KOREA MISSILE LAUNCH

- * US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and South Korean Minister of National Defense Suh Wook agreed on Thursday for "firm responses" to Pyongyang's missile launch, the two leaders said in a joint statement after a phone talk earlier in the day.
- * The United States, Albania, Ireland, France, Norway, and the United Kingdom call for a UN Security Council meeting on Friday to discuss the latest missile launch by North Korea, a UNSC source told Sputnik.
- * US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida agreed to work to hold North Korea accountable for its recent missile test, the White House said.
- * South Korea fires a number of ballistic and cruise missiles towards the Sea of Japan in response to North Korea's launch, the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JSC) said.

SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- * Canada will introduce new bans on the export of certain goods and technologies to Russia in order to undermine and erode the country's military, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's office said in a statement on Thursday.
- * Canada is imposing a new round of sanctions against Russia targeting the Federation Council, the country's upper legislative chamber, Trudeau announced.
- * 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.
- * 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.

ENERGY MARKETS

- * The operator of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, Nord Stream 2 AG, will file for bankruptcy in Switzerland, the Stuttgarter Zeitung newspaper reported, citing the company's CEO.
- * Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jansa said that he doubts Europe will agree to pay for Russia's gas in rubles.
- * The European Union and the United States will announce a new energy partnership on Friday that will envision additional deliveries of the liquefied natural gas to Europe, President of European Commission Ursula von der Leyen said.
- * The United States is well-positioned to continue to provide the European Union with liquefied natural gas, Center for LNG and Natural Gas Supply Association spokesperson Daphne Magnuson told Sputnik.
- * Rejection of resources from Russia will unbalance the global energy system, Maria Zakharova, the Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman, said
- * Serbia needs a new agreement on deliveries of Russian gas for 10 years and explanations of Gazprom's condition on payment in rubles, Srbijagas head Dusan Bajatovic told Sputnik.

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US to Allow Transactions to Third-Country Diplomatic Missions in Russia - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States issued a license to allow transactions to third-country diplomatic or consular missions in Russia that would ordinarily be prohibited under existing US sanctions, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

"US persons are authorized to engage in all transactions ordinarily incident and necessary to the official business of third-country diplomatic or consular missions located in the Russian Federation that are prohibited by Executive Order (EO) 14024 or section 1(a)(iv) of E.O. 14068," the Treasury Department said in a notice.

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US Mortgage Rates Increased by 0.25% This Week Alone - Home Loan Agency

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The mortgage rates in the United States have surged by an average of a quarter of a percent across all loan types this week, federally chartered investor Freddie Mac said on Thursday.

"This week, the 30-year fixed-rate mortgage increased by more than a quarter of a percent as mortgage rates across all loan types continued to move up," Freddie Mac said in a press release.

According to Freddie Mac data, the 30-year fixed-rate mortgage has increased by 0.26 percent over the past week, from 4.16% to 4.42% while the 15-year fixed-rate has climbed by 0.24%, from 3.39%, to 3.63%.

The loan corporation sees rising inflation, escalating geopolitical uncertainty, and the Federal Reserve's actions as the main drivers for higher mortgage rates and weaker consumer purchasing power.

The US Commerce Department said on Wednesday 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% with the average selling price for a new US home being \$511,000 in February.

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US News Organizations, Reporters Can Engage in Crimea Transactions - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is authorizing US news organizations and their employees to engage in certain transactions in Crimea and the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

"Organizations that are United States persons and individuals who are United States persons regularly employed by a news reporting organization, either as journalists (including photojournalists) or as supporting broadcast or technical personnel, are authorized to engage in the following transactions in the Crimea region of Ukraine, the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) or Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) regions of Ukraine," the Treasury Department said.

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US Troubled by Presence of Iranian IRGC Officers at Doha Defense Show - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is troubled by the presence of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers at the Doha Defense Show and its maritime defense exhibit, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"We are deeply disappointed and troubled by the presence of Iranian military officials and reportedly Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers at the Doha Defense Show in Qatar," Price said in a statement.

The United States rejects Iran's presence at the show due to the fact it is perceived as the biggest threat to maritime stability in the Persian Gulf region, the statement said.

Transactions related to Iranian weapons are generally sanctionable under multiple US authorities, the statement added.

The question of whether to remove the IRGC's designation as a foreign terrorist organization by the US government are central to negotiations to return to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, according to media reports.

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Austin Discusses With Ukraine Counterpart Continued Provision of Weapons to Kiev- Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in talks with his Ukrainian counterpart, Oleksii Reznikov, discussed the continued provision of weaponry to Ukraine, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke today with Ukrainian Minister of Defense Oleksii Reznikov to discuss the continued provision of defensive lethal assistance, including the \$1 billion in security assistance recently announced by President Biden," Kirby said.

Austin made clear to Reznikov that "material from this latest announcement are now flowing into the region," Kirbu also said.

The US Defense Secretary also underscored the continued resolve of the United States to support Ukraine's military amid Russia's special operation, Kirby also said. Austin applauded the skill and bravery with which Ukrainian forces have been using the supplied weapons and systems, Kirby added.

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Canada Imposes New Sanctions on Russia, Bans Certain Technology Imports - Trudeau

TORONTO, March 24 (Sputnik) - Canada is imposing a new round of sanctions against Russia and this time is targeting its upper legislative chamber Federation Council, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced on Thursday.

"Today, Canada will be increasing pressure [on Moscow] by sanctioning 160 members of the Russian Federation Council," Trudeau told a news conference following an emergency NATO leaders' summit in Brussels.

The Prime Minister's Office issued a statement announcing that Canada will introduce new bans on the export of certain goods and technologies to Russia in order to undermine and erode the Russian military.

"To further build on Canada's coordinated response to Russia's illegal, unprovoked and unjustifiable aggression against Ukraine, the Prime Minister today announced additional measures to support Ukraine and hold Russia accountable for its invasion, including: imposing in the coming days new prohibitions under the Special Economic Measures (Russia) Regulations to prohibit the export of certain goods and technologies to Russia, with the aim of undermining and eroding the capabilities of the Russian military," the statement said.

