

4/8/22 Friday

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Alabama Lawmakers Pass Bill Making Giving Gender-Affirming Treatment to Kids a Felony Crime

In 2022 alone, more than 160 bills concerning LGBTQ+ have been introduced in state legislatures across the United States. While a federal anti-discrimination bill, the Equality Act, passed the House last year, it stalled in the Senate over protections for trans women. On Thursday, Alabama became the latest US state to pass a bill criminalizing giving gender-affirming treatment to transgender youth. However, it is the first time a state has made doing so a felony offense.

Senate Bill 184 passed the Alabama House of Representatives on Thursday by a vote of 66 to 28, having been pushed to the front of the agenda alongside several other similar bills, including the first bill banning trans people from bathrooms and locker rooms of the gender they assume in eight years, HB 322. That bill also limits instruction on LGBTQ topics in public schools, similarly to Florida's so-called "Don't Say Gay" law.

Called the Vulnerable Child Protection Act, [SB 184 says that anyone](#) who provides gender-affirming procedures to anyone under the age of 18 can be convicted of a felony and face up to 10 years in prison and a \$15,000 fine. That could include prescribing puberty blockers, hormone replacement therapy, or gender-affirming surgeries.

According to [the UCLA School of Law](#), 15 US states have passed or introduced similar bills, including [Arizona](#) and [Arkansas](#), while similar efforts in Utah, Indiana, Florida, and Mississippi have all [been defeated](#)., including by successful governors' vetoes. The bans threaten the healthcare of roughly 58,000 trans youth, according to their estimate.

In Texas, a trans youth healthcare ban has [encountered trouble](#) getting through the legislature, but that hasn't stopped Attorney General Ken Paxton and Governor Greg Abbott from declaring parents child abusers if they affirm their trans kid's gender and ordering Child Protective Services to investigate such cases, potentially leading to taking children from their families. A Texas court [temporarily enjoined the practice](#) last month.

Ahead of the vote in the Alabama House on Thursday, the Cotton State's sole openly gay lawmaker, Democratic Rep. Neil Rafferty, furiously denounced the bill and its backers, telling them, "Don't you dare call me a friend after this."

"It's hard enough growing up being different," Rafferty said, [according to AL.com](#). "It's even harder growing up being different, and then have a state legislature, your elected officials, the leaders of this state, put a target on children's backs, put a target on the parents' backs, and once again get in the middle of their decisions."

Taking a cue from Texas, the bill's sponsor, Republican Sen. Shay Shelnett, called gender-affirming healthcare "child abuse."

"We don't want parents to be abusing their children. We don't want to make that an option, because that's what it is; it's child abuse. This is just to protect children," [Shelnutt said when](#) the bill was introduced in February.

According to experts, Alabama's bill misinforms on what gender-affirming treatment for children looks like. For example, it bans minors from receiving gender-affirming "surgical procedures," but those surgeries, already extremely rare for minors, are already barred for patients in The Cotton State before the age of legal majority for medical decisions, which is 19. However, for other procedures, the [general age of consent](#) for healthcare in Alabama is 14 years old.

"When lawmakers attempt to practice medicine with a life without a license, they realize quickly that there was a lot more they didn't understand than what they thought they did," Morissa Ladinsky, an associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, [told ABC News](#).

The professor also noted that the bill incorrectly states that puberty blockers can cause infertility or other health risks when those risks are only present in people who begin taking them after finishing puberty.

Almost [every leading medical and mental health](#) professional organization in the US opposes such legislation, "which interferes with their ability to provide best-practice, often life-saving care," according to the [Human Rights Campaign](#), a nationwide LGBTQ rights advocacy group.

"This legislation targets vulnerable young people and puts them at great risk of physical and mental harm," Mark Del Monte, chief executive of the American Academy of Pediatrics, [said in a statement](#). "Criminalizing evidence-based, medically necessary services is dangerous."

By comparison, China's first specialized [trans youth clinic opened in Shanghai](#) in November 2021. Luo Feihong, director of the endocrine and genetic metabolic department of the Children's Hospital where the new clinic is attached, told [the Global Times](#) that their multidisciplinary approach is "of great help to reduce the negative emotions of these children and adolescents, improve their academic performance, improve their family relations and build a harmonious society."

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US to Deploy One Patriot Missile System in Slovakia, Pentagon Chief Announces

While NATO has said it will not become militarily involved in Ukraine, including refusing to set up a no-fly zone, it has rushed to flood the country with weapons, including man-portable weapons and larger weapons systems. Some former Soviet allies have also considered sending their Soviet-made equipment for Ukraine to use.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Friday that the US would position an MIM-104 Patriot air defense system in Slovakia, a NATO ally in Central Europe.

