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Yemen's Hadi Steps Down in Favor of Presidential Council Amid Riyadh Peace Talks

Amid ongoing peace talks in Riyadh, Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi has agreed to relinquish power in favor of a Presidential Council, as his government continues peace talks that the Houthis have so far refused to join.

"I irreversibly delegate to the Presidential Leadership Council my full powers," [Hadi said Thursday](#) on a television station operated by his rump government. He also announced the firing of Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and delegated al-Ahmar's powers to the council. Hadi said the move was motivated by a "desire to involve effective leaders in managing the state in this transitional phase, and affirming our commitment to Yemen's unity, sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity."

The new council will have the power to make decisions concerning foreign policy and national security, especially negotiating with Ansarullah, the Shiite rebel movement better known as the Houthis, who control roughly one-third of Yemen, including the capital Sana'a. It can also enable a state of emergency, and appoint governments, security directors, and supreme court judges, [according to Al-Arabiya](#), a Saudi-owned news outlet that operates from the United Arab Emirates.

The council will be headed by Maj. Gen. Rashad al-Alimi, and will also include Sultan Ali al-Arada, Tariq Muhammad Salih, Abed al-Rahman Abu Zara'a, Abdullah al-Alimi Bawazeer, Othman Hussein Megali, Aidarous Qassem al-Zubaidi, and Faraj Salmin al-Bahsani. Supporting the council will be a 50-member commission to advise and consult with them. It includes legal and economic teams. The council will end its term upon the election of a new president - a process not yet agreed upon, as the Houthis have so far refused to join the talks, saying they will only negotiate on Yemeni soil.

However, the Houthis and Saudis [agreed to a two-month ceasefire](#) last week, at the beginning of Ramadan, helping to set the present process in motion.

"These measures were issued outside Yemen in form and content, and our people are not concerned with what the outside decides in its internal affairs," [Mohammed Abdul-Salam](#), the Houthis' top negotiator, said about the news of the council's formation.

"Yemen is not a child until others engineer for it the shape of its state and government and decide for it its present and future," he added.

Transitional Leader-Turned President-in-Exile

Hadi, 76, has been in power since June 2011, playing the role of acting president off and on for several months amid a political crisis centered on then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh. He was chosen as president for a two-year transitional period in a February 2012 election held between Yemeni political factions, but which the Houthis boycotted.

Hadi's [mandate was extended](#) for another year in January 2014, and the day after his mandate expired in January 2015, he was forced from office by mass protests led by the Houthis but

motivated by widespread dissatisfaction with his rule, including an end to fuel subsidies and a proposed federalization plan that critics said would amplify poverty in the already-poor country. A month later, in the southern city of Aden, Hadi rescinded his resignation, denounced the Houthi seizure of power, and fled to Riyadh, seeking help crushing the uprising.

The Saudi bombing campaign against the Houthis began in late March 2015, being joined by a coalition of Sunni states including the UAE, Morocco, and Sudan, as well as the United States. The US ostensibly ended its support for Saudi offensive operations last year, but has continued to provide [extensive air defenses](#) for the kingdom against [Houthi drone and missile](#) attacks targeting Saudi military installations and oil infrastructure, the basis of its economy, as part of a war of attrition.

The war has killed nearly 400,000 Yemenis in the eight years since, according to [United Nations estimates](#), most of whom have died due to indirect causes related to the conflict, such as inadequate food, drinking water, medicine, and other infrastructure. However, constant bombing of urban areas by the Saudi-led coalition has also claimed many lives. The UN has called the situation the world's worst humanitarian crisis and condemned the Saudi blockade of the country as exacerbating that crisis.

Last month, [UN agency chiefs warned](#) Yemen was "teetering on the edge of outright catastrophe" amid news the food crisis was getting worse, with the likely prospect that the number of people experiencing "catastrophic" or famine-like levels of hunger will increase five-fold by the end of the year, from 31,000 in mid-March to 161,000 by December. More than 17.4 million Yemenis are food insecure, or 58% of the country.

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UN General Assembly Suspends Russia's Membership in Human Rights Council

US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield called Russia's membership in the Human Rights Council a "farce," but a study by the Costs of War Project found the US War on Terror was responsible for the deaths of 364,000 civilians, and the US still sits on the same council. Following demands by the United States and the Group of Seven, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voted on Thursday to remove Russia from the 47-member UN Human Rights Council. The G7 previously removed Russia from its ranks as the G8 in March 2014, after Crimea rejoined Russia following a referendum.

The UNGA voted 93 to 24 on Thursday, with 58 countries abstaining from the vote. It is the first time a permanent member of the UN Security Council has been forcibly removed from any UN body.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitri Peskov said Moscow regrets its suspension from the UNHRC and will continue to defend its interests and clarify its position. Russia's deputy envoy to the UN, Dmitry Polyansky, called the decision "illegal" and "politically motivated."

The US pushed for the move earlier this week after Russian forces withdrew from the Ukrainian city of Bucha and images of dozens of dead civilians circulated in the Western press. The US claimed Russian troops executed them, but Moscow pointed out a several-day gap between the

Russian pullout and the discovery of the bodies, during which time Ukrainian police made sweeps through the area to remove pro-Russian citizens. Moscow has denied all accusations of targeting civilians.

In turn, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov called attention to the [hypocrisy in US media](#) due to its refusal to give equal coverage to video evidence of Ukrainian soldiers executing Russian prisoners of war, which is a war crime and the footage of which the [New York Times has verified](#) the authenticity. Human Rights Watch has also [launched a probe](#) of the reports.

Russia [launched the special operation](#) in Ukraine on February 24 after months of attempts at negotiating a solution to Russian security red lines with NATO had failed and Ukrainian forces attacked the independent People's Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk, which then appealed to Moscow for help. The Russian Defense Ministry has said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only, while Ukrainian forces have been using civilians as shields and positioning weapons systems in civilian areas.

In response to the operation, the US and its allies have sought to isolate Russia on the global stage politically and economically, implementing wide-reaching sanctions against the Russian economy and seeking to oust it from long-standing positions, such as the UN Human Rights Council and its permanent veto power in the UN Security Council.

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China 'Resolutely Opposes' Now-Canceled Trip by US House Speaker Pelosi to Taiwan, FM Says

Ahead of an Asia trip by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) rumored to include a stop off in Taiwan, China has lodged strong objections. However, later on Thursday, the senior lawmaker tested positive for COVID-19, and her trip was postponed.

Japan's [Fuji News Network](#) reported on Thursday, citing "people familiar with the matter," that Pelosi would visit Taiwan on Friday prior to arriving in Japan for a Sunday meeting with Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Pelosi's office has not released an itinerary of her Asia trip and rejected media requests for it on security grounds.

However, the 82-year-old senior lawmaker contracted COVID-19 on Thursday, and while her [office described her](#) as asymptomatic, she will be quarantined for five days. [Her office said that the trip](#) would now be "postponed to a later date."

If she did touch down on the autonomous island, she would be the first House Speaker to visit Taiwan [since Newt Gingrich did so](#) 25 years ago in the aftermath of the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis.

Beijing regards Taiwan as a Chinese province in rebellion and has repeatedly condemned Washington's open but unofficial support for the Taiwanese government, noting the US agreed with Beijing's position in the [1970s diplomatic negotiations](#) underpinning the opening of relations between the two countries. Upon learning of Pelosi's planned trip, they invoked those agreements.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson [Zhao Lijian warned](#) that “If the US insists on having its own way, China will take firm and strong measures to firmly safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity. All possible consequences that arise from this will completely be borne by the US side.”

“China resolutely opposes all forms of official contact between the US and Taiwan. Congress is a branch of the US government and should stringently abide by the one-China policy that the US upholds,” Zhao told reporters on Thursday.

“If Speaker Pelosi visits Taiwan, this would gravely violate the one-China principle and the stipulations of the three China-US Joint Communiqués, seriously undermine China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, severely impact the political foundation of China-US relations and send an erroneous signal to ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist forces,” he added. “China firmly opposes this and has lodged solemn representations with the US side.”

Zhao was also asked about a comment by US Treasury Secretary [Janet Yellen the day prior](#), in which she said the US was prepared to impose similar sanctions on China to those on Russia if China were to attempt to reunite Taiwan with the mainland by force.

“There is but one China in the world and Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory,” Zhao said. “The Taiwan question is an issue left over from the civil war in China. The means of its resolution is China’s internal affair, where no foreign country has any right to interfere.”

The Taiwanese government is all that remains of the old republican government, which lost the civil war to communist forces in 1949. The Communist Party of China established the People’s Republic of China in Beijing, but was unable to cross the strait and conquer Taiwan. In the years since, all but a handful of nations have switched their recognition of the legitimate Chinese government from Taipei to Beijing.

Visits by top US officials to Taiwan have increased in recent years, as Washington has seen Taiwan as a key part of its “great power competition” strategy against China and Russia. Last month saw former US Secretary of State and former CIA director [Mike Pompeo visit the island](#), as well as a second delegation of several [former leading US defense](#) officials. The US has also vastly increased its military aid to the island, most recently [approving a \\$95 million sale](#) of Patriot air defense systems on Wednesday.

Li Fei, a researcher at Xiamen University’s Taiwan Research Institute, told the [South China Morning Post](#) that a visit by Pelosi would be “part of Washington’s salami-slicing tactics on Taiwan in recent years – trying to force a showdown with Beijing and stir up regional conflict to maintain US global hegemony.”

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Chinese Tests Explode Myth of Nuclear Bunker Buster-Proof Facilities

Recent scale model tests by Chinese military scientists have called into question many of the assumptions about subterranean fortifications being immune from nuclear strikes, finding that rather than dissipate shockwaves, solid rock could amplify them.

A paper published in the peer-reviewed Chinese Journal of Rock Mechanics and Engineering last week revealed the startling find. Li Jie, lead project scientist with the Army Engineering University of the PLA in Nanjing and one of the authors of the report, wrote that experts had “severely underestimated the actual impact” of nuclear weapons.

[According to their findings](#), a tactical nuclear warhead of low explosive yield would still be capable of triggering an earthquake sufficient to destroy heavily fortified sites a considerable distance from the impact site. The shockwaves didn’t diminish nearly as quickly as expected, retaining their energy over much longer distances, even becoming amplified. A tunnel buried two kilometers underground would be literally squeezed by the rocks around it until it buckled. The Chinese scientists didn’t use real nuclear weapons, of course: they built a small-scale mock-up and fired a special bullet at the rock that would create an impact equivalent to a 200 kiloton nuclear bomb’s explosion. They found that a properly placed blast could amplify the bomb’s destructive power by 1,000 times.

Previously, it was assumed that both [conventional and nuclear-tipped](#) bunker busters had limited use beyond a certain depth, being able to reach a maximum depth of just 130 feet before exploding, with the shockwaves dissipating with increasing distance from the blast.

“In the face of nuclear ‘bunker busters,’ other nations can be expected to respond the way they did to guided bombs, by continuing to dig deeper until they are safe from nuclear attack as well,” the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) think tank [wrote in a 2005 paper](#) about nuclear bunker busters.

“The digger will always win this competition for several reasons. First, the depth of destruction of a nuclear weapon goes up only as the third root of the yield. For example, to destroy ten times deeper requires a bomb a thousand times more powerful.”

Many nuclear powers have built such bunkers to house their command facilities in the event of a nuclear war, as have several other states that fear being the targets of such weapons. The US’ Cheyenne Mountain Complex, home to the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD), is buried under 1,600 feet of granite in Colorado. Russia is [rumored to have two such sites](#) in the Urals, at Yamantau and Kosvinsky Kamen, although Moscow has never confirmed their existence. China’s [Joint Battle Command Center](#) is just west of Beijing but located in the world’s deepest karst caves. Iran and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) have also built facilities deep inside mountains in an [attempt to bomb-proof them](#).

However, the US Air Force moved its NORAD operations out of Cheyenne Mountain more than a decade ago, [to a basement facility](#) inside of nearby Peterson Air Force Base that offers inferior protection.

The FAS noted that if, by some strange twist of science, a weapon were invented that could neutralize deeply buried facilities, “potential target nations can develop other countermeasures, such as dispersing weapons widely or making them mobile; this increases the vulnerability to conventional attack, of course, so it may have some advantage.”