Canada has been among the most active supporters of Kiev throughout Russia's special operation in Ukraine, providing the government troops with millions of dollars' worth of lethal aid and has also imposed sanctions on 720 individuals and numerous entities.

However, the sanctions imposed by Canada and its allies have had a limited impact on the Russian economy.

Russian officials, including Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev, have said that Russia has many reliable partners not only in the post-Soviet space, but also in China, Southeast Asia and Africa.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation solely targets Ukrainian military infrastructure.

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Biden Administration Expels Record Number of Colombian Migrants Since February - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has removed since February a record number of Colombians migrants who entered the United States illegally via its southern border with Mexico, CBS News reported on Thursday.

A large number of critics of the Biden administration's lax immigration practices have been instrumental in putting pressure on immigration officials to use what is referred as Title 42 - a measure first implemented by the Trump administration in March of 2020. Title 42 gives border agencies greater latitude to swiftly expel migrants instead of processing them under immigration laws.

However, on the flip side, asylum seekers with credible claims of fearing persecution do not have their claims investigated by US officials and face deportation from the United States. Before of the Biden administration's migrant removal operations, most Colombian migrants were allowed to stay and seek asylum in the United States. However, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) confirmed that it has been operating the expulsion flights to Colombia since February.

Government data shows that 20 Colombians were expelled under Title 42 in February and 9,600 entered in US government custody along the southern border with Mexico that represents an all-time high.

In addition, US border officials have so far processed 23,985 Colombians in fiscal year 2022 - a 287 percent increase from the previous fiscal year.

Immigration officials have said the majority of Colombian migrants fly to Mexico and then try to enter the United States near Yuma, Arizona, where more than 70 percent of them were arrested and processed since February, according to US Customs and Border Protection.

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US Senate Minority Leader Says Cannot Support Jackson's Nomination to Supreme Court

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Thursday that he cannot support the nomination of Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson to become a justice on the US Supreme Court.

"After studying the nominee's record and watching her performance this week, I cannot and will not support Judge Jackson for a lifetime appointment to the Supreme Court," McConnell said in a speech on the Senate floor.

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US, Spanish Lawmakers Raise Concerns About Spanish-Language Disinformation - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US and Spanish lawmakers share concern about Spanish-language disinformation in both their countries and across Latin America and the Caribbean, the lawmakers said on Thursday in a joint statement.

"We, the Chairs of the Foreign Relations Committees of the United States and Spain, express our deep concern over the spread and amplification of Spanish-language dis/misinformation on social media and encrypted messaging platforms in our respective countries and across Latin America and the Caribbean," the statement said.

The statement was issued by US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Gregory Meeks and Sen. Bob Menendez alongside Spanish lawmakers Pau Mari-Klose and Antonio Gutierrez Limones.

Malicious actors, including governmental ones, have increasingly adopted disinformation activities to undermine democratic governance, human rights, and COVID-19 public health responses, the statement said.

The lawmakers in particular deplore actors that allegedly engage in such practices from the territory of Russia, the statement added.

The lawmakers called upon the Biden administration and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez to undertake additional efforts to counter Spanish-language disinformation while

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January 6 Panel Says to Vote on Holding Ex-Trump Officials Navarro, Scavino in Contempt

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) – The US House's January 6 select committee said Thursday it will vote on March 28 whether to hold former Trump officials Peter Navarro and Daniel Scavino in criminal contempt for refusing to volunteer talk to the committee as it seeks to get to the bottom of who was involved in the January 6, 2021 riot at the US Capitol.

"Monday, March 28th at 7:30 PM The Select Committee will vote on a report recommending that the House of Representatives cite Peter Navarro and Daniel Scavino, Jr. for criminal contempt of Congress and refer them for prosecution," the committee wrote on Twitter.

Navarro served as former President Donald Trump's director of trade and manufacturing policy, and the policy coordinator for the National Defense Production Act. Scavino was Trump's deputy chief of staff. For the past seven months, the committee – composed of seven Democrats and two Republicans – has been investigating the attack on the Capitol. The committee, which is composed of seven Democrats and two Republicans, has subpoenaed at least 89 people and organizations as it seeks "information about attempts to disrupt or delay the certification of electoral votes and any efforts to corruptly change the outcome of the 2020 election."

The March 28 meeting will be the third for the committee to consider criminal contempt charges against those associated with Trump. The panel has so far approved contempt referrals for former DOJ official Jeffrey Clarke, former chief of staff Mark Meadows and former Trump strategist Steve Bannon.

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US Approves Possible \$176M In Sale of Multiple Launch Rocket Systems to Bahrain - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has approved a possible \$175.98 million sale of multiple launch rocket system upgrades to the government of Bahrain, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Thursday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the government of Bahrain of M270 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS) upgrade and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$175.98 million," the DCSA said in a press release. Bahrain requested to buy upgrades to nine M270 MLRS, including Common Fire Control Systems, Improved Launcher Mechanical Systems and other equipment, the press release said. The effort will also include two years' spare parts, US government engineering support and other related elements of logistical and program support, the release said.

The proposed sale would support the foreign policy and national security of the United States by improving the security of Bahrain, a major non-NATO ally that is an important force for political stability and economic progress in the Middle East, the release added.

Lockheed Martin will act as principal contractor for the proposed sale, which will not require the assignment of any additional US government or contractor representatives to Bahrain for implementation, according to the release.

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'No Realistic Way' for EU to Replace Russian Gas Despite US Help - Ex-Texas Oil Regulator

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The European Union has no realistic path to replace all of the Russian natural gas it needs even if the US boosts exports or other states divert shipments, former Texas industry regulator Ryan Sitton told Sputnik.

The EU and US are poised to announce a new energy partnership that envisions Europe acquiring more liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the United States to reduce dependence on Russia. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the EU's plan "to break free from Russian fossil fuels," will be unveiled together with US President Joe Biden on Friday.