"US European Command will reposition one Patriot missile system, manned by US service members, to Slovakia," Austin said in a Friday statement. "We expect this battery and its crew to arrive in coming days. Their deployment length has not yet been fixed, as we continue to consult with the Slovakian government about more permanent air defense solutions."

The news comes after Slovak Prime Minister [Eduard Heger said the country](#) had given its Russian-made S-300 (NATO reporting name S-10 Grumble) air defense system to Ukraine. The two countries share a 50-mile-long border in the Carpathian Mountains. In a Friday statement, US President Joe Biden thanked Bratislava for the decision, noting the US was sending the Patriot system "to enable this transfer and ensure the continued security of Slovakia."

Last month, [Germany and the Netherlands](#) sent three Patriot missile batteries to Slovakia as well, and the US has also [stationed two additional batteries](#) in eastern Poland. The systems are to be part of a new NATO battle group being formed in Slovakia, which is [one of four new such groups](#) announced by the alliance last month. NATO already has four battle groups in Poland and the Baltic States as part of an Enhanced Forward Presence deployment. The new battle groups are being sent to Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary.

US Air Force Gen. Tod Wolters, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and NATO's second-highest-ranking general, [told a Senate panel](#) last week that the US has 102,000 troops in Europe, nearly double the number at the start of the year.

The massive buildup has come after Russia launched a special operation in Ukraine on February 24 aimed at neutralizing the country's military and rendering the country unable to serve as a NATO base from which to attack Russia. Ukraine is not a NATO ally, but has received extensive arms and training from NATO since the US-backed coup in 2014 and has added to its constitution that joining the alliance is a goal of the government. Moscow has said NATO expansion further eastward is a red line.

The powerful [Patriot anti-air missile system](#) is capable of shooting down drones, aircraft, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles within a 100-mile radius. However, it is unlikely to be able to engage hypersonic weapons. Each truck-mounted launcher operates in tandem with as many as four other launchers and communications, command and control, and radar stations. They can also [network with other air defenses](#) systems, such as the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system.

In addition to the numerous Patriot systems, the US has also built an Aegis Ashore missile base in Deveselu, Romania, and a [second base in Radzikowo, Poland](#), is nearing completion. Ostensibly built to defend Europe against Iranian ballistic missiles, Russia has long warned that the Aegis system can be used to launch offensive missiles deep into Russian territory and that it can shoot down Russian missiles as well. The [Anti-Ballistic Missile \(ABM\) Treaty](#) once banned such installations because they create the danger of a nuclear first strike, if one side believes it can shoot down all of the opponent's missiles they would fire in retaliation. However, the US unilaterally withdrew from that treaty in 2002.

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US State Department to Keep Iran's IRGC Quds Force on Terrorist List

After reports Washington was weighing removing Iran's Quds Force from its list of designated terrorist organizations, the US State Department indicated on Friday that the elite unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

"The president shares the chairman's view that IRGC Quds forces are terrorists," US State Department spokesperson [Jalina Porter told reporters](#) on Friday. Earlier this week, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley told a congressional hearing the same thing.

"In my personal opinion, I believe the IRGC Quds Force to be a terrorist organization, and I do not support them being delisted from the foreign terrorist organization list," [Milley told the House Armed Services Committee](#).

Named after the Arabic name for Jerusalem, Al-Quds, the Quds Force is a highly secretive branch of the IRGC. Estimates of its size vary widely, with the UK's International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) think tank putting its strength at 5,000 personnel and the Royal United Services Institute [estimating nearly four times](#) that size, at 17,000-20,000 men.

The Quds Force is accused by Washington of orchestrating anti-American resistance operations and attacks against US forces and installations around the globe, but especially in nearby Iraq, which the US invaded in 2003 in the hopes of turning Baghdad into a friendly government.

In January 2020, a US Reaper drone was used to assassinate Quds Force commander Maj. Gen. [Qasem Soleimani outside Baghdad](#) International Airport. Then-US President Donald Trump claimed Soleimani was responsible for masterminding several attacks on US forces and was planning several attacks on US embassies. However, it never produced evidence to support those claims, and the Iraqi government, which had narrowly survived the Daesh onslaught three years earlier with the help of the IRGC, was infuriated by the breach of their sovereignty and demanded that all US forces leave the country. Trump responded by [threatening to freeze Iraq's account](#) at the New York Federal Reserve Bank.

The US State Department has considered the Quds Force a terrorist organization since 2007 and added the entire IRGC to the list in 2019, [despite the objections](#) of the CIA and Pentagon, which noted the designation had never been applied to state entities before.

