

4/5/22 Tuesday

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Amazon Secures Deal to Launch Majority of 3,200 Project Kuiper Internet Satellites

SpaceX has launched more than 2,300 Starlink internet satellites into orbit and has plans to deploy as many as 30,000. However, the satellites have already caused problems for astronomers, and the US space agency NASA has warned that more could pose a danger to orbital infrastructures. Now Amazon is set to join the internet satellite race.

Ecommerce and web services giant [Amazon announced on Tuesday](#) that it has secured launches for most of the 3,236 satellites for Project Kuiper, its \$10 billion competitor in scalable internet services to SpaceX's Starlink network.

Most of the launches will be on United Launch Alliance Vulcan Centaur rockets, with the rest using Arianespace's Ariane 6 rocket, and Blue Origin's New Glenn, the latter of which is also owned by Amazon's founder and chairman Jeff Bezos. The launches are scheduled over the next five years. However, none of the three rockets are in service yet, making the launches very prospective.

An Amazon spokesperson [told SpaceNews](#) the company "has talked to every major launch provider and they will continue to explore all options for future launch services."

"Project Kuiper will leverage Amazon's global logistics and operations footprint to provide excellent customer service, and Amazon Web Services will provide networking and infrastructure to serve a diverse, global customer base. We'll also apply Amazon's experience producing low-cost devices and services like Echo and Kindle to deliver broadband service at an affordable, accessible price for customers," Amazon said in the news release.

"Once deployed, the Kuiper System will serve individual households, as well as schools, hospitals, businesses, disaster relief efforts, government agencies, and other organizations operating in places without reliable broadband," it added.

According to the US [Federal Communications Commission](#), about 6% of the US population doesn't have access to broadband internet service and about 30% of the country doesn't use it at all.

The network is named after 20th-century Dutch astronomer Gerard Kuiper, who is considered the father of modern planetary science. The [Kuiper Belt](#), beyond Neptune's orbit, is similar to the asteroid belt and is also named after the astronomer.

Amazon is aiming to compete with the more established SpaceX in the race to dominate the satellite internet market. SpaceX has launched more than 2,300 Starlink internet satellites into LEO, although about 200 have failed for various reasons.

The huge number of satellites [has already caused problems](#) for stargazers and astronomers alike, and China's Tiangong space station [had to adjust course](#) at least twice last year to avoid Starlink satellites.

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A Look at the United States' 'Most Terrible War Crimes' Since World War 2

Speaking before the United Nations Security Council on Tuesday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky claimed Russia was responsible for "the most terrible war crimes in the world" since World War II amid its ongoing special operation in Ukraine, and demanded Russia's expulsion from UN bodies.

Zelensky was specifically referring to film footage shown to the council of dozens of dead bodies in Bucha, a suburb of Kiev, which the Ukrainian government has claimed were executed by Russian forces before they withdrew from the city last week.

The Russian Defense Ministry has [dismissed the claims as a provocation](#), noting that Ukrainian artillery had previously bombarded the town and that Ukrainian police conducted an operation in Bucha to "clear the area of saboteurs and accomplices of Russian troops" prior to news emerging of the alleged massacre, both of which could also be responsible for the deaths. Regardless, the claim that the Bucha incident represents the worst war crime since the total war that ended in 1945 is clear hyperbole, especially considering the incessant war-making of Ukraine's patron, the United States.

To help jog the memory of the Ukrainian president, we have compiled a few examples of US war crimes since 1945 that have not been investigated as crimes.

No Gun Ri Massacre, July 1950

Early in the Korean War, US soldiers from the 7th Cavalry Regiment attacked a large group of South Korean refugees at a railroad bridge [near the village of No Gun Ri](#). According to the No Gun Ri Peace Foundation, between 250 and 300 people were killed, mostly women and children.

The massacre was covered up until 1999, when an Associated Press report revealed it to the world, citing US and North Korean documentation of the killings that showed US troops had orders to fire on all refugees, as they believed North Korean infiltrators might be among them. The group massacred at No Gun Ri were by no means the only ones killed by US troops, either, as accusations of more than 200 separate incidents emerged when an investigative committee was launched in South Korea in 2008.

The US investigation led to then-US President Bill Clinton issuing a statement of regret, but Washington rejected an outright apology or the possibility of compensation for the survivors. South Korean investigators called the US probe a "whitewash."

Operation Speedy Express, December 1968 - May 1969

The US Army's 9th Infantry Division was responsible for "pacifying" a large part of the Mekong River Delta in order to reduce Vietnamese National Liberation Front operations near the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon (today Ho Chi Minh City).

During the six-month operation, the US troops carried out indiscriminate massacres of Vietnamese villages, using air assaults and nighttime riverine attacks to kill as many people as possible. Commanders in the field were reportedly given orders not to return until killing an acceptable number of people, and so-called "free-fire zones" resulted in massive civilian deaths.

An internal probe by the US Army Inspector General found the operation created between 5,000 and 7,000 civilian casualties, and that another 10,899 fighters had been killed. However, the distinction between fighters and civilians was often inflated in the fighters' favor during the Vietnam War, in order to make US commanders look more effective.

Highway of Death, February 1991

In the final days of Operation Desert Storm, US aircraft annihilated as many as 2,000 vehicles on Highway 80, which runs north out of Kuwait City toward Basra, Iraq. A mix of civilians fleeing the war and Iraqi military units withdrawing from military operations were bombed during two days of airstrikes from February 25 to 27. As the fleeing soldiers were outside of combat, they were not legitimate military targets, according to former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark. Estimates of the deaths vary wildly, from 200 to more than 1,000. In addition, [American eyewitnesses reported](#) that a US armored unit had opened fire on a group of 350 disarmed Iraqi soldiers who had surrendered after fleeing the carnage, killing an unknown number of them.

Bombing of Albanian Refugees at Koriša, May 1999

On May 14, 1999, US aircraft bombed a group of several hundred Albanian refugees near Koriša, Kosovo, who had been hiding in the hills for weeks. According to Yugoslav authorities, 87 refugees were killed in the strike. The US claimed they were being used as human shields by the Yugoslavs, but [provided no evidence to back up](#) its claim.

Second Battle of Fallujah, November 2004

The US Marine Corps, in conjunction with Special Operations forces, US air forces, and the British "Black Watch" battalion, launched a massive assault on the Iraqi city of Fallujah in November 2004 that destroyed almost the entire city. The stated objective was to weaken the Iraqi insurgency against the US-UK occupation, but the heavy use of artillery, airstrikes, and chemical weapons such as white phosphorus and incendiary bombs, and depleted uranium, resulted in massive civilian deaths.

The [Red Cross estimated that 800](#) civilians were killed in the battle, while Iraqi NGOs and medical workers estimated between 4,000 and 6,000 people were killed, mostly civilians, [which the Guardian noted](#) was a higher death rate than the British cities of Coventry and London faced during The Blitz bombing campaign by Germany in 1940.

Bombing of Kunduz Hospital, October 2015

On October 3, 2015, a US Air Force AC-130U gunship circled the Kunduz Trauma Center in the northern Afghan city of Kunduz, bombarding it with artillery and machine-gun fire for 30 minutes. The hospital was operated by Medecins Sans Frontieres, who denied US claims that Taliban fighters were hiding in the facility. Forty-two people were killed in the assault and another 33 went missing, including both MSF staff and patients.

The Pentagon initially tried to cover up the strike, claiming there might have been some incidental collateral damage due to nearby fighting. However, after it emerged that the strike had been directly ordered by US commanders, then-US President Barack Obama apologized for the strike and paid the families of victims \$6,000 each. MSF accused the US of [admitting to a war crime](#) by attempting to justify the attack by claiming Taliban fighters were inside.

Bombing of al-Aghawat al-Jadidah, March 2017

It's estimated that [40,000 civilians were killed](#) during the nine-month siege of Mosul, Iraq, by Iraqi forces and the US-led anti-Daesh coalition, in large part due to the unrelenting artillery

bombardment of the city. However, one particular incident stands out: a US airstrike on March 17, 2017, in the al-Aghawat al-Jadidah neighborhood in western Mosul.

The US admitted a week after the attack [that it had targeted](#) “the location corresponding to allegations of civilian casualties.” [Amnesty International reported](#) that as many as 150 civilians were killed in the attack after having been told not to flee the city by US officials, although Iraqi reports say [more than 300 were killed](#).

Siege of Raqqa, June - October 2017

As the battle for Mosul was drawing to a close, the siege of Daesh’s de facto capital of Raqqa, Syria, began. US Marine Corps artillery pounded the city nonstop, [firing 35,000 rounds](#) in five months - more than were used in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Twice during the bombardment, US M777 155 mm howitzers burned through their cannon barrels - an extremely rare feat, notes the [Marine Corps Times](#).

At the same time, US air forces dropped some 20,000 munitions across Iraq and Syria, most of which also fell on Raqqa. [Investigations by Amnesty International](#) and Airwars found that the total number of civilians killed in Raqqa was more than 1,600.

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US Man Told FBI Masturbating in Front of Woman Four Times During Flight Was ‘Kind of Kinky’ - Report

The US Federal Aviation Administration has revealed that 2021 was the worst year on record for unruly passengers on commercial aircraft, with more than 5,000 reported incidents despite adopting a “zero tolerance” policy toward malign behavior.

A man flying from Seattle, Washington, to Phoenix, Arizona, earlier this week is accused of masturbating four times in front of a female passenger over the course of the flight, according to a criminal complaint filed in a federal court that was [obtained by the Daily Beast](#).

According to a deposition by an FBI special agent, Antonio Sherrodd McGarity started his lewd behavior not long after the Southwest Airlines plane left Seattle.

“Shortly after taking off, and while the aircraft was in the air, McGarity exposed his penis by pulling down his pants and shorts and began masturbating,” the deposition states.

A woman sitting next to him quickly took notice, and according to the officer, McGarity “advised he asked the female witness if she minded if he masturbates.” When she put her hands in the air and said “it really doesn’t matter,” McGarity reportedly missed the sarcasm and thought she was okay with him doing his thing.

“McGarity said he thought it was kind of kinky,” the officer noted.

According to the woman’s account, after masturbating about four times, McGarity fell asleep and she asked the staff if she could move to another seat on the aircraft, which she then did.

When the plane arrived at Phoenix’s Sky Harbor International Airport, McGarity was arrested by Phoenix Police. A Southwest Airlines official told the [New York Post](#) they had “immediately placed the passenger on our No-Fly List, resulting in a lifetime ban from traveling on Southwest.”

A similar incident happened on another Southwest flight in 2020, although that incident was reportedly not witnessed by passengers.

The FAA has recorded a marked increase in rowdy behavior by airline passengers in recent years, driven in part by new regulations about mask-wearing brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. In January 2021, the FAA adopted a [“zero tolerance” policy](#) toward unruly passenger behavior, dropping the warnings system in favor of immediate law enforcement action. Despite ramping up punishments, the [FAA recorded 5,981 reports](#) of unruly passengers last year, 4,290 of which were mask-related incidents. Wearing a mask is mandatory on all mass transit in the United States, including buses, trains, trams, and aircraft, [as per an executive order](#).

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Listen: Air France Pilots Panic as Plane Temporarily Loses Control During Paris Airport Approach

In May 2021, international carrier Air France and manufacturer Airbus were ordered by a Paris court to stand trial for involuntary manslaughter in the 2009 crash of Flight 447, which killed 228 people - the deadliest incident both in Air France’s history and involving an Airbus A330. Panic gripped the pilots of an Air France Boeing 777 passenger aircraft on Tuesday as they were preparing to land in Paris, when suddenly they couldn’t control the aircraft during a critical moment.

The airliner was on final approach to Charles de Gaulle airport on Tuesday morning, having flown overnight from New York’s JFK Airport. However, at about 4,000 feet altitude and just moments before they should have touched wheels to tarmac, they encountered a problem. A recording of their communications with air traffic control at the airport that was obtained by Air Live captured the distress of the moment.

The pilots can be heard breathing heavily as they struggle with the controls and try to keep the plane on course. When air traffic control inquires what’s going on, the pilot yells back “stop, stop!” and says he’ll call the controllers back.

However, calm and control quickly returns to the cabin and the pilots explain to the tower that they had been unable to control the aircraft for a moment and are going to pull up and come around for another pass at a different runway. At its lowest altitude during the incident, the plane was just 1,100 feet off the ground.

The tower controllers can be heard saying that they tracked the aircraft’s course deviation as it dipped to its port side - which also appeared on flight tracking websites.

Air France confirmed the incident to the [UK Daily Mail](#), saying the plane “aborted their landing sequence and performed a go-around due to a technical incident during the approach.” “The crew mastered the situation and landed the aircraft normally after a second approach,” the airline added. “Air France understands and regrets the discomfort felt by customers.”

