

4/1/22 Friday

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Xi Tells EU to Treat China 'Independently' as West Pressures Beijing to Denounce Ukraine Operation

The US has threatened to sanction China repeatedly since Russia launched a special operation in Ukraine on February 24 and the West moved to sever Moscow from the global economy. However, Beijing says its trade with Russia is strictly legal and in accordance with international trade laws.

At a virtual summit with European Union leaders on Friday, Chinese President Xi Jinping said the political bloc should treat China "independently" instead of following Washington's lead. Xi harkened back to his first visit to EU headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, eight years ago, when he [suggested China and Europe](#) "build a bridge of friendship and cooperation across the Eurasian continent." He said that if anything, that vision has become all the more relevant amid current crises, including the situation in Ukraine and the continuing COVID-19 pandemic. "China and the EU should play a constructive role in adding stabilizing factors to a turbulent world," Xi said, [according to China Daily](#). "It has been proven that China and the EU share extensive common interests and a solid foundation for cooperation."

The 27-member bloc constitutes one-quarter of China's foreign trade, and last year, [China passed the US](#) to become the EU's biggest trading partner. However, the two economic superpowers have struggled to implement some of the principles outlined by Xi, butting heads in particular over China's deradicalization program in Xinjiang, where Uyghur terrorist groups with bases in Afghanistan have staged attacks aimed at separating the province from China. EU sanctions against China [have frustrated implementation](#) of a massive investment deal, for example.

Some EU politicians objected to the summit, which fell on April 1 - a Western holiday in which it's common to play practical jokes or stage hoaxes to fool others.

"We will see at the April Fool's Day Summit whether the EU is already able to apply the Russia lessons learned recently to its China relations," Reinhard Bütikofer, a leader of Germany's Green Party and the chair of the EU delegation for relations with China, [told Politico](#) ahead of the meeting.

European Council President [Charles Michel told reporters](#) after the summit that he and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had "called on China to help end the war in Ukraine. China cannot turn a blind eye to Russia's violation of international law." "Any attempts to circumvent sanctions or provide aid to Russia would prolong the war," he added.

Since the start of Russia's special "neutralization" operation in Ukraine on February 24, the US in particular has tried to cast China as if it were party to the conflict, saying that a lack of a denunciation of the operation by Beijing was equivalent to giving approval. Washington has also

claimed China had advance warning of the operation - a claim Chinese Ambassador to the United States [Qin Gang tackled head-on](#) in a Washington Post op-ed last month. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang told the EU leaders on Friday that Beijing would push for peace in "its own way."

However, Beijing has so far concentrated on criticizing NATO for provoking the conflict, calling the anti-Russian alliance an "[outdated security concept](#)" and denouncing Western sanctions against Russia as "getting [more and more outrageous](#)." At the same time, China has supported negotiations between Russia and Ukraine to resolve the situation.

On Wednesday, Russian Foreign Minister [Sergey Lavrov traveled](#) to the eastern Chinese city of Tunxi to meet with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, as part of a summit on the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson [Wang Wenbin told reporters](#) "there is no limit to China-Russia cooperation in the pursuit of peace, no limit to our efforts to safeguard security, and no limit to our opposition to hegemony. China-Russia relations feature non-alliance, non-confrontation, and non-targeting of any third party."

"As permanent members of the UN Security Council, China and Russia develop bilateral relations following the principle of non-alliance, non-confrontation and non-targeting of any third party. Both sides will continue to practice true multilateralism, stay committed to the vision of a multi-polar world, and work to promote democracy in international relations," the spokesperson added.

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US Scraps Minuteman III Test After Launch Initially Postponed Over Russia Nuclear Tensions

While Russia's massive nuclear arsenal remains on high alert, Moscow has asserted it would only use the highly destructive weapons if the country's existence was directly threatened. The United States has decided to cancel a previously postponed test of an unarmed Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), as tensions with the Russia Federation remain high, the US Air Force confirmed to Sputnik on Friday.

"The Department of the Air Force recently cancelled the routinely planned test flight of an LGM-30G Minuteman III missile scheduled for March 2022," US Air Force spokesperson Ann Stefanek told Sputnik in a statement.

"The launch had been previously delayed due to an overabundance of caution to avoid misinterpretation or miscommunication during the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and was cancelled for the same reason. Our next planned test flight is later this year. The Department is confident in the readiness of the strategic forces of the United States," she added.

The launching of an LGM-30G Minuteman III had been scheduled far in advance for the first weekend of March, but the Pentagon [decided to delay the test](#) after Russia put its [nuclear forces on high alert](#) amid rising tensions with the NATO alliance. Days earlier, Russia had launched its special operation in Ukraine aimed at neutralizing the country's military and denying it the opportunity to serve as a NATO base from which to attack Russia, and it was unclear if NATO would attempt to intervene.

The US has not yet raised its own nuclear alert status, saying it sees no signs Russia is likely to use a nuclear weapon.

The US regularly [fires several Minuteman missiles](#) each year without their normal load of nuclear warheads in order to test the aging rocket's launch, flight and guidance systems. The missiles typically launch from the US West Coast and land in Kwajalein Atoll, thousands of miles away in the South Pacific. The missiles have been the basis of the US' land-based nuclear deterrent since 1970, and their replacement, the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent, is [expected to begin replacing](#) them by 2030.

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Amazon Workers in New York Declare Victory in Union Drive

Ecommerce and web services giant Amazon has employed extensive union-busting practices that have succeeded at blocking its shops from organizing for more than 20 years.

For the first time, an Amazon facility's workers have voted to join a labor union. A massive warehouse in Staten Island, New York, has voted to be represented in negotiations with its employer by the Amazon Labor Union, a group formed by former Amazon employees who were fired for organizing for better working conditions.

The final vote that came down was 2,654 workers for joining the ALU and 2,131 against it.

"We worked hard, had fun and made history," tweeted ALU leader [Christian Smalls on Friday](#) after the final vote results had been announced. "Welcome the 1st union in America for Amazon."

The warehouse that voted to unionize, JFK8, is the largest of four Amazon facilities on Staten Island. It has long been a hotbed of workers' struggles, as testified by its [extremely high incidence rate](#) for injuries. After the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, workers at the facility, including Smalls, [organized for better](#) COVID-19 safety measures in their workplace, resulting in retaliatory firings by Amazon.

"When COVID-19 came to play, Amazon failed us," Smalls said at a [Friday press conference](#).

"They dropped the ball, they lied to the public, saying they're doing all these things - none of that was the reality of our situation."

He recalled that their efforts to defame him after his firing him the "face of the whole unionizing effort, which I had no intention [of becoming] at the time," setting in motion the creation of the ALU and beginning a union drive that culminated in Friday's victory.

Another smaller Amazon facility on Staten Island also recently won the right to vote on joining the ALU, which is set to take place later this month.

A third warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, is [also counting votes for a union drive](#) that ended on March 28. That vote is a re-do after the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which oversees employer-union relations and ensures their fairness, [threw out the results](#) of a 2021 union vote in which Amazon was found to have unfairly meddled. US labor laws prevent employers from attempting to influence the way their employees vote in a union drive.

However, at last count, the Bessemer vote showed a majority of ballots voting against unionization. The Bessemer facility, roughly equal in size to JFK8, would be represented by the

Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), an established union that represents about 60,000 workers in the manufacturing and distribution sectors.

Amazon workers have complained about long work shifts [without bathroom breaks](#), a high degree of surveillance of their work, and inadequate [attention given to safety](#). Suicide is a shockingly common concern at Amazon facilities: [the Daily Beast found](#) that 189 emergency calls relating to suicide were made between 2003 and 2018.

Many of these dynamics only accelerated when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, sending billions of people home for safety and creating a massive demand for product deliveries. In the first six months of the pandemic, Bezos' wealth [ballooned by \\$48 billion](#), and in 2020 Amazon's [profits increased by 84%](#) over the previous year. In 2021, the company added another 22% growth, bringing in \$469 billion in revenue, according to [company earnings reports](#).

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Houthis, Saudi-Led Coalition Reportedly Agree to UN- Proposal for Two-Month Ceasefire in Yemen War

The seven-year-long war in Yemen has created the world's largest humanitarian crisis, as a Saudi naval blockade has prevented food and medicine from entering the country, where a relentless bombing campaign has destroyed most of the infrastructure already. According to United Nations estimates, over 400,000 people have been killed.

The Saudi-led coalition in Yemen has agreed to a two-month ceasefire with Ansarallah, the Zaidi rebel group better known as the Houthis. The deal was announced Friday by Hans Grundberg, the UN special envoy for Yemen.

The truce takes effect on Saturday at 19:00, according to UN deputy spokesman Farhan Haq. The Muslim holy month of Ramadan begins on Friday evening.

The peace agreement comes two days after [peace talks started in Riyadh](#) under the auspices of the United Nations and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). However, it by no means the first ceasefire or attempt to reach a peace deal, which the UN has been attempting to negotiate for years. Before his untimely death in January 2020, Omani Sultan Qaboos had also [attempted to negotiate peace](#) as a neutral actor.

However, Friday's deal has been reached without the direct presence of any Houthi delegates, as the group refuses to negotiate outside of Yemeni territory. In addition to the issue of an end to hostile actions, the two sides have discussed a large prisoner transfer that would include the release of the brother of Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi by the Houthis, as well as an end to the Saudi-imposed blockade.

"The Yemen blockade is considered a military action because it was imposed by force of arms. If the siege is not lifted, the coalition's announcement of the cessation of military operations will be meaningless," Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthis' political bureau, wrote on Twitter on Wednesday.

"The suffering of the Yemenis as a result of the blockade is more severe than the war itself. This means the continuation of Yemeni military operations aimed at breaking the siege," he added.

The UN has called the war the world's worst humanitarian crisis. According to UN estimates, [some 400,000 Yemenis](#) have been killed by the war, most of whom have died due to indirect causes, such as lack of adequate food, water, medicine, and epidemic diseases like cholera and COVID-19. Millions more are judged as food insecure. The Houthis lack adequate air defense systems to hold off the Saudi Royal Air Force, which has waged an [indiscriminate bombing campaign](#) in Yemeni cities.

The war began in March 2015, when Hadi fled to Riyadh after being ousted from the country by the ascendant Houthi movement. The Zaidi Shiite groups hail from the country's impoverished north, and their objections to Hadi's neoliberal reforms, including slashing fuel subsidies and a federalization scheme, became rallying points for a mass movement of Yemen's poor.

The Saudi-led coalition that launched a military campaign to return Hadi to power included the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Sudan, and the United States, along with several other nations. However, by 2022, all but Riyadh and Abu Dhabi had pulled out of the war. The US said it would stop selling the Saudis offensive weapons last year, but they have continued to [provide air defense cover](#) inside Saudi Arabia against Houthi missile and drone attacks.

The US and Saudis have claimed that the Houthis are a "proxy" force for Iran, but while the US Navy has [claimed to have captured weapons](#) shipments bound for Yemen, no proof of extensive material support sufficient to sustain the Houthi's military campaign has been demonstrated. Despite the blockade and air campaigns, the Houthis have steadily expanded their control outward from the capital of Sana'a, limiting Hadi's government to a strip of land on the Gulf of Aden and an steadily decreasing part of [Marib and Shabwa Governorates](#) in the country's north.

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Luck of the Draw: Ukraine Could Join US, England & Iran in Same Group for Qatar World Cup

It's not an April Fools prank! Group B at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar will include the United States, England, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and a fourth team from Europe to be determined by playoff.

The [drawing on Friday placed](#) the three teams together, and also set Scotland, Wales and Ukraine against each other for the fourth spot. The results will be clear by June, with the first World Cup games set to begin in late November to avoid the blistering hot summer sun of the Persian Gulf.

"Let's do this," the US Men's National Team tweeted in response to the news, later adding, "See you on Black Friday, England," referring to the day after Thanksgiving Day in the US, when the Christmas season begins.

"It was great to get England, that match is always going to get a lot of attention because of England and its fans, that's very exciting," US head coach [Gregg Berhalter said after](#), adding that "It's a good group."

However, the Yanks will face a steep uphill fight: they've rarely done well against England or Iran, the latter of which knocked them out of the 1998 games. Iran is the highest-ranked team in

Asia. However, the last time the US played England at the World Cup was in 2010. Although it was a draw, the US won the group.

Of the remaining three, none have been to a World Cup since 2006, when Ukraine lost to that year's champion, Italy, in the quarterfinals. Scotland last joined the world championships in 1998, and Wales way back in 1958.

The winners of Group B are likely to face off against the reigning champions, France, in the quarterfinals, who will first have to contend with Denmark, Tunisia and either Peru, the United Arab Emirates, or Australia.

Host team Qatar will also face a tough climb, being placed with the Netherlands, Senegal and Ecuador. Spain and Germany were both placed in Group E, along with Japan and either Costa Rica or New Zealand. Brazil will be feeling deja-vu, having been placed in Group G with Switzerland and Serbia, just like in 2018.

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Gov. Kemp to Sign Georgia State Bill Allowing Permitless Concealed Carry of Handguns
By - Evan Craighead

GOP lawmakers in Georgia claim SB 319, a bill allowing state residents to carry a concealed handgun in public without a license or background check, will allow those in the southern state to better protect themselves from crime. Meanwhile, Democrats and other critics argue that the loosening of such restrictions may lead to unprecedented bloodshed.

Georgia's controversial permitless concealed carry bill passed by a 34-22 vote in the state senate on Friday, advancing the measure to Governor Brian Kemp (R), who has staunchly supported such legislation since his 2018 gubernatorial run.

The '[Georgia Constitutional Carry Act of 2021](#),' allows for a "lawful weapons carrier" to carry a concealed handgun in areas where license holders are currently allowed. Prohibited areas include airports, the state Capitol, and government buildings with security guards at the entrance.

"I look forward to signing the Georgia Constitutional Carry Act of 2021 into law soon and fulfilling another promise I made to the voters of this state," [tweeted Governor Kemp](#) shortly after the Friday vote.

Legislation allowing permitless concealed carry has been passed in 24 states, including Georgia's neighboring states of Tennessee and Alabama. Some states, such as North Dakota, restrict the allowance to residents only.

Supporters of the bill have proclaimed that their Second Amendment rights have been actively violated due to the \$75 bill associated with a Weapons Carry License (WCL) in Georgia. In addition to the fee, WCL applicants must pass a criminal background check and provide their fingerprints.

Under current WCL guidelines, a number of individuals are not eligible for a permit, including convicted felons, individuals hospitalized for certain mental health issues, and those who have received treatment for drugs and/or alcohol within five years of the application date.

While residents would avoid the WCL process under the legislation, a background check is still required for individuals purchasing a firearm from a dealer or store in Georgia.

Dudley Brown, president of the National Association for Gun Rights, heralded the Senate's advancement of the measure as a step toward restoring "the constitutional right to bear arms without government infringement or taxation on that right."

"This is a great day for gun owners," Brown declared, [as reported by the The Atlanta Journal-Constitution newspaper](#).

Republican State Sen. Randy Robertson said those opposing the bill are blaming "an inanimate object" for the actions of criminals.

"I'm proud to report that since I've been up here for almost three months, none of my weapons have broken out of my house and injured anyone," Robertson quipped.

Some Georgia lawmakers, like Democratic State Rep. Shea Roberts, claimed the bill will do more harm than good. The bill advanced in the Georgia House with a 100-67 vote on Wednesday.

"With rights come responsibility," Roberts said on Thursday, noting that she could not support the bill as a mother. "Responsibility means doing everything we can to make sure people who carry guns — especially in public places around our families — go through the process to carry a permit."

Max Flugrath, spokesperson for the Democratic Party of Georgia, warned that Kemp's approval of such legislation "would ignore law enforcement's warnings that it would put officers in greater danger — all in an effort to gain the support of special interests and extremists" amid the governor's reelection bid.

Permits would still be offered by the state, as Georgia would seek to maintain gun carry "reciprocity" with other US states.

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NASA's Artemis 1 Begins Critical 'Wet Dress Rehearsal' Ahead of Summer Liftoff

By - Evan Craighead

Artemis 1 is the first planned unscrewed test flight for NASA's Artemis program, which aims to set a long-term human spaceflight goal to Mars after landing humans on the moon by 2025. The mission, slated for as early as June 1, will also serve as the first flight for NASA's Space Launch System (SLS) and the Orion crew capsule.

NASA's Artemis program commenced its three-day "wet" dress rehearsal at 5:00 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time on Friday, marking a major milestone for the program team and the SLS, a new flagship rocket designed to transport both humans and cargo into deep space.

"Wet" dress rehearsals refer to tests in which a spacecraft's rockets are loaded with liquid propellant necessary for take off.