"There's no way to just completely remove Russian gas from the European market - it makes up far too large of a portion of the amount of gas that they use," Sitton, a former member of the Texas Railroad Commission, the oil regulator in the United States' top oil-producing state, said.

"Western countries could decide to direct their gas to Europe and that will supplant some of the Russian gas but, practically speaking, there's not a realistic way to replace all of it."

Although the US can export more and Australia, which is sending a lot of gas to China, could ship more to Europe right now, it will likely not be sufficient, Sitton added.

Center for LNG and the Natural Gas Supply Association spokesperson Daphne Magnuson told Sputnik on Thursday that the United States is increasing its capacity to export more LNG to the EU after the Energy Department recently approved several pending permits with more approvals coming. Last week, the US authorized LNG exports from two current operating export facilities in the states of Louisiana and Texas.

Earlier in March, Biden announced a US-only ban on Russian oil imports although the United States imports much less oil from Russia than European states, which have been leery of imposing similar restrictions.

Before Biden departed for Europe this week, Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm told Sky News the US would not ask Europe to fully abandon Russian energy supplies.

IMPACT OF RUBLE PAYMENTS ON ENERGY PRICES

Earlier this week, Russian President Vladimir Putin instructed Gazprom to change existing gas contracts into rubles in response to the EU, US, and Japan blocking Russia from accessing euros, dollars and yen.

The announcement caused the Russian currency to climb against the dollar while global gas prices jumped. Meanwhile, International Energy Agency chief Fatih Birol described Putin's order as a "security threat."

However, Sitton said Moscow's demand for European countries to purchase Russian gas in rubles should not have a massive impact on energy prices.

"It just introduces another complexity, which in general, all those complexities do add cost and they add price because the more people are unsure, the higher the prices," he said.

Sitton predicts the price of Russian crude oil might actually go down a little bit while they slightly increase elsewhere.

"I think his [Putin's] logic is while he may lose a little bit more in the price of oil, his price of oil is dropping dramatically anyway, because there's just not as many buyers for it on the market. But he's going to pump up the price of his ruble, he's going to try to make it up in terms of the value of his currency," Sitton said.

Natural gas prices were surging on the European market late last year, spurred by growing energy demand amid an economic recovery after months of lockdowns, as well as a limited supply.

This has prompted the EU authorities to reinforce efforts toward ensuring the bloc's energy security, the need for which has become even more pressing during the conflict with Russia, the EU's main energy supplier, over the latter's special military operation in Ukraine.

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China Set to Dominate Latin America Like Africa, US Response 'Feeble' - SOUTHCOM Chief

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - China is driving fast to become as dominant economically in Latin America as it already is in Africa, Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) chief Gen. Laura Richardson told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in prepared testimony on Thursday.

"The PRC [People's Republic of China] continues its relentless march to expand its economic, diplomatic, technological, informational, and military influence in LAC [Latin American Countries] and challenges US influence in all these areas," Richardson said.

Unless the United States maintained its already modest levels of investment throughout the region, Beijing would soon hold the massive influence across the Western Hemisphere south of the Rio Grande that it already enjoyed throughout the continent of Africa, the SOUTHCOM chief warned.

"Without continued modest [US] investment, negative PRC influence in this region could soon resemble the self-serving, predatory influence it now holds in Africa," she said.

Over the past year, China and its state-owned enterprises had continued to target, recruit, and bribe officials at all levels throughout the region to expand their economic, political, and military influence including investments in strategic infrastructure, systematic technology, disinformation and propaganda campaigns, Richardson said.

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Blinken to Meet With Top Israeli Officials, Palestine's Abbas - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during his visit to Israel next week will meet with the Israeli cabinet to discuss coordination on Ukraine and Iran, including efforts to build on the Abraham Accords, Department of State Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Acting Assistant Secretary Yael Lempert said on Thursday.

"During his visit to Israel and the West Bank, the Secretary will underscore the United States' ironclad commitment to Israeli security coordination on Ukraine and Iran and work to build upon the gains from the Abraham accords," Lempert said during a conference call. "While there he will meet with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, Foreign Minister and alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid, Defense Minister Benny Gantz, and also with Israeli President Isaac Herzog."

Blinken will also meet with President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas as well as representatives of Palestinian civil society, Lempert said. Blinken will raise the United States' commitment to a two-state solution, she added.

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Austin, South Korean Minister Agree on Need for 'Firm Responses' to DPRK's Missile Launch

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and South Korean Minister of National Defense Suh Wook agreed on Thursday for "firm responses" to Pyongyang's missile launch, the two leaders said in a joint statement after a phone talk earlier in the day.

"The two leaders strongly condemned today's missile launch and shared a common understanding that DPRK's missile launches pose a serious threat to the peace and stability of

not only the Korean Peninsula and the Indo-Pacific region, but also to the entire world," the statement said. "They also agreed that firm responses, including further actions from the UN Security Council, are necessary."

Austin also spoke with Japanese Minister of Defense Nobuo Kishi.

"The two leaders shared their assessments and discussed measures to respond to the DPRK's recent Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) launches," the Pentagon said in a separate readout. "They agreed upon the seriousness of today's missile launch, which landed within Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone."

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Trudeau Says Canada Can Play 'Modest Role' in Replacing Russian Energy on Global Markets

TORONTO, March 24 (Sputnik) – Canada can play a small part in replacing Russian energy exports amid an upheaval on the global market following a myriad of sanctions on Moscow in response to its special military operation in Ukraine, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday.

"We recognize that replacing Russian oil and gas, in the short term, is going to be important. Canada can, perhaps, play a modest role in that," Trudeau told a news conference following an emergency NATO leaders' summit in Brussels.

However, Trudeau emphasized phasing renewable energy into the global energy market remains the medium- and long-term priority.