"The go-around is defined by the authorities, aircraft manufacturers and Air France as a normal procedure," they further noted. "The crews are trained and regularly instructed in these procedures, which are used by all airlines to guarantee the safety of flights and passengers, which is an absolute necessity for Air France."

No one was injured in the incident.

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Tiger Woods Playing at the Masters 'As of Right Now'

By - Ian DeMartino

Tiger Woods last played in a Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) event at the 2020 Masters Tournament. After a car crash that nearly cost him his right leg, Tiger is playing in a major tournament for the first time.

Tiger Woods says [he plans to play](#) in the Masters Tournament at Augusta National Golf Club this year, at least as of now.

Woods said he has to see how he feels after a practice round on Wednesday, but felt good enough to play after practicing with his son Charlie and friend and fellow PGA pro Justin Thomas.

A mere 14 months ago, Woods, 46, was in a serious car crash that nearly led to his leg being amputated. Doctors instead inserted a rod into his right tibia and plates and screws into his ankle and foot on the same side. Woods says he was confined to a hospital bed for three months.

Woods is a 15-time major champion, the second most all-time, and hopes to win his sixth Masters title, which would tie Jack Nicklaus for most Masters wins of all time. Nicklaus also holds the most major wins, with 18.

While Woods admitted he will never play PGA golf regularly again, he hopes to take the same approach as Hall of Famer Ben Hogan, who would pick a few tournaments a year in the twilight of his career and focus on those. Like Woods, Hogan suffered a near fatal car accident and then continued to play at a high level, winning six of his nine majors after.

Tiger Woods does not just plan to play in the tournament, he hopes to win it. "I don't show up to an event unless I think I can win it. So that's the attitude I've had. There will be a day when it won't happen, and I'll know when that is," golf's biggest star said.

He believes his body will respond fine to playing golf, it is walking on the injured leg that has him concerned. "72 holes is a long road, and it's going to be a tough challenge and a challenge that I'm up for." Augusta is known for its extremely hilly courses.

Woods was once seen as a shoe-in to beat Nicklaus' record for most major wins of all time; he won 14 Majors between 1997 and 2008. But after several surgeries and a previous car accident in 2009, along with a very public divorce that led to intense public scrutiny of his sexual habits, Woods did not win another major tournament until the 2019 Masters.

Then the second, more serious, car crash happened in February 2021, and many wondered if Tiger Woods would ever play again, including himself.

“To finally get out of that where I wasn't in a wheelchair or crutches and walking and still had more surgeries ahead of me” Woods explained at a press conference “to say that I was going to be here playing and talking to [media] again, it would have been very unlikely.”

Few expect him to win the three additional majors he will need to tie Nicklaus, much less the four to beat the record, but most are just happy to see golf's most visible and famous player out on the course again. Besides, very few people expected him to win the Masters in 2019 after an eleven year major tournament drought.

If there is one thing Tiger Woods has proven over his professional career that spans four decades, it is to never count him out.

Assuming all goes well on Wednesday, Woods will tee off at 10:34am ET on Thursday with South Africa's Louis Oosthuizen and Chile's Joaquin Niemann. According to Caesar Sportsbook, Woods is [currently listed](#) at 50-1 odds to win the tournament.

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Marijuana 'Gifting' Businesses Remain Operational After Legislation Fails in DC Council
By - Ian DeMartino

Cannabis has been legal in Washington D.C. since voters overwhelmingly approved Initiative 71 in November 2014. But Congress has outlawed recreational sales in the District through the congressional budget, one of the many reasons local politicians are pushing for statehood for the nation's capital.

Recreational cannabis “gifting” businesses will continue to operate in Washington DC after the city Council narrowly voted down emergency legislation designed to bring them to heel today. Medical marijuana sales are legal inside Washington DC, as is gifting cannabis to friends, thanks to initiative 71. This has led to so-called I-71 businesses that sell a different product, such as a candle or a shirt, and then “gift” marijuana to the customer.

Those businesses were targeted by members of the DC council who argue that the practice is illegal, regardless of the loophole, and that they hurt legitimate medical marijuana businesses and growers who are operating in the city.

The emergency initiative would have shut down the I-71 stores for 96 hours and imposed a \$30,000 fine on sellers and landlords. May 16 was the proposed deadline for compliance but an amendment would have moved that to August 2. The bill would have also opened up medical marijuana sales to anyone over 21 who “self-certified” that they need marijuana for medical reasons, removing the need for a doctor's note.

But I-71 advocates argue their practices are legal and the few licensed medical marijuana dispensaries in the city are not prepared for the market currently served by I-71 businesses. Multiple council members, on both sides of the issue, lambasted Congress for not allowing DC to govern what happens within its own borders.

“Even with a Democratic Congress and president we still don't have [the ability to regulate ourselves] and are used as a bargaining chip.” said Councilmember Pinto, who voted for the

emergency legislation “I want a city that supports I-71 businesses. People who are outraged should be, but they should be outraged at Congress.”

The council members who opposed the initiative pointed out that enacting civil penalties on I-71 businesses would disproportionately focus on people of color, who are already affected by the larger War on Drugs.

“We all want a marijuana market that is robust and diverse but the people left behind when new markets open are those who lack access to capital,” said At-Large Councilmember Robert C White. “We know people who makeup I-71 businesses are the people who would bear brunt of enforcement if marijuana were still illegal. Putting enforcement aside, we aren’t making a pathway. It is not realistic to expect that Congress will get their act together and the people we are forcing out now will be given a pathway in the future.”

Multiple council members took issue with the emergency aspect of the legislation. “Why go the emergency route when we have a bill in three committees?” At-Large Councilmember Christina Henderson asked. “When we consider the drastic impact of the war on drugs, it is clear there will be a disproportionate effect on people of color. The whole purpose of the Office of Racial Equality is for these issues. Why are we going to use emergency legislation that will bypass that?”

The final vote was 8 - 5 in favor of the ban, but because it was emergency legislation, which bypasses committees, it required nine votes to pass.

Councilmembers Christina Henderson, Janeese Lewis George, Elissa Silverman, Robert C. White Jr and Trayon White Sr (no relation) voted No on the provision.

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Don't Say Union: Proposed Amazon Employee App Blocks Words Related to Collective Bargaining

By - Ian DeMartino

Days after workers at Amazon's Staten Island, NY facility became the first in the company to successfully unionize, a proposed internal employee chat app may, according to internal documents, ban words related to unionization, workers' rights or general complaints.

If true, the [list of words](#) would illustrate just how concerned Amazon is about unionization efforts, which is apparently willing to sacrifice the app's efficiency in an attempt to prevent workers from hearing even a whisper of discontent from their fellow employees.

The main goal of the app, according to The Intercept's detailing of a high-level executive meeting through a source, is to increase worker happiness and productivity. “Shout outs” could be given out on the app, which would be “gamified,” resulting in stars and badges for those who contribute directly to Amazon's business success.

During the meeting, it was suggested that the app include an “Auto bad word monitor,” ostensibly to foster a positive associate experience on the app. But profanities and slurs would not be the only words blocked.

The Intercept listed 41 words and phrases that will be blocked by the Amazon app according to leaked internal documents. "Union" "I hate" "Grievance" "Slave" "Master" "Unite/Unity" "Living Wage" "Rate" "Injustice" "Fairness" and "Representation" are just some of the words that could be perceived as relating to unionization or worker's rights.

Other words, like "Trash" "Robots" "Concerned" and "Restrooms," while potentially related to employee complaints, could make communicating on the app difficult even for innocuous day-to-day conversations.

Responding to the Intercept, an Amazon spokesperson denied that the yet-to-be-released app would ban any words other than profanities and slurs.

"[T]here are no plans for many of the words you're calling out to be screened," the spokesperson told The Intercept "The only kinds of words that may be screened are ones that are offensive or harassing, which is intended to protect our team."

On Friday, April 1, Amazon workers in Staten Island, NY voted to be represented by the [Amazon Labor Union](#), a group of former Amazon employees who had been fired for staging a walkout in an attempt to obtain better working conditions.

Amazon spent \$4.3 million fighting unions in 2021 alone. Another unionizing effort in Bessemer, Alabama was narrowly voted down, though the vote was close enough that it may be overturned by ballot challenges.

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US to Provide Bank Transaction Licenses for Russia Energy as Long as EU Needs Them- Yellen

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue providing banking transaction licenses for Russian energy to support its European allies who need US banks to facilitate such imports even if Washington has banned purchases of Russian oil, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"Many of our European partners remain heavily dependent on Russian natural gas, as well as oil, and they are committed to making the transition away from that dependence as soon as possible," Yellen told the US House Financial Services Committee. "We're doing all we can to help. But in the meantime, we issued these licenses ... to make sure that there can be a continued flow of Russian natural gas and oil [to Europe]. We're working closely with them on sanctions and want to remain aligned with them."

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US to Unveil Sanctions on Major Russian State Enterprises on Thursday - White House

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States will roll out full blocking sanctions against major Russian state-owned enterprises on April 7, the White House revealed in a fact sheet on Wednesday.

"Full blocking sanctions on critical major Russian state-owned enterprises. This will prohibit any U.S. person from transacting with these entities and freeze any of their assets subject to U.S. jurisdiction, thereby damaging the Kremlin's ability to use these entities it depends on to enable and fund its war in Ukraine," the release said. "The Department of Treasury will announce these entities tomorrow."

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US Sanctions Now Block More Than 2/3 of Russian Banking Sector - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US financial sanctions on Russia for their special operation in Ukraine have now blocked more than two-thirds of the Russian banking sector following the announcement of additional sanctions on Sberbank and Alfa-Bank, a senior administration official said on Wednesday.

"In total, we've now fully blocked more than two-thirds of the Russian banking sector, which before the invasion held about \$1.4 trillion in assets," the senior administration official said.

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US Imposing Sanctions on Russia's Medvedev, Prime Minister Mishustin - White House

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States has targeted Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev in the latest round of "full blocking sanctions," the White House announced on Wednesday.

"Full blocking sanctions on Russian elites and their family members, including sanctions on: President Putin's adult children, Foreign Minister Lavrov's wife and daughter and members of Russia's Security Council including former President and Prime Minister of Russia Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin," the White House said in a press release. The new round of sanctions is expected to cut off the listed individuals from the US financial system and freeze their assets in the United States in response to their alleged support of Russia's special operation in Ukraine.

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Russia Will Need New Source of Dollars Outside US Amid Banking Sanctions - US Official

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Russia will need to find a new source of dollars and a new debt payment route outside the United States due to sanctions imposed on the country's financial sector, a senior administration official said on Wednesday.

"On Monday, we cut off Russia's ability to use its frozen central bank funds to make debt payments, and so Russia will now have to find new sources of dollars from outside the US and to find a new payment route other than US banks to avoid falling into default," the senior administration official said.

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US Charges Russian Businessman Malofeyev With Sanctions Violations

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – The United States is charging Russian businessman Konstantin Malofeyev, who created the Russian cable television network Tsargrad, with sanctions violations, US Attorney General Merrick Garland said Wednesday.

"The first action we are announcing today is unsealing of an indictment charging Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev with sanctions violations," Garland told reporters.

The US Treasury Department previously identified Malofeyev as one of the main sources of financing Russian activities in Crimea and providing material support to the Donetsk People's Republic, Garland added.

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US Official Predicts Russia Will Drop Out of Top 20 Economies Due to Sanctions

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States predicts that Russia will drop from being the eleventh largest economy in the world to outside the top 20 economies as a result of the Western sanctions, a senior Biden administration official said on Wednesday.

"Russia used to be the eleventh largest economy in the world. It is now very likely to drop out of the top 20," the official said.

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US in Alignment With G7 Announces Ban on New Investment in Russia

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States in coordination with G7 is introducing a ban on any new investment in Russia, a senior Biden administration official said on Wednesday.

"Today, in alignment with the G7 in the EU, we're announcing a ban on new investment in Russia, which President Biden will implement with an executive order and this will ensure the mass exodus from Russia that we're seeing from the private sector, which is now over 600 multinational companies," the official said.

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US to Sanction Putin's Children, Other Top Officials' Families - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing sanctions on the children of Russian President Vladimir Putin as well as the families of other top Russian officials such as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, a senior administration official said on Wednesday.

"Today we're sanctioning Putin's adult children, Minister Lavrov's wife and his daughter, and members of Russia's Security Council," the senior administration official said.

The US on Wednesday also announced sanctions against a number of Russian government officials including Security Council deputy chair Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin.

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US Disrupts Alleged Russian Military Intelligence 'Global Botnet' - Attorney General

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US Attorney General Merrick Garland announced on Wednesday that the United States disrupted a "global botnet" allegedly controlled by Russian military intelligence.

"The action we announcing today is disruption of a global botnet controlled by the Russian military intelligence agency commonly known as the GRU," Garland said.