It was rumored that the removal of either entity from the terrorist list might be [part of the final negotiations](#) to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a 2015 deal that lifted US economic sanctions against Iran in exchange for it accepting strict limitations on its nuclear program. The Trump administration unilaterally pulled out of the deal in 2018, claiming without evidence that Iran was secretly violating it and pursuing a nuclear weapon, so Iran began reducing its commitments under the deal and producing higher-quality uranium. When US President Joe Biden took office last year, he began talks to revive the deal, which is now on the cusp of an agreement.

Last week, the [Washington Post](#) reported that the US refusal is the biggest sticking point in the talks.

"If there is a pause in the Vienna talks, it is because of the American side's extravagance," Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian [wrote on Twitter](#) on Tuesday. "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs acts with power and logic in order to achieve the highest interests of the nation and to observe the red lines. We will never go overboard with America. If the White House behaves realistically, an agreement is achievable."

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Shanghai Converting Office Buildings into Quarantine Sites as Omicron Outbreak Hits 131,000 Cases

The lockdown in China's largest city continued on Friday as health authorities registered more than double the number of symptomatic cases. However, the vast majority of cases in the six-week-long outbreak have been asymptomatic, with total cases since March 1 hitting 131,000.

Health officials in the eastern metropolis of Shanghai recorded 824 new symptomatic cases of COVID-19 and a total of 21,222 new cases on Thursday, breaking the city's record for the seventh consecutive day, according to the [Shanghai Health Commission](#).

The city went under lockdown two weeks ago as cases ballooned, with the closures expected to end on April 5. However, the explosion of cases has forced authorities to double down and begin searching for more quarantine and treatment spaces. According to the [South China Morning Post](#), the financial hub is converting conference centers and public facilities, adding tens of thousands of bunks to complement the 77,000 hospital beds already set aside for those suffering from COVID-19.

While there have not been any deaths reported in Shanghai due to the latest COVID-19 wave, one person was in serious condition on Thursday, according to the local paper [Shanghai Daily](#). The massive city of 25 million has drawn on resources from surrounding regions, with about 38,000 medical staff from 15 provinces being sent there and Chinese [military transport aircraft](#) flying in army medical staff as well as advanced testing equipment and protective gear.

Meanwhile, most transportation connections are shut down, including the airport, port and rail lines, as health officials rush to test the city's entire population again and again. According to the SCMP, officials tested all residents four times between April 3 and 7, with the most recent using both antigen and nucleic tests to guard against false negatives.

On the one hand, residents have gushed about the [extensive support network](#) funneling food, medicine and other goods to residents under lockdown, while on the other, safety measures such as the [extermination of pets](#) owned by those who test positive and are sent to quarantine have aroused fury.

Two other outbreaks are also raging in China. In the northern Jilin Province, an outbreak that [started in early March](#) has continued to grow, even as officials in the city of Jilin [announced on Friday](#) that the city's lockdown had totally ended community spread of the disease. The virus is still spreading in the nearby larger city of Changchun, albeit more slowly than before, and [a Wednesday estimate](#) by a Peking University professor suggested the province's total daily positive causes could hit 120,000 by early May.

In the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, a semi-autonomous region off the southern Chinese coast, a catastrophic outbreak that began in January has finally begun to recede. [Just 2,492 cases](#) were reported by health authorities on Friday, having peaked at 72,600 new cases on March 4. The city has counted 1.185 million cases in total and 8,643 deaths, the vast majority of which occurred this year. However, researchers at the University of Hong Kong

[projected in mid-March](#) that the true number of infections was closer to 3.6 million - half the population of the Chinese special administrative region.

The outbreaks have eclipsed the initial COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan in late 2019, which set off the global pandemic in early 2020 and only had about 85,000 cases and 4,600 deaths. China has since maintained [a “zero Covid” strategy](#) in stark contrast to the West’s [“living with Covid” approach](#), helping to keep Covid outbreaks small and under control until the ultra-transmissible Omicron variant reached China in early 2022. The mainland has registered about 275,000 cases since the initial outbreak, but just a handful of deaths since then, including [just two in all of 2021](#).

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Cheney: Jan. 6 Panel Has Enough Evidence to Refer Trump for Criminal Charges
By - Evan Craighead

The US House panel stated last month that it had “good-faith basis for concluding that [then-President Trump] and members of his Campaign engaged in a criminal conspiracy to defraud the” US. The probe into the US Capitol riot appears to be nearing a critical moment for possible criminal referrals as public hearings are expected to begin next month.