At approximately 5 p.m. EDT, members of the Artemis program team arrived at their respective stations at the John F. Kennedy Space Center in Merritt Island, Florida. Before the "call to

stations,” team members reportedly conducted a number of checks and closed the crew module hatch of NASA's Orion capsule.

The SLS rocket will launch NASA's Orion spacecraft without a crew for its initial four-to-six-week moon mission later this year. Boeing, the space agency's primary contractor, has been assisting with the development of the costly rocket since the early 2010s.

A livestream of the test has been active since later Friday morning. NASA, citing International Traffic in Arms Regulation (ITAR) restrictions related to the SLS' rocket, noted that it does not plan to provide live commentary or audio with the stream.

ITAR, enforced by the US Department of State, is a regulatory regime designed to bolster national security via the restriction and control of defense and military-related technologies. In many cases, the tech has been identified on the US Munitions List and is either blocked from being exported, or requires further approval before issuing it to a foreign country, entity, or national.

ITAR also covers “technical data” related to the technologies in question.

“We're really, really super sensitive to cryogenic launch vehicles that are of this size and capability, [and] are very analogous to ballistic type capabilities that our countries are very interested in,” [senior NASA official Tom Whitmeyer told reporters earlier this week](#).

NASA's most-recent update detailed that teams at the rocket's LC-39B launch pad were filling the sound suppression system with water.

Because the SLS is expected to create about 176 decibels at liftoff, experts designed a water system capable of dampening and absorbing the noise.

“The system reached a peak flow rate of more than 1 million gallons per minute,” officials estimated during a 30-second water flow test in September 2019.

The Friday evening “call to stations” marked the 45-hour countdown clock for the wet dress rehearsal. The clock will run until 33 seconds prior to ‘launch,’ and then the countdown will be reset to 10 minutes before T-0, allowing the Artemis team to run through the steps once again. The second countdown stops with less than 10 seconds before liftoff.

More than 700,000 gallons (3.2 million liters) of propellant will be pumped into SLS tanks on Sunday, according to NASA. Later that day, team members will be polled to determine whether they're ready to enter a mock terminal count.

The SLS rocket will launch NASA's Orion spacecraft without a crew for its initial four-to-six-week moon mission later this year. Boeing, the space agency's primary contractor, has been assisting with the development of the costly rocket since the early 2010s.

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AG Garland: DoJ Will ‘Do the Right Thing,’ Not Feeling Political Pressure With Jan. 6 Referrals
By - Evan Craighead

On Monday, a federal judge presiding over a civil suit involving the US House Select Committee probing the January 6 insurrection proclaimed that former US President Donald Trump and

right-wing attorney John Eastman likely sought out to disrupt the congressional certification of the 2020 presidential election.

US Attorney General Merrick Garland on Friday pushed back against members of the US House Select Committee investigating the insurrection after the 9-member panel issued a stern memo to the US Department of Justice, urging Garland and the department to “act swiftly” and pursue criminal charges against two Trump-era advisers previously determined to be in contempt of Congress.

“The only pressure I feel, and the only pressure that our line prosecutors feel, is to do the right thing. That means we follow the facts and the law, wherever they may lead,” said Garland, responding to a query about whether he and the federal agency feel pressure following this week’s developments in a Central California court.

US District Judge David Carter wrote in a Monday filing that it was “more likely than not that President Trump corruptly attempted to obstruct” the certification of Electoral College votes on January 6, 2021. The civil case resulted in right-wing attorney John Eastman was being ordered to turn over a total of 101 relevant emails to the 9-member congressional panel.

While Carter’s comments did not directly impact the former US president in a legal sense, the federal judge’s comments were cited by several members of the House Select Committee. The group notably voted to recommend Trump-era trade adviser Peter Navarro and former White House Deputy Chief of Staff for Communications Dan Scavino for criminal contempt charges after both refused to cooperate with a congressional subpoena, and failed to appear at scheduled depositions.

Although Scavino was among the first wave of subpoenas issued by the committee in September 2021, the long-time Trump ally was granted a total of six extensions to reschedule his deposition and turn over documents.

Both recommendations now advance to a full vote in the House. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer has vowed to bring the matters forward “as soon as the schedule permits.”

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.

“This committee is doing its job,” said Select Committee member Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) during the group’s March 28 business meeting. “The Department of Justice needs to do theirs.” Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY), one of two House Republicans on the panel, also called for the DoJ to pursue the recommended charges, proclaiming that the ongoing situation in Ukraine should be a reminder of “what happens when authoritarians rule.”

Committee Chair Bennie Thompson (D-MS) and Cheney both highlighted Judge Carter’s ruling in their referral recommendation.

Prior to Monday’s vote, the panel already advanced three criminal referrals. However, as of this article’s publication, the recommendation against ex-White House strategist Steve Bannon is the only referral to result in a federal indictment.

Contempt referrals were also issued against ex-DOJ official Jeffrey Clark and former White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows. Clark’s referral did not make it to the House floor after he agreed to sit for a deposition in which he pleaded the Fifth Amendment over 100 times.

Garland did not offer reporters much when asked about the status of the recommendation against Meadows, as the DoJ does not “comment on ongoing referrals.”

“We follow the facts and the law wherever they lead, and that’s all I can say about the investigation,” Garland told reporters on Friday. “The best way to undermine an investigation is to say things out of court about how they’re going.”

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Sarah Palin Announces Run for US Congress as Special Election Field Exceeds 50 Candidates
By - Evan Craighead

Last month, former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin proclaimed it “would be an honor” to replace the late Rep. Don Young (R-AK), who was the longest-serving House Republican in history. Young, 88, was reportedly en route to Alaska and surrounded by family and friends when he died on March 18.

Former Alaska Governor and 2008 Republican nominee for Vice President Sarah Palin is once again vying for public office in a fresh bid to run for Alaska’s one-and-only seat in the US House of Representatives, according to a Friday announcement backed by an official campaign filing with the Federal Election Commission.

“Public service is a calling, and I would be honored to represent the men and women of Alaska in Congress, just as Rep. Young did for 49 years,” Palin said in a social media statement.

The former governor of Alaska acknowledged that she had “very big shoes to fill” in honoring Rep. Young, a career politician reelected to a 25th term in 2020.

“I plan to honor Rep. Young’s legacy by offering myself up in the name of service to the state he loved and fought for, because I share that passion for Alaska and the United States of America,” she added.

Palin, who was selected as the GOP nominee for vice president in 2008, claimed the US was at a “tipping point” due to the destruction caused by the “far left.” She also suggested that Alaska could be the answer for the country’s ongoing fuel dilemma.

“We need energy security for this country, and Alaska can help provide that – but only if the federal government gets out of the way and lets the free market do what it does best,” Palin asserted.

Palin’s campaign is one of many in the already-crowded special election, as at least 51 candidates are hoping to secure the coveted US House seat.

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Investors See Market Losses as Trump’s Social Media Venture Misses Deadlines, Dips 93% in Downloads

By - Evan Craighead

The alternative social media platform backed by former US President Donald Trump has failed to live up to its own expectations amid a series of technical problems and public relations issues stemming from the app's surprise wait list. The app has observed a 93% dip in weekly downloads since its launch week high of some 872,000 downloads.

Investment anxiety is mounting after the Trump Media & Technology Group (TMTG) failed to achieve a late March deadline imposed by CEO Devin Nunes, a congressman-turned-executive who said the app was slated to be "fully operational" by the month's end.

Back in February, TMTG launched 'Truth Social,' a social media platform backed by former US President Donald Trump that touts free speech and appears to be 45's response to "Big Tech" platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube—all of which have banned the former US president.

The endeavor came as a merger between TMTG and investors via a 'special purpose acquisition company,' or SPAC, called Digital World Acquisition Corp.

Trump's adult sons are now active on the platform, as well as an array of GOP lawmakers, including Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), Matt Gaetz (R-FL) and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA). However, the former US president has been glaringly inactive since his initial post.

At the same time, the site's newcomers have flocked to the former president's page, as 45's account has recently amassed more than 800,000 fans.

Shares of the SPAC have dropped 35% since March 4, including a 2% loss on Friday.

[Sources told Axios](#) that technical issues are the main barrier preventing app developers from eliminating the waitlist. Downloads have significantly declined to just 8,000 per day, compared to a 170,000-download high in February.

Flop or not, the SPAC appears to have piqued the interest of federal securities regulators who are now investigating the startup. A filing with the US Securities and Exchange Commission showed that the SPAC has opted to shield the identity of several individuals in leadership.

In addition to a lack of information on key leadership roles like chief financial officer (CFO), the SPAC also refused to disclose the names of investors who pledged some \$1 billion in private investment in public equity (PIPE) financing to assist in helping Truth Social go public.

The SPAC claimed that accounting delays were behind the delayed issuances.

Nunes and TMTG are expected to expand the Trump-labeled brand beyond social networks, and into the realm of news, streaming, and even a cloud-computing platform.

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Pentagon Confirms Guantanamo Bay Detainee Sufyian Barhoumi Repatriated to Native Algeria
By - Evan Craighead

Sufyian Barhoumi, 48, was initially captured in Pakistan in March 2002, and has remained at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility in Cuba for nearly two decades. Barhoumi did not face trial

during his detention, which appeared indefinite until August 2016, when the Algerian national was notified of his eligibility for repatriation.

The US Department of Defense confirmed in a Saturday announcement that Sufyan Barhoumi was successfully transferred from the Cuba-based detention facility to his native country of Algeria.

The 48-year-old Algerian national is subject to security and “humane treatment assurances” following his stint, according to the [Pentagon’s memo](#), citing conversations with foreign counterparts.

“The United States appreciates the willingness of Algeria, and other partners to support ongoing US efforts toward a deliberate and thorough process focused on responsibly reducing the detainee population and ultimately closing of the Guantanamo Bay facility,” the readout detailed.

The move comes more than five years after a Periodic Review Board (PRB) process “determined that law of war detention of Mr. Barhoumi was no longer necessary to protect against a continuing significant threat to the national security of the United States.”

The PRB process was established by an executive order issued on March 7, 2011, by then-US President Barack Obama. The panel is made up of one senior official representing the Pentagon, US Homeland Security Department, Department of Justice, State Department, as well as a representation from the Joint Staff and Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Officials selected for the administrative procedure are granted veto power over any recommendation.

The Algerian national’s transfer did not appear to be a top priority of Trump administration officials, as the matter was continually sidelined due to policy at the time. Trump, during his first presidential campaign, notably vowed to fill up the detention center with war criminals.

In 2017, then-Defense Secretary Ash Carter claimed that Barhoumi was not relocated to his home country due to “a variety of substantive concerns, shared by multiple agencies.” Per the PRB report, Barhoumi told the US that he was not affiliated with the Taliban* or al-Qaeda* affiliation, although he did admit to engaging in extremist activities.

Barhoumi’s repatriation process did not officially kick off until February 4, when US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin notified Congress of the department’s intent to repatriate Barhoumi to Algeria. By then, the detainee had been informed of his father’s passing.

Of the 37 detainees who remain at Guantanamo Bay, 18 are eligible for transfer; seven are eligible for a PRB; 10 are tied to ongoing military commissions process; and two have been convicted via the process.

Confirmation of Barhoumi’s repatriation marks the second transfer this year, and third repatriation from the detention facility since US President Joe Biden took office.

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Pyongyang Warns of ‘Merciless’ Response After Seoul Remarks on Missile Strike Capabilities
By - Evan Craighead

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have intensified in recent weeks due to Pyongyang continuing to conduct an unprecedented number of ballistic missile tests, including its first full intercontinental ballistic missile test since 2017. Seoul has since responded by touting its own weapons and missiles capable of striking Northern targets.

North Korea on Sunday moved to condemn South Korea's defense minister over remarks regarding Seoul's reported ability to swiftly strike "any target in North Korea."

Kim Jong Yo, the sister of North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un, argued that South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook's comments "further worsened the inter-Korean relations and military tension on the Korean peninsula," per a statement issued by state news media KCNA. Days prior, Suh claimed that Seoul would actively support its military to ensure it has the capability to deliver a robust and overwhelming response to North Korean missile threats.

At the time, the defense minister referred to the northern country as its "enemy."

Kim, who also serves as vice department director of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, noted that Pyongyang will have to "reconsider a lot of things" and that Seoul "may face a serious threat" as a result of verbally flexing its military capabilities.

Pak Jong Chon, secretary of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, asserted that North Korea, in the event of a preemptive strike, "will mercilessly direct all its military force into destroying major targets in Seoul and the South Korean army."

On Friday, the US imposed sanctions on five entities accused of providing support to the North Korean development of ballistic missiles and other possible weapons of mass destruction.

Heightened tensions come alongside the forthcoming transfer of presidential power from South Korean President Moon Jae-in to President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol.

Yoon has previously claimed that a preemptive strike may be South Korea's only hope in effectively countering Pyongyang's new hypersonic missiles. The president-elect also supports Seoul strengthening its relationship with the US and North Korea through a permanent three-way dialogue channel.

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UK Energy Minister: Britain Could Build Seven Nuclear Power Stations Amid Energy

Independence Push

By - Evan Craighead

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has proclaimed that it is time for Britain to make "big new bets" on nuclear energy if the country wants to become self-sufficient and lower exorbitant energy costs amid the imposition of sanctions on Russian gas.

British Business and Energy Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng has told The Sunday Telegraph that the UK is capable of building up to seven new nuclear power stations as part of its long-term goal to be self-sufficient in the energy sector.

"There is a world where we have six or seven sites in the UK", by 2050, Secretary Kwarteng told the outlet.

The energy secretary's comments reportedly come ahead of "Great British Nuclear", which is reportedly intended to act as a vehicle to skirt red tape and ultimately speed up the planning process for the nuclear sites.

The UK's nuclear-driven energy security strategy - slated to be unveiled on Thursday - will likely call on the government to commit to the construction of at least two large-scale nuclear plants by 2030.

[Government data shows](#) that, as of now, around 16% of Britain's electricity is attributed to nuclear sources. [Other estimates](#) have ranged from anywhere between 15 to 20%.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson recently told The Daily Telegraph that the country is in need of an energy supply that is "more secure, more sustainable, and less vulnerable to manipulation by others".

Moreover, the strategy must incorporate "power that can be relied upon even when the Sun isn't shining or the wind isn't blowing", Johnson noted.

The push for nuclear energy could also assist in the government's pledge to achieve "net-zero" emissions by 2050, as nuclear energy has been known to provide a "reliable source of low-carbon electricity".

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Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán Declares 'Great Victory' in General Election
By - Evan Craighead

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was projected to win a fourth consecutive term on Sunday as polls showed that the ruling Fidesz party and its junior party, the Hungarian Christian Democrats, were on track to retain its two-thirds supermajority by winning 133 seats in the 199-member parliament.

With more than 36.3% of votes counted, Viktor Orbán, Hungary's sitting prime minister, has declared an early victory in the country's general election.

Orbán's projected victory comes alongside polls showing that the ruling conservative government and its junior party will likely retain the parliament supermajority that has allowed the country to become an "illiberal democracy" during the prime minister's 12-year reign.

"Dear friends, this victory will also remain unforgettable for the rest of our lives," Orbán said, "because there were a lot of those that we needed to fight against: the 'left' at home, the 'international left' abroad, the Brussels bureaucrats, all the financial institutions of the Soros empire, the international media, and actually even the Ukrainian president."

Early reports show that support for the right-wing nationalist party is stronger than it was four years ago in Hungary's 106 individual constituencies.

Péter Márki-Zay, leader of the United for Hungary opposition bloc, acknowledged defeat in the general election shortly after the prime minister claimed victory.

Márki-Zay, who ran and won the 2018 mayoral election in Hódmezővásárhely, was unable to secure enough support in his own Hódmezővásárhely-Makó district. With more than 98% of votes counted, 52.24% supported Orbán, while only 39.71% backed the opposition leader.

"The truth is that Fidesz won this election ... I ask everyone to calm down, go home, love each other and get enough sleep," Márki-Zay told supporters after publicly accepting defeat. "The most important thing is that we are pure in soul, we are now standing not only before the Hungarian nation, but, more importantly, before God."

Both prime ministerial candidates addressed voters after casting their own ballots in the election.

According to the incumbent prime minister, the gravity of Sunday's election was major due to both the inclement weather and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. He asserted that while the conservative Fidesz and its junior party were on the side of peace, the opposition would likely roll back nationalist policies and make decisions that would likely lead the country into war.

"Vladimir Putin is not running in the elections," the prime minister told reporters when asked for his thoughts on the conflict in nearby Ukraine.

Orbán similarly quipped that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky would not be casting his ballot in Sunday's election.

During his own address, Márki-Zay attempted to rally young voters, counter talking points from the governing party, and highlight allegations of corruption.