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China Indicating No Intention to Violate Anti-Russia Sanctions - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - China is not showing any intent to undermine anti-Russia sanctions, a senior US administration official said on Wednesday.

"We've had a series of private consultations going up to the highest level of our government and China's government about the importance of respecting the sanctions regime that we put in place as well as the export controls," the official said. "And you've seen, I think, in the public rhetoric from China that they're not openly at least indicating any intention to do so. And we're watching that very closely."

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US Imposes 'Full Blocking Sanctions' Against Russia's Sberbank, Alpha Bank - Official

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed "full blocking sanctions" on Sberbank and Alpha Bank in its latest round of restrictive measures to escalate the financial shock for Russia, a senior Biden administration official said on Wednesday.

"We're dramatically escalating the financial shock by imposing full blocking sanctions on Russia's largest financial institution Sberbank and its largest private bank Alpha Bank," the official said.

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US GDP Growth Seen at 3%-3.5% This Year vs 5.7% in 2021 - Federal Reserve Official

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US economic growth is likely to slow to between 3% and 3.5% this year from last year's 5.7% expansion as runaway inflation tops policy-makers concerns, Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia President Patrick Harker said on Wednesday. "With the runoff of pandemic support, tightening monetary conditions, and the war in Ukraine pressuring commodity prices, I think growth will moderate this year," Harker told a live-streamed discussion on the economy. "We can probably expect 3 percent to 3.5 percent GDP growth this year before falling to trend growth of 2 percent to 2.5 percent during the next couple of years." Harker also said he was "acutely concerned" about inflation, which he described as "widespread" and "running far too high."

New coronavirus lockdowns in China could slow the economy in the top manufacturer of consumer goods for the United States, adding stress to US supply chains, he said.

"Russia's invasion of Ukraine will add to inflation pressure, not only hiking oil and gas prices but other commodities, like wheat and fertilizer, as well," Harker said. "Delivery times remain elevated, and while there are some signs in the data, and in what we hear from our contacts, that supply chain constraints are finally easing, we are not out of the woods yet. In response to a new COVID-19 wave, China is instituting hard lockdowns in major manufacturing hubs, further choking supply."

After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by the COVID-19, the US economy expanded by 5.7% in 2021, growing at its fastest pace since 1982.

However, inflation grew even faster. The Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, a US inflation indicator closely followed by the Fed, expanded 5.8% in the year December and 6.4% in the 12 months to February, both also at their fastest in four decades.

The Federal Reserve has vowed to bring inflation back to its target range of 2% with a series of rate hikes.

The US central bank approved its first pandemic-era rate hike on March 16, raising rates by 25 basis points, or a quarter percentage point. Many of its policy-makers have said since that the March hike was too tame and more aggressive increases of 50 basis points, or half percentage point, may be needed. The central bank is considering as many as seven rate adjustments this year.

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FDA Says COVID-19 Vaccines in US 'Not Well-Matched' to Dominant Circulating Variant

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – COVID-19 vaccines currently available in the United States are not well suited to fighting the dominant variant of the novel coronavirus, but their effectiveness can be improved by means of boosters, Deputy Director-Clinical of the US Food and Drug Administration Doran Fink said on Wednesday.

"While currently available vaccines are not well-matched to the dominant circulating variant (Omicron BA.2 sublineage), vaccine effectiveness against COVID-19 and serious outcomes is improved by use of booster doses," Fink told a Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee meeting.

The effectiveness of available COVID-19 shots is nevertheless mitigated by waning protection over time mostly against milder disease, Fink added.

The US has so far approved the Pfizer/BioNTech, Johnson & Johnson, and Moderna coronavirus vaccines.

Over 980,000 Americans have died of COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic. Overall, COVID-19 cases appear to be waning with death and hospitalizations falling, although the effects of the BA.2 variant are a concern to doctors, researchers and others in the medical community.

To date, about 70% of Americans 5 and older have been fully vaccinated. Though older Americans lead the way with about 90% fully vaccinated of those 65 and over, about 41% of the more than 110 million people 50 and over are fully vaccinated but have not received their first booster, the CDC and US Census Bureau data indicate.

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US, Allies Providing Ukraine With 10 Anti-Tank Systems for Every Russian Tank – Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – The United States and their allies are providing Ukraine with 10 anti-tank systems for every single Russian tank in the country, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"To put this in perspective: between the United States and other allies and partners, for every Russian tank in Ukraine, we have provided or will soon provide 10 anti-tank systems. Ten for every single Russian tank," Blinken told NBC News.

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UNGA to Vote Thursday on US Push to Suspend Russia From Human Rights Council - Official

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly will vote Thursday on the US push to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council, Paulina Kubiak, spokeswoman for the General Assembly president, confirmed to Sputnik.

"I can confirm that the Emergency Special Session will resume on Thursday at 10AM [14:00 GMT]," she said on Wednesday.

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RPT - Biden's Ukraine Arms-Buying Spree Boosts US Defense Industry Giants

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US defense contractors are raking in additional billions of dollars as a direct result of President Joe Biden's policy toward Ukraine, and stand to gain even more based on administration plans to bolster NATO while setting new military spending records.

After Russia launched its operation in Ukraine on February 24, the Pentagon's top five suppliers saw their stock prices rise - with three jumping by double digits in the first week, as investors on Wall Street anticipated a surge in weapons orders.

However, the spike began well before Russian forces entered Ukraine and in line with Washington's growing support for Kiev. For example, in the second week of January the US delivered about \$200 million in security assistance to Ukraine just as lawmakers were set to introduce legislation for \$200 million more.

In January, Raytheon chief Greg Hayes told investors on an earnings call that he fully expected to see the company benefit from the tensions in Eastern Europe with new international sales opportunities, a sentiment other contractors echoed, which has now become a reality. Since the beginning of the year, Lockheed Martin's stock price rose by over 25 percent while Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, and General Dynamics each saw a spike of over 15%.

"War is excellent for business," Australian global peace activist Helen Caldicott told Sputnik. Javelin manufacturer Raytheon and Stinger supplier Lockheed Martin are especially ecstatic over the situation in Ukraine, added Caldicott, the founder of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Physicians for Social Responsibility.

Former Pentagon analyst Chuck Spinney was surprised by neither the conflict itself, which he called a "predictable consequence" of NATO expansion, nor the US defense establishment's reaction to it.

"It now has champagne corks popping in the Pentagon, in the defense industry, and in their wholly owned subsidiaries in Congress, think tanks, the intelligence apparatus, and the press," Spinney told Sputnik.

ARMS SPENDING SPREE

US President Joe Biden has repeatedly boasted about the largess of security aid his administration has bestowed Ukraine, which now stands at \$2.3 billion - 70 percent of which has been doled out within the past five weeks alone.

The weapons the Biden administration committed or delivered to Ukraine by mid-March included 1,400 Stinger anti-aircraft weapons, 10,000 Javelin and AT4 shoulder-fired anti-tank systems, and 60 million rounds of ammunition, to name just a few of the big ticket items listed on a White House fact sheet. Thousands of other weapons in the packages include grenade launchers, rifles, pistols, machine guns, and shotguns - in addition to 100 tactical drones, 25,000 sets of body armor, and 25,000 helmets.

US allies are also giving defense contractors reason to celebrate. According to the White House, at least 30 countries have provided security assistance to Ukraine since the operation began.

Yet, even before current tensions, Ukraine for years had been a leading recipient of US military aid. Since 2014, the US has provided Kiev with a total of more than \$4 billion in security assistance, including the aid authorized under Biden, according to a State Department fact sheet.

Meanwhile, the US troop presence in Europe has jumped from 60,000 to 100,000 following the start of the Ukraine conflict. And the US and its NATO allies have announced intentions to send even more to boost the alliance's "eastern flank."

Spinney said understanding the internal political-economic causes of the US addiction to the narcotic of defense spending is at the heart of the problem. Citing American strategic thinker John Boyd, Spinney said the strategy is simple: "Don't interrupt the money flow, add to it."

Sure enough, on March 28, the Biden administration submitted to Congress a budget request for 2023 that included \$773 billion in spending for the Pentagon, a 4% increase from the previous year. Another \$40 billion in defense-related spending through other agencies brings the total to \$813 billion, which would represent a record level national security budget if approved.

Biden has asked Congress for nearly \$7 billion to strengthen NATO and other European partners in order to counter Moscow, according to the White House. In addition, \$682 million was requested for Ukraine security assistance, an increase of \$219 million, which Biden said was meant to forcefully respond to Russia's "aggression" against Ukraine.

Nor is the next wave of weapons spending likely to stop there. Senior military commanders have already staked out the ground for further prodigal spending. On March 29, US European Command chief Todd Wolters in testimony to Congress said he suspected the Pentagon was "going to still need more."

Only six days earlier, Republican lawmakers called for higher defense spending, saying that Russia's operation in Ukraine "has already left us and our NATO allies less secure."

VICIOUS CYCLE, TWISTED INCENTIVES

The recent spending sprees, the experts said, are consistent with confrontational US policies - from the Cold War to the war on terrorism. Exacerbating the dilemma is the close ties between the Washington establishment and the defense industry, which lobbies lawmakers and funds their campaigns.

Another problem is the so-called revolving door, wherein many defense officials tasked with overseeing procurement go on to work for companies in the private sector. In January, the Project On Government Oversight watchdog reported that over the past three years Lockheed Martin hired 44 former Pentagon officials, Raytheon and Northrop Grumman 24 each, Boeing at least 23, and General Dynamics eight.

A staggering \$286 billion in US defense spending went to these five well-connected suppliers in 2019 and 2020, according to the report.

Spinney, who once appeared on Time Magazine's cover for highlighting reckless defense spending during the Reagan administration, said the "first" Cold War's 40-year climate of fear was something then-Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev tried to end. But successive US administrations were busy planting the seed money for a new generation of cold-war inspired weapons.

The former Pentagon analyst said President George W. Bush's Global War on Terror was the bridging operation that "greased the transition" to Cold War II by keeping defense budgets at Cold War levels.

The 9-11 terrorist attacks helped fuel a climate of fear, he added, that is now needed to sustain Cold War II for the remainder of the 21st Century.

Caldicott said the consequences of those decisions have unleashed wars and suffering around the world anew over the past two decades.

"Since 2001, the US has spent \$6.4 trillion on killing and destruction in 85 countries, murdering 801,000 people," Caldicott said while noting that the stocks of the top five defense contractors outperformed the overall market by a whopping 58 percent.

To make matters worse, the peace activist added, all members of Congress received huge amounts of money from these "killing corporations."

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US, Chinese Special Envoys Meet to Discuss N. Korea Missile Launches - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US special envoy Sung Kim and Chinese counterpart Liu Xiaoming held talks in Washington on North Korea's recent missile tests and ways to encourage Pyongyang to engage in negotiations, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"Special Representative Kim condemned the DPRK's March 24 ICBM launch, the latest in a series of increasingly escalatory actions by the DPRK. He noted that each of the DPRK's 13 ballistic missile launches this year constituted clear violations of multiple UN Security Council resolutions and posed a serious threat to regional stability, and reiterated the importance of

responding firmly to these escalatory actions," Price said on Tuesday. "Kim reaffirmed that the United States is committed to engage in serious and sustained diplomacy with the DPRK." The two envoys also discussed opportunities to advance the "shared goal of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula and how to encourage the DPRK to engage in meaningful negotiations," Price added.

On Monday, Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, said her country will use nuclear weapons if threatened by South Korea. She said it was "a very big mistake" on the part of the South Korean defense minister to speak about a preventive strike against North Korea.

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US Lawmaker Introduces Bill to Establish National Strategic Uranium Reserve

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US Republican Congressman Bob Latta introduced a bill that if passed by Congress and signed into law would establish a national strategic uranium reserve in the United States.

"Today, Congressman Bob Latta (R-OH5) introduced the National Opportunity to Restore Uranium Supply Services In America Act of 2022, otherwise referred to as the NO RUSSIA Act of 2022, which would establish a national strategic uranium reserve and a program to ensure the availability of domestic uranium by increasing domestic uranium production, conversion, and enrichment," the congressman's office said in a press release on Tuesday.

Latta said the United States has lost its competitive edge in the development of nuclear energy and must cut its reliance on Russian uranium.

In early March, US media reported that the Biden administration is considering sanctions against Russian uranium supplier Rosatom.

The Biden administration is expected to announce a new wave of anti-Russia sanctions on Wednesday that will target state-owned enterprises, Russian government officials and financial institutions, according to the White House.

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Ivanka Trump Testifies Before US Capitol Riot Committee for 8 Hours - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Ivanka Trump, the daughter of former President Donald Trump, testified before the US House January 6 panel for around eight hours, NBC reported. Ivanka, who also served as a White House aide during the Trump administration, answered questions virtually on Tuesday, the report said, citing lawmakers.