Modern bunker buster bombs were inspired by the massive [“earthquake bombs”](#) used in World War 2, which used their great mass to drive into the ground before exploding. The resulting blast

could penetrate hardened facilities like submarine pens and destabilize the foundations of structures far from the explosion itself, including buildings and dams.

In December, the [US began production](#) of its newest type of nuclear bunker buster, an updated version of the B61 nuclear gravity bomb, the B61-12. The weapon is designed to be carried by F-15 and F-16 strike aircraft and have four explosive yield options: 0.3 kilotons, 1.5 kilotons, 10 kilotons, and 50 kilotons. For comparison, the bomb the US used to destroy the Japanese city of Hiroshima in 1945 had a yield of 15 kilotons, meaning its explosive power was equivalent to 15,000 tons of TNT.

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New US Sanctions On Iran Over Missile Program Threaten To Derail Nuclear Deal Negotiations
By - Wyatt Reed

The US announced sanctions against various people and groups it accuses of involvement in Iran's ballistic missile program on Wednesday. The US government insists its new sanctions on Iran aren't meant to impact efforts to restore the nuclear deal.

According to a statement by the US Treasury, the US "[will not hesitate](#) to target those who support Iran's ballistic missile program." Though the move is likely to complicate ongoing negotiations with Iran, Washington continues to insist on "Iran's full return" to the conditions of the nuclear deal from which the US unilaterally withdrew under President Donald Trump in 2018.

The US Treasury added that Washington "will also work with other partners in the region to hold Iran accountable for its actions," before describing actions such as Iranian strikes on an alleged Mossad facility as "gross violations of the sovereignty of its neighbors."

The US also justified the move with claims that Yemeni strikes against a Saudi Aramco facility this month were "Iranian enabled."

But despite repeated escalations in the unilateral sanctions regime imposed on Iran by Washington, Iran's crude oil exports have reportedly increased by an astonishing 40% since August.

ep Borrell's recent suggestion that a resolution to negotiations could come "within days" is now looking increasingly tenuous, as Borrell now insists that issues such as "the status of the Revolutionary Guard in Iran" are [preventing an agreement](#) from being reached.

With the Iranian government continuing to label the US classification of the IRGC as a terrorist organization a '[red line](#),' it remains to be seen whether the apparent impasse can be overcome.

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Al-Qaeda Chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri Reappears in Video, Squashing Rumors of Terrorist's Death
By - Wyatt Reed

New footage of the notorious terrorist—the first seen since November 2021—confirms Zawahiri did not die of natural causes, as recently alleged.

Rumors of Al-Qaeda* leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri's death were quashed this week when the notorious terrorist group published footage of their "General Emir" reciting a poem praising a Muslim student in India for refusing to remove her burqa.

In a video lasting approximately nine minutes, Zawahiri urged Indian Muslims to respond to what he called anti-Islamic "oppression" and condemned the government of India, as well as the administrations of neighboring Pakistan and Bangladesh, who he accused of being "allies of the West."

Tensions over the wearing of Islamic veils and headscarves have been simmering for several months in the southwestern Indian state of Karnataka following a January ban on hijabs in the classroom at public schools in the Udupi district.

The ban sparked protests by Muslim students and counter-protests by Hindu youth. A top court for the state has upheld the ban for now, until a final decision can be reached.

Al-Qaeda's new campaign to further drive a wedge between India's Hindu and Muslim populations comes amid possible steps by Pakistan and India to overcome their historic divide, which dates back to the partition of India by the British in 1947.

Embattled Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan [has repeatedly praised](#) India's "independent foreign policy" in recent weeks as both nations have resisted efforts by the US and European nations to be drawn into an economic confrontation with Russia.

"My foreign policy will be independent," as well, Khan told Pakistanis during a [widely-viewed address to the nation Thursday](#).

"An independent foreign policy," he said, "is one which is meant for Pakistanis... It doesn't mean we will be anti-Americans, anti-India or anti-European."

Khan ordered new elections for Pakistan's parliament this weekend following the opposition's move to subject him to a no-confidence vote—a vote which Khan openly accused the US of orchestrating and influencing as part of a "foreign conspiracy" to overthrow his government. The US State Department has denied the allegations.

Ties between the CIA and Osama Bin Laden, Al-Zawahiri's predecessor, predated the creation of Al Qaeda by many years. Under "Operation Cyclone," billions of dollars in weapons, including thousands of Stinger surface-to-air missiles, were shipped to the so-called "freedom fighters" of Bin Laden's mujahideen forces to fight against Afghanistan's secular socialist government and the Soviet troops backing them.

There is still no evidence to suggest that, in its current form, Al-Qaeda exists as an appendage of Western intelligence services. The timing and targets of the terrorist group's latest video release raise fresh questions over what their next target will be.

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Zelensky Says Ukraine Won't Be 'Liberal, European,' Aims to Imitate Israel Instead
By - Wyatt Reed

Comments from the floundering leader of the Ukrainian regime make clear that, for at least the next decade, a truly democratic Ukraine is a pipe dream.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky raised eyebrows Tuesday when he told Ukrainian media that he foresees his country becoming like Israel and suggested civilians could expect to be subjected to a type of martial law for the foreseeable future.

“We will not be surprised if we have representatives of the armed forces or the national guard in cinemas, supermarkets, and people with weapons,” Zelensky told reporters, adding that because he is “confident that the question of security will be issue number one for the next ten years,” Ukraine won’t be “liberal [and] European.”

“Ukraine will definitely not be what we wanted it to be from the beginning,” he admitted, pledging that it “will become a ‘big Israel’ with its own face.”

But it’s unclear if Zelensky’s apparent admiration is mutual. Israeli authorities [continue to refuse](#) Kiev’s demand for weapons shipment, and efforts by Ukrainian delegates who are reportedly currently in Israel to purchase weapons from private vendors are being rebuffed by Israeli authorities, per Haaretz. But now there are indications Russian-Israeli relations may have hit a turning point.

Beyond [sparking widespread mockery](#), the claim by Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid that “Russian forces committed war crimes against a defenseless population” seemed to signal a previously unseen willingness to be dragged into economic conflict by other western powers. Last month, simmering tensions between Israel and the Ukrainian regime boiled over into public view. Axios reported that a senior Ukrainian official [complained](#) Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennet’s push for diplomacy between Ukraine and Russia “looks like an excuse for why he is not speaking out against Russia, not providing weapons to Ukraine and not sanctioning Russia.” But within Israel, it seems there’s little appetite for a public confrontation with Russia over its ongoing special military operation in Ukraine. A majority of Israelis support the official policy of neutrality, according to a Direct Polls LTD survey published last month. And Palestinians feel similarly, with an astonishing 71% of [survey respondents](#) expressing their preference that the Palestinian Authority maintain its neutrality as well.

If the Ukrainian regime ultimately does succeed in converting the country into a “Big Israel,” it will be welcome news for some. Elena Bunina, the former CEO of Russian search engine Yandex, has reportedly [relocated from Russia to Israel](#), telling colleagues—with no apparent trace of irony—that she “cannot work in a country that is at war with its neighbors.”

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Turkish Gov’t Welcomes Apparent US State Dept Green Light For F-16 Deal

By - Wyatt Reed

The US State Department sent a letter to Congress indicating Turkey’s long-delayed plan to purchase US-manufactured F-35 fighter jets could finally bear fruit—just not quite the fruit the Turkish government had hoped for.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Thursday that Ankara [welcomes](#) the State Department’s position that the “Biden administration believes a potential sale of F-16 fighter jets

to Turkey would be in line with US national security interests and also serve NATO's long-term unity.”

The US stance was revealed in a March 17th letter which was reportedly sent by the State Department's top legislative affairs official to Rep. Frank Pallone (D-NJ), who recently demanded a stop to the arms deal, citing Turkish President Recep Erdogan's supposed lack of commitment to NATO and what he and a bipartisan group of 50 lawmakers [called](#) "vast human rights abuses.”

While the letter doesn't explicitly endorse the weapons deal, it opens the door to a possible way for Erdogan to recoup the \$1.4 billion in Turkish public funds Washington has been sitting on since blocking the transfer of F-35 jets to Turkish authorities mid-sale in 2019 after Turkey's acquisition of Russian-made [S-400 surface-to-air missile systems](#). The US went on to unleash a variety of punitive sanctions on the country as well, claiming the missile system posed a potential security threat to the F-35 program.

Turkey has maintained the S-400 would not be integrated into NATO systems and would not pose a threat to the military alliance or the F-35, and is moving ahead with plans to purchase a second batch of S-400s despite US intimidation.

According to military scholars, the F-35 likely faces more pressing threats; in July 2021, the Pentagon admitted there were still seven "[critical technical deficiencies](#)" and 850 "category 2 deficiencies" which had to be addressed before the plane could enter general production. [In late November](#), an F-35 reportedly sold to the UK Royal Navy by Lockheed Martin [for a tidy sum of \\$115 million](#) tumbled to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea after it suffered engine failure and failed to take off from an aircraft carrier. And last month, the US Navy was [forced to fish an F-35](#) out of the South China Sea after another of what Lockheed Martin calls the world's "most lethal, survivable and connected fighter jet" suffered a similar fate.

For now, at least, Ankara has signaled it's content to take the more reliable F-16 fighter jets instead. Last month, President Erdogan's office said he told Biden in a phone call that he expects Turkey's request for 40 of the planes to be finalized [as soon as possible](#) and demanded an end to the "unjust" sanctions imposed by the US on Turkey in 2020.

But any approval for the deal is expected to be met with heavy resistance from US Congress. Rep. Pallone likely spoke for dozens of his colleagues when he [wrote](#) Thursday on Twitter that going forward with the deal would be a "huge mistake.”

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Peru Declares Month-Long State of Emergency on Highways as Protests Remain Violent

The political crisis facing Pedro Castillo intensified this week as powerful politicians, publications, and private interests appear to be seeking the novice president's ouster. Peru announced a month-long state of emergency throughout the country's highway system in response to protests that have continued to turn violent even after the curfew imposed Tuesday by the embattled government of President Pedro Castillo was lifted.

In an official notice, the Peruvian government explained the state of emergency was necessary to “reestablish and preserve the internal order, as well as preserve the constitutional rights of the population.”

On Wednesday, one person [reportedly died](#) and fifteen were injured—including twelve officers and three civilians—as Peruvian police fought to open a road seized by demonstrators in the Ica region. As many as nine major roadways continue to be affected by blockades.

Tensions have simmered in Peruvian cities this week as protesters affiliated with transportation unions demanded the government do more to offset the recent rise in gas prices which has accompanied Western efforts to ban Russian energy from global markets. After a meeting with opposition lawmakers Tuesday, Castillo told reporters that while “Peru is not going through a good moment... we have to solve it with the powers of the state.”

Castillo has faced numerous calls to step down from members of the opposition and [some of Peru's biggest newspapers](#). He's been heavily criticized for imposing a curfew amid protests which the Chamber of Commerce of Lima [estimated](#) were costing one billion Soles (\$270 million US) every day in the capital city alone. Demonstrators who defied Tuesday's curfew order reportedly [ransacked the Peruvian Judiciary](#) and made off with sensitive files.

Some observers say oligarchic factions which fiercely resisted Castillo presidential's victory last year are co-opting the protest movement.

“Two parallel types of protest are taking place in the country: on the one hand, a group that since June 2021 has not accepted its defeat and in its anti-democratic fervor only seeks to sabotage, and, on the other, citizens who want the president to fulfill his campaign promises,” wrote one Twitter user in [a post that went viral](#) on the social media giant Tuesday.

Vladimir Cerron, the founder of the Peru Libre party from which President Castillo hails, reported Saturday that “delinquents” had [vandalized his home](#) as protests descended into violence.

Within days, cities across the country were hit hard by a wave of looting

The country's right-wing opposition has been seeking to depose President Castillo since even before the former teacher took office. [Last June](#), failed presidential candidate Keiko Fujimori used manufactured claims of election fraud to contest his victory for weeks. That same month, Vladimiro Montesinos, the notorious CIA collaborator currently jailed for human rights violations (who served as spymaster for Keiko's father, former Peruvian dictator Alberto Fujimori) [was secretly recorded](#) apparently offering bribes to secure the presidency for her illegally.

In late March, Castillo narrowly survived [the second attempt to impeach him](#) in under a year.