"We today have a real election which is not only an opportunity to vote, but, for the first time in twelve years, an opportunity to opt for change," he said, accusing the incumbent government of gerrymandering, monopolizing Hungarian media, and "eliminating independent courts including the Constitutional Court."

The opposition leader also pushed back against allegations that his more liberal government would disrupt, or even cut off, energy ties with Russia.

"Russia would continue to need the money of EU member states as many EU members would also need Russian gas," Márki-Zay noted. "This is why it cannot come into question that either Germany, Hungary, or another member should put their own gas supplies at risk."

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NASA Postpones Critical Artemis 1 Dress Rehearsal Over Exposure Concerns During Fueling
By - Evan Craighead

NASA confirmed in a late Saturday release that at least four lightning strikes pounded the area around Launch Pad 39B, home of the agency's Space Launch System (SLS) megarocket.

Three towers and a catenary wire structure ultimately safeguarded the rocket from direct lightning impact, allowing technicians to continue their critical dress rehearsal.

Officials have postponed what was supposed to be a nearly 3-day 'wet dress rehearsal' for the Artemis 1 SLS rocket after team members of the moon mission found themselves unable to pressurize the mobile launcher used to provide propellant to the megarocket.

"Wet" dress rehearsals refer to tests in which a spacecraft's rockets are loaded with liquid propellant necessary for take off.

“The fans are needed to provide positive pressure to the enclosed areas within the mobile launcher and keep out hazardous gases,” NASA’s Madison Tuttle said in a statement. As a result, technicians were unable to safely proceed with the fueling portion of the test, which kicked off around 5:00 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time on Friday.

The fueling segment requires more than 700,000 gallons (3.2 million liters) of propellant to be pumped into SLS megarocket’s core stage and cryogenic propulsion stage.

NASA officials have said that teams are expected to continue the tanking process as early as Monday, depending on discussions regarding range and commodity availability.

Artemis 1 team members began fueling the megarocket Sunday morning, just hours after the area surrounding its upgraded launch pad endured severe weather, including at least four lightning strikes.

The SLS and its Orion crew capsule were spared from lightning strikes that could cause dayslong delays, including at least one strike deemed to be the strongest encountered by the new system. Both the SLS and Orion capsule were powered up, while the side-mounted solid rocket boosters and an interim cryogenic propulsion stage were off at the time.

“The new system also has an array of sensors, both on the ground and the mobile launcher, will help determine the rocket’s condition after a nearby lightning strike,” [tweeted Jeremy Parsons](#), NASA’s deputy manager of the Exploration Ground Systems.

The SLS rocket will launch NASA’s Orion spacecraft without a crew for its initial four-to-six-week moon mission later this year. Boeing, the space agency’s primary contractor, has been assisting with the development of the costly rocket since the early 2010s.

Despite the postponement, a livestream of the test has remained active since later Friday morning.

No live commentary or audio is likely to accompany the stream, as previously stated by NASA, citing International Traffic in Arms Regulation restrictions.

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Two US Navy Personnel Injured in Mishap Aboard Docked Nuclear Ballistic Submarine
By - Evan Craighead

Commissioned in 1997, the USS Louisiana (SSBN 743) is a 560-foot (171-metre) nuclear-powered submarine equipped with Trident ballistic missiles. The Ohio-class submarine’s current homeport is located in Bangor, Washington, at Naval Base Kitsap—one of four US Navy nuclear shipyards.

At least two US Navy personnel were taken to a local medical facility in Washington state after a mishap occurred during a routine air test on the USS Louisiana, Naval Base Kitsap’s Puget Sound Naval Shipyard & Intermediate Maintenance Facility confirmed in an 2 April release. Another five Navy personnel were evaluated by service medics at the scene and did not require further treatment, [per the memo](#). Both injured sailors were discharged from the medical facility on the same day.

Around noon local time on Saturday, the nuclear-powered ballistic submarine "experienced a problem with the forward logistics escape trunk during testing, resulting in the rapid depressurization of the compartment", officials said.

"The depressurization created a loud noise due to the escaping air and dislodged a scaffolding enclosure and other equipment".

Service officials signalled an intent to investigate the incident, although no probe was publicly announced in the release.

Compartment air tests are routinely conducted to ensure equipment maintains functionality.

The Louisiana's nuclear propulsion space was not impacted by the incident.

State and local authorities have also been notified of the situation.

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Jan. 6 Panel Has 'Intense Interest' in Seven-Hour Gap of White House Logs, Rep. Raskin Says
By - Evan Craighead

Last week, US Attorney General Merrick Garland proclaimed that he and the US Department of Justice are not allowing political agendas to impact their decisions on whether to pursue related criminal referrals recommended by the House Select Committee probing the US Capitol riot, as well as the full legislative chamber.

As the investigation into the US Capitol insurrection appears to be nearing a conclusion, questions still linger concerning a 7-hour gap in White House call logs provided to the 9-member panel via subpoena, according to Select Committee member Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD).

During a Sunday appearance on CBS' "Face the Nation", the Maryland Democrat detailed that the committee – made up of two Republicans and seven Democrats – is still trying to compile evidence to accurately represent the insurrection and whether there was indeed a "self-coup". "We are aware of other phone calls that took place during that time that included the president", Raskin said. "But we have no comprehensive fine-grain portrait of what was going on during that period. And that is obviously of intense interest to us".

The Select Committee may begin holding public hearings on the matter as early as May, Raskin said.

Because the panel lacks the authority to directly charge individuals with crimes, committee members have recently taken to directly pressuring the US Department of Justice and its leadership.

As of this article's publication, ex-White House strategist Steve Bannon is the only referral to result in a federal indictment.

Late last month, the group voted to recommend Trump-era trade adviser Peter Navarro and former White House Deputy Chief of Staff for Communications Dan Scavino for criminal contempt charges after both refused to cooperate with a congressional subpoena, and failed to appear at scheduled depositions.

Both recommendations now advance to a full vote in the House before it is sent to the DOJ.

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Will Smith Resigns From Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Over Chris Rock Slap - Report
By - Mary Manley

The news comes days after the "Oscars slap" in which actor Will Smith assaulted comedian Chris Rock during the Academy Awards last weekend in response to a joke Rock made about Will Smith's wife, Jada Pinkett Smith, who suffers from alopecia. Rock made a "G.I. Jane" joke, referring to the movie in which Demi Moore played a woman with a shaved head.

Will Smith announced on Friday that he is resigning from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. He added in the announcement that he is open to accepting any consequences that Academy board members may feel is appropriate.

"Change takes time," the actor wrote. "And I am committed to doing the work to ensure that I never again allow violence to overtake reason."

The actor lamented that the list of those he had "hurt" included Rock and his family, as well as his own family, adding, "I betrayed the trust of the Academy. I deprived other nominees and winners of their opportunity to celebrate and be celebrated for their extraordinary work."

The shocking career move made by the actor may be an attempt to stay afloat in the career storm he has landed himself in after he assaulted comedian Chris Rock on live television. Rock was hosting the Oscars when he made a joke about Jade Pinkett Smith. "Jada, I love you. 'G.I. Jane 2', can't wait to see it," he joked in reference to her shaved head.

In 2018 Jada Pinkett Smith revealed she has alopecia, which is a hair loss condition.

The apparent offense the comedian made in reference to his wife caused Will Smith to storm the stage while an unsuspecting Rock and audience watched in confusion as well as laughter as Smith struck Rock with a hard slap. Some thought it was part of the show until the "King Richard" actor got back to his seat and started yelling, "Keep my wife's name out your f***** mouth!" The audience full of a-list stars fell silent when they realized the incident was not scripted.

Will Smith did not apologize to Rock in his acceptance [speech](#) when he won an Oscar for best actor for his performance as Serena and Venus Williams' father Richard Williams in the film "King Richard". He apologized to the Academy but not to Rock, this failure in addition to his decision to attend a party after the Awards show did not sit well with members of the Academy. Chris Rock has not fully addressed the incident. During his stand up show in Boston on Wednesday night he said, "How was your weekend?" To a cheering crowd. He then joked, "I had a whole show I wrote before this weekend. I'm still kind of processing what happened. So, at some point I'll talk about that s***. And it will be serious and funny." Thus far he has not issued an official statement on the assault.

Thus far no actor has ever been stripped of their Academy Award. A source told [Variety](#) that the Academy is still conducting a disciplinary process as well as an investigation into the "slap".

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US Judge Denies Ghislaine Maxwell's Bid for New Trial Despite Juror's Mistake

By - Mary Manley

The ruling comes a month after a juror testified in court that he had made an "inadvertent mistake" in filling out his jury questionnaire form. The juror said under oath on March 8 that he had failed to indicate that he was a victim of sexual abuse, though he was sexually abused by a stepbrother and friend when he was 9 and 10 years old.

US Judge Alison J. Nathan ruled on Friday that the juror's mistake will not be enough to cause a mistrial, and denied Ghislaine Maxwell's request for a retrial. And while the juror said that his past did not influence his approach as a juror during his decision making, Maxwell's [lawyers](#) argued that "had he told the truth, he would have been challenged, and excluded, for cause."

Maxwell's lawyers were hopeful to take action once the juror had revealed to the news media that he had informed other jurors during deliberations about his own history of sexual abuse. The juror had explained that he could remember "some details, but not everything" when it came to his own sexual abuse experiences. The reliability of victims' memories was a key point of contention in the case.

Judges, however, are not allowed to know what is said in the jury deliberation room, but may examine a juror's questionnaire made during the jury selection.

Nathan found that the juror made "several direct, unambiguous statements to multiple media outlets about his own experience that do not pertain to jury deliberations, and that cast doubt on the accuracy of his responses" in the jury selection process; she also acknowledged the mistake he made on his juror [questionnaire](#).

But the prosecution noted that eight other potential jurors reported having experienced sexual abuse or harassment and were still able to remain in the jury pool without any objection from Maxwell's lawyers.

"It was entirely appropriate for Juror 50 to sit on this jury," the prosecutors wrote, "and nothing about his service as a juror calls into question the integrity of the verdict in this case."

The former British socialite was convicted in December 2021 on five of the six [charges](#) she was accused of, including sex-trafficking, conspiracy to entice individuals under the age of 17 to travel in interstate commerce with intent to engage in illegal sexual activity, conspiracy to transport individuals under the age of 17 to travel in interstate commerce with intent to engage in illegal sexual activity, and conspiracy to commit sex trafficking of individuals under the age of 18.

Maxwell's conviction stemmed from the predatory crimes committed by American financier Jeffrey Epstein, who was said to be either her boyfriend- or friend as their relationship was never fully disclosed. Epstein killed himself in prison in 2019 at the age of 66 while awaiting his own trial on federal sex-trafficking charges, though he had pleaded guilty before his death. He was found dead in his cell at the Metropolitan Correction Center the morning of August 10, 2019. The medical examiner determined he had [hanged](#) himself with a bedsheet.

Maxwell's trial is often viewed by the media as the trial that Epstein never had. During her trial, she was described by prosecutors as a serial predator, who, between 1994 and 2004, preyed on powerless, oftentimes financially poor, underage girls and lured them in for Epstein. The defense has argued that Maxwell is paying for the Epstein's crimes although the jury ultimately convicted the socialite.

The trial lasted for only seventeen days. She is expected to be sentenced to 65 years in prison on June 28.

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Piece of Blood-Stained Dress From Lincoln Assassination Heads to Auction in New York
By - Mary Manley

The dress, which belonged to British stage actress Laura Keene, bears the blood of President Abraham Lincoln, who was assassinated at Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC, in 1865. A section of the dress which has the blood of the 16th US president will be selling for the blood-soaked price of \$125,000.

Are you a history buff who likes to get close to historical artifacts? Like really, really close? Now may be your chance.

The dress is being sold by Daniel R. Weinberg, who owns the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop in Chicago. The dress will be available to purchase later this month at the New York International Antiquarian Book Fair ([NYIABF](#)) at the Park Avenue Armory beginning April 22.

"This particular costume fragment, though small, carries a great moment, actually having been at the scene of the crime," Weinberg said of the blood-stained dress. "The blood is much darker than [other artifacts], indicating that it was close to the wound."

President Lincoln had been attending a performance of the comedy play "Our American Cousin" in which Laura Keene was to perform, but actor John Wilkes Booth, a Confederate sympathizer, shot Lincoln in the back of the head during the play. He jumped from the presidential box, breaking his leg, but escaped Washington, DC on [horseback](#).

A 23-year-old doctor named Charles Leale was in the audience at the time. He attempted to save the president while Keene tried to help, carrying water to the scene and at one point even held the president's bleeding head in her lap - hence, where the blood stain came into effect. In the sale, is this small scrap of bloody fabric along with a note, which is a response to one of Keene's friends who had asked for the president's bodily matter. The [note](#) reads: "I accede your request. Very truly yours, Laura Keene." The message is dated May 20th, 1865.

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Dog Lovers Beware: Study Shows Cat Owners Are Better Looking and Have More Sex
By - Mary Manley

It seems dogs have once again been outdone by their feline nemesis, but this time it appears to be all thanks to a parasite called the *Toxoplasma gondii*.

A study published in PeerJ [journal](#) by lead researcher Javier Borraz-Leon and his team from University of Turku in Finland, has found evidence that suggests toxoplasma-infected individuals were considered more attractive and even healthier than those not infected by the virus.

[Toxoplasmosis](#) is an infection caused by a single-celled parasite named *Toxoplasma gondii*. It's possible that more than 40 million people in the United States may be infected by the bug, but what exactly does that have to do with the frisky feline in your house?

The parasite will linger in your cat's litter box, so if you aren't careful while cleaning it out, or if the cat's poop comes into contact with something close to where you eat, you could accidentally swallow the parasite.

Most healthy people shouldn't be worried though, as an individual's immune system usually works to keep the parasite from doing too much damage. However, those with compromised immune systems, as well as persons who are pregnant, must be much more cautious.

But while most parasites cause a whole range of health issues, researchers of this study found that the parasite might be the best aid in helping you score a date. In this case, the researchers believe the parasite infects its host in such a way as to manipulate its chances of reproducing.

"There is evidence that *Toxoplasma gondii* (*T. gondii*) manipulates phenotypic characteristics of its intermediate hosts to increase its spread," the study says, meaning that the parasite is most likely trying to help you score more matches on your dating app.

For this study, researchers compared the "self-perceived attractiveness, number of sexual partners, number of minor ailments, body mass index, mate value, handgrip strength, facial fluctuating asymmetry, and facial width-to-height ratio" between persons who were infected by *Toxoplasma* and those who were not infected. They also asked an independent group of 205 raters to judge the attractiveness and "perceived" health of the two subject groups.

Their findings? Men and women who were infected by the parasite had more symmetrical facial features, and were perceived as being more attractive and healthier than non-infected subjects. The infected female participants also weighed 10% less, had more confidence, and a higher number of sexual partners than those who were not infected. Men who were infected were also 3 centimeters taller, with dominant masculine facial features, and had higher levels of testosterone.

Those infected by the *Toxoplasma gondii* parasite also showed differences in their mood and temperament. "...infected men are more expedient, jealous, dogmatic, and suspicious, whereas infected women are more conscientious, persistent, warm-hearted, outgoing, and moralistic than non-infected subjects," the study notes.

"The parasite may produce changes in the appearance and behavior of the human host, either as a by-product of the infection or as the result of the manipulation of the parasite to increase its spread to new hosts," said lead researcher Javier Borráz-León, of Finland's University of Turku. While the parasite has been studied before, this is one of the first significant studies of its effects on a human's phenotypic characteristics.

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Will Smith Just Resigned From the Academy, But What Does That Mean Exactly?

By - Mary Manley

On Friday, Will Smith announced that he is resigning from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The news comes almost a week after the "King Richard" actor slapped comedian Chris Rock when he made a joke about Smith's wife Jada Pinkett Smith, who suffers from alopecia, a hair loss condition.

Since the "Oscars slap", actor Will Smith has been condemned by the Academy, which will be conducting a formal investigation and disciplinary process regarding the assault later this month. In response to the disciplinary hearing notice, Smith announced Friday he would be resigning from the Academy for his actions, but what exactly does it mean when an actor resigns?

For starters, Smith will get to keep his Oscar for Best Actor. He will also still be invited to future Academy Award ceremonies, as well as being eligible for a future nomination by the Academy. What it does mean is that Smith will no longer be a "voting" member of the Academy.

In a statement to NBC News, David Rubin, the president of the Academy, confirmed that members had received and accepted Smith's resignation.

The 52-year-old actor won an Oscar for his performance in "King Richard", but the attention on Sunday night had already been stolen by the slapping incident that came after comedian Chris Rock made a joke in light of Pinkett Smith's hair loss.