"She's answering questions," Committee Chair Bennie Thompson said as quoted in the report. "Not in broad, chatty terms, but she's answering questions."

Last week, the committee interviewed Ivanka's husband, Jared Kushner, for more than six hours.

On January 6, 2021 a group of Trump supporters entered the US Capitol to protest the certifying of the 2020 presidential election results. The House committee in charge of the probe has interviewed several hundred people, requested White House records from the National Archives, and held several former Trump advisers in contempt.

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US Senators Urge Biden to Lift 25% Tariffs on Steel From Ukraine - Letter

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein and Republican Senator Patrick Toomey sent a letter to US President Joe Biden urging him to lift the 25 percent tariff on steel from Ukraine in order to boost the country's economy.

"[W]e respectfully request that you remove the 25 percent US tariff on steel imports from Ukraine to help it eventually stabilize and rebuild its economy," the senators said in the letter on Tuesday.

The lawmakers pointed out that Ukraine's metal production is vital to the country's economy, 80 percent of it is exported, and steel and related sectors comprise nearly 12 percent of Ukraine's gross domestic product.

In 2018, US President Donald Trump imposed tariffs of 25 percent on certain steel from numerous countries including Ukraine.

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 intensifying 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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Authorities Arrest 3rd Person Involved in Sacramento K Street Shooting - Police

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Officers have arrested a third man in relation to the "K Street" mass shooting that took place over the weekend, the Sacramento Police Department said.

"In the course of investigating the multiple homicides of April 3, 2022, detectives identified a man who was seen carrying a gun in the immediate aftermath of the shooting," the Sacramento Police Department said in a press release on Tuesday. "In following up on this information, detectives recovered a handgun and arrested 31-year-old Daviyonne Dawson late Monday on charges of being a prohibited person in possession of a firearm."

Dawson has not been charged with any crimes directly related to the shootings, the release said. Police also recovered a handgun but said it was not used in the shooting, the release added.

On Monday and Tuesday, officers arrested Dandrae Martin, 26, and his brother Smiley Martin, 27. Dandrae faces charges of assault with a firearm and possession of a firearm by a prohibited person. Smiley faces charges of possession of a firearm by a prohibited person.

On Sunday morning, a mass shooting at the intersection of K Street and 10th Street in Sacramento left six people died and 12 wounded. Police said the gunfire also damaged three buildings and three vehicles.

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AUKUS Leaders Agree to Begin Work on Hypersonics, Electronic Warfare - Joint Statement (Updates with details in paras 4-10)

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) agreed to begin trilateral cooperation on the development of new hypersonic and electronic warfare capabilities, the leaders of the three countries said in a joint statement. "The AUKUS partners will work together to accelerate development of advanced hypersonic and counter-hypersonic capabilities," the statement said on Tuesday.

The AUKUS partners will also cooperate on developing enhanced techniques to operate in an electronic warfare environment, the statement added.

The three countries are also collaborating on autonomous underwater vehicles, initial trials and experimentation of this capability is planned for 2023, the statement said.

The three leaders - Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and US President Joe Biden today reviewed progress under the AUKUS pact, the joint statement released by the White House said.

Multiple senior-level meetings have taken place since the announcement of the AUKUS pact on September 15, 2021 to advance trilateral work on providing Australia with US nuclear-powered submarines and developing other advanced military capabilities, the statement said.

The leaders also said they are pleased with the progress in their trilateral program for Australia to establish a conventionally armed, nuclear powered submarine capability.

The White House said in a separate press release that initial steps are underway to ensure Australia has a workforce with necessary skills, training, and qualifications to build, operate, and sustain a conventionally-armed nuclear-powered submarines. A group of Australian personnel have begun school and training in nuclear science and engineering, the release added.

Moreover, combined teams from the three countries have visited multiple sites in Australia to baseline its nuclear stewardship, infrastructure, workforce, and industrial capabilities and requirements, the release said. The Australian government is also in the initial process to secure additional land on which to build the Nuclear-Powered Submarine Construction Yard, according to the release.

The three heads of state, in addition, vowed to deepen cooperation on artificial intelligence and quantum technologies.

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China's Nuclear Force Expansion to Lead to Tri-Party Nuclear World - US Air Force Chief

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 5 (Sputnik) - The growth of China's nuclear force will result in a tri-party nuclear world within a period of several years, US Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall said during the Space Symposium.

"The biggest concerns I think are two-fold. ... One is the threat of use of tactical nuclear weapons by Russia. The other is the revelation of Chinese expansion of their nuclear force which will put the Chinese on the level of roughly equivalent in a few years to the United States and Russia," Kendall said on Tuesday. "That's going to bring us into a three party or tri-party nuclear world with great powers that we have never had before and I think we're just getting into that and we're just starting to think about what that means."

In December, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin accused China of rapidly building up its nuclear arsenal, claiming that Beijing intends to raise the number of nuclear warheads to 1,000 by 2030.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry said the following months that the US government's statements on China concerning its nuclear arsenal are not true. The Foreign Ministry highlighted that China adheres to the "no first use of nuclear weapons" principle and keeps its nuclear weapons at the minimum level required to safeguard national security.

The Foreign Ministry pointed out that a rapid or significant increase in a number of nuclear warheads goes against China's policy. However, it also noted that this does not mean China is not modernizing its current arsenal, but the modernization is proceeding in accordance with Beijing's interest in ensuring the reliability of its arsenal in order to maintain security and strategic deterrence.

Kendall said the United States is trying to bring China to the negotiation table to agree to the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (new START). The United States believes that China increasing its nuclear arsenal would make it one of the largest in the world, with deterrence becoming more difficult, he added.

Under the New START treaty, Russia and the United States negotiated a limit of 1,550 offensive nuclear warheads each.

Russia has said that it has no intention of forcing China to participate in nuclear talks and Beijing should itself decide whether these talks are beneficial for the country.

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Twitter Says Has Been Working on Adding Edit Button on Its Platform Since 2021

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Social media giant Twitter said it has been working on developing an edit feature for its platform since last year and will begin testing it among users in the coming months.

"Now that everyone is asking... yes, we've been working on an edit feature since last year," the company said in a tweet on Tuesday.

The company said it will begin testing the edit feature with users who are so-called Twitter Blue subscribers, which offers users access to extra features on the platform.

Twitter Blue subscribers will be able to test the edit feature in the coming months and the company will learn about what works, what does not work and what else may be possible, the company said.

Earlier on Tuesday, Twitter announced it is appointing Tesla CEO and SpaceX founder Elon Musk to the company's board of directors.

On Monday, the US Securities and Exchange Commission said Musk acquired a 9.2 percent stake in Twitter. Twitter shares jumped by 28 percent at pre-market trading sessions on Monday.

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Regulators Propose Ban on Only Remaining Form of Asbestos Used in US - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said that it has proposed a new rule banning the last remaining form of asbestos still used in the United States due to the risk of cancer posed by the substance.

"Today, we're taking an important step forward to protect public health and finally put an end to the use of dangerous asbestos in the United States," EPA Administrator Michael Regan said in a press release on Tuesday.

The rule would ban chrysotile asbestos, the only form of asbestos currently imported to the US for use in gaskets, brake blocks and other vehicle friction products, the release said.

The proposed rule is the first issued under the new process to evaluate and address the safety of existing chemicals under the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA), enacted in 2016, the release added.

A 1991 court decision overturned the EPA's 1989 asbestos ban and weakened their authority to address health risks posed by existing chemicals under the TSCA. Amendments made to the TSCA in 2016 altered the policies to allow for protections against unreasonable chemical risks. Use of asbestos in the United States has been declining for decades, according to the press release. Its use is currently banned in over 50 countries around the world, according to the release.

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Blinken Discusses Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh in Calls With Armenian, Azerbaijani Leaders

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed the situation in Ukraine and emphasized the need for diplomacy in Nagorno-Karabakh in separate calls with the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan today. The Secretary ... highlighted the continued commitment of the US and its partners to hold the Russian Federation and its enablers accountable for the unprovoked and unjustified war against Ukraine," the statement said on Tuesday. "The Secretary underscored that now was not the time for further escalation in the region."

The call with the leader of Azerbaijan mirrored the one with Pashinyan during which Blinken expressed his encouragement for further peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, including Pashinyan's and Aliyev's planned meeting April 6 with European Council President Michel, the statement said.

On Monday, the Azerbaijani defense ministry said that Armenian armed forces attacked positions of the Azerbaijan army in Azerbaijan's Tovuz region, which is located in a border area north of the regular conflict zone in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Occasional clashes have taken place in the strategic border zone between Azerbaijan's Tovuz and Armenia's Tavush regions in recent years.

The decades-long conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia escalated in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and left thousands of casualties on both sides. A trilateral ceasefire declaration was mediated by Russia in November of that year and the sides agreed to a deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the region.

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Two Fueling Problems Further Delay Artemis Moon Rocket Rehearsal - NASA Officials

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The Artemis program to put Americans back on the Moon for the first time since 1972 suffered two more delays in wet dress rehearsal problems on Sunday and Monday, and the procedure will now be further deferred until after the manned Axiom mission to the International Space Station (ISS), NASA officials said.

"We were able to load LOX (liquid oxygen) into the core stage for the very first time: We got about half way with the LH2 (liquid hydrogen) pneumatic pressure at the pad," NASA Launch Director Charlie Blackwell-Thompson told a press conference on Tuesday. "We decided we would need to send a team into the pad [so] we stopped our cryogenic loading operations yesterday."

NASA launch managers tried on Sunday and on Monday to load nearly 1 million gallons of fuel into the 322-foot-tall Space Launch System in the wet dress rehearsal planned to be the last full checkout before the Artemis 1 is fired for its first test flight. On Sunday, faulty fans stopped the test and a jammed valve halted it a second time on Monday.

"We are remaining at the pad in preparation for our next wet dress rehearsal attempt. ... They had a vaporizer leak that froze up," Blackwell-Thompson said.

The NASA officials refused to give any firm date as to when the delayed Artemis 1 flight would now take place. But they said it would have to wait until after the next manned Axiom mission to the ISS.

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Wall Street Tumbles as Fed Says Has No Qualms Using Heavy Rate Hikes to Quell Inflation

NEW YORK, April 5 (Sputnik) - US stocks tumbled on Tuesday, with Big Tech losing more than 2% after Federal Reserve Governor Lael Brainard said the central bank had no hesitation using heavy rate hikes to bring runaway inflation under control.

Wall Street's three key stock indexes - the S&P 500, the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the Nasdaq Composite - fell 1.4% on the average.

Nasdaq, which houses the biggest technology names of the world, including Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, led losses, with a drop of 328 points, or 2.3%, settling at 14,204.

"Given the risks that lie ahead, and the impact of higher inflation, it's clear that the risks for the data in the coming months are firmly tilted to the downside," Craig Erlam, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.

Brainard vowed to bring inflation back to the Federal Reserve's so-called neutral target of 2% later this year, after it grew 6.4% in the 12 months to February, according to the Personal Consumption Expenditure Index.

"The combined impact of rate hikes and balance-sheet reductions will move monetary policy closer to neutral later this year," Brainard, who is awaiting confirmation as Federal Reserve Vice Chair, said in a speech on inflation expectations. "Inflation is too high. High inflation burdens all Americans. Lowering inflation is our most essential duty. We must also sustain the recovery to include everyone."

The US central bank approved its first pandemic-era rate hike on March 16, raising rates by 25 basis points, or a quarter percentage point. Many of its policy-makers have said since that the March hike was too tame and more aggressive increases of 50 basis points, or half percentage point, may be needed. The Federal Reserve is considering as many as seven rate adjustments this year.

Aside from keeping rates at almost zero for two years prior to its March rate hike, the Federal Reserve purchased \$120 billion worth of bonds and assets for each month during that period to support the economy. Those asset purchases and others have added some \$4 trillion to the central bank's so-called balance sheet, which now stands at around \$8.5 trillion. Federal Reserve officials also hope to trim that figure significantly.

"I expect the balance sheet to shrink much faster than in prior recovery," Brainard said. "After policy becomes more neutral, the extent of additional tightening will be determined by the changing inflation and employment outlooks."

The S&P 500 - which groups the top 500 US stocks - had the second largest dip among Wall Street's indexes, finishing down 55 points, or 1.2%, at 4,528.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which lists travel, aviation and cross-industry value stocks, settled down 281 points, or 0.8%, at 34,641.

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US Approves \$95Mln Possible Sale of Patriot System Support, Equipment to Taiwan - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has approved a possible \$95 million sale of contractor technical support and equipment for the Patriot air defense system to Taiwan, the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States of Contractor Technical Assistance and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$95 million," the DSCA said in a press release on Tuesday.

The possible sale of contractor technical assistance support includes training, planning, fielding, deployment, operation, maintenance and sustainment of the Patriot system as well as associated equipment, the release added.