The Peruvian president has been forced to reshuffle his cabinet four times in the past six months and has faced seemingly ceaseless calls to remove a number of his high-profile appointees. While his moves to request the resignation of his first foreign minister, Hector Bejar, and his first prime minister, Guido Bellido, were apparently intended to mollify the right-wing, it seems such moves have only emboldened his political opponents.

In February, after Peru's Attorney General's office announced it was opening an investigation into Castillo for alleged corruption, the president accused the office of participation in [“a plot to destabilize the government.”](#)

“The Peruvian people and the international community are aware of the anti-democratic and coup-mongering will of this minority sector,” he said at the time, before calling on Peruvians to “defend democracy and... a government that is borne of the people.”

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Mike Mularkey: Titans Hired Me Before Satisfying Rooney Rule

By - Ian DeMartino

The Rooney Rule is an NFL policy established in 2003 designed to increase the hiring of minority coaches in the league. The NFL is currently the defendant in a class action lawsuit that alleges racial discrimination by the league.

In a 2020 interview that has resurfaced as part of a lawsuit against the NFL, former head coach Mike Mularkey alleged that the Titans told him in 2016 that he was hired before satisfying the Rooney Rule by interviewing minority candidates.

The interview, on Steelers Realms podcast, went by without much notice when it originally aired, [but it resurfaced](#) when it was added to Brian Flores' class action lawsuit against the NFL for racial discrimination.

"I allowed myself, at one point, when I was in Tennessee, to get caught up in something that I regret," Mularkey, who is white, confessed. "I still regret it. The ownership there, Amy Adams Strunk and her family, came in and told me I was going to be the head coach in 2016 before they went through the Rooney Rule.

"And so I sat there knowing I was the head coach in '16, as they went through this fake hiring process knowing a lot of the coaches that they were interviewing, knowing how much they prepared to go through those interviews, knowing that everything they could do and they had no chance to get that job. And actually, the GM Jon Robinson, he was in an interview with me. He had no idea why he is interviewing me, that I have the job already."

Mularkey offered up the information nearly unprompted. He was asked if he had any regrets from his coaching career, but the question was casual, likely expecting Mularkey to talk about a free agent he passed on, or a game plan that didn't pan out in a big spot.

Ray Horton, who has recently joined Brian Flores' lawsuit along with Steve Wilks, was interviewed for the Titans head coaching position after Mularkey was allegedly told he already had the job.

The comments are significant because the Rooney Rule, which was [recently expanded](#) to require teams to hire a minority or woman on the offensive side of the ball, dictated that teams interview at least two minority candidates before hiring a head coach.

The interview is the most concrete evidence yet that teams interview minority candidates with no intention of hiring them in order to satisfy the Rooney Rule.

Horton alleges that his interview with the Titans was a sham that he had no chance of being successful in. Mularkey's comments seemingly back up that claim.

The Titans [have denied](#) Mularkey's claims.

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Exclusive: Amazon Labor Union President Teases Alliance With Walmart Workers
By - Ian DeMartino

On April 1, Amazon employees in Staten Island, NY, voted to unionize for the first time in the tech giant's history. Another vote in Alabama currently favors non unionization but the vote is within the margin of challenged ballots.

Amazon, in its fight against unionization efforts around the country, decided to make Christian Smalls the face of the labor movement. The plan was to create a target they could hit to damage the entire movement. The only problem was that he won. Now Smalls and his allies, fresh off their victory, are working to unionize Amazon facilities around the nation and possibly even other big retailers.

Speaking to Political Misfits, Christian Smalls, the president of the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) that recently won a unionization vote at a facility in Staten Island, NY, teased a potential super union with the workers of Walmart.

Co-host John Kiriakou asked Smalls if he thought the vote in Staten Island was worrying Walmart, which is the second-largest retailer in America after Amazon.

"I can tell you now I got emails from Walmart workers, for sure. Guaranteed. So look out for the Walu, the W-A-L-U." presumably standing for the Walmart Amazon Labor Union.

It is not clear if Smalls is in any serious talks about forming a joint union with Walmart workers or if they were simply asking him for advice, but the prospect has to be salivating for labor advocates who for years have rallied against alleged exploitative practices by both companies. Smalls did mention that he has been contacted by Amazon workers across the country asking for advice on how to unionize their facilities.

He has also been talking with Teamsters and the AFL-CIO while in Washington, DC. While he appreciates the support, he is really focused on the Amazon workers around the country.

"The workers are most important. They are paying attention and they want to unionize their facilities. So that's what I am worried about, the workers."

There is also the little detail of successfully getting a contract from Amazon now that they have unionized. Workers in other facilities are less likely to join the battle if the ALU cannot successfully get their members more favorable conditions than they had prior to organizing.

"First, we have to fight for a contract. That's the real battle. We are going to walk and chew at the same time. The election [in Alabama] and the contract. We want to make sure we deliver a contract. That would be the real victory."

In a speech on Wednesday at North America's Building Trades Unions Legislative Conference, President Joe Biden seemingly referenced the ALU's victory in Staten Island. "By the way, Amazon, here we come. Watch. Watch."

Smalls welcomed the support but wants to make sure it is followed up by action. "That's good, the highest plateau in the country and he actually mentioned Amazon. That's great. I wish he would have shouted out the Amazon Labor Union because we are the ones coming for them."

Smalls explained, "They have to pass the Pro Act. And if they don't pass it, Biden needs to not wait on Congress and pass it through an Executive Order."

The Pro Act is a reference to the Protecting the Right to Organize Act of 2021, which would prohibit compulsory company meetings that discourage unionization efforts, often called captive audience meetings.

“That would be monumental because we would’ve won possibly by a landslide if they weren’t able to do that,” Smalls said. “They put these workers in classrooms for 20 minutes every single day for the last six or seven months. They are very coercive, they are telling people to vote no. They are taking away their options. It’s suppressing their votes and spreading misinformation, spreading lies. That doesn’t help the workers who are trying to organize.”

The National Labor Relation Board’s general counsel said in a memo on Tuesday that she plans to ask the board to make such meetings a labor violation.

After the Staten Island vote, Amazon said it would fight the legitimacy of the vote in a brief statement.

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UFC Will Pay Fan-Voted Bonuses in Bitcoin in Partnership With Crypto.com
By - Ian DeMartino

Crypto.com has signed a slew of sponsorship deals recently, including the naming rights of a Formula 1 race and the famous Staples Center in Los Angeles, now the Crypto.com center. It first signed a partnership with the UFC in July 2021.

The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) and Crypto.com will be paying UFC fighters in Bitcoin for special fan bonuses at upcoming UFC Pay Per View (PPV) events.

Fans can hop on crypto.com’s website and vote for their three favorite fighters for the event. The fighter receiving the most votes will get a bonus of \$30,000, second place \$20,000 and third place \$10,000. All bonuses will be paid in Bitcoin based on the exchange rate at the time.

“Fan Bonus of the Night” voting will open at the next UFC event, UFC: 273 Voklanovski vs The Korean Zombie (Chan Sung Jung) on Saturday, April 9.

“Crypto.com has been an official UFC partner for less than a year, and I’m telling you they are already one of the best partners we’ve ever had,” said UFC President Dana White in a statement. “They’re constantly coming up with new ideas about how we can work together to connect with the fans. This new Fan Bonus of the Night is an awesome way to get fans more engaged in our events while rewarding the fighters for bad-ass performances.”

Other than the actual payments being in Bitcoin and fans voting on a cryptocurrency website, there does not appear to be anything that would require cryptocurrency or blockchain technology. Voting will not be done on the blockchain, for example. Instead, it will be handled like most online polls: with a centralized entity, in this case, Crypto.com, tallying the votes and then revealing who wins.

Fans will be entered to win prizes when they vote. Ten UFC themed NFTs, two UFC Fight Pass subscriptions and five \$200 UFC Store gift cards will be given away to fans per PPV.

This isn’t the MMA promotion’s first foray into cryptocurrencies. UFC already sells NFTs representing various fighters. 50% of the proceeds of the sales of [UFC NFTs go to fighters](#), compared to just 30% for traditional apparel.

UFC has been criticized for its low pay compared to other sports leagues, a perception it has been fighting against. Several former fighters have filed a class action lawsuit against the

promotion, arguing that it utilized monopolistic practices to keep fighter pay low. That lawsuit has been working its way through the courts [since 2014](#).

Cryptocurrency's biggest gathering "Bitcoin Miami 2022" is currently being held at the Miami Beach Convention Center until April 9.

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US Senate Confirms Ketanji Brown Jackson to Supreme Court

By - Ian DeMartino

The Senate has confirmed Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court, the first black woman to be appointed to the nation's highest court.

Ketanji Brown Jackson was confirmed in the Senate by a vote of 53 to 47. She will not be sworn in immediately. Jackson will be sworn in after current Justice Stephen Breyer retires this summer.

Three Republicans joined a united Democratic party in voting to end the debate on Jackson and move forward with a vote.

Senator Rand Paul had been the lone senator not to vote, holding up the confirmation slightly.

Paul eventually voted no, confirming Jackson to the applause of Democratic senators.

Vice President and President of the Senate Kamala Harris was visibly elated as she made the announcement. No African American women voted on Brown's confirmation, but Harris did preside over the vote.

Senator Susan Collins of Maine was the first Republican senator to announce that she would be voting for Brown. She was joined by Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Mitt Romney of Utah.

Republican opponents called Brown soft on crime, questioned her views on packing the court, and accused her of giving out light sentences in child porn cases. Those attacks did not stick and Brown was confirmed with less difficulty than previous appointments.

Senator Patrick Leahy, a Democrat from Vermont, said that the nomination of a black woman to the Supreme Court is "long overdue" but that he is not voting for her because of that but because she is "objectively qualified". He also said criticisms of her "fell flat" and "only served the vitriol" of partisan politics.

Jackson and President Biden watched the confirmation hearings together in the Roosevelt Room in the White House. The two of them, along with Vice President Harris, will give a statement together on Friday.

Justice Breyer told President Biden in a letter that he would retire at the end of the Supreme Court's current term, expected in late June or early July, after which Jackson will be officially sworn in.

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Brazilian Space Chief Says Politicians Must Understand Importance of Space Investments

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 7 (Sputnik) - Brazilian Space Agency President Carlos Moura told Sputnik he is hopeful that his country's politicians will invest more in ambitious space-related projects as they realize the great importance of space.

Asked whether Brazil plans to send astronauts in space, Moura said, "We would like to."

Moura explained that he is frequently asked, especially by young people, whether Brazil will have another astronaut in space.

"Unfortunately, due to the costs, we don't have such plans at the moment," he said. "But I hope that in the near future, Brazil's politicians will understand that space is very, very important for us. And then we'll have more resources to invest in more ambitious projects."

When asked about Brazil's participation in a possible future space station project, Moura pointed out that it is hard to say whether Brazil would participate in it, but it certainly would like to be a member or otherwise contribute.

"The problem is that for the moment, our economy is so tight that we do not have the capability to invest in levers like that. But certainly, we'd like to participate as a user, as a scientific contributor," he said.

In April of 2021, China began constructing its own space station - the Tiangong - in low earth orbit. Three Chinese astronauts became the first inhabitants on the space station in June.

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Russia, Other States Should Work on ISS or Another Station - Brazil Space Agency

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 7 (Sputnik) - Russia and other countries should work together on maintaining the International Space Station (ISS) or possibly constructing another station in the future, Brazilian Space Agency President Carlos Moura told Sputnik on the sidelines of the Space Symposium.

"I believe that they will extend the life of the ISS a little bit, but from 2030 [onward], I don't know," Moura said when asked about the future of the station. "But I believe that for Russia and other countries, we should work together. So I hope that we will have the ISS or something like it."

On Saturday, Roscosmos chief Dmitry Rogozin said the Russian space agency will soon inform the government of how it plans to terminate cooperation with its Western partners on the ISS and it is analyzing the options for cooperation with its US, EU, Canadian and Japanese partners.

Rogozin pointed out that Russia and the Western countries could cooperate in space only after they lift all sanctions imposed on Russia.

NASA engineer Kathy Lueders said on Thursday that the US space agency and its international partners, including Roscosmos, are working out budgetary arrangements to extend their work on the ISS despite the existing political tensions between the United States and Russia.