Rock's "G.I. Jane" joke was in reference to the 1997 movie in which actress Demi Moore played a woman with a shaved head. Although video had shown Smith initially chuckling at the remark, he later stormed the stage and slapped Rock in an alleged effort to defend his wife.

Though the assault was televised, Rock allegedly declined to file a police report regarding the event. Will Packer, the broadcast producer for the ceremony that night, told ABC News in an interview that the Los Angeles Police Department approached Rock and asked him if he wanted to press charges.

"They were saying, you know, this is battery, was the word they used in that moment", [Packer](#) said. "They said, 'we will go get him. We are prepared. We're prepared to get him right now. You can press charges. We can arrest him'".

Packer said that the police department was giving the comedian options, but Rock was "dismissive of those options", explaining, "He was like, 'No, I'm fine'. He was like, 'no, no, no'". Rock spoke about the incident for the first time on Wednesday in a comedy show in Boston. He did not fully address being slapped by Will Smith. Instead, he joked: "I had a whole show I wrote before this weekend. I'm still kind of processing what happened. So, at some point I'll talk about that s**t. And it will be serious and funny".

Smith has referred to the incident as "shocking, painful, and inexcusable".

"Change takes time and I am committed to doing the work to ensure that I never again allow violence to overtake reason", Smith [wrote](#) in his resignation announcement. He added that he would be accepting "all consequences" from the Academy's Board of Governors.

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German Man Arrested After Getting COVID-19 Jab 87 Times in Scheme to Help Anti-Vaxxers
By - Mary Manley

The news of the man's alleged crimes comes months after anti-vaccination protests were held on the streets of Berlin in January, when the German government announced proposed plans for mandatory vaccinations of their citizens.

A German man who was selling vaccination passports to anti-vaxxers was vaccinated in four different states, including Saxony, where he received 87 COVID-19 vaccinations. He reportedly went to at least three vaccination centers a day during his heist before he was ultimately arrested.

The 61-year-old is presently under investigation by authorities in Saxony, with help from authorities in other states as well.

He was reportedly caught red-handed after a health care worker recognised him in Dresden, said Kai Kranich, a spokesperson for the German Red Cross. When he arrived to get another shot at a vaccination [center](#) in the town of Eilenburg near Leipzig, the health care staff called the police and he was subsequently taken into police custody.

The man would reportedly enter a vaccination site with a blank vaccination document. After receiving his vaccine dose he would use the pages with information on the vaccine batch numbers and sell them to anti-vaxxers.

While the suspect used his real name and date of birth to register for the jab, he did not present his health insurance, which would have made health care officials more aware of the heinous actions.

"A national vaccine register or a coronavirus vaccine register would have shed light on the case immediately," Knut Köhler, a spokesperson for the Saxony state medical association told [Frei Presse](#), who first reported on the incident.

Although over 75% of eligible people in Germany are already vaccinated, there remains a minority of individuals who are opposed to vaccination, sometimes referred to as "anti-vaxxers." Germany is also behind in their vaccination rates when compared to other European countries. Spain reported that 85% of their people are fully vaccinated, while over 91% of people in Portugal are vaccinated.

[Protests](#) against vaccines in Germany increased in January of this year, when the government announced that they would be scheduling mandatory vaccinations for the month of March, but because of backlash from the "far right" anti-vaccination groups, the vote on vaccine mandates was pushed to the beginning of [April](#).

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'Smoky Casinos That Smell Bad': Grammys Want Out of 'Gross A**' Las Vegas

By - Mary Manley

Due to rising COVID-19 cases, the 64th annual Grammy Awards moved to Las Vegas, a city roughly 300 miles away from its usual hometown of Los Angeles. The show was supposed to take stage at the Crypto Arena on January 31, but will take place at the MGM Grand Garden Arena on Sunday.

The music industry has officially lost its cool. The Grammys weekend in Las Vegas has turned into a nightmare since their move to a city that doesn't have the same "expert tailors like Los Angeles," a source told Page Six.

"Stylists are having meltdowns because there are no expert tailors like LA, and they have to lug couture gowns and tuxedos through smoky casinos that smell bad," the source [said](#).

The move has upset many of the stylish gentry of Los Angeles, with several industry sources reporting it to be a "disaster" regarding their lack of access to luxury goods and services.

"People are stressed and frazzled running up and down the strip. There are multiple conferences going on, a big poker event and getting luxury cars for artists has been a disaster," an industry source said.

A music publicity agent - who will not be attending - reportedly told Page Six that the move has caused what is typically a cool and stylish event to descend into a nightmare because "no one wants to go to that gross a** town."

Musicians have also had to downsize their entourages due to the move, and music industry events like large, flashy label parties will also be a no-go. A source said that the Grammys has essentially been downsized this year, because "no one really wants to go."

But comedian Trevor Noah has not been deterred by the setting of "gross a**" Las Vegas, and is ready to host the show on Sunday, positively remarking that Las Vegas is "a perfect place to have a celebration."

"There's an element of this [show] that's like a music camp," Noah [said](#). "I think it's going to bring a different energy, and I'm excited to be a part of it."

However, certain musicians have decided to skip out on the event, including Drake, The Weeknd, who is boycotting the awards, and Kanye West (Ye), who was banned from performing at the show after calling Noah a racial slur on [Instagram](#).

Despite all the drama, stars like Billie Eilish, Olivia Rodrigo, Lil Nas X, H.E.R. and Jon Batiste will be ready to perform on the Las Vegas strip.

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Spring Break Craze, Tech Issues Prompt US Airlines to Cancel & Delay Thousands of Flights
By - Mary Manley

As the worst aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic begin to fall away due to vaccination rates, those who wish to broaden their horizon beyond the living room are seeking to travel, and their desire to do so is feverish. The traveling boom is here, but are airlines prepared for their eager customers?

A thunderstorm that's hitting Florida combined with technology issues faced by Southwest Airlines, as well as a union strike from pilots working for [Delta](#), [American](#), and [Alaska](#) Airlines have wreaked havoc on spring breakers this weekend. Through Saturday and Sunday, more than 3,200 flights were canceled and 7,000 flights were delayed, according to the flight-tracking site [FlightAware](#).

Airports in Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, Orlando and even Baltimore experienced disruptions this weekend. Airlines struggling to serve customers during the busy weekend included JetBlue, Southwest, Alaska Airlines, Frontier, Spirit, and American Airlines. But by Sunday, several airlines reportedly said things were getting back to normal.

Southwest Airlines canceled about 1,000 Florida flights over the weekend due to "weather and airspace congestion," as well as "intermittent performance issues following routine overnight maintenance of some of [its] backend [technology](#)," but announced that as of 1 p.m. on Sunday, they had no more cancellations.

"We offer heartfelt apologies to our customers for any inconvenience, and gratitude to our employees who are working diligently to make it up to them," Southwest wrote. "We'll continue to update customers whose journey with us today might be delayed as a result of the now-resolved issues."

During their technology dilemma, Southwest also reported that their crew members were unable to find hotel rooms, an issue they also dealt with last year. "With widespread cancellations in the midst of a busy travel season, hotel rooms were unavailable in a few cities, and late day crew timeouts in those cities meant that some crew members were left without rooms," Southwest said in a letter to crew members on [Sunday](#). "We take that shortfall seriously and are working to follow up with affected crew members."

Alaska Airlines also had weekend flight cancellations beginning on Friday that affected more than 37,000 customers, with the airline saying on [Sunday](#) that even more cancellations were possible. But it doesn't look as though weather or technology were to blame for the airline's cancellations; 3,100 pilots employed by Alaska Airlines are striking in an effort to change their contracts so as to receive better job security and schedule stability.

With flight bookings surging, airline CEOs are sure to make a pretty penny, but Alaska Airlines pilots say their company failed to prepare for the travel upswing. "Alaska Airlines failed to properly plan for increased travel demand and take the steps necessary to ensure it attracted and retained pilots," the pilots union said on Friday.

The demand for travel is coming at a time when rates of those being fully vaccinated in the US have reached 66.1%, with 218 million Americans receiving their jabs. A [McKinsey](#) survey from the summer of last year revealed travel to be the second-most desired activity among respondents following dining out.

And despite a surge in airfare prices following rising gas costs, spring breakers still packed airports this season, with an average of more than 2.1 million travelers going through airport security checkpoints everyday for the past two [weeks](#). This same time two years ago, airports were essentially ghost towns. And most travelers are flying domestically for pleasure, while business and international travel struggle to keep up.

In February, American consumers spent \$6.6 billion on booking airline tickets.

"The demand (for domestic leisure travel) is higher than it's ever been," said the former American Airlines CEO Doug Parker at the J.P. Morgan Industrials Conference on March 15.

"And I can tell you that at American, we didn't just have our record day, we had three days that were the best, highest days ever. Two of them were 15% higher than any day we've ever had," he added.

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Sacramento Shooting: Police Chief Reveals 'Multiple Shooters' Left 6 Dead, 12 Injured
By - Mary Manley

Six people were killed and another 12 were injured near 10th and K streets in the California city of Sacramento on Saturday night. Police arrived at the scene of the shooting which took place at around 2 a.m. A stolen firearm was recovered, but police are still searching for their suspects. A shooting broke out after an argument on [Sunday](#) in downtown Sacramento that killed three men and three women while leaving three others to battle gunshot wounds at UC Davis Medical Center, while a fourth person was taken to Sutter Hospital. Including the four who were taken to hospitals, at least 12 people were left with injuries. However, information on their condition has yet to be released.

"Officers began lifesaving measures to multiple victims on scene," police said. "Despite these efforts, six victims were pronounced deceased at the scene."

Thus far, the only information released about the shooting by Sacramento Police Chief Kathy Lester includes that there was a stolen gun found at the scene, and that "multiple shooters" were involved. She [added](#) that police were patrolling an area near the shooting site two blocks from the State Capitol at 2 a.m. when they heard gunfire, prompting them to rush to the scene. Authorities are now asking the public for assistance in capturing their suspect. Forty evidence markers could be seen on the street tied to the crime, and police seem to be focusing on an area of the street outside of the Sharif Fine Jewelry store. The area where the shooting took place is near restaurants, bars and nightclubs. The nightclubs typically close at 2 a.m.

Eyewitness Kelsey Schar, 18, was staying on the fourth floor of Citizen Hotel when she said he heard gunshots, as well as flashes in the dark, prompting her to look out her window where she "saw a guy running and just shooting," she told the Associated [Press](#).

Eyewitness Madalyn Woodard, a friend of Schar, added that she saw a crowd in the street scatter during the gunfire and a girl who seemed to have been shot in the arm laying on the ground as security guards from a nightclub nearby ran over to help her stop the bleeding. A video posted to Twitter shows a fight breaking out followed by the sounds of gunshots. A police camera also managed to capture part of the shooting, according to Lester, as well as hundreds of pieces of evidence on the scene.

"This morning our city has a broken heart," Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg said. "We don't know all the facts, but we know there were mass casualties in a very short amount of time."

"The first thing I saw was one of the victims, blood all over her, screaming that she had lost her sister, and a mother running up trying to find out if her son was one of the victims," said Berry Accius, a community activist. "Something you never want to wake up to," he added. "Another cowardly act, a senseless act of violence that should have never happened."

Accius commented on Sunday's violence, saying, "Here we are again, a month after five people dying, we're here with six." Accius is urging city officials to address issues surrounding gun violence, warning that the gun violence in poverty-stricken communities, which he says government officials lack investment in, will soon spread.

Sunday's shooting marks the third time in the US this year that at least six people have been murdered during a mass shooting. It is also the second mass shooting in Sacramento in the last five weeks. On February 28, David [Mora](#) killed his three daughters, a chaperone and himself during a supervised visitation while in a church. Mora used a homemade semi-automatic rifle, despite his restraining order which prohibited him from possessing a firearm.

"What we do know at this point is that another mass casualty shooting has occurred, leaving families with lost loved ones, multiple individuals injured and a community in grief," said California Governor Gavin Newsom. "The scourge of gun violence continues to be a crisis in our country, and we must resolve to bring an end to this carnage."

US President Joe Biden issued a [statement](#) late Sunday in acknowledgement of the shooting, noting that "America once again mourns for another community devastated by gun violence." He went on to call on congressional lawmakers to ban ghost guns, assault weapons, high-capacity magazines and require background checks for all firearm sales, among other measures to ensure comprehensive gun control.

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Israel Winds Up on WHO's 'Outbreak Countries' After Spike in Polio Cases
By - Mary Manley

The rise in polio cases began on 8 March when a four year-old was diagnosed with the disabling disease. The boy was not vaccinated. As of Sunday, there were eight more confirmed cases of polio in Jerusalem, which had initially been polio-free since 1988.

New cases of the poliovirus among unvaccinated children in [Jerusalem](#) have caused the World Health Organisation to put Israel back on their list of polio "outbreak countries".

The country was declared polio-free in 1988, but the first case of the virus since then showed up on 8 March when a four year-boy started to show symptoms. Since then, eight more cases of the virus have been confirmed, all among unvaccinated children.

The new cases have prompted the Health Ministry to launch an operation that will watch for new cases of the poliovirus. They have also initiated a public awareness campaign to educate parents on vaccinating their children.

Some children in Israel were not able to receive doses of their routine vaccinations due to school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; however, schools are just one of several places where children can be vaccinated. Dr Sharon Alroy-Preis, who is the head of public health services at the Israeli Ministry of Health, has stated that this is not the primary issue in vaccinating these children.

"The situation we are seeing in Jerusalem is not just a result of [closures during] COVID", said Alroy-Preis. "There are whole communities that choose not to vaccinate, for ideological reasons

or technical reasons. They have too many children to bring to get vaccinated, or the schedule is too much to keep up with".

"It is a challenge for several reasons", she added. "First, due to fake news, suddenly everything has a question mark over it. Even vaccines that we have had for years and that we've seen eliminate diseases, suddenly they are being questioned".

Alroy-Preis also noted that because the poliovirus only shows flu-like symptoms in 10%-20% of cases, there is a likelihood that there are "hundreds of children in the Jerusalem area walking around with the virus who do not know they have it".

Traces of the virus have also been discovered in the sewage systems of Jerusalem, Beit Shemesh, Tiberias, and Modiin [IIIT](#).

The ministry fears that the virus will spread outside of Jerusalem and reach other parts of Israel, and as such they will be working on a "countrywide operation", says Alroy-Preis, adding that only parents of unvaccinated children should be concerned. "Most parents do vaccinate their children, and we are just filling in the cracks".

The [poliovirus](#) mainly affects those aged younger than five, and a majority of those infected will not have any visible symptoms. One out of four people with the infection will have flu-like symptoms that include a sore throat, fever, nausea, stomach pain, and a headache. But less than one out of 100 of those infected by the poliovirus will develop much more serious health issues such as paresthesia, meningitis, and even paralysis.

In the past month, more than 18,000 children in Jerusalem have received a dose of their polio vaccine thanks to the ministry's efforts to ramp up vaccination rates.

But as of now, Israel will be included on the WHO's Global Polio Eradication Initiative's list of countries with polio outbreaks among 28 other countries. Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia, and Ukraine are also on the list of areas with outbreaks. These countries had managed to eradicate polio in the past, but the virus has since resurfaced. Only two countries have never ceased transmission of the virus, those being Afghanistan and [Pakistan](#).

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Duke & Duchess of Cambridge Ready for Move Closer to Queen Elizabeth Amid Prince Andrew Concerns

By - Mary Manley

Due to fear that disgraced Prince Andrew is getting too close to his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge are choosing to move closer to the Queen this summer in an effort to put the family's skeleton back in the closet.

William and Kate plus three: Prince George (8), Princess Charlotte (6), and Prince Louis (3), are eyeing up property this summer in order to move closer to their grandmother the Queen this summer, but you won't catch this couple eyeing up any old ranch on Zillow. The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge have begun their search and have already looked at several royal mansions in Windsor.

Kate, 40, and Will, 39, have ruled out Fort Belvedere, which belonged to the Queen's uncle King Edward VIII and his lover Wallis Simpson, the woman whom King Edward abdicated the throne for so he could marry.

There were also rumours that suggested the pair may have looked at Adelaide Cottage as well, which was built in 1831 by King William IV for his wife Queen Adelaide. The cottage rests in the shadow of Windsor Castle, the Queen's official residence, as well as the oldest and largest inhabited castle in the [world](#).

The couple reportedly took a peek at Prince Andrew's Royal Lodge, a 31-bedroom mansion he might lose his rights to due to his sex abuse scandal tied to disgraced American financier Jeffrey Epstein, a convicted serial sex offender and paedophile who committed suicide while awaiting trial.