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US Air Force Chief Sees Ukraine Conflict as 'Wake Up Call' for More Security Investment

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 5 (Sputnik) - US Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall during remarks at the Space Symposium said the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has served as a wake up call showing that more investment is required in security.

"It is not at all clear at this time how it's all going to end, it's a wake up call that this sort of thing can happen," Kendall said at the press conference, stressing there needed to be investment in security on Tuesday. "And we need to do it with our partners around the world."

Kendall added that there is going to be a lot of lessons learned from the situation by many different parties.

The US, he added, needs to sort out what it implies for future investments. The process has just started, Kendall added, and there is a long way to go.

"I hate to say there's any silver lining in this but I think the fact that there's more awareness of the possibility of threats like this and more awareness about what the commercial world can provide to help resist and deter something like that and we'll move forward from there," Kendall said.

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

provocations. In response to Russia's operation, Western countries have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * Russia should not have withdrawn its forces from the town of Bucha in light of the alleged atrocities that emerged after their pullout, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Tuesday.
- * The United Nations is unable to work effectively and provide the security guarantees to Ukraine that the latter believes are needed, Volodymyr Zelenskyy said.
- * The United Nations is investigating allegations that Ukrainian forces have used cluster munitions during the ongoing conflict, Under-Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo said.
- * Russian Ombudswoman Tatyana Moskalkova confirmed that an exchange of prisoners of war in the 86-for-86 format had taken place between Russia and Ukraine.
- * Statements about a provocation in the Ukrainian town of Bucha near Kiev from US President Joe Biden and from the Pentagon contradict each other, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- * The Ukraine conflict is a protracted one, could last for years and the United States and NATO allies will be involved in it for "quite some time," Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said.

RUSSIA-UKRAINE TALKS

- * China welcomes Russia-Ukraine talks and urges them to continue the negotiations, permanent representative to the United Nations Zhang Jun said on Tuesday.
- * Moscow does not reject the possibility of a meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy after the sides agree on a treaty, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- * The West aims to undermine Moscow-Kiev talks, which saw some progress during a meeting in Istanbul, by fueling hysteria over the situation in Bucha, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

DIPLOMATS EXPULSIONS

- * Moscow's response to the European Union's decision on expelling 19 employees of the Russian permanent mission will be appropriate, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Tuesday.
- * Romania has decided to expel ten employees of the Russian embassy in Bucharest, the Foreign Ministry said.

- * The EU has declared 19 employees of Russia's Permanent Mission to the European Union persona non gratae for alleged involvement in activities inconsistent their diplomatic status, the union's foreign policy service said in a statement.
- * The Slovenian Foreign Ministry informed Russian ambassador Timur Eyvazov about its decision to reduce the number of the Russian embassy employees.
- * Estonia has decided to close the Russian consulate general in Narva and the embassy office in Tartu, the Foreign Ministry said.
- * Latvia has decided to close Russian consulates in Liepaja and Daugavpils, Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics said.
- * Madrid has decided to expel some 25 Russian diplomats, Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares said.

WESTERN RESTRICTIONS ON RUSSIA

- * The US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has halted information exchanges with Russia in an effort to reduce the country's ability to collect taxes and fund its special military operation in Ukraine, the Treasury Department told Reuters on Tuesday.
- * Representatives of the EU countries during a meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) on Tuesday expressed their readiness to expand import and export restrictive measures against Russia, French Economy and Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said at a press conference after the meeting..
- * The United States is imposing anti-Russia sanctions on the Garantex virtual currency exchange and Hydra Market, the US Department of Treasury said.

AUKUS COOPERATION ON HYPERSONIC WARFARE

- * Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) said in a joint statement on Tuesday that they agreed to begin trilateral cooperation on the development of new hypersonic and electronic warfare capabilities.
- * Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jun said regarding the announcement by AUKUS they will cooperate on developing hypersonic weapons that countries should avoid creating another Ukraine-like crisis.

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US to Provide Millions of Pediatric COVID-19 Vaccines to Poor Countries - White House

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is planning to provide millions of pediatric COVID-19 vaccines to low and middle income countries, White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator Jeff Zients told reporters on Tuesday.

"Today, we are adding to our list of first announcing that we will be the first nation to donate tens of millions of pediatric COVID-19 vaccines to low and lower middle income countries for free," Zients said in a press briefing.

Over 20 of such countries already have approached the US asking to provide vaccines to their children, he added.

Zients also noted that the US has delivered over half a billion of regular COVID-19 vaccines to more than 100 countries.

He then called on Congress to act quickly to boost global efforts.

"We urge Congress to act promptly on adopting additional funding to fight COVID-19 so we can accelerate our efforts on vaccinating people around the world," Zients said.

Global vaccination is in America's interest because the virus does not recognize borders, he added.

On Monday, US senators reached a \$10 billion package on a covid bill but it lacked funding for global efforts.

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US House Passes Resolution to Uphold NATO Principles, Set Up Democratic Resilience Center

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Tuesday passed a resolution reaffirming support for the founding principles of NATO and calling for the establishment of a Center for Democratic Resilience at the alliance's headquarters.

The House passed the resolution, sponsored by Democratic Representative Gerald Connolly, in a vote of 362 in favor to 63 against. Connolly also serves as President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

The resolution calls on US President Joe Biden to promote the adoption of a new NATO strategic concept that clarifies the alliance's shared democratic values and the commitment to enhancing democratic institutions within member and member-aspiring states as well as partner states.

The resolution comes amid increased engagement of NATO member states due to Russia's ongoing special operation in Ukraine. The alliance has bolstered its force posture along its eastern flank and increased communication between its leaders.

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New US Sanctions Aim to Cause Uncertainty to Russia's Financial System - White House

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The new US sanctions that are expected to be announced later this week aim to cause more uncertainty and challenges to Russia's financial system amid Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"Russia does not have unlimited resources, especially now given the crippling sanctions we have put in place and they are going to be forced to choose between draining remaining

valuable dollar reserves or new revenue coming in or default," Psaki said during a press briefing. "[T]he biggest part of our objective here is to deplete the resources that Putin has to continue his war against Ukraine and obviously causing more uncertainty and challenges to their financial system is a part of that."

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White House Confirms New Russia Sanctions Will Target Officials, Financial Institutions

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The new round of US sanctions to be announced against Russia later this week will target government officials, financial institutions and state-owned enterprises, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said during a press briefing on Tuesday. "You can expect, as many of you have reported, that they will target Russian government officials, their family members, Russian owned financial institutions, [and] also state-owned enterprises," Psaki said when asked about the new US sanctions package against Russia.

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US Shares Ukraine Frustration About Russia Holding UN Security Council Seat - White House
WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States shares Ukraine's frustration about Russia's permanent membership on the UN Security Council, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy expressed frustration earlier in the day about Russia's position in the world body as well as with the United Nations' inability to provide security guarantees to Kiev.

"I think he's certainly referring to - obviously he can speak for himself, but - his frustration, which we share, that Russia is a member of the UN Security Council. We don't see that changing," Psaki said during a White House press briefing.

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Trudeau Invites Mexico's Obrador to Participate in Ukraine Refugees Fundraiser - Statement

TORONTO, April 5 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has invited Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador to participate in a so-called pledging conference for Ukrainian refugees, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) said on Tuesday.

"The Prime Minister invited the President to participate in the "Stand Up for Ukraine" campaign pledging event on April 9, which he is co-convening with the President of the European

Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to raise funds for Ukrainian refugees and internally displaced people," the PMO said in a statement.

The two leaders also discussed the global challenges spilling over from the conflict in Ukraine, including soaring energy and food prices, the statement said.

The two officials also discussed North American trade following the implementation of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) successor deal.

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US Expects India to 'Downscale' Purchases of Russian Military Equipment - Austin

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States expects India to cut back on purchases of Russian military equipment given that Washington does not believe such purchases are in Delhi's best interest, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a congressional testimony on Tuesday.

India has taken a neutral stance in the ongoing conflict between Russia and the United States and its allies with respect to Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine, and has refused to join the Western sanctions against Russia.

"We continue to work with [India] to ensure that they understand... we believe it is not in [India's] best interests to continue to invest in Russian equipment," Austin told the congressional defense committee. "Our requirement going forward is that they downscale the types of equipment that they are investing in and look to invest more in the types of things that will make us continue to be compatible.

The Indian military uses a variety of Russian-made weapons, including missile systems, tanks and artillery guns and has signed on additional deals, including the purchase of Russia's S-400 air defense system.

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Crude Prices Dip After Heavy Rate Hikes Suggested in No. 1 Oil Consumer US

NEW YORK, April 5 (Sputnik) - Crude prices dipped at Tuesday's settlement after Federal Reserve Governor Lael Brainard said the central bank will use heavy rate hikes if necessary to bring US inflation under control, impacting sentiment across markets in the world's largest oil consuming country.

Smaller forecasts of crude and fuel inventory drawdowns for last week also impacted sentiment in oil, traders said.

London-traded Brent, the global oil benchmark, settled down 89 cents, or 0.8%, at \$106.64 per barrel. It rallied 4% earlier in the day, to nearly \$110, on talk of additional Western sanctions planned against major energy exporter Russia.

New York-traded US crude benchmark West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, settled down \$1.32, or 1.3%, at \$101.96, after an intraday high of \$105.59.

"The trend in recent weeks has broadly been one of consolidation, albeit following an extremely volatile period and what we've seen so far this week doesn't suggest anything has changed," Craig Erlam, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.

Brent fell 13% last week for its biggest weekly decline since April 2020 after finishing the first quarter up 39%, demonstrating the recent volatility in oil.

WTI, on its part, settled below the key \$100 support last week as it fell about 13%, just like Brent, for its worst week since April 2020. That came despite a 33% rally in the first quarter. Tuesday's reversal in crude prices came after Brainard vowed to bring inflation back to the Fed's so-called neutral target of 2% later this year, after it grew 6.4% in the 12 months to February, according to Personal Consumption Expenditure Index.

"The combined impact of rate hikes and balance-sheet reductions will move monetary policy closer to neutral later this year," Brainard, who is awaiting confirmation as Fed Vice Chair, said in a speech on inflation expectations. "Inflation is too high. High inflation burdens all Americans. Lowering inflation is our most essential duty. We must also sustain the recovery to include everyone."

The Fed approved its first pandemic-era rate hike on March 16, raising rates by 25 basis points. Many of its policy-makers have said since that the March hike was too tame and more aggressive increases of 50 basis points may be needed. The central bank is considering as many as seven rate adjustments this year.

Aside from keeping rates at almost zero for two years prior to its March rate hike, the Fed purchased \$120 billion worth of bonds and assets for each month during that period to support the economy. Those asset purchases and others have added some \$4 trillion to the central bank's so-called balance sheet, which now stands at around \$8.5 trillion. Fed officials also hope to trim that figure significantly.

"I expect the balance sheet to shrink much faster than in prior recovery," Brainard said. "After policy becomes more neutral, the extent of additional tightening will be determined by the changing inflation and employment outlooks."

Stocks on Wall Street, which trended higher earlier in the day, tumbled on Brainard's remarks, pulling oil prices down as well. With an hour to the close, the S&P 500 was down 1% on the day. Oil traders were also wary about US weekly oil inventory data, due after market settlement from the American Petroleum Institute (API).

The API will release at approximately 4:30 p.m. ET (20:30 GMT) a snapshot of closing balances on US crude, gasoline and distillates for the week ended April 1. The numbers serve as a precursor to official inventory data on the same due from the US Energy Information Administration on Wednesday.

For last week, analysts tracked by Investing.com expect the EIA to report a crude stockpile draw of 2.06 million barrels, on top of the 3.45-million barrel reduction reported during the week to March 25.

On the gasoline inventory front, the consensus is for a build of 63,000 barrels over the 785,000-barrel build in the previous week.

With distillate stockpiles, the expectation is for a drop of 819,000 barrels versus the prior week's build of 1.39 million.

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Biden Signs Executive Order Directing US Agencies to Expand Affordable Care Act

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Tuesday signed an executive order that directs US federal agencies to expand the Affordable Care Act (ACA), also known as Obamacare.

"I just signed an executive order that directs federal agencies to continue doing everything in their power to expand the quality and affordability of health coverage," Biden said via Twitter after the signing ceremony at the White House.

The White House said the alluded measures include undertaking efforts to provide and ensure easy enrollment for medical coverage and assisting citizens to keep the insurance plans they choose.

Efforts should also be undertaken to improve the comprehensiveness of coverage and protect Americans from low-quality coverage, as well as make health coverage more accessible and affordable by expanding eligibility and lowering costs, the White House said.

The Biden administration has also promised to take steps to reduce the burden of medical debt that many Americans are still facing, the White House added.

The ACA was adopted by President Barack Obama in 2010. The measure enabled approximately 31 million Americans to get health coverage.

Obama, while speaking at the signing ceremony as a special guest, noted that the ACA became popular and survived despite facing heavy opposition.