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Brazilian Space Chief Says Nations Should Think Long-Term, Keep Space Out of Geopolitics

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 7 (Sputnik) - Countries should think long-term about space cooperation, as there are many things on which they could work together regardless of geopolitical tensions, Carlos Moura, the president of the Brazilian Space Agency, told Sputnik. When asked whether anti-Russia sanctions in connection with the Ukraine crisis had had any impact on cooperation between the two countries in space, Moura stated: "Not for the moment." "I believe that, especially in space, we should think long term cooperation, scientific cooperation," Moura said on the sidelines of the Space Symposium. "There are some fields where we can work together, for example, to study the space weather, some other things, it is something that you can do aside from the geopolitical problems." Moura spoke on the sidelines of the 37th Space Symposium in Colorado Springs, which brings together representatives of the world's space agencies, commercial space businesses as well as military, national security and intelligence agencies to discuss and plan the future of space exploration.

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Brazilian Space Agency Wants to Resume Education Courses With Russia - President

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 7 (Sputnik) - The Brazilian Space Agency (AEB) would like to resume education courses with Russia, believing that the two countries have many capabilities to share, AEB President Carlos Moura told Sputnik on the sidelines of the Space Symposium. "We were planning how we can restart the education courses with Russia because some years ago, some special institutions in Russia, for example, MAI, Moscow Aviation Institute, they helped us on the design review of our small satellites," Moura said. "So it's something maybe we can restart because we have a lot of capabilities, so it's good for us to exchange." Moura went on to say that while there are no joint projects between Brazil and Russia, they are cooperating on ground stations for GLONASS. "Russia has four stations in Brazil, they are installed in universities," he explained. "That's the unique cooperation we have." In addition, BRICS has an agreement on a virtual constellation of remote sensing satellites, the space chief said. "So it's something very new. But it's a kind of consortium between the five countries. That's what we have for the moment," he noted. When asked about a possible meeting with Russian space agency Roscosmos, Moura said they do not have any specific plans. "They [Russia] probably will continue working with the ground stations," he said. "And maybe we will after the tensions going down we can start to do discussions concerning cooperation. For

example, one of the cooperation [projects]... is that we are opening in Brazil, the Regional Center for Space Technology. The idea is to foster the development of those capabilities, not only in Brazil, but in South America and Africa."

"And one of the models that we are following is the regional center that you opened in Russia," he added. "Some of the Brazilians participated in the final review before UNOOSA [United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs] approved that regional center in Russia ... So we install our regional center. Probably we will invite some Russian specialists to help us to make the final review, something that we can work together on in education."

Moura spoke on the sidelines of the 37th Space Symposium in Colorado Springs, which brings together representatives of the world's space agencies, commercial space businesses as well as military, national security and intelligence agencies to discuss and plan the future of space exploration.

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Black Women Elated by Jackson's Confirmation to US Supreme Court, Yet Some Fear Backlash

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The Senate confirmation of Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson to the US Supreme Court marks a historic moment for Black women and a hard-fought win against hostile forces, but vigilance is warranted because backlash often accompanies progress, activists told Sputnik.

Jackson will be the first African-American woman to sit on the US Supreme Court in its 232-year history as a result of Thursday's Senate confirmation vote. She replaces Justice Stephen Breyer, 83, who announced that he was stepping down earlier this year.

The final confirmation vote was 53 to 47, with all 50 Democrats voting for Jackson, joined by Republican Senators Mitt Romney, Lisa Murkowski, and Susan Collins.

Jackson, 51, will be the first justice on the court who brings experience as a public defender since Justice Thurgood Marshall stepped down in 1991. Nominated by President Joe Biden, Jackson spent eight years on the US District Court for DC before she rose to the DC Court of Appeals last year.

Jackson has more legal experience than four of her soon-to-be colleagues had when they were nominated, according to experts.

"She got confirmed! She got confirmed," said Kim Chavis, a former Assistant US Attorney for the District of Columbia and director of the Criminal Justice Program at Wake Forest University School of Law. "It is a really wonderful moment for our country because there is a Black woman Supreme Court Justice chosen not so much for the color of her skin but for her intellect and view of the world from her judicial lens."

Jackson is a fabulous jurist who is held in the highest regard for her intellect and integrity, she told Sputnik.

"I am also glad that someone will be on the court with a criminal justice defense background as we begin to see transformation happening in the criminal justice system. There may be opportunities for change through case law," Chavis said.

In the midst of her delight, Chavis said, she is deeply disappointed at the disrespect and hostility Jackson had to swallow from Republican Senators Ted Cruz, Josh Hawley, Lindsay Graham, and Tom Cotton. And then only three Republicans voted for her confirmation despite her impeccable credentials, soaring intellect and calm demeanor.

"It's unfortunate but I'm not surprised. I think we had the opportunity to see them as they really are during the confirmation process - it leaves a lot to be desired," Chavis told Sputnik.

The most important aspect of all this, Chavis and other Black women professionals said, is that despite all the impediments and difficulties Jackson encountered, including 23 hours being grilled by hostile Republicans, Thursday's confirmation was still historic.

US Vice President Kamala Harris, the first Black woman to be elected vice president, in her capacity as president of the Senate, presided over the landmark vote. After Harris banged the gavel - a broad smile lighting up her face - Democratic senators stood up cheering and clapping giving Jackson, the occasion, and maybe themselves, a standing ovation while Republicans silently filed out of the Senate chamber.

Spotlight PR founder and author Jennifer Farmer described Jackson's confirmation as momentous.

"It's hugely important for Black woman and girls to see someone who looks like them on the Supreme Court," Farmer said.

Farmer, author of the book, "First and Only: A Black Woman's Guide to Thriving at Work and in Life," said it was painful to see Jackson treated the way she was, but that is all the more reason to actively support her. Both Harris and Jackson will need support because their work is "just beginning," she added.

"We have to be vigilant, watchful and willing to call out elected officials or the media and with regards to Cruz, Graham, Cotton and others... [and] our white allies must be willing to call them out because of their beyond unacceptable behavior," Farmer said.

Chavis and Farmer said every Black woman or woman of color has stories about being constantly second-guessed, belittled, overlooked or marginalized in the workplace and like Jackson, women are often socialized and not given the space to show anger or to push back against the disrespect, misogyny or marginalization from their white bosses or co-workers.

"Judge Jackson could not respond the way most people would, but she handled it elegantly and with grace which is a testament to her temperament," Chavis said.

Phyllis Hill said she believes that the hand of God and the ancestors led to this outcome.

"I feel jubilation," said Hill, national organizing director of Faith in Action and founder of the Black Southern Women's Collaborative. "There's nothing like being in the middle of a work day and receiving tons of texts about Judge Jackson's confirmation. I see this as a spiritual matter. I see someone who looks like me but it's not about one person. It's faith and works."

Hill said Jackson ticked all the boxes and God and the ancestors ensured that this good work would come to pass.

"I say praise to God and to her for a job well done. Black women know how to lead, Black women are prepared to lead. Watch out!" said Hill. "I am, however, disheartened. It was maddening to see the malicious, greedy, 'for their own delight' and political ambition antics. They are trying to regain their seats or run for the presidency. They have shown us that their white supremacist tendencies are always on display. They passed this test at Judge Jackson's spiritual, emotional and physical expense."

Both Hill and Farmer said African Americans should prepare for the inevitable white backlash that comes on the heels of any notable Black achievement or progress or as seen since 2020, the strenuous and forceful resistance to widespread demands for social justice after George Floyd was murdered.

"We need to brace for the backlash because with any Black historic progress comes backlash. We saw it when Barack Obama was elected," Farmer warned. "We should be prepared but not surprised when this happens. As with the anti-Critical Race Theory backlash, we know it's coming."

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Canada Budget Shrouded in 'Uncertainty' Amid Ukraine Conflict, Global Turbulence

TORONTO, April 7 (Sputnik) - Canada's economic blueprint shows the economy facing a precarious future as the country navigates a global upheaval, including Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

In Canada's federal budget, unveiled on Thursday, the word "uncertain" or some variation of it is referenced at least 30 times throughout the document, with the authors laying out multiple scenarios of economic activity based on the development of the conflict in Ukraine.

Canadian economists considered scenarios based on "heightened" impact - a prolonged conflict between Russia and Ukraine - and a "moderate" situation, which entails de-escalation in the near term.

"While the macroeconomic inputs of the February 2022 survey of private sector economists continue to provide a reasonable basis for fiscal planning, the economic outlook is clouded by a number of key uncertainties," the document read. "The Department of Finance actively engages with external economists to assess risks and uncertainties to the outlook."

Ottawa projects that the Canadian economic growth will be between 2.8 and 4.3 percent in 2022, with a prolonged conflict between Moscow and Kiev yielding the lower end of the projections, while real GDP growth could slow to 0.4 percent in 2023 in the worst-case scenario. Canada, which along with many countries around the world, remains gripped by an inflationary crisis is also unsure in its outlook concerning inflation as expenses for most Canadians continue to soar.

"Uncertainty remains about the outlook for inflation," the document read.

The country's highest inflation levels since August 1991 forced Ottawa to revise the Consumer Price Index (CPI) projections by 0.8% to 3.9% for 2022 from earlier estimates and the GDP inflation by 1.2% to 3.7%. According to the document, the Bank of Canada remains committed to bringing the CPI, which currently stands at 5.8%, to its benchmark rate of 2 percent.

The rising costs, which are becoming too much to bear for a sizeable number of Canadians, according to polling numbers, in combination with the economic uncertainty are also dragging down consumer and business confidence.

Canada's budget also allots millions of dollars in monetary infusions for Kiev.

Ottawa will offer Ukraine nearly \$800 million in loans through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to prop up the Kiev regime and provide nearly \$400 million in military aid in the next fiscal year.

Furthermore, Canada intends to increase military spending by some \$6.4 billion over the next five years, however, this will not be enough to bring the country in line with NATO's target of military spend equivalent to 2% of a member state's economy.

Canada did, however, manage to cut down on its record-shattering \$282.67 billion deficit from a year earlier, projecting the budget shortfall to be \$90.4 billion in 2022 and vowing to nearly eliminate it by 2026-27.

Unlike previous budgets, the 2022 economic blueprint is unlikely to face political scrutiny, with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announcing a deal, which will see the left-wing New Democratic Party (NDP) back the Liberal government's major initiatives through 2025.

Canada's official opposition leader Candice Bergen, a Conservative, said the budget is "not responsible," meant to appease the NDP and which fails to reign in inflation.

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US Sanctions Russian Shipbuilding, Diamond Mining Companies - Treasury Dept.

(Updates with modified headline adds details and background throughout)

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States issued new sanctions against Russia's United Shipbuilding Corporation and its board members, and Alrosa, the world's largest diamond mining company, the US Treasury Department said in a statement.

"United Shipbuilding Corporation (USC) is a major Russian SOE responsible for developing and building the Russian Navy's warships. USC is responsible for the construction of almost all of Russia's warships, as well as those built for foreign customers. Along with re-designating USC, the Department of State designated 28 subsidiaries and eight board members," the Treasury Department said in a press release on Thursday.

Some of the other newly-sanctioned entities include Aysberg Central Design Building, Baltic Shipyard, Almaz Central Marine Design Bureau, Admiralty Shipyards, and Severnaya Verf. The president of United Shipbuilding Corporation Alexei Rakhnamov is among the eight officials sanctioned, according to Treasury.

Other Russian officials designated for their ties to United Shipbuilding Corporation include Andrey Vasilyevich Lavrishchev, Vitaliy Anatolyevich Markelov, Georgiy Sergeyeich Poltavchenko, Vladimir Yakovlevich Pospelov, Oleg Nikolayevich Ryazantsev, Ilya Vasilyevich Shestakov, and Andrei Nikolaevich Shishkin, according to the Treasury.

The United States also sanctioned Alrosa, a Russian state-owned enterprise that is the world's largest diamond mining company, accounting for 28 percent of global diamond mining, the Treasury said.

All entities owned 50 percent or more, directly or indirectly, by Alrosa are also sanctioned, the Treasury added.

The sanctions are the latest in the United States' pressure campaign against Russia over its special military operation 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 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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US Authorizes Export of Tech Related to Internet Communications to Russia - Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States authorizes the exportation and sale to Russia of services, software, and technology relevant to the exchange of communications over the Internet, the US Treasury Department said.