One of Epstein's alleged victims named Virginia Giuffre says that he raped and sexually abused her when she was 17. A photo shows Prince Andrew and Giuffre together. "I am holding Prince Andrew accountable for what he did to me", Giuffre said in a [statement](#) after successfully suing Prince Andrew. "The powerful and the rich are not exempt from being held responsible for their actions".

There is growing tension in the family as certain royals believe the now disgraced Andrew is trying to use his closeness to the Queen as a life-line back into society's good graces. While the [Queen](#) has stripped her second son (and ninth in line to the throne) of his royal title and military honours, sources say Andrew is spending more and more time with her especially since the passing of her husband Prince Philip.

The Queen allowed Andrew to walk her into [Westminster](#) Abbey at Prince Philip's memorial service, despite the Queen's eldest son Prince Charles and grandson William reportedly begging her not to. Sources say there is now a growing concern that he will use the Queen's Platinum Jubilee weekend in June as another stepping stone back into the "good graces" of society.

"The need to move to Windsor is growing more and more. Andrew spends a lot of time with the Queen. He lives next door and is always there for her. During the COVID lockdown, the family were glad Andrew was always on hand", a [source](#) said.

"There is not a man, woman, or child who would not say he had every right to be at Philip's thanksgiving. But the family have been adamant there's no way back", they added. "There are real fears that despite being banished from The Firm in January, he is using his closeness to the Queen as a springboard back into public life".

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Chicago Announces \$12.5M Program to Help Residents Pay for Gas, Transit
By - Ian DeMartino

With gas prices and inflation rising nationwide, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot has announced a new program designed to help Chicago residents deal with the crisis.

The city of Chicago is allocating \$12.5 million for prepaid gas and public transportation cards for residents, [in an effort](#) to ease the effects of rising gas prices in the Windy City, Mayor Lori Lightfoot announced in a press conference today.

The newly announced Chicago Moves program will provide 50,000 gas cards worth \$150 each and 100,000 pre-loaded public transit cards worth \$50 each.

The cards will be handed out in a lottery system and will be restricted to residents of Chicago over the age of 18, who make 140% or less of the Chicago area's median income and hold a valid vehicle city sticker. It is unclear from the announcement if residents applying for the public transit cards will be required to hold a vehicle city sticker.

The cards will be given out in a lottery system in 10,000 increments. Residents can begin applying for the cards on April 27th, pending approval from the city council.

"People have to be able to get to work, school, places of worship, medical offices, grocery stores," Mayor Lightfoot stated at the press conference.

Illinois has some of the highest gas prices in the country outside of the West Coast. The national average is \$4.225 compared to \$4.463 in Illinois and \$4.843 in Chicago, according to the American Automobile Association (AAA). Prices have been rising nationally since NATO imposed sanctions on Russia in response to the special operation in Ukraine.

The Mayor also announced that while she is not accusing anyone of price gouging, she is going to ask Attorney General Kwame Raoul to look into the possibility.

"I'm very concerned about gas gouging, and I'm not accusing anyone, but it's worthy of the Attorney General to look at this, because the escalation is really pricing people out," the mayor said.

This is the first program of its kind in a major American city. Some states have been pausing state taxes on gasoline, something Illinois and the city of Chicago have been considering. That move is opposed by Illinois' Civic Federation because of the effect it would have on infrastructure funding.

Chicago has a \$0.08 per gallon gas tax, which adds to the \$0.06 tax from Cook County and the \$0.39 tax from the state of Illinois.

The gas cards will only be spendable on gasoline and will be limited to gas stations within the city limits of Chicago.

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Flamingo Spotted off Texas Coast, 17 Years After its Escape from a Zoo
By - Ian DeMartino

Greater flamingos are not native to the United States, but the birds' non-migratory lifestyle and unique look make them popular attractions at zoos across the nation.

A greater flamingo that escaped a Kansas zoo 17 years ago during a storm has been spotted off the Gulf Coast of Texas.

Flamingo No. 492, lovingly nicknamed 'Pink Floyd' by its former captors, was spotted by fishing guide David Foreman and a friend in Port Lavaca. He had spent years telling visitors that any flamingos they thought they saw were actually roseate spoonbills.

Roseate spoonbills share signature pink feathers with flamingos, but have shorter legs and a different beak profile.

"It was just one of those humbling moments," Foreman [told The Guardian](#), "where you've told all these people over the years that there's no flamingos in Texas, and, damn, here's a flamingo." Pink Floyd and another Flamingo, no. 347, escaped the Sedgwick County Zoo during a storm in 2005. Zoo employees had not yet clipped the birds' wings, enabling the escape. No. 347 has not been seen since.

But Pink Floyd, originally from Africa, has been exploring America since its release. The bird has been spotted in Wisconsin, Louisiana and Texas over the years. It was three years old when it escaped, which would put it in its 20s today. Flamingos can live into their 40s in the wild.

Foreman captured video of the bird, which has been shared on Texas's Park and Wildlife Twitter account.

<https://twitter.com/TPWDnews/status/1508434039992160265>

Officials were able to confirm that the flamingo is indeed no. 492 by spotting the bird's leg band identifier on the video, according to [local news reports](#).

According to Paul Rose, co-chair for the flamingo specialists of the International Union for Conservation of Nature via The Guardian, flamingos don't migrate seasonally. Instead, they are considered "itinerant nomads" that move only when needed.

"They will leave a particular area for a new area if food resources are not plentiful, or if they need to go and breed," Rose told The Guardian. "So if this flamingo had found everything it required in one particular wetland, he would stay there. That's why they're generally quite easy birds to cater for in the zoo."

Flamingos are social animals, so while the Texas Gulf Coast provides the bird with warm temperatures, food and the shallow wetlands flamingos prefer, it is missing out on the companionship it would have received in its natural habitat or the zoo.

In 2006, no. 492 was spotted with a Caribbean flamingo who likely made its way to the United States on the winds from a tropical storm, but the two birds have not been spotted together since 2013.

There are no plans to recapture Pink Floyd because, according to local news reports, zoo officials say it would be difficult to do without disturbing local wildlife.

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Biden: Undocumented Migrants Will Be Deported Immediately, Even Without Title 42
By - Ian DeMartino

Biden was elected partially on the promise of a more humane immigration policy than his predecessor. With more immigrants arriving at the US-Mexico border than before, Republicans and some Democrats are calling for a return to Trump-era policies.

US President Joe Biden announced Thursday that undocumented migrants attempting to cross the border will be deported immediately. The proclamation comes as the Trump-era policy Title 42 is set to be rescinded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in May. Title 42 enables the border patrol to immediately remove migrants from the country without allowing them to apply for refugee status. During the 2020 campaign, Biden [called the policy](#) “inhumane.”

Yet the coming end of Title 42 has Republicans and some Democrats fearful about a possible wave of undocumented immigrants attempting to cross the southern border. Title 42 was put in place by former US President Donald Trump at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ostensibly designed to stop the spread of COVID-19 through immigration, it has become a policy whose only function can be to limit refugees, as the United States already has the most COVID-19 cases and deaths in the world.

“To be clear, people who cross the border without legal authorization will be placed immediately in deportation procedures,” White House Communications Director Kate Bedingfield said. “And, if they cannot certify their stay in the United States, they will be returned quickly to their countries.”

More than 1.6 million migrants have been deported under the Trump and Biden administrations, according to [The Daily Mail](#). However, children under the age of 18 became exempt from Title 42 under Biden.

Migrant advocacy groups have been urging the Biden administration to end Title 42, [referring to the practice](#), as Biden did, as inhumane. Biden has had to juggle his campaign promises with push back from members of his own party.

Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV) has urged Biden to keep Title 42 in place, as Sen. Maggie Hassan (D-NH) tweeted she is concerned that the administration does not have a plan to deal with a potential surge in immigrants.

During the campaign, then-candidate [Biden promised](#) to increase the number of refugees into the country from Trump’s historically low 15,000 to 123,000. However, he revised that number to a more modest 62,500 for fiscal year 2021 once in office. [According to CNBC](#), the administration ended up only allowing in 11,411 refugees during that time, the lowest since the Refugee Act passed in 1980. Biden did increase the number to 125,000 for fiscal 2022, with 15,000 for Latin America and the Caribbean.

It is unclear how or if the 100,000 refugees from Ukraine that the United States plans to let in will affect that number. Approximately 10,000 spots [were designated](#) for Europe and Central Asia, with another 10,000 set aside to increase each region’s cap if needed, but the [White House said](#) it would not require an increase to the 125,000 figure because they “don’t currently envision the need to go beyond that.”

Many of the migrants arriving at the southern border come from the “Golden Triangle” of Latin American countries: El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. It is worth acknowledging the United States’ role in those countries and how its backing of regime change contributed to the refugee crisis in present day.

In 1954, the [CIA orchestrated](#) a coup d’etat to overthrow the first democratically-elected leader of Guatemala, with US support of the Guatemalan government continuing well into the 1980s.

Former US President Ronald Reagan poured [billions of dollars](#) to prop up a right-wing government in El Salvador that utilized death squads and killed over 75,000 Salvadorans, most of them civilians.

In 2009, segments of the US government supported a coup d'etat in Honduras, despite public claims of neutrality by the Obama administration, according to an investigation [by The Intercept](#). It could be argued that these three countries still have not recovered from coups orchestrated or supported by the US government.

In February 2021, the Biden administration signed an executive order, called the Root Causes Initiative, earmarking \$4 billion in aid to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras over the next four years. According to Marisa Limón Garza, deputy director of Hope Border Institute, an organization that is a part of the Root Causes Initiative, there is still a long way to go before immigration will be properly addressed in this way.

“The question becomes: How do we move beyond deterrence tactics that are outdated and don't really work,” Limón Garza [told Devex](#). “And how do we think about more humanitarian, thoughtful approaches while also addressing those drivers of migration?”

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First Audio Recordings of Mars Reveals Red Planet Has Two Speeds of Sound
By - Ian DeMartino

Sound on Earth is well studied and understood, but scientists know very little about it when it comes to other planets. The Perseverance rover was launched in the summer of 2020, with its main goal being to search for signs of ancient life. It landed on the Jezero Crater on Mars on February 18, 2021 and came equipped with two microphones.

Newly analyzed findings have determined that there are two speeds of sound on Mars, with higher pitched sounds moving through the atmosphere quicker than lower frequency sounds. The Perseverance rover landed on Mars in 2021 equipped with two microphones as part of a larger effort to give scientists the opportunity to capture the sounds of Mars for the first time. The red planet is, unsurprisingly, very quiet. The only sound, outside of those created by the rover and its sister craft - the small Ingenuity helicopter that arrived attached to the Perseverance - is the wind.

Scientists expected sound to travel slower on Mars than Earth because Mars has a much thinner atmosphere - 170 times thinner than Earth's - and is made up of 95% carbon dioxide, compared to Earth's 0.04%. This makes all sound about 20 decibels weaker than on Earth.

Ultimately, this means sound – most sound anyway – travels at 240 meters per second, compared to 340 meters per second on Earth. But Sylvestre Maurice, the scientific co-director of the SuperCam recorder on Perseverance's mast, was perplexed when the sound made by the rover's laser traveled at 250 meters per second, 10 meters faster than expected.

“I panicked a little, I told myself that one of the two measurements was wrong because on Earth, you only have one speed of sound.”

The sound created by Ingenuity's helicopter rotors, a much deeper sound, traveled at the expected speed of 240 meters per second.

The French CNRS institute said in a statement that the two different speeds of sound would "make it difficult for two people standing only five meters apart to have a conversation."

That likely would not be the case inside of an artificial habitat for humans, as those would be filled with air mimicking the atmosphere on Earth.

In Maurice's mind, the discovery proved that the "scientific gamble" of attaching recording devices on the Perseverance paid off. Two previous attempts to record sound on Mars, in 1999 and again in 2008, failed.

It is possible that future missions to other celestial bodies, like Venus or Saturn's moon Titan, could also include microphones.

Perseverance's mission is not over. While its core mission is only scheduled for two years, its predecessor, the Curiosity rover, continues to operate seven years after its two year mission was accomplished.

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Russia to Keep Pushing for UNSC Meeting Over Bucha Despite UK Obstruction - Deputy Envoy (Adds details in para 3, background in para 5)

UNITED NATIONS, April 1 (Sputnik) - Russia will continue pushing for a UN Security Council meeting on Monday to discuss the latest provocation in the Ukrainian city of Bucha, despite obstruction from the United Kingdom, which is presiding over the body this month, deputy envoy to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

"It's hard to imagine ... but the UK presidency of the UN Security Council which has just started tries to deny our right to request a separate meeting of the Council on heinous Ukrainian provocation in Bucha. We asked for it to take place at 15.00 [19:00 GMT] on Monday 4 April 24hrs in advance of the planned meeting in full respect of SC rules of procedure," Polyanskiy wrote on Telegram.

The UK risks compromising its UNSC presidency from the very beginning, he warned, noting that Russia, while presiding over the body in February, did not object to a single meeting on Ukraine "despite all the Ukrainian provocations and tense situation on the ground."

"They [Britain] clearly want to avoid us raising this issue separately which will cause reputational damage to Western countries who have already blamed Russia for murdering civilians in Bucha. This will not work and the world should learn the truth. We will insist that the meeting takes place on Monday as we requested," he added.

Over the weekend, the Ukrainian authorities and Western media distributed video showing the bodies of dead civilians strewn across Bucha and accused the Russian forces, which withdrew from the town on March 30, of the killings. The Russian Defense Ministry said the footage was a staged provocation and that no civilians were killed at the time the Russian forces controlled Bucha.

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Russia to Continue Pushing for UNSC Meeting to Discuss Bucha Despite UK Obstruction

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"As we understand, the main task of our British colleagues is to dissolve through baseless procedural pretexts our request in another meeting on Ukraine scheduled on Tuesday with a bigger focus. They clearly want to avoid us raising this issue separately which will cause reputational damage to Western countries who have already blamed Russia of murdering civilians in Bucha. This will not work and the world should learn the truth. We will insist that the meeting takes place on Monday as we requested," he added.

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US Will Push to Suspend Russia From UN Human Rights Council - Thomas-Greenfield

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States will push to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council, envoy to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Monday. "Russia's participation on the Human Rights Council is a farce. And it is wrong, which is why we believe it is time the UN General Assembly vote to remove them," she was quoted by Reuters as saying during her visit to Romania to discuss the Ukraine refugee crisis.

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US Media Opts to Speculate About Russia's Routine Annual Military Draft

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - A number of US media outlets, including CNN and the Washington Post, are speculating about Russia's annual military draft amid the country's special military operation in Ukraine.

On Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered 134,500 new conscripts into the army as part of the country's annual spring draft. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said the conscripts drafted this spring would not be sent to any "hot spots."

Nevertheless, the draft has become a topic of speculation for the US corporate media as they claimed that Russia is drafting young men because its special military operation in Ukraine is allegedly facing difficulties.

Friday's edition of the Washington Post came out with the headline "As Russia drafts young men, some fear ending up on Ukraine's front line," while The Hill put forth "Putin ordering draft of 135,000 amid difficulties in Ukraine war."

CNN went even further by claiming that 134,500 Russians will replace those conscripts who are rotating out of service. As is usual more times than not, the corporate outlet did not provide any evidence to back its claim.

However, the simple fact is that Russian law requires the president to set the draft goal for the conscription campaign very year from April to July with a target number and having some 134,000 conscripts has been the rough number for the past several years.

Putin and Shoigu have repeatedly said that conscripts are not taking part in Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. The Defense Ministry admitted in March that some conscripts were present in Ukraine but reassured the public that all were withdrawn to Russia.

Russia has obligatory military service for all male citizens ages 18-27. The draft takes place twice a year, in spring and in fall. The term of service for each man is one year and the new conscripts receive basic combat training for a month or vocational military training from three to five months, and then continue their service until the end of the term.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Defense Ministry said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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US Actor Will Smith Resigns From Hollywood's Movie Academy Over Chris Rock Slap - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - American actor Will Smith resigned from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in light of his physical confrontation with comedian Chris Rock, the entertainment magazine Variety reported.

The report said on Friday that Smith decided to resign from the Academy as he faces a possible ban or suspension from the organization after he slapped Rock during the Oscars show on Sunday.

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US Cancels ICBM Test to Avoid 'Misinterpretation' Amid Russia's Op in Ukraine - Air Force
(Adds quote, details, background in paras 3-8)

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States canceled a test launch of a Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that had initially been delayed due to nuclear tensions with Russia, a US Air Force spokesperson confirmed to Sputnik.

"It is," the spokesperson said on Friday when asked if the ICBM test launch had shifted from being delayed to canceled.

In a separate statement obtained by Sputnik, Air Force spokesperson Ann Stefanek said the US used the same rationale in both delaying and canceling the test.