Despite its achievements, a lot of work remains to be done as many Americans continue to experience problems with covering medical costs, Obama said.

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Biden's Ukraine Arms-Buying Spree Boosts US Defense Industry Giants

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US defense contractors are raking in additional billions of dollars as a direct result of President Joe Biden's policy toward Ukraine, and stand to gain even more based on administration plans to bolster NATO while setting new military spending records.

After Russia launched its operation in Ukraine on February 24, the Pentagon's top five suppliers saw their stock prices rise - with three jumping by double digits in the first week, as investors on Wall Street anticipated a surge in weapons orders.

However, the spike began well before Russian forces entered Ukraine and in line with Washington's growing support for Kiev. For example, in the second week of January the US

delivered about \$200 million in security assistance to Ukraine just as lawmakers were set to introduce legislation for \$200 million more.

In January, Raytheon chief Greg Hayes told investors on an earnings call that he fully expected to see the company benefit from the tensions in Eastern Europe with new international sales opportunities, a sentiment other contractors echoed, which has now become a reality. Since the beginning of the year, Lockheed Martin's stock price rose by over 25 percent while Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, and General Dynamics each saw a spike of over 15%.

"War is excellent for business," Australian global peace activist Helen Caldicott told Sputnik. Javelin manufacturer Raytheon and Stinger supplier Lockheed Martin are especially ecstatic over the situation in Ukraine, added Caldicott, the founder of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Physicians for Social Responsibility.

Former Pentagon analyst Chuck Spinney was surprised by neither the conflict itself, which he called a "predictable consequence" of NATO expansion, nor the US defense establishment's reaction to it.

"It now has champagne corks popping in the Pentagon, in the defense industry, and in their wholly owned subsidiaries in Congress, think tanks, the intelligence apparatus, and the press," Spinney told Sputnik.

ARMS SPENDING SPREE

US President Joe Biden has repeatedly boasted about the largess of security aid his administration has bestowed Ukraine, which now stands at \$2.3 billion - 70 percent of which has been doled out within the past five weeks alone.

The weapons the Biden administration committed or delivered to Ukraine by mid-March included 1,400 Stinger anti-aircraft weapons, 10,000 Javelin and AT4 shoulder-fired anti-tank systems, and 60 million rounds of ammunition, to name just a few of the big ticket items listed on a White House fact sheet. Thousands of other weapons in the packages include grenade launchers, rifles, pistols, machine guns, and shotguns - in addition to 100 tactical drones, 25,000 sets of body armor, and 25,000 helmets.

US allies are also giving defense contractors reason to celebrate. According to the White House, at least 30 countries have provided security assistance to Ukraine since the operation began.

Yet, even before current tensions, Ukraine for years had been a leading recipient of US military aid. Since 2014, the US has provided Kiev with a total of more than \$4 billion in security assistance, including the aid authorized under Biden, according to a State Department fact sheet.

Meanwhile, the US troop presence in Europe has jumped from 60,000 to 100,000 following the start of the Ukraine conflict. And the US and its NATO allies have announced intentions to send even more to boost the alliance's "eastern flank."

Spinney said understanding the internal political-economic causes of the US addiction to the narcotic of defense spending is at the heart of the problem. Citing American strategic thinker John Boyd, Spinney said the strategy is simple: "Don't interrupt the money flow, add to it." Sure enough, on March 28, the Biden administration submitted to Congress a budget request for 2023 that included \$773 billion in spending for the Pentagon, a 4% increase from the previous year. Another \$40 billion in defense-related spending through other agencies brings

the total to \$813 billion, which would represent a record level national security budget if approved.

Biden has asked Congress for nearly \$7 billion to strengthen NATO and other European partners in order to counter Moscow, according to the White House. In addition, \$682 million was requested for Ukraine security assistance, an increase of \$219 million, which Biden said was meant to forcefully respond to Russia's "aggression" against Ukraine.

Nor is the next wave of weapons spending likely to stop there. Senior military commanders have already staked out the ground for further prodigal spending. On March 29, US European Command chief Todd Wolters in testimony to Congress said he suspected the Pentagon was "going to still need more."

Only six days earlier, Republican lawmakers called for higher defense spending, saying that Russia's operation in Ukraine "has already left us and our NATO allies less secure."

VICIOUS CYCLE, TWISTED INCENTIVES

The recent spending sprees, the experts said, are consistent with confrontational US policies - from the Cold War to the war on terrorism. Exacerbating the dilemma is the close ties between the Washington establishment and the defense industry, which lobbies lawmakers and funds their campaigns.

Another problem is the so-called revolving door, wherein many defense officials tasked with overseeing procurement go on to work for companies in the private sector. In January, the Project On Government Oversight watchdog reported that over the past three years Lockheed Martin hired 44 former Pentagon officials, Raytheon and Northrop Grumman 24 each, Boeing at least 23, and General Dynamics eight.

A staggering \$286 billion in US defense spending went to these five well-connected suppliers in 2019 and 2020, according to the report.

Spinney, who once appeared on Time Magazine's cover for highlighting reckless defense spending during the Reagan administration, said the "first" Cold War's 40-year climate of fear was something then-Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev tried to end. But successive US administrations were busy planting the seed money for a new generation of cold-war inspired weapons.

The former Pentagon analyst said President George W. Bush's Global War on Terror was the bridging operation that "greased the transition" to Cold War II by keeping defense budgets at Cold War levels.

The 9-11 terrorist attacks helped fuel a climate of fear, he added, that is now needed to sustain Cold War II for the remainder of the 21st Century.

Caldicott said the consequences of those decisions have unleashed wars and suffering around the world anew over the past two decades.

"Since 2001, the US has spent \$6.4 trillion on killing and destruction in 85 countries, murdering 801,000 people," Caldicott said while noting that the stocks of the top five defense contractors outperformed the overall market by a whopping 58 percent.

To make matters worse, the peace activist added, all members of Congress received huge amounts of money from these "killing corporations."

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Pentagon Leaders Say Some Ukrainian Troops Being Trained Inside US

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Some Ukrainian troops are receiving military training in the United States including on how to use equipment provided by the Pentagon, top US defense officials said at a House Armed Services committee hearing on Tuesday.

The US government has provided Ukraine with \$2.3 billion in security assistance since President Joe Biden took office last January, including thousands of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missile systems. Roughly 70 percent of that aid was provided or obligated after Russia launched its operation in Ukraine on February 24.

"Some of them are being trained right here in the United States in our school system," US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley said when asked if Ukrainian troops were being trained on how to use military equipment provided by Washington.

Milley said the training was being conducted through the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin also confirmed the US was training Ukrainians on how to use the equipment.

"To use some of the gear? Certainly, they have to have training. And we're doing that," Austin said. "And you can take advantage of the Ukrainians that are already here [in the US] to leverage them as well."

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

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US Sanctions Russia's Garantex Virtual Currency Exchange, Hydra Market - Treasury Dept.
(Adds details in paras 3,5)

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing anti-Russia sanctions on the Garantex virtual currency exchange and Hydra Market, the US Department of Treasury said on Tuesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned the world's largest and most prominent darknet market, Hydra Market (Hydra) in a coordinated international effort to disrupt proliferation of malicious cybercrime services, dangerous drugs, and other illegal offerings available through the Russia-based site," the Treasury said in a press release.

The Treasury also identified more than 100 virtual currency addresses associated with Hydra's operations that have been used to conduct illicit transactions, according to the release.

The Treasury Department said it designated Garantex for operating or having operated in the financial services sector of the Russian economy.

The release said Garantex allows customers to buy and sell virtual currencies using fiat currencies, and a majority of its operations are carried out in Moscow and St. Petersburg. More than \$100 million of Garantex's transactions are associated with illicit actors and darknet markets, the release added.

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US, India Top Diplomats Agree to Closely Coordinate on Ukraine Developments - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke by telephone with Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and agreed with respect to the situation in Ukraine to closely coordinate on the developments in that country, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar today to review regional and global priorities, including the situation in Ukraine. They agreed to remain closely coordinated on developments and looked forward to meeting again soon," Price said in a statement.

On Friday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with Jaishankar in India and told him that Russia appreciates that Delhi does not have a one-sided approach to the crisis in Ukraine. 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 from Ukrainian troops. In response, the United States and its allies imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia including airspace closures and restrictive measures targeting numerous Russian officials and entities, media and financial institutions.

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US to Tighten Sanctions on Russian Banks Amid War Crimes Allegations - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States will tighten sanctions against top Russian financial institutions amid allegations of war crimes and other abuses in Ukraine, The Wall Street Journal said on Tuesday in a report, citing individuals familiar with the matter.

The Biden administration is considering tightening sanctions against financial institutions such as Sberbank - the largest bank in Russia - the individuals said. Sberbank and other Russian banks are already subject to some restrictions on foreign transactions.

The European Union also intends to ban all transactions with VTB Bank, the second largest lender in Russia, and three other Russian banks already disconnected from the SWIFT payment system, the report added.

The US intends on Wednesday to announce a new sanctions package targeting financial institutions, state-owned enterprises and government officials as well, the report said. The package is also expected to ban all new investment in Russia, according to the report.

The new sanctions come amid allegations of war crimes in Ukraine, including in the city of Bucha. Images emerged showing what appears to be civilian remains on roadways several days after the departure of Russian forces and entry of Ukrainian forces into Bucha.

Russia's Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia denied the accusations at a meeting of the UN Security Council, instead contending that radical Ukrainian forces have been committing abuses against civilians and POWs, as well as breaking humanitarian agreements.

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New US Air Force One Under Development Narrowly Escaped Damage in Boeing Mishap - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - One of the new Air Force One jets under development narrowly escaped being damaged in a mishap at a Boeing factory earlier this year, The Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday, citing sources familiar with the matter.

The report said Boeing crews at a factory in the state of Texas made two attempts to shift the weight of one of the aircraft to jacks from a scaffold-like structure but the weight on some of the jacks exceeded the limit the devices were designed to carry.

The Boeing employee overseeing the task was not qualified for the work, crews did not follow the procedures for executing such a task, and one employee involved in the operation failed a drug test after the incident, according to the newspaper.

Boeing and the Pentagon are in the middle of negotiations over the timeline for the delivery of the two new Air Force One jets valued at \$3.9 billion, the report said. The Boeing jets were originally scheduled to be delivered by the end of 2024, but the US Air Force expects them to arrive 24 months late, the report said.

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Germany, US Seize \$25Mln in Bitcoin From Hydra, Cryptocurrency Wallets - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - German and US authorities seized \$25 million worth of bitcoin from the Hydra Market and cryptocurrency wallets on Tuesday morning, the US Department of Justice said.

"The Justice Department announced today the seizure of Hydra Market (Hydra), the world's largest and longest-running darknet market ... The seizure of the Hydra servers and cryptocurrency wallets containing \$25 million worth of bitcoin was made this morning in Germany by the German Federal Criminal Police (the Bundeskriminalamt), in coordination with U.S. law enforcement," the Justice Department said in a press release.

It added that the Hydra marketplace "enabled users in mainly Russian-speaking countries to buy and sell illicit goods and services, including illegal drugs, stolen financial information, fraudulent identification documents, and money laundering and mixing services, anonymously and outside the reach of law enforcement."

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US-Dutch Citizen Charged With \$14Bln Tender Offer Fraud Scheme – DOJ

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - American prosecutors have charged a dual US-Dutch citizen with securities fraud, wire fraud and a \$14 billion fraudulent bid in connection with several schemes involving his company, Xcalibur Aerospace Ltd., the US Department of Justice said on Tuesday.

"From in or about August 2019 until in or about November 2020, MELVILLE TEN CATE, the defendant, executed fraudulent schemes designed to induce others to invest in, or otherwise transfer money to, Xcalibur and TEN CATE," prosecutors said. "First, TEN CATE attempted to secure \$500 million in debt financing from U.S. banks and third-party debt issuers. In doing so, TEN CATE materially misrepresented Xcalibur's business activities and finances to the banks and other potential investors, including by falsely claiming that Xcalibur's financial records had been audited by an international accounting firm, that Xcalibur had outside investors, and that Xcalibur had cash reserves of almost £9.8 billion."

In another fraud plan, beginning in November 2020, Ten Cate bought ad space in a national newspaper, where he claimed that Xcalibur had secured billions of dollars in financing and was making a tender offer to acquire a multibillion-dollar US corporation. The newspaper published Ten Cate's tender offer which was never completed.

Ten Cate, 53, of Dubai, United Arab Emirates, is charged with one count of tender offer fraud, one count of securities fraud, and two counts of wire fraud. He faces a maximum of 20 years' imprisonment on each count. He is still at large.