"The exportation or reexportation, sale, or supply, directly or indirectly, from the United States or by US persons, wherever located, to the Russian Federation of services, software, hardware, or technology incident to the exchange of communications over the internet, such as instant messaging, videoconferencing, chat and email, social networking, sharing of photos, movies, and documents, web browsing, blogging, web hosting, and domain name registration services, that is prohibited by the RuHSR, is authorized," the Treasury said in a notice on Thursday.

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US Sanctions Russia's Alrosa, World's Largest Diamond Mining Company - Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States sanctioned the firm Alrosa, the world's largest diamonds mining company from Russia, the US Department of Treasury said.

"Today the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated Alrosa, a Russian state-owned enterprise (SOE) and the world's largest diamond mining company, which is also responsible for 90 percent of Russia's diamond mining capacity," the Treasury Department said in a press release on Thursday.

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US Sanctions Persons, Entities Tied to Russia's United Shipbuilding Corporation - Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States issued new sanctions against officials and individuals with ties to Russia's United Shipbuilding Corporation, the US Treasury Department said.

The new sanctions target eight individuals and 31 entities including United Shipbuilding Corporation Jsc, Aysberg Central Design Building, Baltic Shipyard Jsc, Almaz Central Marine

Design Bureau Joint Stock Company, Joint Stock Company Admiralty Shipyards, And Public Joint Stock Company Shipbuilding Plant Severnaya Verf.

The president of United Shipbuilding Corporation Alexei Rakhnamov is among the eight officials sanctioned, according to a Treasury statement on Thursday.

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US Closely Following Developments in Tel Aviv After Fatal Terrorist Attack - Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is closely following developments in the investigation into the terrorist attack in Tel Aviv that resulted in two dead people and at least six other injured, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

"We are closely following developments and will continue to be in regular contact with our Israeli partners, with whom we stand resolutely in the face of senseless terrorism and violence,"

Blinken said in a press release on Thursday.

Media reported that the shooting was carried out in several places. One of the assailants was neutralized but another gunman is still on the loose.

Tel Aviv is placed on lockdown while police and special military units patrol the streets and search for the gunman in buildings.

This is the third terrorist attack to take place in Israel in recent weeks.

Last week, a Palestinian gunman opened fire in the Israeli city of Bnei Brak, killing five people. Prior to that, terror attacks occurred in Be'er Sheva and Hadera, leaving a total death toll of 11 people.

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Canada Budget Faces 'Uncertainty' on Inflation Projections - Finance Dept.

TORONTO, April 7 (Sputnik) - Ottawa is unsure in its outlook on inflation given that the expenses for most Canadians have continued to soar, the Department of Finance admitted in the 2022 federal budget.

Canada along with numerous countries around the world remains gripped by an inflationary crisis that, according to polls, has more than 40 percent of the population struggling to afford basic necessities and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau warning of an impending "difficult time."

"Uncertainty remains about the outlook for inflation," the document read.

Canada's Department of Finance says Russia's ongoing special military operation in Ukraine and a resurgence of COVID-19 in China is complicating its forecasting efforts.

Ottawa's economic modeling considers both "heightened" and "moderate" impact scenarios from the conflict in Ukraine.

The country's highest inflation levels since August 1991 forced Ottawa to revise the Consumer Price Index (CPI) projects by 0.8% to 3.9% for 2022 from earlier estimates and the GDP inflation by 1.2% to 3.7%.

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US Senators Introduce Bill to Extend Title 42 Border Policy Until 2025 - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - A group of Republican US Senators have introducing legislation to extend until 2025 the Title 42 policy implemented by the Trump administration that allows for the deportation of illegal immigrants on public health grounds, the lawmakers said in a press release.

"US Senator Roger Wicker, R-Miss., joined Senator Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and his Republican colleagues in introducing a bill to extend Title 42 authority until February 2025. The bill comes in response to President Joe Biden's decision to rescind Title 42 authority, which the Biden Administration warned would result in a massive surge of illegal immigration across the southern border," the press release said on Thursday.

The Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention (CDC) announced it will terminate the Title 42 public health policy on May 23. The policy has been in effect since March 2020 and was used by the Trump and Biden administrations to turn away thousands of illegal immigrants in an effort to prevent communicable diseases from spreading in the United States.

Republicans and others have criticized the Biden administration for keeping the southern US border effectively open and allowing for more than 2 million illegal immigrants to enter the country.

The Biden administration said the Homeland Security Department has contingency plans to respond to the possible arrival of 12,000 to 18,000 illegal migrants per day at the southern border after the Title 42 policy is terminated, according to US media reports.

However, the senators said in the release that rescinding Title 42 would invite a massive surge of illegal immigration that will inflict a lasting crisis on the United States and put communities in harm's way.

Other co-sponsors of the legislation include Senators Thom Tillis, Jim Risch, Steve Daines and Tim Scott, according to the press release.

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Biden Says Applauds UN Vote to Suspend Russia From Human Rights Council

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in a statement that he applauds the General Assembly of the United Nations' vote to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council in response to Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine.

Earlier in the day, the UN General Assembly suspended Russia from the Human Rights Council in a 93-24 vote, with 58 countries abstaining.

"I applaud the overwhelming vote today in the General Assembly of the United Nations to kick Russia off the UN Human Rights Council," Biden said on Thursday.

Biden said the vote marks a meaningful step by the international community further demonstrating how President Vladimir Putin has made Russia an "international pariah." The countries that voted against include Algeria, Belarus, Bolivia, Burundi, the CAR, China, Republic of the Congo, Cuba, North Korea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Mali, Nicaragua, Russia, Syria, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.

Egypt, Cameroon, Ghana, India, Kuwait, Mexico, Mongolia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and the UAE are among those that abstained.

Serbia, Israel, and Turkey were among those that supported the move to suspend Russia from the body.

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. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only, but later accused Ukrainian forces of using typical terrorist methods, such as hiding behind civilians and positioning weapons systems in civilian areas.

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New York Suspends Gasoline Tax For 7 Months Starting June 1 - Governor

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US state of New York will suspend gasoline tax for seven months starting June 1 amid a surge in prices following the Biden administration's decision to embargo Russian oil imports, Governor Kathy Hochul said during a budget announcement.

"We are going to suspend from June 1 to December 31 the state sales tax on fuel, which will result in an estimated \$585 million in relief for working families and businesses across our state," Hochul said on Thursday.

Hochul also announced that effective upon signing the budget, the state of New York legalizes the sale of "to go" alcoholic drinks to bring relief for small businesses and restaurants.

The move is another attempt to decrease the gasoline prices on a state scale as the national fuel prices have been surging for the past month amid the Russian special military operation in Ukraine and a cascade of sanctions imposed on Moscow that followed it.

Last week, the Biden administration announced that it will release a record of 1.0 million barrels per day of oil from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) over the next six months to alleviate a global supply crunch with a total of 180 million barrels to be added to the market to support the supply.

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Canada to Provide Ukraine With Almost \$400Mln in Additional Military Aid - Federal Budget

TORONTO, April 7 (Sputnik) - Canada will provide Ukraine with nearly \$400 million in military aid in the next fiscal, the Department of Finance announced in the Federal Budget. "Budget 2022 proposes to provide an additional C\$500 million [\$397 million USD] in 2022-23 to provide further military aid to Ukraine," the document read on Thursday.

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Canada to Increase Military Expenditures by \$6.4Bln in Next 5 Years - Federal Budget

TORONTO, April 7 (Sputnik) - Canada intends to increase military spending by some \$6.4 billion over the next five years, the Department of Finance announced in the Federal Budget. "To immediately reinforce Canada's national defense, announcements in Budget 2022 will provide a total of more than \$8 billion in new funding over five years," the document read on Thursday.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) -

UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

- * The UN General Assembly on Thursday suspended Russia from the Human Rights Council in a 93-24 vote, with 58 countries abstaining.
- * The restriction of Russia's membership in the UN Human Rights Council is unlawful, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
- * Russia will end its membership in the Human Rights Council on April 7, before its term ends, Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Gennady Kuzmin said.
- * The UN General Assembly vote on whether to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council represents an attempt by the United States to continue its dominant position, Kuzmin said.

SANCTIONS

- * Russia has blacklisted 228 Australian citizens, including Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Defense Minister Peter Dutton, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Thursday.

* Russia added 130 New Zealand citizens, including the country's prime minister, to its "black list," the Foreign Ministry said.

* US President Joe Biden will sign legislation to revoke normal trade relations with Russia and Belarus, and to ban Russian oil imports in the United States, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

* The US Senate unanimously passed legislation to suspend Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status with Russia and Belarus amid the ongoing special operation in Ukraine.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* All war crimes should be investigated, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Thursday in comments on the killings of Russian prisoners of war in Ukraine.

* The NATO foreign ministers agreed to strengthen support to Ukraine during its meeting, Stoltenberg said.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed the situation in Ukraine and the ongoing Moscow-Kiev talks with permanent members of the Russian Security Council on Thursday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* Ukraine presented a new draft treaty with Russia on April 6, which differs from proposals presented in Istanbul, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

TERRORIST ATTACK IN ISRAEL

* Six injured people in serious and critical condition were taken to hospital as a result of a terrorist attack in the center of Tel Aviv, according to Magen David Adom Ambulance Service doctors.

ENERGY MARKETS

* The US House of Representatives on Thursday passed legislation to ban US imports of Russian energy products, including crude oil, in response to the Russian special military operation in Ukraine.

* European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen believes that the settlements of European companies for Russian gas in rubles will circumvent anti-Russian sanctions, and will also pose a high risk for them.

* The Biden administration will continue finding ways to reduce the energy bills of Americans as it joins global allies in approving a historic 240-million-barrel release of oil from their combined reserves, a White House statement said.

* Some separate deals on sale of oil and coal from Russia to China for yuan exist, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on Thursday, adding that such agreements are being worked out now by the Central Bank and the Finance Ministry.

SPUTNIK MEDIA CHIEF DETAINED IN ESTONIA

* The accusations against Elena Cherysheva, the head of Sputnik Media, who was detained in Estonia, border on absurdity, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Thursday.

US-RUSSIA CYBERSECURITY DISPUTES

- * The United States used the elimination of the REvil hacker group in Russia only in the interests of its business and domestic policy, Russian Security Council Deputy Secretary Oleg Khramov said on Thursday.
- * Moscow calls on Washington to discuss possible cybercrimes on a reciprocal basis with the facts in hand, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.
- * The United States regularly leaked information from the channel of cybersecurity communication with Russia, Khramov said.
- * The United States has suspended the communication channel used to cooperate with Russia on criminal ransomware actors amid Moscow's special operation in Ukraine, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS

- * The Kremlin positively views the willingness of Armenia and Azerbaijan to start talks on the peace treaty, spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.
- * Russia and the European Union have expressed readiness in assisting the delimitation and demarcation process of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said.

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Canada to Offer Ukraine \$790Mln in Loans Through IMF to Prop Up Kiev - Federal Budget

TORONTO, April 7 (Sputnik) - Canada will offer Ukraine up to \$790 million in loans through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the next fiscal year to prop up the Kiev government, the Department of Finance announced in the Federal Budget on Thursday. "Budget 2022 announces that Canada will offer up to \$1 billion [US\$790 million] in new loan resources to the Ukrainian government through a new Administered Account for Ukraine at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) so that the government can continue to operate," the document read.

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Wall Street Up After 2-Day Drop, But Off Highs on Hawkish Interest Rate Hike Talk

NEW YORK, April 8 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street rose for the first time in three days but still closed off their highs after a red-hot labor market was offset by hawkish talk about forthcoming interest rate hikes.

The three key US stock indexes - the S&P 500, the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the Nasdaq Composite - rose 0.2% on the average on Thursday, rising after a combined loss of 2.6% in two previous days.

Stocks rose after US jobless claims resumed their downward trend with a 3% decline last week that some economists said marked a near 55-year low.

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

The sterling jobs data was, however, offset by comments from the Federal Reserve's most hawkish policy-maker, James Bullard, who said on Thursday that interest rates must breach the central bank's typical target and go as high as 3.5% later this year, in order to suppress inflation growing at twice the pace.

After slashing rates to nearly zero at the height of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Federal Reserve's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) approved the first pandemic-era rate hike on March 16, raising rates by 25 basis points, or a quarter point. Many FOMC members have concluded since that the hike was too tame to rein in inflation galloping at 40-year highs and that more aggressive increases of 50 basis points may be needed in the future. The central bank is also considering as many as seven rate adjustments in all this year.