Energy prices have skyrocketed in recent months, appreciating even faster following start of Russia's special military operation, with gas futures in Europe topping \$1,400 on Wednesday. Amid crippling global energy shortages, prices spiked even higher on Wednesday after Russian President Vladimir Putin said that it made no sense for Russia to sell goods to unfriendly countries in currencies other than rubles after the European Union, the United States and Japan blocked the Russian government's access to euros, dollars and yen, ordering the government to instruct Gazprom to change existing gas contracts into rubles.

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Blinken to Meet With Abu Dhabi Crown Prince During Visit to Morocco - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will meet with the Abu Dhabi crown prince in Morocco next week to discuss regional security and international matters, Department of State Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Acting Assistant Secretary Yael Lempert said on Thursday.

"While in Rabat, the Secretary will also meet with Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheik Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to discuss regional security and international developments," Lempert said during a conference call.

Earlier this month, US media reported that Saudi and UAE leaders ignored calls from the White House to discuss efforts to increase oil production amid the West's efforts to isolate Russia over its special military operation in Ukraine.

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Trudeau Says Canada Will Supply Ukraine With More Lethal Aid in Coming 'Days and Weeks'
(Adds details, background in paras 3-5)

TORONTO, March 24 (Sputnik) - Canada will provide further tranches of lethal aid to Ukraine in the coming days and weeks, as Ottawa seeks to prop up Kiev in the conflict with Russia, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday.

"We will be sending more lethal equipment to Ukraine in the coming days and weeks," Trudeau told a news conference following an emergency NATO leaders' summit in Brussels.

The prime minister made the promise despite admission from his defense minister that Ottawa has "exhausted" the Canadian military's inventory it can provide to Ukraine and that existing "capacity issues" need to be addressed in order to ensure the capability of the Canadian Armed Forces.

Canada has previously approved three lethal aid packages to Ukraine, 4,500 M72 rocket launchers and up to 7,500 hand grenades.

Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine on February 24 in response to calls from the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics (DPR and LPR) for protection against intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation, which targets Ukrainian military infrastructure, aims to "demilitarize and denazify" Ukraine. Moscow has said it has no plans to occupy Ukraine. Western nations have imposed numerous sanctions on Russia.

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Arab League Concerned Over Ukrainian Crisis Impact on Syrian Conflict

UNITED NATIONS, March 24 (Sputnik) – The Arab League has serious concerns over the potential impact of events in Ukraine on the Syrian crisis, Assistant Secretary-General Hossam Zaki told a UN Security Council on Thursday.

"We express our deep concerns over impact of the war in Ukraine on the Syrian crisis, whether on the ground or in terms of the way your council deals with the situation in Syria," Zaki said.

He voiced the hope that the international community, "given the global challenges" arising from the Ukraine conflict, would continue to address the humanitarian situation in Syria with the "same level of interest."

The Ukraine crisis has brought on global food insecurity concerns, since Russia and Ukraine are among the top wheat producers in the world.

"We hope that purely political considerations will not prevent the council from addressing humanitarian aspects," Zaki added.

The Syrian war has been going on since 2011, with President Bashar Assad's forces fighting terrorist and insurgent groups. The ongoing conflict has caused millions of the country's citizens to flee to other countries.

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US Senate Faces Roadblocks in Passing Bill on Russian Oil Ban, Trade Status Revocation

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The US Senate is facing roadblocks in its attempt to pass legislation to ban the import of Russian oil and revoke the country's permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) status amid its ongoing special operation in Ukraine due to an amendment sought by Sen. Rand Paul on Thursday, which would clarify the definition of human rights abuses used to impose sanctions.

The Senate, led by Democratic Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, is attempting to pass legislation to revoke Russia's PNTR status, as well as a bill to ban the import of Russian energy products. However, Paul objected to attempts to move forward the bills due to concerns about the language used.

Paul is seeking an amendment to more clearly define what human-rights abuses are in the legislation, which he argues gives the US government too wide of an authority to impose sanctions in its current form.

"We're going to get rid of all definitions of gross human rights, and we're going to replace it with – not a list of things like torture and murder, indefinite detention – we're going to replace it with the words 'gross human rights abuse.' That still sounds pretty good, but it's like, what does that mean? The problem is that many different people have different definitions of rights," Paul said on the Senate floor on Thursday.

Schumer offered that Paul's amendments be moved forward and debated and voted upon on the Senate floor, alongside the legislation. Paul objected to the offer, instead offering to discuss the legislation over the next several days to come to an agreement, including possibly adding to the old definition.

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Iran, Ukraine to Top Blinken's Agenda on Trips to Israel, Morocco, Algeria - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - Iran and Ukraine will be on top of the agenda during Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to Israel, the West Bank, Morocco and Algeria from March 26 to 30, Department of State Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs Acting Assistant Secretary Yael Lempert said on Thursday.

"In terms of our engagement of Ukraine ... that will be a topic I'm sure on all of our stops as well as I anticipate Iran, which you know is an issue of great interest to all our partners in the region ... both of those are going to be really at the top of the agenda in terms of our discussions," Lempert said during a conference call.

In Israel, Blinken will discuss the Israeli government's role as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine.

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Biden Says He Dreams of Winning Election Without Opposition

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden during his visit to the European Council on Thursday said that he is dreaming of winning an election without opposition.

"I came to congratulate a man [European Council President Charles Michel] who just got re-elected without opposition. I dream about that someday," Biden told a press briefing.

During a separate press conference at the NATO headquarters in Brussels earlier in the day, Biden said that he would be very fortunate if he were to have Donald Trump running against him in the next election.

The US president is currently in Europe and, after having attended an extraordinary NATO summit on the situation in Ukraine and a G7 meeting, he is joining a European Council summit and 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.

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Kamala Harris Announces Moves to Protect Native Americans' Right to Vote - White House

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has unveiled a package of new measures to protect the rights of Native Americans to vote in the United States, Vice President Kamala Harris said in a speech on Thursday.

"Today, we are also announcing new steps to protect the voting rights of members of Tribal Nations and Native communities," Harris said. "[O]ur administration is releasing a set of proposed actions that elections officials and federal, state, and local policymakers ... must take to help secure the freedom to vote."