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US Recession, Stagflation Unlikely Despite Inflation, Rate Hikes - San Francisco Fed Chief

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is unlikely to enter into either a recession or stagflation this year despite hefty interest rate hikes planned by the US central bank to fight

inflation at 40-year highs, the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco President Mary Daly said on Tuesday.

"We'll be able to get inflation moving down by the end of the year, but there will be no recession," Daly said in a live-streamed speech on the economy and inflation. "Growth would decelerate, but this will be a temporary occurrence. I don't think we'll enter a recession. I don't think we'll see stagflation."

After the US economy contracted 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by the COVID-19 measures, it expanded by 5.7% in 2021, growing at the fastest pace since 1982.

However, inflation has grown even faster. The Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, a US inflation indicator closely followed by the Federal Reserve, expanded 5.8% in the year December and 6.4% in the 12 months to February, both also at their fastest in four decades. The Federal Reserve has vowed to bring inflation back to its target range of 2% with a series of rate hikes.

The central bank approved its first pandemic-era rate hike on March 16, raising rates by 25 basis points, or a quarter percentage point. Many of its policy-makers have said since that the March hike was too tame and more aggressive increases of 50 basis points, or half percentage point, may be needed. The central bank is considering as many as seven rate adjustments this year.

Many economists have expressed fears that aggressive or excessive action on rates by the Federal Reserve could lead to a recession, which is technically defined as two quarters or more of negative growth in a year.

Some have also spoken about the potential for stagflation, which is a combination of slow economic growth, high unemployment and high inflation. This phenomenon is common particularly when oil prices are high, like they are now, at around 14-year peaks of above \$100 a barrel.

Daly dismissed such concerns, admitting that "Fed predictions suggest [a] little overshooting on rates." But she added: "I don't expect a significant slowdown in the US economy as a result of high oil prices."

She said she expected inflation pressure and supply-chain issues from the two-year long coronavirus pandemic to persist, although "some green shoots", or new economic fortunes, were also likely.

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China's UN Envoy Urges All Parties to Check Facts on Bucha, Avoid Unfounded Accusations

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - All allegations of war crimes and other human rights abuses in Ukraine must be verified and factual before conclusions are drawn and accusations made, China's Ambassador to the UN Zhang Jun said on Tuesday.

"The reports and images of civilian deaths in Bucha are very disturbing, and the relevant circumstances and specific causes of the incident must be verified and established. Any and all

accusations should be based on facts before conclusions are drawn. Parties should exercise restraint and avoid unfounded accusations," Zhang said during a UN Security Council meeting. Images purporting to show the bodies of civilians killed on the streets of the city of Bucha emerged several days after the departure of Russian forces from the area and Ukrainian forces entered.

Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia during the Security Council meeting disputed allegations from the Ukrainian and Western delegations about Russian forces committing atrocities in Bucha, instead contending that Ukrainian forces and radicals are responsible for abuses of civilians and POWs, as well as violations of humanitarian agreements.

Russia has said it launched the special operation in Ukraine to demilitarize and de-Nazify the country after the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend them from attacks by Ukrainian troops.

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US Sanctions Russia's Garantex Virtual Currency Exchange, Hydra Market - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing anti-Russia sanctions on the Garantex virtual currency exchange and Hydra Market, the US Department of Treasury said on Tuesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned the world's largest and most prominent darknet market, Hydra Market (Hydra) in a coordinated international effort to disrupt proliferation of malicious cybercrime services, dangerous drugs, and other illegal offerings available through the Russia-based site," the Treasury said in a press release.

The Treasury Department said it designated Garantex for operating or having operated in the financial services sector of the Russian economy.

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US Deployed Cyber Force in Ukraine Since Fall to Combat Russian Moves - NSA Chief

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The US Cyber Command has been deploying forces in Ukraine since late last year to help the country prepare for what was then an anticipated Russian invasion, the force's top officer and National Security Agency (NSA) commander, Gen. Paul Nakasone said in a congressional hearing on Tuesday.

"Coordinating with the Ukrainians in an effort to help them harden their networks, we deployed a hunt team who sat side-by-side with our partners to gain critical insights that have increased homeland defense for both the United States and Ukraine," Nakasone told the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

The Cyber Command and the NSA have played integral roles in the US efforts to support Ukraine since Russian forces began deploying on the country's borders last fall, he said. "We provided remote analytic support to Ukraine and conducted network defense activities aligned to critical networks from outside Ukraine - directly in support of mission partners. ...We have provided intelligence on the building threat [and] helped to warn US government and industry to tighten security within critical infrastructure sectors," Nakasone said. Russia's military and intelligence forces were employing a range of cyber capabilities, to include espionage, influence and attack units to support its invasion and to defend Russian actions with a worldwide propaganda campaign, Nakasone added.

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China Envoy to UN on AUKUS Hypersonic Plans: States Must Avoid Another Ukraine-Like Crisis

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jun said on Tuesday regarding the announcement by Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) they will cooperate on developing hypersonic weapons that countries should avoid creating another Ukraine-like crisis.

"Anyone who does not want to see the Ukrainian crisis should refrain from doing things that may lead the other parts of the world into a crisis like this," Zhang said. "[A]s the Chinese saying goes, if you do not like it, do not impose it against the others."

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Ukraine Conflict Threatens Uneven COVID-19 Recovery in Pacific Region - World Bank

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The conflict in Ukraine threatens uneven recovery from the coronavirus pandemic among developing East Asian and Pacific countries, the World Bank said in a report on Tuesday.

"Just as the economies of East Asia and the Pacific were recovering from the pandemic-induced shock, the war in Ukraine is weighing on growth momentum," World Bank Vice President for East Asia and Pacific Manuela Ferro said. "The region's largely strong fundamentals and sound policies should help it weather these storms."

Countries in the East Asia-Pacific region that were large importers of fuel, such as Mongolia and Thailand, and big buyers of food, including the Pacific Islands, were already seeing a decline in real incomes, the report said.

Countries with large debt, like the Lao and Mongolia, and those highly dependent on exports, like Malaysia and Vietnam, were susceptible to global financial and growth shocks, the report said.

While commodity producers and fiscally-prudent countries may be better equipped to weather shocks, the repercussions of these events will dampen growth prospects for most in the region, the report said.

Overall economic growth was projected to slow to 5% in 2022 - a reduction of 0.4 percentage point than expected in October. If global conditions worsen and national policy responses remain weak, then growth could slow to 4%, the report said.

China, which accounts for 86% of regional output, was projected to grow 5% in the baseline and 4% in the downside scenario, the report said.

Output in the rest of the region was projected to expand 4.8% in the baseline and 4.2% in the downside scenario. In the downside scenario, 6 million more people in the region would remain trapped in poverty in 2022 at the \$5.50 per-day poverty line, the report said.

"The war, financial tightening and China slowdown are likely to magnify existing post-COVID difficulties," the report added. "Struggling regional firms, more than 50 percent of which reported payment arrears in 2021, will be hit by new supply and demand shocks. Households, many of whom fell back into poverty during the pandemic, will see real incomes shrink even further as prices soar."

Indebted governments, who have seen their debt as a share of GDP increase by 10 percentage points since 2019, will struggle to provide economic support, the report added.

Increased inflation, at least 1.0 percentage point above previous expectations due to the oil price shock alone, will shrink room for monetary easing, according to the report.

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US Joint Chiefs Chair Predicts Ukraine Conflict Could Be 'Measured in Years'

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – The Ukraine conflict is a protracted one, could last for years and the United States and NATO allies will be involved in it for "quite some time," Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said in a congressional testimony on Tuesday.

"I do think this [conflict in Ukraine] is a very protracted conflict. And I think it's at least measured in years. I don't know about decade but at least years for sure. This is a very extended conflict that Russia has initiated, and I think that NATO, the United States, Ukraine, and all of the allies and partners are going to be involved in this for quite some time," Milley told the US House Armed Services Committee.

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Nebenzia Says Hopes UN States Will Not Fall for US Manipulation to Remove Russia From HRC

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Tuesday he hopes his UN counterparts will not let themselves be manipulated by the United States in its attempts to remove Russia from the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC).

"I hope that our colleagues from the United Nations will not allow themselves to be manipulated and play up to Washington and its very dangerous games," Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting.

Earlier during the meeting, US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield urged other states to follow calls to remove Russia from its position on the UNHRC due to its ongoing special operation in Ukraine.

Russia has said it launched the special operation to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine after the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to help defend them from attacks by Ukrainian troops.

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Rate Hikes, Balance Sheet Cuts to Move US Inflation Closer to 2% in 2022 - Fed Official
WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US inflation could be closer later this year to the Federal Reserve's "neutral" target of 2% growth per annum after rate hikes and asset reductions planned by the central bank, Fed Governor Lael Brainard said Tuesday.

"The combined impact of rate hikes and balance-sheet reductions will move monetary policy closer to neutral later this year," Brainard said in a speech on inflation expectations. "Inflation is too high. High inflation burdens all Americans. Lowering inflation is our most essential duty. We must also sustain the recovery to include everyone."

After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by COVID-19, the US economy expanded by 5.7% in 2021, growing at its fastest pace since 1982.

But inflation grew even faster. The Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, a US inflation indicator closely followed by the Fed, expanded 5.8% in the year to December and 6.4% in the 12 months to February, both also at their fastest in four decades.

The Fed has vowed to bring inflation back to its target range of 2% with a series of rate hikes. The central bank approved its first pandemic-era rate hike on March 16, raising rates by 25 basis points. Many of its policy-makers have said since that the March hike was too tame and more aggressive increases of 50 basis points may be needed. The central bank is considering as many as seven rate adjustments this year.

Aside from keeping rates at almost zero for two years prior to its March rate hike, the Fed purchased \$120 billion worth of bonds and assets for each month during that period to support the economy. Those asset purchases and others have added some \$4 trillion to the central bank's so-called balance sheet, which now stands at around \$8.5 trillion. Fed officials also hope to trim that figure significantly.

"I expect the balance sheet to shrink much faster than in prior recovery," Brainard said. "After policy becomes more neutral, the extent of additional tightening will be determined by the changing inflation and employment outlooks."

Despite inflation at 40-year highs, one silver lining for the US economy has been its resilient jobs market.

US unemployment reached a record high of 14.8% in April 2020, with the loss of some 20 million jobs in the aftermath of the coronavirus breakout. Jobs recovery has, however, been stellar over the past year, with the unemployment rate moving down to 3.6% in March. An unemployment rate of 4% or below is regarded by the Fed as "maximum employment".

Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said last month the labor market was "extremely tight" with robust demand and subdued supply. He also noted that more than a million positions were filled within the first two months of the year. A government report showed job openings in February near record highs as vacancies continued to outpace hires in an unemployment market that remained overwhelmingly in favor of workers.

Still, with inflation being as high as it is, the wage benefits enjoyed by US workers were being whittled away by soaring prices, Brainard said.

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AUKUS Leaders Agree to Begin Work on Hypersonics, Electronic Warfare - Joint Statement WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) said in a joint statement on Tuesday that they agreed to begin trilateral cooperation on the development of new hypersonic and electronic warfare capabilities.

"The AUKUS partners will work together to accelerate development of advanced hypersonic and counter-hypersonic capabilities," the statement said.

The AUKUS partners will also cooperate on developing enhanced techniques to operate in an electronic warfare environment, the statement added.

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US to Announce Additional Sweeping Sanctions Against Russia on Wednesday - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United States will announce additional sanctions against Russia in coordination with other G7 countries and the European Union, Reuters reported citing sources.

The sanctions will include a ban on all new investments in Russia and additional restrictive measures on financial institutions and state-owned enterprises in Russia.

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US-Russia Cooperation on International Space Station Essential for World Peace - Astronaut

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Continued US-Russia cooperation in operating the International Space Station (ISS) is essential for the preservation of world peace, returned US astronaut Mark Vande Hei told a NASA press conference on Tuesday.

"Having a space station where we can cooperate is important for a peaceful future," Vande Hei said.

Vande Hei and his two Russian cosmonaut crew mates, Anton Shkaplerov and Pyotr Dubrov, returned to earth from the ISS on the Russian spacecraft Soyuz MS-19 on March 30 landing safely in Kazakhstan.

Vande Hei spent 355 days in space, breaking the duration record in space for any US astronaut that was previously held by Scott Kelly at 340 days. The overall duration record is held by Russian cosmonaut Valery Poliyakov who logged 438 days in space on a single mission on the Mir EO-15 space station.

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US Defense Chief Austin Warns Against Making Direct Comparisons Between Ukraine, Taiwan

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Tuesday warned against drawing direct parallels between Russia's special military operation in Ukraine and a hypothetical conflict between China and Taiwan.

"It's not advisable to make direct comparisons between Ukraine and Taiwan. These are two completely different scenarios, two different theaters," Austin told the US House Armed Services Committee.

Austin declined to speculate whether Ukraine's defensive posture would give China second thoughts about reuniting with Taiwan. China's defense ministry has previously said no force will prevent the country's reunification with Taiwan.