The pace of hikes suggested by Bullard implied that the central bank should embark on 50 basis point, or half-point increases, at each of its six remaining meetings for the year. The Federal Reserve's typical target for inflation is just 2% a year.

Stocks came off their highs as investors' "fears grew that the Fed may have to be much more aggressive in tightening policy over the next few meetings," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "Inflation is everywhere and that has stock investors nervous."

At the close, Wall Street's S&P 500 - which groups the top 500 US stocks - was up just 20 points, or 0.4%, at 4,501. It hit a high of 4,521 earlier in the session.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which lists travel, aviation and cross-industry value stocks, finished up 87 points, or 0.3%, at 34,584. The Dow rose to as high as 34,706 earlier.

The Nasdaq Composite, which houses the biggest technology names of the world, including Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, edged up just 8 points, or 0.06%, to close at 13,897.

Nasdaq earlier rallied to 13,978.

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First All-Commercial Mission to Space Station Ready to Fly on Friday - NASA Officials

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The first all commercial crewed mission to the International Space Station (ISS) looks ready to take off on schedule on Friday, NASA and Axiom senior officials told a press conference at Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Florida.

"The launch is scheduled for tomorrow," Axiom Space Operations Director Derek Hassmann said on Thursday. "The rocket and the spacecraft are in great shape and ready to go and ready to launch."

Axiom Ax-1 crew members, Commander Michael Lopez-Alegria of the United States and Spain, Pilot Larry Connor of the United States, Mission Specialist Eytan Stibbe of Israel, and Mission Specialist Mark Pathy of Canada, will launch on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket aboard the Dragon Endeavour spacecraft on its third flight to the station, NASA said.

Friday's liftoff is scheduled at 11:17 a.m. EST (3:17 p.m. GMT) from Launch Complex 39A at NASA's Kennedy Space Center, NASA said in a blog post. Officials are predicting a 90% chance of favorable weather conditions for launch, with the primary concern being "liftoff winds," NASA said.

During the 10-day mission, eight of which will be spent on the space station, the crew will complete more than 25 science experiments in a microgravity environment. NASA is working to build a sustainable low-Earth orbit (LEO) economy and the mission will be on "the leading edge" of that effort, ISS Deputy Program Manager Dana Weigel said.

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Ex-Congressional Staffer Pleads Guilty to Theft of Public Funds - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - Former Congressional staffer Sterling Carter has pleaded guilty in the US District Court for the District of Columbia to theft of public funds, the US Justice Department said on Thursday.

"Carter will be sentenced on July 28 and faces up to ten years in prison. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the US Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Carter, 24, of Glenwood, Georgia, was employed by a member of Congress and was responsible for managing the office's budget and processing payroll as well as bonus payments for all employees, the release said.

Between November 2019 and January 2021, Carter submitted fraudulent paperwork which purported to authorize a higher salary and bonus payments for himself, the release said. The theft garnered him nearly \$80,000 in unauthorized salary and bonus payments, the release added.

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Blinken Says US May Follow in EU Footsteps in Expelling Russian Diplomats

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States may follow in the European Union's footsteps in expelling Russian diplomats, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"We are always looking at this and we'll continue to do so," Blinken told reporters when asked whether the United States would follow in the European Union footsteps and expel Russian diplomats.

Blinken said sometimes it is essential to deal with diplomats from various countries who have "an adversarial relationship with the truth."

"That's part of the job," he added.

On Wednesday, the European Union declared 19 employees of Russia's Permanent Mission to the bloc *persona non gratae* for being involved in activities inconsistent their diplomatic status, the EU foreign policy service said in a statement.

The Russian Embassy in the United States said in late March that the State Department, when welcoming EU members' decisions to expel Russian diplomats, contradicts Washington's statements about its commitment to diplomatic work.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said earlier that in order to stop the expulsion of US diplomats from Russia, Washington must stop ordering Russian diplomats out of the United States.

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US Sentences Ukrainian National to 5 Years for His Role in Hacking Group - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - A Ukrainian national has been sentenced to five years in prison for his role in the Fin7 hacking group criminal activities, the US Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"[Denys] Iarmak was directly involved in designing phishing emails embedded with malware, intruding on victim networks, and extracting data such as payment card information," the release said.

Iarmak, 32, served as a high-level hacker for the Fin7 group that stole more than 200 million customer card records from businesses in all 50 states and incurred costs in excess of \$1 billion, the release added.

The Justice Department noted in the release that Iarmak and others in this cybercrime group used hacking techniques to essentially rob thousands of locations of multiple restaurant chains at once, from the comfort and safety of their keyboards in distant countries.

In November, Iarmak pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and one count of conspiracy to commit computer hacking after being charged and arrested in Thailand in 2019, according to the release.

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Oil Prices Dip 3rd Day in Row as EU Pauses on Russian Energy Sanctions Plan

NEW YORK, April 7 (Sputnik) - Oil prices fell for a third straight day on Thursday after the European Union paused on an immediate ban of Russian coal and other energy imports, providing itself some breathing room amid the global energy crisis.

Adding to the downdraft in oil was the worst coronavirus outbreak in Shanghai in two years that has forced a lockdown in China's second largest city and triggered concerns about demand in the world's second oil consuming country.

Brent, the global benchmark for oil, settled down 49 cents, or 0.5%, at \$100.58 per barrel, after a Thursday low of \$98.50.

Last week, Brent fell 13% last week for its biggest weekly decline since April 2020 after finishing the first quarter up 39%.

New York-traded US crude benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) settled down 20 cents, or 0.2%, at \$96.03. It hit an intraday low of \$93.86 earlier.

WTI 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.

The European Union's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, told a NATO meeting that new EU measures against Russia, including a ban on coal, might be passed by Friday and the bloc would discuss imposing an oil embargo next. However, the coal ban would take full effect from mid-August, a month later than initially planned, Borrell said.

Crude prices fell for a third straight day after the Paris-based International Energy Agency said it will release 60 million barrels from the reserves of its members into the open market, adding to an earlier reserves release of 180 million barrels announced by the United States.

The combined 240 million barrels would be added to the market over a six-month period, resulting in a net inflow of 1.33 million barrels per day.

That would be more than triple the monthly increments of 400,000 barrels per day in output that global oil producers under the Saudi-controlled and Russian-steered OPEC+ alliance have been doing.

OPEC+ is keeping at least four million barrels of regular daily supply needed by consumers off the market to ensure that crude prices stay at above or around \$100 per barrel, which has been the norm since the US and EU sanctions imposed on Russia for its special military operation in Ukraine.

Separately, the delivery of some 3 million barrels per day of Russian oil exports is being delayed by sanctions, with some being denied altogether.

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Four US Soldiers Being Evaluated for Injuries After Attack on Base in E. Syria - Coalition

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - Four US service members are injured following an attack against a base in Eastern Syria, Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve said on Thursday.

"At 1:09 am, April 7, Coalition forces at Green Village in Eastern Syria received 2 rounds of indirect fire that struck two support buildings," the coalition said in a press release. "At this time, four US service members are being evaluated for minor injuries and possible traumatic brain injuries."

The attack is under investigation, the release said.

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St. Louis Fed Chief Pushes for 3.5% in US Rate Hikes by Later This Year

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - St. Louis Federal Reserve President James Bullard, considered one of the most hawkish policy-makers of the central bank, said on Thursday that US interest rates must surpass the Fed's typical target and go as high as 3.5% later this year in order to suppress inflation, growing at twice that pace.

"I would like to see the Fed Funds Rate rise to 3.5% in the second half of 2022," Bullard said in comments made at a live-streamed event.

After slashing US interest rates to nearly zero at the height of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Fed's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) approved the first pandemic-era rate hike on March 16, raising rates by 25 basis points.

Many FOMC members have concluded since that the hike was too tame to rein in inflation galloping at 40-year highs and that more aggressive increases of 50 basis points may be needed in the future. The central bank is also considering as many as seven rate adjustments in all this year.

Bullard said the Fed was behind in its fight against inflation and needs to raise rates another 3 percentage points before the year's end. The pace he was suggesting implied that the Fed should embark on 50 basis point, or half-point increases, at each of its six remaining meetings for the year. The Fed's typical target for inflation is just 2% a year.

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 December and 6.4% in the 12 months to February, both also at their fastest in four decades.

FOMC officials have vowed to bring inflation back to the Fed's target range of 2% a year anywhere from between the end of 2022 and the end of 2023.

Bullard's comments on Thursday came after two other Fed regional chiefs, Patrick Harker of Philadelphia and Tom Barkin of Richmond, spoke this week of the need to step up, or even double down, on rate hikes at the upcoming May meeting of the FOMC.

The comments by Barkin and Harker came after Fed Governor and soon-to-be Vice Chair Lael Brainard said on Tuesday that the central bank had no hesitation using heavy rate hikes to bring inflation under control.

Adding to the hawkish tone were the FOMC's meeting minutes from March, released on Wednesday, which said that most members of the committee were agreeable to having "one or two" 50 basis point hikes in coming meetings.

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US Expects to Hold Ongoing Talks With China on Russia Sanctions Compliance - White House

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States expects to hold ongoing talks with China about complying with Western sanctions on Russia and not providing Moscow with material support during their ongoing special operation in Ukraine, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"There will be ongoing conversations with China, I would expect, including our expectation that they abide by sanctions and that they do not provide material support to Russia. I don't have anything to predict in terms of which channel it will happen through next," Psaki said during a White House press briefing.

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Biden to Sign Bills to Scrap Russia, Belarus Trade Status, Ban Russian Oil Imports - Psaki

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will sign legislation to revoke normal trade relations with Russia and Belarus, and to ban Russian oil imports in the United States, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"This is something the President supports, had called for, and certainly plans to sign it," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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Biden Admin. Vows to Cut More Energy Costs for Americans After Record Oil Reserves Release

(Adds details. context with paragraphs 4-9)

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will continue finding ways to reduce the energy bills of Americans as it joins global allies in approving a historic 240-million-barrel release of oil from their combined reserves, a White House statement said on Thursday.

"We will continue to take every action we can to increase supply in the immediate term so families can pay for gas while at the same time working with the international community to

achieve energy independence that reduces demand for oil and bolsters our clean energy economy," the statement said.

The 180 million barrels coming out of the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) and the 60 million barrels due from the reserves of other member states in the International Energy Agency would be the largest ever, the statement added.

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

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

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

The White House statement on Thursday noted that gasoline bills for Americans had also spiraled as a result of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, resulting from President Vladimir Putin's resolve to "demilitarize" his southern neighbor. The United States has banned Russian energy imports and joined its Western allies in sanctioning Russia in most aspects, as a result of the conflict.

"Since Putin accelerated his military build-up around Ukraine this past winter, gas prices have increased by nearly a dollar per gallon because less oil is getting to market, and the reduction in supply is raising prices at the pump for Americans," the White House statement added.

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

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Over 60 Athletes From Russia, Belarus to Be Removed From Boston Marathon, 5K Run - BAA

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - More than 60 athletes from Russia and Belarus were disqualified from the city of Boston's upcoming famous marathon and 5K run, the organizing body's spokesperson told Sputnik on Thursday.

On Wednesday, the Boston Athletic Association (B.A.A.) announced its decision to ban athletes residing in Russia and Belarus from participating in the marathon and 5K run, among the best-known in the world, set to take place on April 18.

"A total of 63 athletes will be removed from the Boston Marathon and B.A.A. 5K collectively," the B.A.A. spokesperson said when asked about the total number banned from the two countries.

Citizens of both countries who live abroad will be able to compete without their national flags. Organizers said they will make "reasonable efforts" to refund the athletes from Russia or Belarus, within the constraints as imposed by federal and international sanctions. However, the spokesperson did not comment on how they are going to return this money.

The Boston marathon is the oldest one in the world. The first race took place in 1897. Over 30,000 athletes expect to run this year.

Three Russian athletes - Olga Markova, Svetlana Zakharova and Lidya Grigoryeva - won the marathon in 1993, 2003 and 2007.

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State Dept. Confirms US Suspended Cybersecurity Cooperation Line With Russia - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has suspended the communication channel used to cooperate with Russia on criminal ransomware actors amid Moscow's special operation in Ukraine, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Thursday.