The measures include improving and expanding postal service in Native American communities so that more people can vote by mail and increasing the number of polling places in those communities to make in-person voting more accessible, Harris said.

Also, the National Institute of Standards and Technology is releasing a report proposing including more disabled people in the design of election procedures to reduce barriers to voting for disabled Americans, she added.

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Iran Boosting Economic, Security Ties With Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba - SOUTHCOM Chief
WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - Iran is expanding its economic and security relationships with Cuba, Bolivia and Venezuela, enabling the Caracas government to defy US and allied-imposed sanctions, Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) chief Gen. Laura Richardson said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"Iran expanded economic and security cooperation with Venezuela, Cuba, and Bolivia through fuel transfers, bartering, food staples, and military assistance, reducing the effects of US sanctions," Richardson told the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

Iran's support has been particularly important in providing aid to the cash-stripped government of President Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, Richardson said.

"The Iranian regime purchased gold from illegal gold mines in Venezuela, allowing the Maduro regime to evade sanctions and finance its oppressive activities against its citizens," she said. Also, in 2021 two Iranian warships were bound for Venezuela, potentially carrying weapons and missile attack boats but were thwarted in their efforts by US diplomatic moves, Richardson added.

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Canada to Ban Certain Technology Exports to Russia to Undermine Its Military - Ottawa

TORONTO, March 24 (Sputnik) - Canada will introduce new bans on the export of certain goods and technologies to Russia in order to undermine and erode the country's military, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's office said in a statement on Thursday.

"To further build on Canada's coordinated response to Russia's illegal, unprovoked and unjustifiable aggression against Ukraine, the Prime Minister today announced additional measures to support Ukraine and hold Russia accountable for its invasion, including: imposing in the coming days new prohibitions under the Special Economic Measures (Russia) Regulations to prohibit the export of certain goods and technologies to Russia, with the aim of undermining and eroding the capabilities of the Russian military," the statement said.

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UN Calls on States to Avoid Hurting People When Imposing Sanctions - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 24 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has reiterated the call that states avoid harming ordinary people when imposing sanctions, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

The spokesperson made the comment regarding the issue of secondary sanctions affecting states and companies dealing with Russia and their possible impact on the global economy.

"On the issue of sanctions, our principal position, Secretary General reiterated that we always call for any sort of sanctions to avoid hurting people," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

On February 24, Russia launched a special operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them against intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. In response to the special operation, the United States and its allies implemented a comprehensive sanctions regime against Russia.

After the start of the Russian special operation, Moscow and Kiev held three rounds of negotiations in Belarus. Now negotiations are held on a daily basis via video link.

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US Can Defend Against North Korea Missiles Now, But Danger Increasing - NORAD Chief

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States can still defend against a North Korean attack after Pyongyang's successful test of an intercontinental ballistic missile, Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) and North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) chief US Air Force Gen. Glen VanHerck told Congress on Thursday.

"I am comfortable where we are today based on the intelligence I have with the current capabilities and capacity of North Korea," VanHerck told the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC). He was speaking after Pyongyang was reported earlier the same day to have successfully test launched an ICBM capable of reaching the United States.

However, VanHerck also warned that North Korea was pushing ahead with efforts to deploy an ICBM force that eventually would be beyond the capacity of NORTHCOM's current forces to defend against.

"Going forward I do believe they could exceed my capacity and capabilities. That is why it is crucial to keep [the] next generation interceptor on time or early," he added.

North Korea's successful flight testing of an ICBM capable of reaching the continental United States and detonation of a thermonuclear weapon underscored its leaders' determination to develop capabilities to threaten our homeland and constrain US options in crisis and conflict, VanHerck said in his prepared testimony to the committee.

VanHerck noted the US currently has 44 ground-based interceptors deployed, with 20 next-generation ground-based interceptors scheduled to be delivered by 2028. The current interceptor force is deployed at Fort Greely in the US state of Alaska and at Vandenberg Air Force Base in southern California.

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Trudeau Says Canada Will Supply Ukraine With More Lethal Aid in Coming 'Days and Weeks'
TORONTO, March 24 (Sputnik) - Canada will provide further tranches of lethal aid to Ukraine in the coming days and weeks, as Ottawa seeks to prop up Kiev in the conflict with Russia, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday.

"We will be sending more lethal equipment to Ukraine in the coming days and weeks," Trudeau told a news conference following an emergency NATO leaders' summit in Brussels.

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Biden Says Made Clear to Xi Consequences of Aiding Russia, But Made No Threats

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he made clear to his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping the consequences of supporting Russia with its special operation in Ukraine, but made no direct threats of action.

"I had a very straightforward conversation with Xi... I made no threats, but I made it clear to him, to make sure he understood the consequences of him helping Russia as had been reported and as was expected. I made no threats, but I pointed out the number of American and foreign corporations that have left Russia as a consequence of their barbaric behavior," Biden said.

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Biden Says He Does Not Believe Ukraine Will Have to Cede Territory to Russia

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that it is up to Kiev to decide on whether to cede any of its territory to Russia, but he does not believe they will have to.

"I don't believe that they're going to have to do that, but that's... their judgment to make," Biden said when asked whether he thinks Kiev should cede some territory to gain a ceasefire with Russia.

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Biden Says Allies Discussed How to Increase Production, Disseminate Food More Rapidly

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that the United States and its allies have discussed how to increase production of food and more quickly disseminate food products in order to avoid shortages.

"We had a long discussion in the G7... the United States is a significant , the third largest producer of wheat in the world as well as Canada, which is also a major major producer and we both talked about how we could increase and disseminate more rapidly food," Biden said.

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Biden Says Russia Needs to Be Removed From G20, Topic Raised at NATO Meeting

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that Russia should be removed from the G20 groups and that the matter was discussed earlier in the day during the NATO meeting.

"My answer is yes, but it depends on the G20," Biden said on whether Russia should be removed from the G20. "That was raised today."