The US defense chief also pushed back on criticism from lawmakers who have alleged that the United States had failed to deter Russia's special military operation.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine on the request of the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics to help defend them from attacks by Ukrainian troops. Russian said the special operation targets Ukraine's military infrastructure and does not plan occupy the country.

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Twitter Asks Governments to Remove Media Featuring Prisoners of War - Statement
(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Twitter said on Tuesday that it has requested governments and state-affiliated press to remove any media that shows prisoners of war, the company said on Tuesday.

"[W]e will now ask government or state affiliated media accounts to remove any media published that features prisoners of war (PoW) under our private information and media policy," Twitter said in a blog post.

Twitter said it will add a warning to media published by government or state-affiliated media accounts featuring prisoners of war.

However, Twitter will remove any tweets, regardless of who posts them, if there is prisoner of war content shared with abusive intent, such as insults, calls for retaliation, taking pleasure in suffering or for any other behavior that violates Twitter rules, the company said.

Last month, media footage emerged on social media reportedly of Russian prisoners of war being shot in the legs and otherwise mistreated. According to the Investigative Committee of Russia, the video was made "at one of the Ukrainian nationalists bases in the Kharkiv region." 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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Arianespace, Blue Origin, ULA to Provide 83 Rockets for Kuiper Comsat Program - Amazon

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Arianespace, Blue Origin and United Launch Alliance (ULA) will construct and provide at least 83 rockets to launch thousands of mini-communications satellites for Project Kuiper, Amazon announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"Amazon today announced agreements with Arianespace, Blue Origin and United Launch Alliance (ULA) to provide heavy-lift launch services for Project Kuiper, Amazon's initiative to increase global broadband access using a constellation of satellites in low Earth orbit (LEO)," the release said.

The contracts total up to 83 launches over a five-year period that would provide capacity for Amazon to deploy the majority of its 3,236-satellites in what amounts to be the largest commercial procurement of launch vehicles in history, the release said.

"[The] launches [are] planned to use Arianespace's Ariane 6, Blue Origin's New Glenn, and United Launch Alliance's Vulcan Centaur rockets to build a low-cost, scalable dispenser system to deploy the satellites," the release added.

The agreements will drive innovation and job creation across the space industry, supporting thousands of suppliers and highly skilled jobs in 49 states across the United States and 13 countries in Europe, according to the release.

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China Welcomes Russia-Ukraine Talks, Urges Them to Continue - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - China welcomes Russia-Ukraine talks and urges them to continue the negotiations, permanent representative to the United Nations Zhang Jun said on Tuesday.

"[We] welcome Russia-Ukraine talks, urge them to continue along the current lines," he said.

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Twitters Asks Governments to Remove Media Featuring Prisoners of War - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Twitter said on Tuesday that it has requested governments and state-affiliated press to remove any media that shows prisoners of war, the company said on Tuesday.

"[W]e will now ask government or state affiliated media accounts to remove any media published that features prisoners of war (PoW) under our private information and media policy," Twitter said in a blog post.

Twitter said it will add a warning to media published by government or state-affiliated media accounts featuring prisoners of war.

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US Sentences Senior Oil Executive to 3 Years for Securities Fraud Scheme – DOJ

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – Joseph A. Kostelecky, 61, a former senior executive of a publicly traded Canadian oil services company, has been sentenced to three years in prison for devising a scheme to inflate the firm's reported revenue that led to more than \$886 million in shareholder losses, the US Department of Justice said Tuesday.

"Kostelecky, of Dickinson (North Dakota), engaged in a scheme to defraud while serving as the highest-ranking U.S. executive of Poseidon Concepts Corporation (Poseidon) from approximately November 2011 to December 2012," prosecutors said in a press release.

"Kostelecky previously pleaded guilty on Oct. 13, 2021, admitting that, in his role, he caused Poseidon to falsely report approximately \$100 million in revenue from purported long-term contracts with oil and natural gas companies that were Poseidon's customers."

The executive directed Poseidon's accounting staff at the US corporate headquarters in Denver, Colorado, and its field office in Dickinson, to record nonexistent revenue from certain contracts

and then assured his bosses the revenue was collectable, although the contracts didn't exist and the revenue would never be able to be collected, prosecutors added. Kostelecky told prosecutors he concocted the fraudulent scheme to overstate the company's stock price so he could continue to receive compensation and inflation of the stock and stock options he owned. In addition to his prison sentence, Kostelecky was ordered to pay \$406.2 million in restitution.

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US, Russian Crew on Space Station Had Warm, Personal, Professional Ties - Vande Hei

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The joint US and Russian crew on the International Space Station (ISS) continued to enjoy warm personal friendships and smooth-running professional teamwork and cooperation throughout the unfolding Ukrainian conflict, returned astronaut Mark Vande Hei told a NASA press conference on Tuesday.

"My Russian crew mates [and I], we supported each other throughout everything," Vande Hei, a retired US Air Force colonel, said. "[They were] very good professionals, technically competent and wonderful human beings. I will always be happy I was in the space station with them."

Vande Hei said he paid no attention to arguments about US-Russian future cooperation or disagreements in the social media back on earth and took such comments as meant for a different audience from himself.

"I had full confidence in our cooperation," he said. "In every case, everyone was very supportive of each other. Being able to trust each is very crucial when you have a small number of people isolated. ... Our focus was on our mission together."

Vande Hei and his two Russian cosmonaut crew mates Anton Shkaplerov and Pyotr Dubrov returned to earth from the ISS on the Russian spacecraft Soyuz MS-19 on March 30 landing safely in Kazakhstan.

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US Senate to Begin Debate on Nomination of Ketanji Brown Jackson to Supreme Court

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Tuesday voted to move into Executive Session in order to consider the nomination of Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court, beginning debate on whether to confirm her to the bench as a replacement for retiring Justice Stephen Breyer.

The Senate decided in a vote of 53-47 to proceed to Executive Session, moving forward the process of considering Jackson's nomination as a full chamber. Democrats were joined by Senators Suzanne Collins, Mitt Romney and Lisa Murkowski in voting to move forward the nomination.

Jackson's nomination was discharged from the Senate Judiciary Committee on Monday after a tie vote along partisan lines.

Senate Minority Leader McConnell in March said he cannot support Jackson's nomination. Republicans have criticized Jackson for her activist judicial philosophy and for allegedly being lenient in sentencing those found guilty on child pornography and sexual abuse charges. US President Joe Biden nominated Jackson to the Supreme Court in February after Justice Breyer announced his upcoming retirement, fulfilling his campaign promise to nominate the first black woman to the bench.

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UN Investigating Allegations That Ukrainian Forces Have Used Cluster Munitions - Official (Adds details about UN probing same allegations against Russia in para 3, background in paras 4, 5)

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is investigating allegations that Ukrainian forces have used cluster munitions during the ongoing conflict, Under-Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo said on Tuesday. "The UN is also investigating allegations that Ukrainian forces used cluster munitions," she told the UN Security Council.

Earlier in the same meeting, DiCarlo said there were "credible allegations" that Russian forces had used cluster munitions.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine responding to calls for help from the Donbas republics in defending themselves against the aggression of Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only.

Moscow has vociferously rejected claims that Russian troops have violated conventions regulating armed conflict. The Russian Defense Ministry said that Ukrainian forces are using typical terrorist methods, such as hiding behind civilians and positioning weapons systems in civilian areas. It also accused the Ukrainian military of using cluster munitions, including in the March 14 missile attack on Donetsk that killed 21 people.

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Russian Cosmonauts Did Not Wear Ukraine Flag Colors on Space Station - US Astronaut

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The three-man Russian replacement crew to the International Space Station (ISS) were not wearing the Ukrainian flag when they wore yellow-colored space suits on their March 18 journey into orbit, returned US astronaut Mark Vande Hei told a NASA press conference on Tuesday.

"As for the yellow flight suits, I think no one thought they would be identified with Ukraine," Vande Hei said. "They chose them because that was the colors of their university they were associated with: I think they were blindsided by [the Western media reaction to] it." The three cosmonauts - Oleg Artemiev, Denis Matveev and Sergey Korsakov - are all graduates of Bauman Moscow State Technical University and in honor of this, the flight of the ship was named "Bauman launch", Sputnik previously reported. Vande Hei landed successfully in Kazakhstan on March 30 with his two Russian crew mates cosmonauts, Anton Shkaplerov and Pyotr Dubrov, after 355 days in space, breaking the duration record in space for any US astronaut. The overall duration record is held by cosmonaut Valery Poliyakov who logged 437 days in space on a single mission on the Mir EO-15 space station.

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Nebenzia Says Russia Should Not Have Left Bucha in Light of What Happened After Pullout UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - Russia should not have withdrawn its forces from the town of Bucha in light of the alleged atrocities that emerged after their pullout, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Tuesday.

"Now we're seeing blatantly criminally staged events with Ukrainian civilians killed by their own radicals ... those killed in the areas from which the Russian forces withdrew after encouraging peace negotiations in Istanbul. Now it turns out that we shouldn't have withdrawn. I'm talking about Bucha first and foremost," Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting. Nebenzia disputed the allegations from the Ukrainian and Western delegations about Russian forces committing atrocities in Ukraine, instead contending that Ukrainian forces and radicals are responsible for abuses of civilians and POWs, as well as violations of humanitarian agreements.

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Zelenskyy Urges UN Security Council to Withdraw Russia's Permanent Membership

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Wolodymyr Zelenskyy on Tuesday urged the UN Security Council to withdraw Russia's permanent membership or to reform the United Nations system. "Now we need decisions from the Security Council for peace in Ukraine," Zelenskyy told the UN Security Council. "If you do not know how to make these decisions, you can do two things: either remove Russia as an aggressor and a source of war so it cannot block decisions about its own aggression and then do everything that we can do to establish peace; or to show how we can reform [the United Nations system] and work for peace." Zelenskyy also suggested to the council to dissolve itself if there is alternative to current situation.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend them from attacks by Ukrainian troops. Russian officials have said the special operation's goals are to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine and the citizens are not in danger.

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Authorities Put High School in Pennsylvania on Lockdown After Student Shot - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - A high school in the US state of Pennsylvania has been placed on lockdown after a student was shot, the city of Erie said on Tuesday.

"Erie Police confirm that a single individual at Erie High School has been shot," the city government said in a statement via Twitter.

The victim is in good condition and has been taken to a local hospital for treatment, the statement said.

The high school will continue to be locked down but the students are safe, the statement added.

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Sacramento Authorities Arrest Second Man in 'K Street' Mass Shooting Case - Police Dept.

Washington, April 5 (Sputnik) - A second person of interest in the investigation of the deadly "K Street" shooting incident over the weekend will be charged and jailed when he leaves the hospital, the Sacramento Police Department said in a press release Tuesday.

"A second suspect has now been identified in this incident. 27-year-old Smiley Martin was located at the scene with serious injuries from gunfire and was transported to an area hospital for treatment," the release said.

The Police Department explained that Martin was quickly identified as a person of interest and has remained under the supervision of an officer at the hospital while his treatment continues.

"Based on information developed during this investigation, Smiley Martin was taken into custody by Sacramento Police Department detectives on April 5, 2022," the release said.

Martin, the brother of Dandrae Martin, will be charged with possession of a firearm by a prohibited person and possession of a machine gun, and will then be booked into the Sacramento County main jail, the release said.

Dandrae Martin is already behind bars, charged with assault and illegal possession of a firearm. Neither of them has been charged with murder, according to the release.

On Sunday morning, a shooting incident on the 10th Street and K Street intersection resulted in the killing of six people and the wounding of 12 others. Police said the gunfire damaged three buildings and three vehicles. Among the evidence on the scene was a stolen handgun switched to allow for automatic gunfire and more than 100 spent shell casings.

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UK Envoy Promises Not to Refuse Holding Requested UN Security Council Meetings

UNITED NATIONS, April 5 (Sputnik) - UK Ambassador to the United Nations Barbara Woodward said on Tuesday that she will not to refuse to host UN Security Council meetings requested by member states.

"The Presidency will not refuse to host meetings in the future," Woodward, who presides over the UN Security Council in April, said when Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia expressed a protest for the United Kingdom's decision to ignore two of Russia's requests to hold emergency meetings.

Woodward noted that the United Kingdom did not reject Russia's requests and did everything in line with the existing rules of procedure.

Nebenzia said that Russia requested a UN Security Council meeting in connection with what he called were "horrific provocations" of the Ukrainian armed forces.

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Biden to Unveil AUKUS Cooperation on Development of Hypersonic Weapons - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) – President Joe Biden will announce a pact between the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia to jointly develop hypersonic weapons, the Financial Times reported on Tuesday, citing sources in the know.

The agreement will be an extension of the so-called AUKUS security pact and could be unveiled as early as Tuesday, the report said.