"The Russian government is engaged in a brutal and unjustified war against Ukraine, so our channel on criminal ransomware actors is not active," the spokesperson said.

The White House on Thursday notified Russia that it was unilaterally closing the communication channel, Russian Security Council Deputy Secretary Oleg Khramov said in an interview with Rossiyskaya Gazeta.

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US House Passes Legislation Banning Imports of Russian Oil, Other Energy Products

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday passed legislation to ban US imports of Russian energy products, including crude oil, in response to the Russian special military operation in Ukraine.

The House passed the Suspending Energy Imports from Russia Act in a 413-9 vote.

The Senate passed the bill unanimously earlier in the day and the measure will now go to President Joe Biden to be signed into law.

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US Senate Confirms Ketanji Brown Jackson's Nomination to Supreme Court

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday confirmed Ketanji Brown Jackson's nomination to the Supreme Court, where she will replace outgoing Justice Stephen Breyer.

The Senate confirmed Jackson's nomination in a vote of 53-46. The Senate is still waiting for Senator Rand Paul to record his vote.

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Biden Not Considered Close Contact of Covid-Infected Pelosi Despite Interactions - WH

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is not considered a close contact of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi who tested positive for COVID-19 earlier in the day ahead of her visit to Taiwan, the White House press office said on Thursday.

"The President is not considered a close contact of Speaker Pelosi as defined by the CDC [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention]. The President saw Speaker Pelosi at White House events and had brief interactions over the course of the last two days," the press office said in a statement.

Biden tested negative last night and will continue to be tested regularly, the statement added. The statement, however, omitted the fact that Pelosi kissed Biden on the cheek following the celebration ceremony of the Affordable Care Act success on Tuesday. Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Barack Obama also attended the event and were in close proximity to Pelosi.

Pelosi's positive test result is the latest of a recent wave of positive tests among White House officials and lawmakers. The list includes White House spokesperson Jen Psaki, Vice President Kamala Harris' communications director Jamal Simmons, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo and US Attorney General Merrick Garland, among others.

US media reported that several members of the press who attended an event on Saturday with Psaki, Garland, Raimondo and Simmons also tested positive.

Earlier on Thursday, Washington, DC Mayor Muriel Bowser also announced that she has tested positive.

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Biden Admin. Vows to Cut More Energy Costs for Americans After Record Oil Reserves Release

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will continue finding ways to reduce the energy bills of Americans as it joins global allies in approving a historic 240-million-barrel release of oil from their combined reserves, a White House statement said on Thursday.

"We will continue to take every action we can to increase supply in the immediate term so families can pay for gas while at the same time working with the international community to achieve energy independence that reduces demand for oil and bolsters our clean energy economy," the statement said.

The 180 million barrels coming out of US Strategic Petroleum Reserve and the 60 million barrels due from the reserves of other members states in the International Energy Agency would be the largest ever, the statement added.

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New York Attorney General Says Filing Contempt of Court Motion Against Trump

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The New York State Attorney General's office is filing a motion against former US President Donald Trump for refusing to provide documents as part of a financial investigation into the Trump Organization, Attorney General Letitia James said on Thursday.

"My office is filing a motion to hold Donald Trump in contempt of court. Despite a crystal clear order from the court, Donald Trump has refused to turn over documents as part of our investigation into him and the Trump Organization's financial dealings," James said via Twitter. The Attorney General said Trump should be fined \$10,000 per day for every day that he continues to violate the order to provide the documents.

James and her office have issued subpoenas to Trump and two of his adult children following investigations into whether the Trump Organization, which represents the family's business interests, had illegally inflated the value of its assets to obtain loans beyond merit.

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Russia Suspends Membership in Human Rights Council on April 7, Before End of Term

UNITED NATIONS, April 7 (Sputnik) - Russia is ending its membership in the Human Rights Council on April 7, before its term ends, after the General Assembly voted to suspend it from the body, Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Gennady Kuzmin said.

"Russia considers the resolution an illegitimate and politically motivated step ... The Russian Federation made a decision about ending its membership in the Human Rights Council before the end of its term on the 7th of April," he said.

The diplomat added that the UN Human Rights Council has been monopolized by a group of countries which are exploiting it for their own purposes.

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US House Passes Bill Ending Normal Trade Relations With Russia, Belarus

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday approved a Senate-passed bill that would strip Russia and Belarus of their so-called most-favored-nation trade status as a response to the Russia special military operation in Ukraine. The House passed the Suspending Normal Trade Relations With Russia and Belarus Act with a 420-3 vote and will send it to President Joe Biden's desk to be signed into law. The measure also would require the US Trade Representative to try to suspend Russia's participation in the World Trade Organization.

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US House Speaker Pelosi Tests Positive for COVID-19 - Deputy Chief of Staff

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has tested positive for COVID-19 but is asymptomatic, her Deputy Chief of Staff Drew Hamill announced on Thursday. "After testing negative this week, Speaker Pelosi received a positive test result for COVID-19 and is currently asymptomatic," Hamill said via Twitter. "The Speaker is fully vaccinated and boosted, and is thankful for the robust protection the vaccine has provided." Hamill said Pelosi will quarantine in a manner recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Protection (CDC). He added that Pelosi is encouraging all Americans to get vaccinated and to get regularly tested. Pelosi's positive test result is the latest of a recent wave of positive tests among White House officials and lawmakers. The list includes White House spokesperson Jen Psaki, Vice President Kamala Harris' communications director Jamal Simmons, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo and US Attorney General Merrick Garland, among others. US media reported that several members of the press who attended an event on Saturday with Psaki, Garland, Raimondo and Simmons also tested positive. Earlier on Thursday, Washington, DC Mayor Muriel Bowser also announced that she has tested positive.

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Blinken Says Hearing 'Clearly' Europe's Commitment to End Dependence on Russian Energy

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday he is hearing "very clearly" that Europe is committed to end its dependence on Russian energy. "We have seen over many years, a dependence buildup in Europe on Russian gas, especially as well as on Russian oil. And I think what I'm hearing very clearly is a commitment to end that dependence," Blinken said during a press briefing following a NATO ministerial meeting in Brussels.

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UNGA Suspends Russia From UN Human Rights Council

(Adds details on how countries voted in paras 2-7)

UNITED NATIONS, April 7 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly suspended Russia from the Human Rights Council on Thursday in a 93-24 vote, with 58 countries abstaining.

The countries that voted against are Algeria, Belarus, Bolivia, Burundi, the CAR, China, Republic of the Congo, Cuba, North Korea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Mali, Nicaragua, Russia, Syria, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.

Egypt, Cameroon, Ghana, India, Kuwait, Mexico, Mongolia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and the UAE are among those that abstained.

Israel and Serbia were among those that supported the move to suspend Russia from the body. Those that rejected the UNGA resolution, in particular China, Cuba and Iran, said they oppose the politicization of human rights.

"China stands for promoting human rights ... but we oppose politicization of human rights," a Chinese representative said before the vote.

The official added that "such a a hasty move will aggravate division at the UN, like adding fuel to the fire."

The US and allies initiated the move in connection with alleged atrocities in the Ukrainian town of Bucha, which Russia has called a staged provocation. Images purporting to show the bodies of civilians killed in Bucha emerged several days after Russian troops left the area and Ukrainian forces entered following peace talks in Istanbul.

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. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only, but later accused Ukrainian forces of using typical terrorist methods, such as hiding behind civilians and positioning weapons systems in civilian areas.

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Blinken Says NATO Allies Discussed New Strategic Concept, Will Be Released in June

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - NATO allies and partners during a summit in Brussels discussed a new strategic concept for the alliance to protect transatlantic security, a blueprint of the strategy will be released during the NATO summit in Madrid in June, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"We discussed at length a new NATO strategic concept, this is the public blueprint for how the alliance will continue to safeguard transatlantic security in what is a rapidly changing landscape," Blinken said after meetings at the NATO ministerial summit in Brussels. "We'll release that document at the NATO summit in Madrid in June."

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Blinken Says Met With Kuleba to Discuss What Else US Can Provide in Security Aid to Kiev

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he met with his Ukrainian counterpart in Brussels to discuss what more the United States can provide to Ukraine in security assistance to fight Russian forces.

"Today, I met again with my colleague and friend Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine's foreign minister, to discuss how we can continue to provide Ukraine's courageous defenders with what they need to keep pushing Russia back," Blinken said after meetings in Brussels at the NATO ministerial summit.

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US Welcomes Humanitarian Ceasefire in Mariupol - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes efforts to establish humanitarian ceasefire in the city of Mariupol, Assistant US Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs Ramin Toloui told reporters on Thursday.

"We welcome the continued efforts towards temporary humanitarian ceasefire that would allow civilians to depart Mariupol and deliver humanitarian assistance to civilians who may remain," Toloui said during a press briefing.

The official highlighted the critical importance of humanitarian corridors for evacuating people and providing assistance to civilians.

In addition, Toloui accused Russia of destroying Ukraine's agricultural facilities and infrastructure, as well as of attacking agribusiness vessels in the Black and Azov seas.

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 defense ministry said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure.

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US Jobless Claims Reset to Downside With Near 55-Year Low in Weekly Filing - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims resumed their downward trend with a 3% decline last week that some economists said marked a near 55-year low, after the previous week's surprise rise that jarred with the trends in a bustling employment market, the Labor Department latest data showed.

"In the week ending April 2, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 166,000, a decrease of 5,000 from the previous week's revised level," a news release from the Labor Department said Thursday.

In the previous week to March 26, jobless claims rose for the first time in three weeks, rising by an unexpected 14,000 from the previous week.

That jarred with employment trends seen in recent months as the US labor market went from strength to strength with the economic recovery from the 2020 outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic that initially decimated jobs growth.

Economists polled by US media had expected claims to average 202,000 last week, or about 40,000 above what the Labor Department reported. Some said the latest number was the lowest in nearly 55 years, though the department itself did not cite any milestone.

For the record, the Labor Department has cited 50-year lows in jobless claims previously, when it reported data for December, when weekly filings stood at just below 200,000.

"This is a staggeringly-low number and highlights an extremely tight labor market," economist Adam Button said in a post on the Forex Live forum, referring to the 166,00 claims reported for the latest week. "It's the lowest since at least 1968, when the US had half the population it does now."

Meanwhile, President Joe Biden said in a statement released by the White House that over a four-week period, "fewer Americans had filed jobless claims than at any time in our nation's recorded history."

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

Aside from ramping job numbers, the United States is experiencing one of the greatest transformations of its employment market as COVID-19 measures upended labor supply and work trends, putting employees' demands above those of employers.

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UNGA Suspends Russia From UN Human Rights Council

UNITED NATIONS, April 7 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly on Thursday suspended Russia from the Human Rights Council in a 93-24 vote, with 58 countries abstaining. The US and allies initiated the move in connection with alleged atrocities in the Ukrainian town of Bucha, which Russia has called a staged provocation. Images purporting to show the bodies of civilians killed in Bucha emerged several days after Russian troops left the area and Ukrainian forces entered following peace talks in Istanbul. 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. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only, but later accused Ukrainian forces of using typical terrorist methods, such as hiding behind civilians and positioning weapons systems in civilian areas.

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US Does Not Fear Putin, But Considers It Important to Avoid Nuclear Rivalry – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) – The United States is not afraid of Russian President Vladimir Putin but considers it important to avoid nuclear rivalry with Moscow, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Thursday.

"I would not use the word 'fear' and Putin in the same sentence, and I just want to point out that it's my job, one of my key responsibilities to manage escalation and make sure that we don't find ourselves in a nuclear contest if that's avoidable, and again, there's nothing about Mr. Putin that we fear," Austin said in a testimony during a Senate hearing.

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US Senate Unanimously Passes Legislation Banning Import of Russian Energy Products

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday unanimously passed legislation suspending the import of energy products from Russia to the United States amid the ongoing special operation in Ukraine.

The Senate passed a revised version of H.R. 6968, the Suspending Energy Imports from Russia Act, in a 100-0 vote. The bill will now be sent back to the House of Representatives for final passage of the revised version.

The legislation prohibits the importation of mineral fuels, oils and distillate products, in addition to directing the US Trade Representative to consider steps to suspend Russia's participation in the World Trade Organization.