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Canada Imposing New Sanctions on 160 Members of Russian Federation Council - Trudeau

TORONTO, March 24 (Sputnik) – Canada is imposing a new round of sanctions against Russia targeting the Federation Council, the country's upper legislative chamber, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced on Thursday.

"Today, Canada will be increasing pressure [on Moscow] by sanctioning 160 members of the Russian Federation Council," Trudeau told a news conference following an emergency NATO leaders' summit in Brussels.

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US Missile Defense System Cannot Intercept Hypersonic Glide Vehicles - NORAD Chief

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The US missile defense system cannot defend against, intercept or destroy any attacks by hypersonic glide vehicles now being developed and deployed by Russia and China, Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) and North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) chief Gen. Glen VanHerck said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"The ballistic missile defense system is not capable of intercepting hypersonic glide vehicles," VanHerck told the US Senate Armed Services Committee. "I cannot defend, nor am I tasked to defend, against a hypersonic glide vehicle attack."

The US armed forces still did not have any integrated space-based radars and monitoring networks capable of tracking such weapons, alerting ground-based forces and directing interceptions of them, VanHerck said.

"It is imperative that the Department of Defense develop and field an integrated space-based domain awareness network capable of detecting and tracking ICBMs [intercontinental ballistic missiles], hypersonic weapons and cruise missiles," he said.

In December 2019, Russia fielded the world's first ICBMs equipped with a hypersonic glide vehicle payload that was designed to glide at extremely high speeds and maneuver at low altitudes in order to complicate the US and allied ability to detect and track them, VanHerck added.

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Trump Sues Hillary Clinton, DNC for Falsely Accusing Him of Colluding With Russia - Filing

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump has initiated legal action against Hillary Clinton, the Democratic National Convention (DNC) and others for falsely claiming he tried to rig the 2016 US presidential election and for falsely accusing him of colluding with Russia, court documents revealed on Thursday.

"The Defendants maliciously conspired to weave a false narrative that their Republican opponent, Donald J. Trump, was colluding with a hostile foreign sovereignty," the document said. "The actions taken in furtherance of their scheme - falsifying evidence, deceiving law enforcement, and exploiting access to highly-sensitive data sources - are so outrageous, subversive and incendiary that even the events of Watergate pale in comparison."

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Biden Says US Would Respond to Russia Using Biological, Chemical Weapons in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies would respond to the use of biological or chemical weapons in Ukraine in a manner dependent on the nature of their use, US President Joe Biden said on Thursday.

"We would respond if [Russian President Vladimir Putin] uses it. The nature of the response would depend on the nature of the use," Biden said during a press conference at NATO headquarters when asked whether the United States and its allies would respond to a biological or chemical weapons attack.

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Biden, Macron Meet on NATO Summit Sidelines to Discuss Ukraine Support - White House

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron met on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Brussels to discuss support for Ukraine amid Russia's special military operation in that country, the White House said on Thursday.

"President Biden met with President Macron of France on the sidelines of the Extraordinary NATO Summit today. The Leaders discussed the United States' and France's shared commitment to continue holding Russia accountable for its actions in Ukraine, and to support the government and people of Ukraine," a White House official said, according to a pool report.

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Russia Developing Super-ICBM That Can Hit US, Canada From South - US NORTHCOM Chief

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - Russia is developing a "super" intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that can hit US targets flying round the world and striking from the south as well as over the Arctic from the North, Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) and North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) chief US Air Force Gen. Glen VanHerck said on Thursday.

"In the next few years, Russia seeks to field a new heavy-lift ICBM that President [Vladimir] Putin claims will be able to deliver nuclear warheads to North America from both northern and southern trajectories," VanHerck told the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC).

The new missile is intended to bypass and render obsolete existing threat warning and assessment systems, the NORAD commander explained.

"Weapons such as these are designed to circumvent the ground-based radars utilized by USNORTHCOM and NORAD to detect and characterize an inbound threat, and challenge our ability to provide threat warning and attack assessment," he said.

Russia remains the primary military threat to the homeland and the focus of its armed forces on targeting the US homeland has provided the model other competitors are beginning to follow, VanHerck added.

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UNGA Adopts Western-Backed Resolution on Ukraine, With 140 Countries in Favor, 5 Against

(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly on Thursday adopted a Western-backed resolution on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, with 140 countries voting in favor, five against and 38 abstaining from the vote.

Russia, Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea and Syria voted against the resolution.

On Tuesday, the Office of the General Assembly said South Africa submitted a draft resolution on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine for a vote in the UN General Assembly.

After adopting the Western-backed draft resolution, the UN General Assembly voted on whether to set the South African proposal for a vote.

Fifty countries voted in support of taking action on the South Africa proposal, 67 voted against and 36 abstained.

On Wednesday, The UN Security Council did not adopt the humanitarian resolution on Ukraine drafted by Russia that called for a negotiated ceasefire, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the scene.

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North America Air Defense Mission Capability 'Continues to Erode' - Commanding General

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The capabilities of US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) and North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) to defend the United States and Canada is eroding and will continue to do so, US Air Force General Glen VanHerck, who commands both organizations, said in a congressional testimony on Thursday. "Quite bluntly, my ability to conduct the missions assigned to USNORTHCOM and NORAD has eroded and continues to erode," VanHerck told the US Senate Armed Services Committee. The United States has been under attack every day in the information space and cyber domain from competitor nations that were spreading disinformation, actively sowing division and fanning the flames of internal discord, VanHerck said.

"These competitors are also constantly seeking to exploit security vulnerabilities and policy gaps, especially in the cyber domain. They are preparing for potential crisis or conflict with the intent to limit decision space for our senior leaders by holding national critical infrastructure at risk," he said.

These competitor nations were also developing an extended capabilities to disrupt and delay the US ability to project power from the homeland and undermining the US national will to intervene to protect its allies and interests around the world, VanHerck added.

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Russia Urges Progress Toward Resolution in Syria, Says Situation 'Potentially Explosive'

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) – Russia is calling for redoubled efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis through political means, as the situation on the ground remains "potentially explosive," Deputy Envoy to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Thursday.