"The launch had been previously delayed due to an overabundance of caution to avoid misinterpretation or miscommunication during the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and was cancelled for the same reason. Our next planned test flight is later this year. The Department is confident in the readiness of the strategic forces of the United States," Stefanek said.

On March 2, the US Department of Defense announced that Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin postponed a long-planned test launch of a Minuteman III ICBM in response to Russian President Vladimir Putin directing a special alert of Russian nuclear forces.

Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said that the United States and Russia have long agreed that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.

The US Defense Department has repeatedly said it has not seen any action from Russia to cause the United States to change its nuclear posture.

The US Air Force tests four Minuteman III ICBMs each year from Vandenberg Space Force Base in the state of California.

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US Canceled ICBM Test to Avoid 'Misinterpretation' Amid Russia's Ukraine Op - Air Force

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States canceled a Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile test launch to avoid misinterpretation or miscommunication amid Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, US Air Force spokesperson Ann Stefanek said in a statement obtained by Sputnik.

"The Department of the Air Force recently cancelled the routinely planned test flight of an LGM-30G Minuteman III missile scheduled for March 2022," Stefanek said in a statement on Wednesday. "The launch had been previously delayed due to an overabundance of caution to avoid misinterpretation or miscommunication during the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and was cancelled for the same reason. Our next planned test flight is later this year. The Department is confident in the readiness of the strategic forces of the United States."

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US Envoy for North Korea to Meet With Officials April 3-7 About Recent Missile Tests

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - US Envoy for North Korea Sung Kim will travel to Washington April 3-7 to discuss with officials Pyongyang's recent intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests, the State Department said in a statement.

"US Special Representative for the DPRK [North Korea] Ambassador Sung Kim will travel to Washington, DC April 3-7 to participate in a series of meetings with US government officials and others on a broad range of DPRK issues, including the DPRK's recent ICBM launches," the State Department said on Friday.

Kim will meet with South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Noh Kyu-Duk to discuss the current state of affairs in the Koreas, the statement said.

Kim will also meet with Chinese Special Representative on Korean Peninsula Affairs, Ambassador Liu Xiaoming, to discuss issues related to North Korea, the statement added. North Korea tested intercontinental ballistic missiles on February 26 and March 4, prompting the Biden administration to impose an array of sanctions on entities connected to the country's weapons programs.

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Nuland Headed to Turkey, France, Germany April 2-9 to Discuss Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Senior US diplomat Victoria Nuland will travel across Europe to countries including Turkey, France and Germany from April 2-9 to discuss the situation in Ukraine and coordinate responses against Russia, the State Department said in a statement.

"Under Secretary for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland will travel April 2-9 to France, Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, and Germany to further strengthen our bilateral relationships, emphasize our unified support for Ukraine, and coordinate on our response to the Russian Federation's unprovoked war," the State Department said on Friday.

Nuland will meet with French, German and UK counterparts in France before leading an interagency delegation to Turkey, Greece and Cyprus, according to the statement. Nuland will then travel to Germany to meet with G7 counterparts about an array of global issues, the statement said.

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US Regrets Russia's Decision Not to Extend OSCE Mission to Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States has expressed regrets regarding Russia's decision not to extend the mandate of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

(OSCE) mission to Ukraine and is calling on Moscow to allow the mandate to be extended, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"The United States deeply regrets the decision by the Russian Federation to block consensus to extend the mandate of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM)," the statement said on Friday. "We continue to call on the Russian Federation to allow the SMM mandate to be extended, cease its ongoing assault on Ukraine, and contribute to a peaceful resolution to the conflict."

On Thursday, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that it is going to recall its staff from the OSCE mission in the Donbas region of Ukraine and opposes the continuation of the mission's mandate. OSCE expressed regret about Russia's decision.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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US Air Force Confirms Canceling ICBM Test That Was First Delayed Over Tensions With Russia

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States canceled a test launch of a Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that had initially been delayed due to nuclear tensions with Russia, a US Air Force spokesperson confirmed to Sputnik.

"It is," the spokesperson said on Friday when asked if the ICBM test launch had shifted from being delayed to canceled.

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Oil Sees Biggest Weekly Loss in 2 Years, US Crude Below \$100 as Biden Releases Reserves

NEW YORK, April 1 (Sputnik) - Oil markets entered April with their worst weekly loss in two years as the Biden administration announced the largest ever crude reserve release that sent the benchmark US price below the key \$100-per-barrel support.

London-traded Brent, the global oil benchmark, settled down 32 cents, or 0.3%, at \$104.39 per barrel after a session low at \$102.37. Week-to-date, Brent was down 13%, its biggest weekly decline since April 2020. Just on Thursday, Brent finished the first quarter up 39%.

New York-traded US crude benchmark West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, settled down \$1.01, or 1%, at \$99.27 a barrel, after an intraday low of \$97.81. WTI was down almost 13% on the week for its biggest weekly drop since April 2020. On Thursday, it settled first quarter trading up 33%.

The Biden administration announced on Thursday that it will release a record of 1.0 million barrels per day of oil from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) over the next six months to alleviate a global supply crunch.

The total 180 million barrels from the release will be issued in two stages, the first between May and June and the second from August to October, the Department of Energy said.

The SPR had 568.3 million barrels in stock as of the week ended March 25, according to the US Energy Information Administration. If 180 million barrels are taken out, the nation's oil reserve could be drawn down to a third of its current size.

Analysts across the energy sector warn of a worsening supply crunch in the coming months as the United States upholds its ban of Russian oil, while many other nations avoid business with Russia as well, due to sanctions imposed against Moscow over its war on Ukraine.

Despite such warnings, the world's biggest oil exporters in OPEC, along with their allies, which include Russia, decided on Thursday to do just a modest production increase for next month.

The wider oil producers' alliance, known as OPEC+, said it would increase output in May by 432,000 barrels a day. That's a slight uptick from its typical monthly increment of 400,000 barrels per day in a market analysts said was in need of around 5 million barrels more.

President Joe Biden began tapping the SPR to provide US refiners with oil loaned from the reserve that they wouldn't have to pay for but return within a stipulated period. By doing this, his administration hoped there will be fewer transactions of oil in the open market and prices for both crude and fuel products like gasoline and diesel would come down.

Prior to this, Biden ordered the release of 50 million barrels from the SPR in November and 30 million last month, in coordination with the reserves released by other countries that included China, Japan, India, South Korea and Britain.

In recent months, the administration released some 3.0 million barrels weekly from the SPR. But its efforts have had a negligible effect so far on prices, with refiners turning out more fuel products than they usually do at this time of year, resulting in an extraordinarily high turnover of barrels.

OPEC+ said on Thursday that the recent volatility in oil prices was "not caused by fundamentals, but by ongoing geopolitical developments," in an apparent reference to the war in Ukraine. Brent hit 14-year highs of almost \$140 per barrel in the aftermath of the sanctions imposed on Russia and have largely held at above \$100 over the past month.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Russia will present the United Nations Security Council on Friday with a new letter about US military biological activities in Ukraine, Russian Deputy UN Envoy Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

* Head of the Russian delegation Vladimir Medinsky announced that talks with the Ukrainian side continue via video conference.

- * The Ukrainian authorities are persuading the Western partners to encourage the International Committee of Red Cross (and other human rights watchdogs to give up their attempts to reach Russian prisoners of war in Ukraine, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service said.

SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA, BELARUS

- * The United States is adding 120 Russian and Belarusian entities to its trade blacklist for their support of the countries' armed forces amid the ongoing special operation in Ukraine, the US Commerce Department said on Friday.

- * Rigorous economic sanctions imposed by the West on Russia for its military operation in Ukraine negated the forecasts on the global economic growth, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said.

- * The European Union is not ruling out the use of property of individuals sanctions by the EU to pay compensation to Ukrainians, European Commissioner for Justice Didier Reynders said.

PUTIN-ERDOGAN TALKS

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin assessed the ongoing negotiation process between Russia and Ukraine during a phone conversation with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday, the Kremlin said.

- * Erdogan and Putin discussed the results of Moscow-Kiev talks in Turkey, held earlier this week, during a phone conversation on Friday, Erdogan's office said.

EU-CHINA DIALOGUE

- * China supports a dialogue between the European Union, the United States, NATO and Russia to resolve security issues, Chinese President Xi Jinping told the EU-China summit on Friday.

- * China profoundly regrets that the situation in Ukraine has reached the current state, Xi Jinping said.

- * The European Union made it very clear that China should "if not support, at least not interfere with" EU sanctions against Russia, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said at a press conference after the EU-China Summit.

DIPLOMATIC DISPUTES

- * Russia will respond to the expulsion of the first secretary of the Russian Embassy in Sofia from Bulgaria, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told Sputnik.

- * Berlin is exploring the possibility of expelling a "significant number" of Russian diplomats on suspicion of espionage, but there is no consensus in the government, the Sueddeutsche Zeitung reported, citing sources.

ENERGY MARKETS

- * The United States is seeing evidence of the oil market being short of two million barrels or more daily due to disrupted supply from Russia, Special Envoy for International Energy Affairs Amos Hochstein said ON Friday.

- * The requirement that gas be paid for in rubles will require making changes in contracts with Russian operators, and thus the consent of all sides is required, the Bulgarian Energy Ministry told Ria Novosti.

- * The Gazprom Group announced on Friday ceasing its participation in German subsidiary GAZPROM Germania GmbH and all its holdings, including Gazprom Marketing & Trading Ltd.
- * Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied the White House's allegation that the country's central bank was artificially propping up the ruble..

FIRE IN BELGOROD

- * The Friday events in Russia's Belgorod is not something that will facilitate talks between Moscow and Kiev, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- * Russian President Vladimir Putin has been informed about a fire at a petroleum depot in Belgorod, Peskov said.

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Food Prices Continue to Rise as Inflation Batters US Consumers - US Agriculture Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The US Agriculture Department's (USDA) newly released update to its Food Price Outlook for 2022 shows that food costs more and it is likely prices will continue to increase because of a range of factors, the USDA said in its report on Friday. "All food prices are now predicted to increase between 4.5 and 5.5 percent," the report said. "Food price increases are expected to be above the increases observed in 2020 and 2021. In 2022, food-at-home prices are predicted to increase between 3 and 4 percent, and food-away-from-home prices are predicted to increase between 5.5 and 6.5 percent. Price increases for food away from home are expected to exceed historical averages and the inflation rate in 2021."

The USDA said the price increases will be piled on top of the ones consumers have already been forced to bear in the past year as the nation comes out of a COVID global pandemic; disruption of United States' national supply chain and uncertainty on global markets.

USDA also said the cost of all food is predicted to increase between 4.5 and 5.5 percent; prices of food-away-from-home should bump up to between 5.5 and 6.5 percent; and the cost of food-at-home should see between 3.0 and 4.0 percent rise in 2022.

Researchers point to inflation, the Federal Reserve's decision to increase interest rates in an attempt to suffocate inflation and the conflict in Ukraine as all contributing to what they describe as upward and downward pressures on food prices.

Rapid increases in the consumption of dairy products have driven up retail prices in recent months. After substantial price increases in January and February, the forecast for fats and oils, fresh fruits, processed fruits and vegetables, sugars and sweets, cereals and bakery products, nonalcoholic beverages and other foods is that consumers will be paying higher prices.

Meanwhile, wholesale dairy prices, farm-level fruit prices, farm-level soybean and wholesale fats and oils prices, and farm-level wheat and wholesale wheat flour prices are all slated to surge.

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Case of Alleged Conspiracy to Kidnap Michigan Governor Whitmer Goes to Jury - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The case involving an alleged plot by four men to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer moved to jury deliberations after closing arguments by the prosecution and defense teams were delivered, MSNBC affiliate WoodTV 8 reported on Friday.

The four men - Brandon Caserta, Barry Croft Jr., Adam Fox and Daniel Harris - face federal charges including conspiracy to commit kidnapping over anger about the state's COVID-19 restrictions at the time.

Whitmer was never harmed and the plot was exposed by a paid informant and undercover agents embedded in the group.

The defense attorneys representing the men in the trial argued that they were pushed into the alleged criminal conspiracy by federal agents investigating the group.

"The evidence shows clearly those plans [to kidnap Whitmer] belong to the government," defense attorney Christopher Gibbons said during closing arguments.

The crucial question for the jury to consider in the case is whether the US government committed entrapment by persuading the defendants to commit crimes they were not already willing to commit, Judge Robert Jonker said during jury instructions.

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US Army General Michael Kurilla Takes Over at CENTCOM Military Command - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Four star US Army Gen. Michael "Erik" Kurilla has taken over leadership of Central Command (CENTCOM), whose area of responsibility is the Middle East region, CENTCOM announced in a press release on Friday.

"The outgoing commander of US Central Command, US Marine Corps General Kenneth McKenzie Jr., relinquished command today during a change of command ceremony," the release said. "US Army General ... Kurilla assumed command of CENTCOM from McKenzie." Kurilla previously commanded the XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg in the US state of North Carolina and served as the CENTCOM chief of staff from August 2018 to September 2019, the release said.

"US Central Command will continue to thrive under the steadfast leadership of General Kurilla during a critical time in a region that remains dangerous and complex," the release cited Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who himself commanded CENTCOM from March 2013 to April 2016, as saying.

CENTCOM comprises more than 44,000 service and family members overseas and Kurilla will oversee all US military missions throughout the 21-country area of responsibility in the Middle

East, Levant and Central Asia, as well as leading the 78-nation campaign against the Islamic State terror group (outlawed in Russia), according to the release.

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Russian Cathedral in Washington Displays Relics of Kiev Saints to Pray for Peace - Rector

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The clergy and believers of the Russian Orthodox cathedral in Washington, DC decided in a rare move to put the relics of the Kiev Caves Monastery Saints in the middle of the church and pray for peace in Russia and Ukraine, St. John the Baptist parish rector Victor Potapov told Sputnik on Friday.

"We have made a solemn promise to serve a special prayer service every Sunday after each Divine Liturgy, in English and Old Church Slavonic, to pray for the Holy Saints of the Kiev Caves Monastery to intercede on behalf of Ukraine and Russia before God," Potapov said.

Displaying relics in the middle of the church is an unusual move, but people understand the reason and appreciated the idea, he said.

"We served the first services last Sunday and we intend to do this in the future until the war ends," Potapov said.

The Kiev Caves Lavra is the oldest Russian monastery that currently belongs to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which is a fully autonomous church within the Moscow Patriarchate. The monastery is known for the more than 100 saints who lived mostly in the first several centuries of Orthodox Christianity in Kiev Rus.

The relics were delivered to the Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Washington in 2009 when Potapov, along with his wife and one of the deacons, decided to undertake a pilgrimage to Kiev and asked Metropolitan Vladimir of Kiev, then primate of the UOC, to share the sanctuary with the faithful in the US capital.

"We received these relics, put them in a beautiful reliquary and now we decided to place them in the middle of the church so that they are visible to everyone and send a strong message for peace," Potapov said.

The clergy and the believers, most of whom are Russians, Ukrainians and Americans, started serving the special services since the very beginning of the conflict on February 24. After the service in front of the copy of the Kursk Root icon of the Mother of God, the second service was conducted before the image of St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco, the parish founder, who was born in the Donbas area when it was a part of the Russian Empire.

Potapov said the parish has organized a fundraiser to provide aid to refugees from Ukraine who have found shelter in different parts of the world as well as those who remain in the country.

"We will send this donation to the Fund for Assistance to the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), which has already collected nearly \$250,000," Potapov said.

The Fund will send the money to ROCOR's Metropolitan Mark of Berlin and Germany, who will provide them to Metropolitan Onufrii, the primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, for further distribution at his discretion.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from attacks by Ukrainian troops amassed in large numbers in the Donbas region. The Russian Defense Ministry said its actions are directed against the Ukrainian military infrastructure and not civilians.

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US Commerce Dept. Adds 120 Entities in Russia, Belarus to Trade Blacklist – Notice
(Adds details, background in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is adding 120 Russian and Belarusian entities to its trade blacklist for their support of the countries' armed forces amid the ongoing special operation in Ukraine, the US Commerce Department said on Friday.

"In response to the Russian Federation's (Russia's) further invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Department of Commerce is amending the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) by adding 120 entities under 120 entries to the Entity List. These 120 entities have been determined by the U.S. Government to be acting contrary to the national security interests or foreign policy of the United States and will be listed on the Entity List under the destinations of Belarus and Russia," the Commerce Department said in a notice in the Federal Register.

The new sanctions, imposed on 96 entities in Russia and 24 in Belarus, entail denial of trade exemptions, including exports, reexports, exports from abroad or transfers (in-country) to these entities, according to the notice. In other words, the sanctioned entities will not be able to apply for a special license to export something from the United States.