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IAF Can Contribute to De-Escalation Between Russia, West Over Ukraine - Executive Director

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 7 Sputnik) - The International Astronautical Federation (IAF) believes it can help deescalate current tensions related to space cooperation between Russia and the West over the Ukraine conflict, IAF Executive Director Christian Feichtinger told Sputnik on the sidelines of the Space Symposium.

"Our mission is to contribute to a deescalation and to keep in contact with people ... so that's our mission. That's what we are going to follow," he said when asked about anti-Russian sanctions and tensions among ISS partners.

The IAF, he added, provides a platform that allows any member organization from any country to meet and to share and to connect.

"As long as people are able to talk to each other, I think there is a good chance that we will see peace on earth," he 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 forces. In response, the West rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow, which includes airspace closures and restrictive measures targeting numerous Russian officials and entities, media and financial institutions.

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Meta Cuts Accounts in Iran, Ukraine, Russia Involved in Cyber Espionage, Spam - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - Meta, formerly known as Facebook, has removed accounts from its social media platform that were involved in cyber espionage or civil society destabilization operations in Iran, Ukraine and Russia, the company announced in a quarterly report on Thursday.

"In Iran, we took action against two cyber espionage operations," the report said. "The first network was linked to a group of hackers known in the security industry as UNC788. The second was a separate, previously unreported group that targeted industries like energy, telecommunications, maritime logistics, information technology and others."

Meta enforcement activities in Ukraine blocked attempts by previously disrupted state and non-state actors to come back on the platform, in addition to combating spam networks using deceptive tactics to monetize public attention to the ongoing war, the report said.

"Under our Inauthentic Behavior policy against mass reporting, we removed a network in Russia for abusing our reporting tools to repeatedly report people in Ukraine and in Russia for fictitious policy violations of Facebook policies in an attempt to silence them" the report added.

Meta also removed a hybrid network operated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Azerbaijan that combined cyber espionage with Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior to target civil society in Azerbaijan by compromising accounts and websites to post on their behalf, according to the report.

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Cuba, Kazakhstan, Venezuela Say Will Vote Against Suspending Russia From UN HRC

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - Cuba, Kazakhstan and Venezuela said on Thursday that they will vote against suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council.

"Today we will have to vote against the resolution," Kazakhstan's representative said, adding that the suspension of Russia will not contribute to the resolution of the Ukraine conflict.

A Venezuelan representative said that the UNGA resolution is an "example of politicization."

Cuba called the upcoming vote unfair, noting that there is no issue of US suspension on agenda despite many instances of human rights violations.

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IAF Determined to Continue Cooperation With Russia, Ukraine - Executive Director

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 7 (Sputnik) - The International Astronautical Federation (IAF) is determined to continue cooperating with Russia and Ukraine as the organization has a code of conduct not to ban any party based on traits like nationality, IAF Executive Director Christian Feichtinger told Sputnik on the sidelines of the Space Symposium.

"We are, of course, determined and open to continue cooperation with all nations, and specifically with all our member organizations, including those from Ukraine, from Russia," Feichtinger said.

He also acknowledged that many of the IAF's 433 members from 72 countries are concerned about what is going on in Ukraine.

"But we have also a code of conduct that says very clearly that the IAF is committed to having organizations and people, and not ban people based on any characteristics like gender or nationality," he said.

The IAF, he added, was created during the times of the Cold War in order to bring the world together. Specifically at these times the East and the West could not freely meet in a bilateral setting, but only in a multilateral setting.

"And since then, we have followed our mission to connect space people," he said. "Space has always been the the domain where we can combine countries or people. And we, up to today, are following, of course, this mission."

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 forces. In response, the West rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow, which includes airspace closures and restrictive measures targeting numerous Russian officials and entities, media and financial institutions.

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Russia Welcome at Upcoming IAF Conference in Quito, IAC in Paris - Executive Director

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 7 (Sputnik) - Christian Feichtinger, executive director of the International Astronautical Federation, told Sputnik that Russia is welcome at the upcoming IAF Global Conference on Space for Emerging Countries in Quito and The International Astronautical Congress in Paris.

"We are planning for upcoming events - a global conference on space for emerging countries in Quito, the International Astronautical Congress in Paris in 2022. And we hope to see all our stakeholders," Feichtinger said on the sidelines of the Space Symposium.

When asked whether Russia is welcome there, Feichtinger stated, "as any other country. Yes." Feichtinger also said he does not have any concrete plans for talks with Roscosmos chief Dmitry Rogozin.

Feichtinger spoke on the sidelines of the 37th Space Symposium that brings together representatives of the world's space agencies, commercial space businesses as well as military, national security and intelligence organizations to discuss and plan the future of space exploration.

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US Defense Chief Says Lack of Contact With Russia 'Disappointing,' Will Keep Reaching Out

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to reach out to Russia for engagement despite a disappointing lack of current contact between US and Russian military leadership, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Thursday.

"[I'm] disappointed, for sure, but, based upon what they've done, nothing surprises me, but it doesn't mean that we'll stop reaching out to engage them. I think we have to have the ability to talk to the leadership," Austin said during testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee when asked about the level of contact between the US and Russia.

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Diplomatic Intervention in Ukraine Conflict Not on 'Immediate Horizon' - US Top General

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - A "diplomatic intervention" in Ukraine conflict is not on the immediate horizon while military activities are ongoing, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"I think it's an open question right now, how this [conflict in Ukraine] ends. Ideally, [Russian President Vladimir] Putin decides to cease fire, stop his aggression. And there's some sort of diplomatic intervention. But right now, that doesn't look like it's on the immediate horizon," Milley told the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

Milley pointed out that a significant battle soon awaits in the southeast of Ukraine around the Donbas region, where Russia intends to amass forces and continue its special operation.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend from attacks by 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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Vote to Suspend Russia From UN HRC Represents US Push to Continue Dominance - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 7 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly vote on whether to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council represents an attempt by the United States to continue its dominant position, Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Gennady Kuzmin said on Thursday.

"Today is an attempt by the US to continue its dominant position," he told a UNGA session which gathered to decide on the Russian membership in the council.

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IAF Hopeful ISS Survives Until 2030 Amid Global Tensions - Executive Director

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 7 (Sputnik) - The International Astronautical Federation (IAF) is hopeful that the International Space Station will exist until 2030 despite the current geopolitical tensions, IAF Executive Director Christian Feichtinger told Sputnik on the sidelines of the Space Symposium.

Over the weekend, Roscosmos chief Dmitry Rogozin said the space agency will soon inform the government of how it plans to terminate cooperation with Western partners on the ISS. Rogozin

has said that Russia and the West could have space cooperation if all sanctions on Russia are lifted.

"Great things can only be achieved if we all work together. So, in this spirit, we hope for the best," he said when asked if the ISS will last until 2030.

However, he also said it is not up to the IAF to decide the matter.

"It is the partnership within the ISS that needs to decide. We provide a platform where they can freely discuss on neutral grounds and in the positive spirit," he added.

The IAF chief called the ISS a "unique" project that has been bringing together many different stakeholders over so many years, noting that "it is difficult to imagine that this cooperation will break up."

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US Senate Passes Legislation Ending Normal Trade Relations With Russia, Belarus

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday unanimously passed legislation to suspend Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status with Russia and Belarus amid the ongoing special operation in Ukraine.

The Senate passed HR 7108, the Suspending Normal Trade Relations with Russia and Belarus Act, in a 100-0 vote. Suspending PNTR status allows the United States to increase tariffs on their imports above standard World Trade Organization levels.

The legislation will now be sent back to the House of Representatives for final passage of the revised version.

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Pentagon Developing Options for Biden on Future Force Posture in Europe – Top US General

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) – Pentagon is developing options for Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and President Joe Biden on future US force posture in Europe in light of the Ukraine conflict, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said on Thursday.

"We're developing options for the secretary and the President to consider on the future force posture in Europe to achieve the two fundamental purposes, which is to assure our allies and deter an adversary, specifically Russia, but right now those are under development," Milley said in a testimony during a Senate hearing.

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US Denies Export Privileges to Russian Carriers Aeroflot, Azur Air, Utair - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) - The United States on Thursday denied export privileges to three Russian airlines due to violations of export controls imposed on Russia, the Commerce Department said.

"Today, Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) Assistant Secretary for Export Enforcement Matthew S. Axelrod issued orders denying the export privileges of three Russian Airlines – Aeroflot, Azur Air, and UTair – due to ongoing export violations related to comprehensive export controls on Russia imposed by the Commerce Department," the press release said.

The restrictions on export privileges is a reminder to parties in Russia and the rest of the world that US legal authorities are substantial, far-reaching and have a meaningful impact on global commerce by parties found to be in violation of US law, the press release added.

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US, Russia Should Cooperate on Leveraging Private Investment for Space Programs - Expert

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 7 (Sputnik) - Russia and the United States along with other countries should cooperate on leveraging private investment to develop human spaceflight programs as governments struggle with tight budgets, Greg Autry, professor of space leadership at Arizona State University's Thunderbird School of Global Management, told Sputnik.

"I think it is time for Russia to fully embrace the commercial future of space. With increasingly difficult budget situations in both our nations, we can only continue bold exploration and science if we leverage private investment and capture returns from the commercial development of space resources," Autry said on the sidelines of the 37th annual Space Symposium. "Our nations should work together on this."

NASA's budget, Autry added, has increased in nominal terms over the last few years, but has fallen far behind as a percentage of US government spending as the country addresses other priorities.

"NASA cannot afford a government-only human spaceflight program and by the same token I do not believe Russia can any longer maintain their human spaceflight program without international and eventually commercial partners," he said. "We should be working together and with our other international partners to find a path for this development to be agreeable, equitable and beneficial for those on Earth."

US-Russian, and previously US-Soviet, cooperation in the exploration of space has been a bright point in a long and unfortunately difficult relationship between the two countries.

"The successful working relationships between our astronauts and your cosmonauts has always been backed by the cooperation of hundreds of engineers, scientists and managers in our respective space agencies," he stressed. "Until recently, our political leaders and agency leaders have been very supportive of this cooperation, even when other geopolitical tension separated our national interests. That has been a very good thing."

Autry said, personally, he is a fan of the historical success of Russian space exploration and feels that both competition and cooperation with Moscow helped NASA achieve great things. "America would never have succeeded in the Moon landings if we had not had the very successful early Soviet space program as a 'foil' to position ourselves against. The point being that even if we are in conflict, we can make each other stronger. Let us hope that never results in actual conflict in space."

Autry shared that he has long been a fan of Yuri Gagarin, and was upset with the Space Foundation's decision to change the name of their annual event from "Yuri's Night" to "A Celebration of Space."

"He achieved an amazing milestone for humanity and was by all accounts a brave and honorable man. I actually keep an original acrylic painting by artist Simon Kregar entitled 'Yuri's Night' over my office desk," he said.

While many are unhappy with Russia's operation in Ukraine, he added, that should not result in Americans censoring past achievements or "canceling" great individuals who are not engaged in the current political process.

"I see nothing but positive outcomes from us all acknowledging what has been achieved by your cosmonauts and our astronauts," Autry said.

Autry went on to say that just recently in October Roscosmos, NASA and the world's space agencies got together in Dubai for the Head of Agencies panel.

"Roscosmos Directory General Dmitry Rogozin was very positive. He was the star of the conference," Autry said.

However, Autry also said he believes many of Rogozin's statements, including about cooperation on the ISS, have been provocative.

"ISS is the greatest construction achievement of humankind and should be persevered," Autry added. "We should work together to keep it going and when it is no longer functional, we should secure it in a higher orbit as an artifact - like many historical ships and aircraft we have preserved."

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US Envoy for Human Rights Will Head to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan Next Week – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 7 (Sputnik) – US under secretary for human rights Uzra Zeya and Special Advisor for International Disability Rights Sara Minkara will visit Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on April 11-16, the State Department said on Thursday.

"In Kazakhstan, Under Secretary Zeya will meet with senior government officials to discuss strengthening the US-Kazakhstan bilateral partnership and creating a more connected, prosperous, and secure Central Asia," the statement read.

In Nur-Sultan, Zeya will participate in an inaugural high-level human rights working group. While visiting Almaty, she will meet with civil society representatives to discuss human rights.

"Zeya will then travel Bishkek, where she will meet with senior government officials to enhance cooperation on bilateral and global issues and discuss the importance of democratic institutions," the statement said.

She will also meet with members of civil society to discuss freedom of expression and human rights in the country, including for people with disabilities, it added.