"Progress on the political track is particularly needed now because the situation on the ground remains tense and potentially explosive," Polyanskiy told a UN Security Council meeting. He expressed concerns over the mobilization of terrorist groups, which represent the main security threat to Syria and the entire region.

Polyanskiy pointed to the importance of opposing these groups, adding that they are operating on territories out of control of the Syrian government.

The Russian diplomat reiterated the call for a diplomatic resolution to the crisis.

"We continue to see no alternative to advancing the political resolution process led and carried out by Syrians themselves," Polyanskiy said.

This process should be facilitated by Syrians themselves with the mediation of the UN, without external interference or the imposition of artificial deadlines, he added.

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UN Expresses Serious Concern Over Security Situation in Al-Hol Camp in Syria - Griffiths

UNITED NATIONS, March 24 (Sputnik) - UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths on Thursday expressed serious concern about the security situation in the Al-Hol refugee camp in Syria.

"We continue to be concerned about the security situation in Al-Hol where some 56,000 people live," Griffiths said during a UN Security Council meeting.

The Al-Hol camp houses mostly Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons from Syria.

Griffiths called on the international community to protect the camp's population, which consists mostly of women and children.

"At the same time we need to maintain the civilian character of this camp," he said.

Griffiths also called on for the full repatriation of third country nationals from the Al-Hol camp.

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Nebenzia Calls Resolution on Ukraine Adopted by UNGA 'Pseudo-Humanitarian'

UNITED NATIONS, March 24 (Sputnik) - Russian Permanent Representative to the UN Vasily Nebenzia called the resolution on Ukraine, which was sponsored by the West and adopted on Thursday in the General Assembly, a pseudo-humanitarian resolution.

Earlier in the day, the UN General Assembly adopted a Western-backed resolution on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine on Thursday, with 140 countries voting in favor and five against. Russia, Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea and Syria voted against. Thirty-eight countries abstained.

"I think it's not worth going into the reasons why Russia voted against the draft pseudo-humanitarian resolution submitted by Western countries and Ukraine," Nebenzia said. He said that the authors of the resolution needed it only "to once again condemn Russia" and put various labels on the country.

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.

On March 20, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said it had recorded more than 2,300 civilian casualties since the start of Russia's operation in Ukraine.

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US, Allies Call for UNSC Meeting on Friday to Discuss North Korea Launch - Source

UNITED NATIONS, March 24 (Sputnik) – The United States, Albania, Ireland, France, Norway, and the United Kingdom call for a UN Security Council meeting on Friday to discuss the latest missile launch by North Korea, a UNSC source told Sputnik.

The six countries have requested an open meeting and consultations on Friday afternoon to discuss the situation around North Korea's "unambiguous" intercontinental ballistic missile launch that took place on Thursday, the source said.

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Center for Liquefied Natural Gas Spokesperson Says US Well-Positioned to Supply EU

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is well-positioned to continue to provide the European Union with liquefied natural gas (LNG), Center for LNG and Natural Gas Supply Association spokesperson Daphne Magnuson told Sputnik on Thursday.

"Regarding the US capability to help Europe, we are fortunate to have an abundant supply of natural gas in the United States and are well-positioned to continue providing US LNG to the European Union," Magnuson said.

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Antonov Calls Reports of FBI Targeting Russian Embassy Ploy to Flaunt US Intelligence

(Updates with more details, background in paras 2, 4-5; edits throughout)

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Thursday that US media reports about the FBI targeting the Russian embassy in Washington to recruit spies are an intelligence ploy intended to flaunt its own prowess. On Wednesday, the Washington Post reported that the FBI is directing social media ads on the cell phones in the Russian Embassy and directly around its vicinity, asking for tips and information through advertisements featuring distorted statements attributed to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"It seems that the piece was written at the behest of the intelligence services eager to promote their 'innovations' in targeting. The attempts to sow distrust and organize desertion among Embassy staff are laughable," Antonov said.

US-Russia relations have plummeted to their lowest point in decades after Moscow commenced a special operation in Ukraine, with the United States imposing comprehensive sanctions on Russian individuals and entities and implementing export controls, while Russia promising to impose counter-sanctions.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine in response to requests from the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics to help defend them against intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation solely targets Ukrainian military infrastructure and civilians are not in danger.

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US Increasing LNG Exports to EU With Support From Federal Government - Industry Group

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is increasing its capacity to export more liquefied natural gas (LNG) to the European Union after the Department of Energy recently approved several pending permits with more approvals coming, Center for LNG and the Natural Gas Supply Association spokesperson Daphne Magnuson told Sputnik on Thursday.

"We [the United States] have been Europe's largest supplier of LNG throughout their energy crisis, and we reaffirm our willingness to help our customers there," Magnuson said. "We have been operating our export facilities at full capacity this winter and are adding incremental volume with the recent approval of pending permits by the Department of Energy, with more approvals waiting."

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Biden, Kishida Agree to Hold North Korea Accountable for Missile Launch - White House

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida agreed to work to hold North Korea accountable for its recent missile test, the White House said on Thursday.

"President Biden met with Prime Minister Kishida on the sidelines of the G7 today. The two Leaders discussed DPRK's launch of a long-range ballistic missile, which both Leaders strongly condemned, stressed the need for diplomacy, and agreed to continue working together to hold the DPRK accountable," a White House official said, according to a pool report.

Biden also conveyed to Kishida the United States' commitment to Japanese and Korean security, as well as thanked him for Japan's response to Russia's ongoing special operation in Ukraine, the official said.

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UNGA Adopts Western-Backed Resolution on Ukraine, With 140 Countries in Favor, 5 Against

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly adopted a Western-backed resolution on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine on Thursday, with 140 countries voting in favor and five against.

Russia, Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea and Syria voted against.