The Russian entities on the list represent an array of military-oriented enterprises and research institutes, including 5th Shipyard, Almaz JSC, Ineko LLC, JSC Energiya, Ryazan Radio-Plant, Special Design Bureau Salute, various tactical missile corporations, and Zhukovskiy Central Aerohydrodynamics Institute.

The list of Belarusian entities includes a number of state bodies, including Department of Internal Affairs of the Gomel Region Executive Committee, Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, KGB division Alpha, and famous Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant.

The main rationale behind the sanctions is a "reasonable cause to believe, based on specific and articulable facts, that the entities have been involved, are involved, or pose a significant risk of being or becoming involved in activities contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States," according to the notice.

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, which includes airspace closures and restrictive measures targeting numerous Russian officials and entities, media, and financial institutions. Some foreign companies have suspended their Russian operations altogether.

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US to Release First 90Mln Barrels of Oil From Reserve Between May, July - Energy Dept.
(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-10)

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The 180 million barrels the Biden administration intends to release from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) will be issued in two stages, with the first scheduled between May and June and the second from August to October, the US Department of Energy (DoE) said on Friday.

"The first 90 million barrels will be released between May and July, through two notices of sale totaling 70 million barrels, and 20 million barrels already scheduled to be released in May 2022," the DoE said in a statement. "The remaining 90 million barrels will be released between August and October 2022."

On Thursday, the Biden administration said it will release a record 1 million barrels per day from the SPR over the next six months to alleviate a global supply crunch in crude oil.

Other US allies will be releasing oil from their reserves as well to complement the total of 180 million barrels that will come out of the United States, energy officials said.

Prior to announcing the move, the Biden administration had ordered the release of 30 million barrels from the SPR in March and another 50 million in November in coordination with other oil consuming countries that included China, Japan, India, South Korea and Britain.

President Joe Biden began tapping the SPR in November to provide US refiners with oil loaned from the reserve that they wouldn't have to pay for but return within a stipulated period. By doing this, the president hoped there will be fewer transactions of oil in the open market and prices for both crude and fuel products like gasoline and diesel will come down.

In recent weeks, the Biden administration has released some 3 million barrels weekly from the SPR. but the move has had a negligible on energy prices. A barrel of crude remains at around \$100 a barrel while a gallon of gasoline fetches nearly about \$4.20 a gallon. This is because refiners have been turning out more fuel products than they usually do at this time of year, resulting in extraordinarily high usage.

Analysts across the energy sector have warned of a worsening supply crunch in the coming months as the United States upholds its ban of Russian oil, while many other nations avoid business with Russia due to sanctions imposed against Moscow over its special military operation in Ukraine.

On Thursday, the world's biggest oil exporters in OPEC along with their allies, including Russia, decided on a modest production increase for next month. The wider oil producers' alliance, known as OPEC+, said it would increase output in May by 432,000 barrels a day. That represents a slight uptick from its typical monthly increment of 400,000 barrels per day in a market analysts said was in need of around 5 million barrels more.

OPEC+ also said on Thursday that the recent volatility in oil prices was not caused by fundamentals, but by ongoing geopolitical developments. Crude oil prices hit 14-year highs of almost \$140 per barrel in the aftermath of the sanctions imposed on Russia and have largely held at above \$100 over the past month.

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Psaki Says Can Not Confirm Reports of Leaving White House for Position at MSNBC

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday that she cannot confirm reports that she is in talks to leave her current position for a role at the MSNBC news outlet later this spring.

"I have nothing to confirm about my length of public service, or planned service, or anything about consideration about next plans," Psaki said during a White House press briefing.

Earlier on Friday, US media reported that Psaki is in talks with the White House counsel and with MSNBC about leaving public service to host a show on the corporate outlet's cable news network sometime in May.

When asked whether it is appropriate to continue working as press secretary while reportedly negotiating a job with a corporate news network, Psaki said she holds herself to all necessary legal and ethical standards for potentially leaving her current position or a position in the private sector.

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US Investigators Head to China to Probe Boeing Crash That Killed 132 - Safety Agency

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - A team of US investigators have departed for China to probe the causes of an airliner crash that killed all 132 people on a Boeing 737-800 operated by China Eastern Airlines on March 21, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) announced on Friday,

"NTSB team has departed for China to participate in CAAC [Civil Aviation Administration of China]'s B-737 accident investigation," the board said in a Twitter message.

The US investigators will limit interactions with those outside of investigation similar to the safety protocols at the Beijing Winter Olympic Games earlier this year, the NTSB explained. This will allow them to begin work immediately without a quarantine, the agency noted.

The China-bound team includes NTSB investigators and technical experts from Boeing, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and engine manufacturer CFM International. The delay in leaving had to do with adhering to China's rigorous constraints because of new outbreaks of a COVID-19 variant, the agency earlier explained.

Flight MU5735, with 132 people aboard, was enroute from the southwestern city of Kunming to Guangzhou on March 21 when it plunged from cruising altitude and crashed.

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US Sending Kiev Equipment to Deploy in Event of Chemical, Biological Attack - White House

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is sending Ukraine equipment to use in the event of a chemical or biological attack, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday. "The United States and members of the international community have, of course, repeatedly warned about the potential for Russia to use chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine, and that Moscow is possibly planning a false flag operation," Psaki told a briefing. "In an effort to assist our Ukrainian partners, the US government is providing the government of Ukraine with life-saving equipment and supplies that can be deployed in the event of Russia use chemical or biological weapons against Ukraine."

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US to Release First 90Mln Barrels of Oil From Reserve Between May and July - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The 180 million barrels the Biden administration intends to release from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve will be issued in two stages, with the first scheduled between May and July and the second from August to October, the Department of Energy (DoE) said Friday.

"The first 90 million barrels will be released between May and July, through two notices of sale totaling 70 million barrels, and 20 million barrels already scheduled to be released in May 2022," the DoE said in a statement. "The remaining 90 million barrels will be released between August and October 2022."

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US Commerce Dept. Adds 120 Entities in Russia, Belarus to Trade Blacklist - Notice

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is adding 120 Russian and Belarusian entities to its trade blacklist for their support of the countries' armed forces amid the ongoing special operation in Ukraine, the US Commerce Department said on Friday.

"In response to the Russian Federation's (Russia's) further invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Department of Commerce is amending the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) by adding 120 entities under 120 entries to the Entity List. These 120 entities have been determined by the U.S. Government to be acting contrary to the national security interests or foreign policy of the United States and will be listed on the Entity List under the destinations of Belarus and Russia," the Commerce Department said in a notice in the Federal Register.

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Blinken in Call With Kuleba Emphasizes 'Unyielding' Support for Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during a phone call with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba underscored unyielding support for Kiev and praised its commitment to diplomacy, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout on Friday.

"The Secretary emphasized the United States' unyielding and steadfast support for Ukraine, and lauded Ukraine's commitment to engaging in diplomacy," Price said. "He stressed that the United States, Allies, and partners will continue to hold accountable those responsible for atrocities committed in Ukraine."

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S&P Global Settles With US Gov't for Extending Credit to Rosneft - Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - Standard & Poor's (S&P) Global has settled a civil liability dispute with the US government over credit it extended in 2016-17 to Russian oil corporation Rosneft in defiance of a 2014 US presidential executive order (EO), the Department of the Treasury said on Friday.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) today announced a \$78,750 settlement with S&P Global, Inc. ("S&P Global") a New York-based company that provides business information and financial analytics," the press release stated. S&P Global has agreed to settle its potential civil liability for apparent violations of the Ukraine-Related Sanctions Regulations issued pursuant to Executive Order 13662 of March 24, 2014, "Blocking Property of Additional Persons Contributing to the Situation in Ukraine," the Treasury said.

"The apparent violations occurred between August 2016 and October 2017, when S&P Global and a company it acquired reissued and re-dated multiple invoices to continue to extend credit to Rosneft, a state-owned Russian oil company, in violation of the debt and equity restrictions set forth under EO 13662," the release said.

After reissuing and re-dating four invoices to extend the original payment dates, S&P Global ultimately accepted past-due payments totaling \$82,500 from Rosneft and OFAC determined that S&P Global did not voluntarily self-disclose the apparent violations and that the apparent violations constitute a non-egregious case, the Treasury said.

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US Charges 12 Individuals With Interstate Gun Trafficking Conspiracy – Attorney General

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice has unsealed a superseding indictment against 12 defendants, including three American soldiers, who allegedly conspired to transport more than 90 guns into Chicago, Illinois from other US states, Attorney General Merrick Garland said on Friday.

"Today, we are announcing a superseding indictment charging 12 individuals in a conspiracy to illegally traffic over 90 guns across state lines into the city of Chicago," Garland said during a press briefing. "Many of these guns have been linked to shootings in the Chicago area in which multiple people have been injured and several killed in July 2021."

Garland recalled that in July 2021, a grand jury charged three enlisted members of the United States Army stationed at the Fort Campbell military installation in Clarksville, Tennessee, with crimes stemming from the purchase and transfer of dozens of firearms to the streets of Chicago. The new indictment adds charges against nine additional individuals who are alleged members of the Gangster Disciples street gang in Chicago. The nine individuals are allegedly responsible for the purchase and delivery of over 90 firearms to Chicago to facilitate violent gang disputes. The investigation into the illegal gun trafficking began following a mass shooting that took place in Chicago on March 26 last year leaving seven wounded and one person dead. Several guns recovered from the crime scene were linked to licensed firearms dealers located in other US states, according to Garland.

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UN Has No Information About Attacks on Railway Tankers With Chlorine in Ukraine- Spokesman

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has no information about possible attacks on railway tankers with containing chlorine, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Friday.

Deputy Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Dmitriy Polyanskiy said earlier in the day there is credible information that Ukrainian nationalists are planning a provocation in the Kharkiv region, including attacks on railway tankers containing up to 800 tonnes of chlorine.

"We do not have information on this. Of course, we are open to receiving information from the parties," Haq said during a press briefing.

The UN spokesperson called on all sides in Ukraine to avoid any actions that could escalate the situation.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation after the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend them from attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only and civilians are not in danger.

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UN Under-Secretary-General to Visit Moscow, Kiev to Discuss Ukraine Situation - Guterres

UNITED NATIONS, April 1 (Sputnik) - UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths will visit Moscow on April 3 and then will visit Kiev to discuss the ongoing situation in Ukraine and a potential for a ceasefire, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday.

"My special envoy, Martin Griffiths, was asked by me to pursue a humanitarian ceasefire in Ukraine. He will be flying to Moscow on Sunday and after that he will be going to Kiev," Guterres said during a press conference.

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US to End Policy Allowing Immediate Deportation of Asylum-Seeking Migrants - DHS

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will end a policy in late May that is used to authorize US immigration enforcement to immediately turn away asylum-seeking migrants at the southern border over public health concerns related to the novel coronavirus, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said on Friday.

"Title 42 is not an immigration authority, but rather a public health authority used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to protect against the spread of communicable disease," Mayorkas said in a press release. "Title 42 remains in place until May 23 and, until then, DHS will continue to expel single adults and families encountered at the Southwest border." After May 23, migrants who are unable to provide a legal basis to remain in the United States will be deported under normal removal proceedings put in place before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The US government has put in place a strategy to deal with the possible increase in the number of undocumented migrants arriving at the US-Mexico border, Mayorkas said.

The Biden administration is increasing its capacity to process new migrant arrivals, evaluate asylum requests, and to quickly remove migrants who do not qualify for protection, he said.

The administration, Mayorkas added, will also increase personnel and resources as needed at the US southern border, pointing out that more than 600 law enforcement officers have already redeployed to the border.

US media reported that the Department of Homeland Security has contingency plans to respond to the possible daily arrival of 12,000 to 18,000 illegal migrants at the southern border after the Title 42 policy is terminated.

US immigration enforcement officers, according to media, have encountered about a million illegal migrants at the southern border over the last six months, which is on pace to beat the all-time record of 1.7 million illegal migrants apprehended on the southern border in 2021.

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UN Says No Indication Its Vehicles Misused in Ukraine - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United Nations does not see any indications that its vehicles have been misused in Ukraine, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Friday. Russian Ambassador to the UN Vasily Nebenzia on Tuesday expressed concerns about the misuse of vehicles belonging to international organizations by Ukrainian troops for military purposes such as to transport weapons. Nebenzia said Vehicles with United Nations insignia have been being confiscated by Ukrainian forces and also OSCE vehicles as well. "Right now there is no indication of any misuse of UN vehicles at this point," Haq said during a press briefing.

The spokesperson acknowledged that one vehicle was taken from its area, but United Nations staff was able to disable it.

"None of our vehicles is being misused," Haq said.

Since, video evidence has surfaced on media and social media of Ukrainian troops misusing ambulances for transporting soldiers and vehicles of international corporations.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from Ukrainian attacks. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and civilians are not in danger.

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US Senators Urge Biden to Suspend Tax Treaty, Data Exchange With Russia - Letter

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - US Senators Rob Portman and Ben Cardin have urged President Joe Biden to consider suspending the Income Tax Convention with Russia to halt the sharing of tax information, discourage US investment in the country, and end preferential tax treatment of Russian businesses in response to the military operation in Ukraine, according to a letter out Friday.

"We do not believe it is in the interest of the United States to engage in information exchange under this Convention and urge you to consider suspending this practice. We were pleased that the United Kingdom has already taken such action, and we believe suspension of tax information exchange represents another opportunity to work closely with our allies in response to Russia's invasion," the letter to Biden said.

They also suggested a suspension of the Income Tax Convention altogether, which they say would prevent preferential tax treatment for Russian businesses in the US and discourage American investment in Russia.

The US should suspend the tax treaty until adherence "returns to the orbit" of American national interest, the senators said in the letter.

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SpaceX Successfully Launches Fourth Smallsat Rideshare Mission on Falcon 9 Rocket

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - SpaceX successfully launched a Falcon 9 rocket from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in the state of Florida carrying 40 spacecraft into space. SpaceX said in a previous press release that the launch represents the company's fourth smallsat rideshare mission.

The Falcon 9 rocket is carried 40 spacecraft into space, including cube satellites, micro satellites, picosats, non-deploying hosted payloads, and an orbital transfer vehicle carrying spacecraft to be deployed at a later time.

SpaceX and NASA have a launch scheduled on April 20 to send NASA astronauts Kjell Lindgren, Bob Hines and Jessica Watkins, as well as European Space Agency astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti, to the ISS on the Falcon 9 rocket bearing the Crew Dragon capsule. The rocket will be launched from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

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Blinken, UK Counterpart Discuss Increasing Pressure on Russia - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his UK counterpart Elizabeth Truss discussed on Friday developing additional steps to intensify the West's response to Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with UK Foreign Secretary Elizabeth Truss," Price said in a press release. "The two discussed the upcoming NATO Foreign Ministerial meeting and developing additional possible actions to ratchet up our response to Putin's continued assault on the Ukrainian people."

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US House Passes Bill Eliminating Criminal Penalties for Cannabis

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Friday passed legislation eliminating criminal penalties for cannabis and removing the drug from the list of federally controlled substances.

The House passed the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act in a vote of 220 to 204, mostly along partisan lines. Three Republicans voted in favor of the legislation, while two Democrats voted against it.

In addition to decriminalizing the substance, the legislation also replaces statutory references to "marijuana" with "cannabis," imposes an excise tax on cannabis products imported into the United States, prohibits the denial of federal public benefits for cannabis-related conduct or convictions, and establishes a process to expunge convictions and review sentences related to federal cannabis offenses among other policy changes.

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UN Says Sides in Yemen Conflict Agree to Two-Month Truce

UNITED NATIONS, April 1 (Sputnik) - The sides in the Yemen conflict have agreed to a two-month ceasefire, which will go into effect on April 2, UN deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said on Friday.

"Hans Grundberg, the special envoy for Yemen, just announced that the parties to the conflict have responded positively to United Nations proposal for two-month truce that comes into effect tomorrow, April 2 at 19:00," Haq told a briefing.

The parties agreed to halt all offensive military operations.

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Russia to Present UNSC With New Letter on US Bio Activities in Ukraine on Friday - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 1 (Sputnik) - Russia will present the United Nations Security Council on Friday with a new letter about US military biological activities in Ukraine, Russian Deputy UN Envoy Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

"In the course of the special military operation in Ukraine, the Russian Ministry of Defense discovered evidence that Ukrainian authorities supported and directly sponsored by the US Department of Defense, were implementing dangerous projects and experiments as a part of military biological program ... We have circulated documented evidence received by our Ministry of Defense as official documents of the Security Council and the General Assembly, those are Russian letters dated March 11, 18, and 29, there will be a new letter today," Polyanskiy said during a press conference.

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US Energy Envoy Says Oil Market Short of 2Mln Barrels Daily From Disrupted Russia Supply (Updates with more details, background in paras 3-9)

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is seeing evidence of the oil market being short of 2 million barrels or more daily due to disrupted supply from Russia, US Special Envoy for International Energy Affairs Amos Hochstein said Friday.