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US Will Issue Rule to Enhance Asylum Claim Process – DOJ

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) – The US departments of homeland security (DHS) and justice (DOJ) will issue a rule on Thursday that officials say will streamline the process surrounding asylum claims and unclog a system where cases sometimes take years to resolve, the DOJ said in a press release.

"The current system for handling asylum claims at our borders has long needed repair," DHS Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas said. "Through this rule, we are building a more functional and sensible asylum system to ensure that individuals who are eligible will receive protection more swiftly, while those who are not eligible will be rapidly removed. We will process claims for asylum or other humanitarian protection in a timely and efficient manner while ensuring due process."

When the rule is implemented, those seeking asylum who are determined to have a credible fear of being harmed or killed if they are sent back to their respective countries, will have an opportunity – in a timely fashion – to have interview with an asylum officer. That interview will

attempt to bring to light any pertinent and useful information related to individuals' requests for asylum. Staff at the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) will then conclude whether to grant or reject the asylum request. Among the considerations will be determining whether the US should protect or reject protection for applicants under the Convention Against Torture (CAT).

Those refused asylum by the USCIS will be sent before an immigration judge as part of a removal proceeding. DHS officials say this proposed rule will not apply to unaccompanied children and will only focus on people who have been placed in expedited removal proceedings. Officials said the rule will be implemented in phases, beginning with a limited number of applicants until the USCIS Asylum Division receives more resources. The rule will be effective 60 days after publication in the Federal Register. The departments are encouraging public comment on the rule during the 60-day comment period where staff of both agencies will consider the comments.

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US Unveils Plans to Welcome 100,000 Refugees, Others Fleeing Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has unveiled plans to welcome up to 100,000 refugees and others fleeing the conflict in Ukraine, including the provision of \$1 billion in new humanitarian aid, the White House announced on Thursday.

"[T]oday, the United States is announcing plans to welcome up to 100,000 Ukrainians and others fleeing Russia's aggression," the White House said in a press release. "[T]he United States is announcing that we are prepared to provide more than \$1 billion in new funding toward humanitarian assistance for those affected by Russia's war in Ukraine and its severe impacts around the world, including a marked rise in food insecurity, over the coming months."

The United State will also spend an additional \$320 million to fund democracy and human rights programs in Ukraine and in the neighboring countries, the release said.

The Biden administration is working to expand and develop new programs with a focus on welcoming Ukrainians who have family members in the United States, according to the release. On February 24, Russia launched a special operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves intensifying attacks from Ukrainian troops. The United States and its allies have since imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, more than 3.6 million Ukrainians have already left the country since the start of the special operation.

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Blinken to Visit Israel, Morocco, Algeria March 26-30 for High-Level Talks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit Israel, the West Bank, Morocco and Algeria March 26-30 to discuss issues such as Ukraine and Iran, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel to Israel, the West Bank, Morocco, and Algeria March 26-30 to consult with partners on a range of regional and global priorities, including the Russian government's war on Ukraine, Iran's destabilizing activities, the Abraham Accords and normalization agreements with Israel, Israeli-Palestinian relations, and preserving the possibility of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, among other topics," Price said in a statement.

Blinken's trip will begin in Israel for meetings with top officials including counterpart Yair Lapid and Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, the statement said. Blinken will then meet with Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita in Morocco, and lastly meet with President Abdelmadjid Tebboune in Algeria, according to the statement.

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China Will Continue to Play Constructive Role in Facilitating Ukraine Peace Talks

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - China will continue to play a constructive role in facilitating the peace talks on the Ukraine crisis, China's Ambassador to the United States Zhang Jun said on Thursday.

"Dialogue and negotiation are the only ways out of the crisis in Ukraine," Zhang said. "China will continue to play a constructive role in facilitating peace talks."

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Pentagon Confirms Austin, Milley Unable to Reach Russian Counterparts Over Past Month

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) – The Pentagon confirmed to Sputnik on Thursday that US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have been unable to reach their Russian counterparts over the past month during the conflict in Ukraine.

"Over the past month, Secretary Austin and Chairman Milley have sought, and continue to seek, calls with their Russian counterparts. Minister [Sergey] Shoigu and General [Valery] Gerasimov have so far declined to engage. We continue to believe that engagement between U.S. and Russian defense leaders is critically important at this time," Pentagon told Sputnik in a statement.

On Wednesday, The Washington Post, citing Pentagon spokesman John Kirby, said that the Russian military leadership had for the past month refused contacts with its US counterparts despite Washington's "repeated attempts" to initiate them.

The newspaper quoted Kirby as saying that the Pentagon believes US-Russia defense leaders' engagement is "critically important at this time."

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.

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Africa's Security Remains Major Concern of European Allies - US General

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The situation in Ukraine does not overshadow developments in Africa, a region in which the United States' allies in Europe have significant concern and interest, Commander of the US Army Southern European Task Force Maj. Gen. Andrew Rohling said on Thursday.

"Despite what is happening in the Ukraine, our European allies have a vested concern and interest in Africa," Rohling said during a press briefing.

Africa's security has been an issue of concern for a long time and this issue continues to be important for the countries of Europe, he said.

On the issue of Mali, Rohling did not specify whether the United States will push the Malian armed forces not to cooperate with the private security company Wagner Group, but did say this is a policy question.

"Wagner is not an organized uniformed military force. They are mercenaries and their missions are not the same, they are there for their own interests," he said.

Russia has repeatedly denied allegations of having a military presence in various African countries. In particular, Moscow has said there were no representatives of the Russian armed forces on the territory of Mali. Russia has also said the government has nothing to do with the work of private security companies.

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Russian Envoy Calls Reports of FBI Targeting DC Embassy a Ploy to Flaunt US Intel Prowess

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) – Russian Ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Antonov, said on Thursday that American media reports of the FBI targeting the Washington, DC embassy for spy recruitment are an intelligence ploy intended to flaunt its own prowess.

"It seems that the piece was written at the behest of intelligence services eager to promote their 'innovations' in targeting. Attempts to sow distrust and organize desertion among Embassy staff are laughable," Antonov said.