"We believe ... not only believe, but I can see the physical evidence that the market is short about 2 million barrels per day, if not more, from [disrupted] Russian supplies to [the] global market," Hochstein told Bloomberg TV. "That is clear to me, we can see that. Perhaps, some in OPEC don't see shortages of supply but I understand that it's a complex issue for them."

Analysts across the energy sector warn of a worsening supply crunch in the coming months as the United States upholds its ban of Russian oil, while many other nations avoid business with Russia due to sanctions imposed against Moscow over its special military operation in the Ukraine.

Despite such warnings, the world's biggest oil exporters in OPEC and their allies, which includes Russia, decided on Thursday to do just a modest production increase for next month. The wider oil producers' alliance, known as OPEC+ said it would increase output in May by 432,000 barrels per day. That is a slight uptick from its typical monthly increment of 400,000 barrels per day in a market analysts said was in need of around 5 million barrels more.

OPEC+ also said on Thursday that the recent volatility in oil prices was not caused by fundamentals, but by ongoing geopolitical developments, in an apparent reference to the Ukraine conflict. Crude oil prices hit 14-year highs of almost \$140 per barrel in the aftermath of the sanctions imposed on Russia and have largely held at above \$100 over the past month. Hochstein said the Biden administration's announcement on Thursday that it will release a record of 1 million barrels per day of oil from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) over the next six months was just the start of a move that will alleviate the global supply crunch. The Biden administration said the total release of 180 million barrels from the SPR will be followed through by 30 US allies who will release oil from their own reserves.

"I believe that we're going to have additional capacity coming online from our allies," Hochstein said. "There's a meeting that is going on right now of the IEA, the International Energy Agency, to look at additional releases from the international market so we won't just have oil coming on the market in the United States, but rather have oil coming online to the market in Asia, as well as Europe over the next several months."

The Biden administration had ordered the release of 50 million barrels from the SPR in November and 30 million earlier this month, in coordination with reserves releases by other major oil consuming countries that included China, Japan, India, South Korea and Britain.

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Pope Apologizes to Canada's Indigenous People for Church Role in Residential School Abuses

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) – Pope Francis apologized on Friday for the Catholic Church's abuse of indigenous children in Canada's residential school system, bowing to decades of pressure from the country's native peoples.

"I also feel shame ... sorrow and shame for the role that a number of Catholics, particularly those with educational responsibilities, have had in all these things that wounded you, and the abuses you suffered and the lack of respect shown for your identity, your culture and even your spiritual values," the Pope told a delegation of First Nations, Inuit and Métis delegates at the end of a week of meetings at the Vatican.

"For the deplorable conduct of these members of the Catholic Church, I ask for God's forgiveness and I want to say to you with all my heart, I am very sorry. And I join my brothers, the Canadian bishops, in asking your pardon," he added.

Delegations had for decades demanded an apology from the Catholic Church for a range of widespread abuse, physical, sexual and psychological. Between the late 1880s and 1990s, the Canadian government operated government-funded, primarily Church-run, compulsory boarding schools that a National Truth and Reconciliation Commission described as a system of cultural genocide.

The Catholic Church operated almost three quarters of the schools. An estimated 150,000 Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to these residential facilities. The last school is said to have closed in 1996.

Children were punished for practicing their traditions or for speaking their languages. Survivors say, and the Pope acknowledged, that inter-generational trauma remains. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report identified thousands of children who died at the schools, from illness and disease, suicide, malnourishment or while trying to escape. An untold number were buried in unmarked graves to save money and often their families were never notified.

This is the first formal apology from a pope on this issue. Pope Benedict XVI, Francis's predecessor, did not do so, despite being pressured by indigenous survivors and their families. Earlier in the day, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau described Pope Francis's apology as a step forward in acknowledging "the truth of our past" and said he looks forward to the pontiff coming to Canada to do it in person.

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Russia to Host UNSC Meeting on April 6 About Military Bio Activities in Ukraine, Beyond

UNITED NATIONS, April 1 (Sputnik) - Russia will host an informal UN Security Council meeting on April 6 to discuss military biological activities in Ukraine and across the world, Deputy Envoy to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Friday.

"I would also like to announce that to keep you better informed, we are going to host an informal Arria-formula meeting of the Security Council at 10 a.m. NYT time [14:00 GMT] on April 6 to discuss a broad topic of the threats to international peace and security emanating from military

biological activities in the regions across the globe. So, the scope will be a little bit wider than Ukraine," Polyanskiy said.

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Biden Says 30 Countries Will Join US in Releasing Oil From Their Reserves

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday that more than 30 countries have agreed to join the United States in releasing oil from their reserves in the market. "This morning over 30 countries from across the world convened an extraordinary meeting and agreed to the release of tens of millions of additional barrels of oil onto the market," Biden said. On Thursday, Biden ordered the release of a record 1 million barrels of oil per day from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserves over the next six months to alleviate a supply crunch that has sent fuel prices to all-time highs. Biden said the United States has received commitments from other countries to release tens of millions of additional barrels into the market. The White House also said it will impose fees on US energy companies that are sitting on idle oil wells. Biden said US oil drillers were ignoring the energy crunch in order to make extraordinary profits without investment.

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US Sanctions 5 North Korean Entities for Supporting Missile, WMD Programs - Treasury Dept.
(Updates with quote in para 2; more details in paras 5, 6; modifies headline)

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States has added five North Korean entities to its list of sanctioned actors for supporting their country's ballistic missile and weapons of mass destruction programs, the US Department of the Treasury Department said in a statement on Friday.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) today sanctioned five entities for providing support to the DPRK's [North Korea's] development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missile programs, in violation of multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions," the statement said.

OFAC added the Hapjanggung, Korea Rounsang, Sunghisan and Unchon Trading Corporations, as well as the Ministry of Rocket Industry, to its Specially Designated Nationals list of sanctioned individuals and entities, the statement said.

The four trading corporations are linked to North Korea's Ministry of Rocket Industry and the Ministry of Rocket Industry itself is linked to the North Korean Munitions Industry Department, according to the Treasury Department.

North Korea's recent ballistic missile tests on February 26 and March 4 represent a clear threat to regional and global security, and the United States is ready to respond using sanctions authorities, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in the statement.

The new sanctions restrict transactions with the sanctioned entities and block all property within the US, limiting the ability of the North Korean military to procure both financial and material support from overseas through front companies and other opaque ownership structures, the statement said.

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US Cars to Meet 49 Miles-Per-Gallon Fuel Efficiency From 2026 - Transportation Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - US-made cars are to deliver a fuel efficiency of 49 miles-per-gallon from 2026 versus the existing 35-mpg requirement as the Biden administration speeds up reduction of fossil fuels consumption amid record high pump prices, the Transportation Department announced on Friday.

"The new Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards require an industry-wide fleet average of approximately 49 mpg for passenger cars and light trucks in model year 2026, the strongest cost savings and fuel efficiency standards to date," the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, a unit of the Transportation Department, said in a statement referring to the so-called CAFE standards.

Under the new CAFE, fuel efficiency standards will be raised by 8% annually for cars of model years 2024-2025 and 10% annually for model year 2026.

The new standards will also increase the estimated fleetwide average by nearly 10 miles per gallon for model year 2026, relative to model year 2021.

Under existing CAFE requirements, passed in December 2007, new cars, sport utility vehicles and light trucks are to average 35 mpg by 2020. As of 2014, manufacturers were meeting standards of 34.2 mpg for passenger cars and 26.2 mpg for light trucks.

The new CAFE requirements for model year 2024-26 will reduce fuel use by more than 200 billion gallons through 2050, as compared to continuing under existing standards, the statement issued on Friday said.

"Strong fuel economy standards strengthen US energy independence and help reduce reliance on fossil fuels," the statement said, adding that since CAFE standards were signed into law in 1975, they have reduced American oil consumption by 25% or approximately 5 million barrels a day.

The new CAFE standards come as the US pump price of gasoline retails at near record highs of above \$4.20 per gallon in the aftermath of the Western sanctions on major oil exporter Russia that have sent crude oil itself to 14-year highs above \$100 per gallon.

Aside from requiring higher miles-per-gallon, President Joe Biden also announced this week his administration's intent to invoke Cold War-era powers to boost domestic output of critical metals and minerals for the making of electric vehicles and the batteries to power them.

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US State Dept. Confirms Taliban Released Detained Afghan-American Naval Reservist, Brother

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) released detained Afghan-American Naval reservist Safi Rauf and his brother Anees Khalil, US State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Friday.

"We can confirm that Safiullah Rauf and Anees Khalil, a U.S. citizen and a Lawful Permanent Resident, respectively, have been released after being unjustly detained in Afghanistan. They are now in Qatar before traveling home," Price said in a statement.

Rauf and Khalil were detained by the Taliban in December while doing humanitarian work in Afghanistan, and released after negotiations between the Taliban, US government and others.

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Over 75% of Americans Disapprove of Job Congress Doing - Poll

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - More than three quarters of Americans disapprove of the job Congress is doing, with the rating remaining low since the fall, according to a Gallup poll out Friday.

"Twenty-one percent of Americans currently approve of the job Congress is doing, while 76% disapprove," the pollster said, noting that this is in line with the 18% to 23% range seen since October.

However, the approval rating is down from the 12-year high of 36% of March 2021.

"Congress' job rating is now about the same as in the second half of 2020, after enjoying a brief rise to 31% following the passage of several pieces of emergency economic-relief legislation in the early days of the pandemic," the press release added.

The survey was conducted March 1-18.

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US Considers OPEC Decision to Increase Oil Production 'Not Right' - Special Envoy

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States believes the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OPEC) decision to continue increasing production was "not right," US Special Envoy and Coordinator for International Energy Affairs Amos Hochstein told Bloomberg on Friday.

"At the end, they've done what they needed to do and announced that they are going to continue to increase production," Hochstein said. "We don't think that right. The president doesn't ask the other people to do the work that we should."

On Thursday, US President Joe Biden authorized a record release of oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) in the amount of one million barrels per day for the next six months amid increasing gasoline prices in the United States.

Biden said the United States has received commitments from other countries to release tens of millions of additional barrels into the market in order to lower the prices.

The White House also said that it will impose fees on US energy firms that sit on idle oil wells to make extraordinary profits from a supply crunch.

Meanwhile, the OPEC+ group of 32 oil producing nations led by Saudi Arabia and steered by Russia approved a modest addition of 432,000 barrels per day (bpd) in output for the month of March.

The OPEC+ has been sticking to monthly increments of around 400,000 bpd despite the global market being in deficit of anywhere from 5-6 million barrels daily, especially after the US ban on Russian oil and other Western sanctions that have impacted energy exports from Russia.

Biden ordered the release of 50 million barrels from the SPR in November and 30 million earlier this month, in coordination with the releases from other countries, including China, Japan, India, South Korea and the United Kingdom.

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Psaki Planning to Leave White House for MSNBC - Reports

(Updates para 4 to note that Psaki is not expected to replace Rachel Maddow)

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki is in talks with MSNBC on joining the network after she leaves her current position around May, Axios reported on Friday, citing a source in the know.

Psaki has been in close consultation with the White House counsel's office about her departure, and told some senior officials about her plans, the news outlet said, citing two sources familiar with the plans.

She, however, has not yet formally told the White House press team about her departure.

Psaki is expected to host a show on MSNBC's cable network, but she is not going to replace anchor Rachel Maddow, which has been speculated, the report said.

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Psaki Planning to Leave White House for MSNBC - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki is in talks with MSNBC on joining the network after leaving her current position around May, Axios reported on Friday, citing a source in the know.

Psaki has been in close consultation with the White House counsel's office about her departure, and told some senior officials at the White House about her plans, the news outlet said, citing two sources familiar with the plans.

She, however, has not yet formally told the White House press team about her departure, according to the report.

Psaki could reportedly replace host Rachel Maddow on MSNBC.

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US, Kazakhstan Transport Accord to Liberalize Central Asia Aviation Sector - State Dept.
WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The US-Kazakhstan Air Transport agreement, which just entered into force, will advance the liberalization of international civil aviation in Central Asia, the US State Department said on Friday.

"The US-Kazakhstan Air Transport Agreement signed on December 30, 2019, has entered into force," the State Department said in a press release. "This agreement between the United States and Kazakhstan is also a step forward in liberalizing the international civil aviation sector in Central Asia."

The State Department said the agreement establishes a modern civil aviation relationship with Kazakhstan in line with with US Open Skies international aviation policy.

"The agreement includes provisions that allow for unrestricted capacity and frequency of services, open route rights, a liberal charter regime, and open code-sharing opportunities," the release added.

The agreement will boost the economic and commercial ties between the two nations and create new opportunities for airlines, travel companies and customers, according to the release.

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US Imposes Sanctions on 5 North Korean Entities - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has added five North Korean entities to its list of sanctioned actors, the Treasury Department said on Friday.

OFAC added the Hapjanggung, Korea Rounsan, Sungnisan, and Unchon Trading Corporations, as well as the Ministry of Rocket Industry, to the Specially Designated Nationals list of sanctioned individuals and entities.

The four trading corporations are linked to the Ministry of Rocket Industry, according to the Treasury Department. The Ministry of Rocket Industry itself is linked to the North Korean Munitions Industry Department.

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Trudeau Says Looks Forward to Pope Francis Delivering Apology in Person in Canada

TORONTO, April 1 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday that he looks forward to Pope Francis coming to Canada to deliver his apology for the Catholic church abuses of Indigenous children.

"I want to acknowledge Pope Francis's apology for the church's role in the abuses that took place in the residential school system. We look forward to him coming to Canada to deliver that apology in person," Trudeau said while delivering remarks on Canada's infrastructure.

Trudeau believes the apology is a step forward in acknowledging "the truth of our past" but admits that there is still work to be done on this issue.

Earlier on Friday, Pope Francis issued an apology to First Nations, Inuit and Metis delegates at the Vatican. Children from these Indigenous communities suffered abuses on behalf of the Catholic church in Canada's residential schools. The Pope also promised to visit Canada.

From more mid-1800s until the 1970s, the Canadian government forcefully removed more than 150,000 Indigenous children from their homes and placed them in state-funded mostly Catholic schools. The Children were beaten for speaking their native languages, maltreated because they were considered inferior, sexually assaulted and brutalized while being Christianized. An undetermined number of them died and were buried in graves at residential schools across Canada.

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US Energy Envoy Says Oil Market Short of 2Mln Barrels Daily From Disrupted Russia Supply

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is seeing evidence of the oil market being short of two million barrels or more daily due to disrupted supply from Russia, Special Envoy for International Energy Affairs Amos Hochstein said Friday.

"We believe ... not only believe, but I can see the physical evidence that the market is short [of] about 2 million barrels per day, if not more, from [disrupted] Russian supplies to [the] global market," Hochstein told Bloomberg TV. "That is clear to me, we can see that. Perhaps, some in OPEC don't see shortages of supply but I understand that it's a complex issue for them."

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IMF Reaches Staff-Level Agreement on \$289Mln Stand-By Arrangement for Georgia

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has reached a staff-level agreement on a \$289 million stand-by arrangement for Georgia, IMF's team head James John said on Friday.

"I am pleased to announce that the IMF team has reached a staff-level agreement with the Georgian authorities on a three-year Stand-by Arrangement (SBA) in the amount of SDR210.4 million (about \$289 million) or 100 percent of Georgia's quota," John said in a statement. The agreement is subject to approval by the IMF's Executive Board, which is expected to consider Georgia's request in May, he added.

John pointed out Georgia's strong economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, spillovers from the conflict in Ukraine and related sanctions are expected to lower Georgia's growth to around 3% in 2022, raise inflation, and widen the current account deficit, he noted.

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US Already Seeing Prices Down After Historic Oil Reserve Release - Official

WASHINGTON, April 1 (Sputnik) - The latest record release from US national oil reserves has already yielded its first results, sending prices down, White House Special Envoy for International Energy Affairs Amos Hochstein told Bloomberg on Friday.

"We have already seen prices come down as a result of that announcement. That's gonna have a major impact in the oil and energy markets at large," Hochstein said.

On Thursday, President Joe Biden ordered the release of a record 1 million barrels of oil per day from America's emergency reserves over the next six months to alleviate a supply crunch that has sent fuel prices to all-time highs. Biden added that the United States has received commitments from other countries to release tens of millions of additional barrels into the market.

The White House also pledged fees for US energy companies that are sitting on idle oil wells. Biden said US oil drillers were ignoring the energy crunch in order to "make extraordinary profits" without investment, adding that one industry chief executive had acknowledged refusal to pump more oil at even \$200 a barrel.