The US House Select Committee probing events surrounding the January 6, 2021, riot at the US Capitol building noted last month that then-US President Donald Trump and key congressional allies conspired to disrupt the certification of Electoral College votes in the 2020 US election, according to Sunday remarks from Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY), committee vice-chair and one of two Republicans on the 9-member panel.

“It’s definitely clear ... what President Trump was doing. What a number of people around him were doing. That they knew it was unlawful. They did it anyway,” Cheney told CNN’s Jake Tapper, speaking of the alleged effort to halt official election proceedings.

Moreover, enough evidence has been gathered to satisfy a criminal referral against the now-former US president.

“I think what we have seen is a massive and well organized and well-planned effort that used multiple tools to try to overturn an election,” the panel’s vice-chair said, touting the committee’s possession of “a tremendous amount of testimony and documents” capable of demonstrating the scope of the effort, including its organization and objective.

“The objective was absolutely to try to stop the kind of electoral votes, to try to interfere with that official proceeding,” Cheney said. “And it’s absolutely clear that they knew what they were doing was wrong.”

Cheney’s remarks came shortly after the [New York Times reported that the panel was divided](#) on whether or not to issue such a referral, which would go to a full vote in the House of Representatives before progressing to the US Department of Justice for the possibility of an indictment.

Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-IL) promptly shot down the reported divide as “nonsense,” tweeting plainly that “there is no split” concerning the panel’s position. However, the Republican lawmaker did not expound on the subject.

“I’m not going to address what we will do,” [he said of the House Select Committee](#). “But DoJ will be able to read everything we do, and it’s their choice.”

Last week, the 9-member panel voted to recommend Trump-era trade adviser Peter Navarro and former White House Deputy Chief of Staff for Communications Dan Scavino for criminal contempt charges after both refused to cooperate with a congressional subpoena, and failed to appear at scheduled depositions.

Trump, who has denied any wrongdoing in relation to the January 6 riot, has not been charged with a crime.

As of this article’s publication, former White House strategist Steve Bannon is the sole individual to be indicted in relation to the investigation—with two counts of contempt of Congress handed down by a grand jury in November.

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

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‘No One Shows Up Anyway’: Elon Musk Floats Converting Twitter’s San Francisco HQ to Homeless Shelter

By - Evan Craighead

Elon Musk, the CEO of SpaceX and Tesla, received a wave of requests from pro-Trump netizens last week after disclosing his assumption of a board seat at Twitter, one of many social media platforms that indefinitely banned then-US President Donald Trump amid his final months in office. Musk is Twitter Inc.’s biggest shareholder, with a 9.2% stake.

Over the weekend, Elon Musk, 50, appeared eager to fuse his ideas and personal brand with Twitter. In a series of provocative tweets, the billionaire entrepreneur offered a number of potential changes for the platform boasting over 200 million active users.

“Convert Twitter SF HQ to homeless shelter since no one shows up anyway,” the poll states, giving users the option to select the affirmative ‘Y’ or ‘N.’

Convert Twitter SF HQ to homeless shelter since no one shows up anyway

— Elon Musk (@elonmusk) [April 10, 2022](#)

San Francisco’s Public Health Department estimates that more than 18,000 individuals are dealing with homelessness at some point during the year.

While the head count for those without homes has been consistently rising, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the issue in terms of health, outreach, and other initiatives.

However, it is anyone's guess whether the vocal billionaire investor was genuinely concerned about those faced with homelessness in San Francisco, as he appeared to make light of the survey in a follow-up poll.

"Delete the w in twitter?" Musk posed, eliciting mixed commentary from respondents.

"And we thought Elon Musk will fight for freedom of speech on Twitter. Dude went straight to breasts," [tweeted a user with the apt handle 'ThePollLady.'](#)

"Just replace the 'i' with an 'a,'" [suggested Kristina Wong.](#)

Musk also tweeted revisions he would make to Twitter Blue, a paid subscription service launched last year that offers platform users exclusive access to premium features.

The service is available to those accessing the website or app from the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

"Everyone who signs up for Twitter Blue (ie pays \$3/month) should get an authentication checkmark," he tweeted, referring to the blue 'verified' icon that has been historically reserved for celebrities, public figures, politicians, members of the press, and other individuals deemed noteworthy by Twitter.

"Price should probably be ~\$2/month, but paid 12 months up front & account doesn't get checkmark for 60 days (watch for CC chargebacks) & suspended with no refund if used for scam/spam," Musk added. "And no ads. The power of corporations to dictate policy is greatly enhanced if Twitter depends on advertising money to survive."

He went on to say that, moving forward, a Twitter Blue subscription "should be proportionate to affordability & in local currency." He also spitballed the idea of Twitter accepting payments in Dogecoin, a cryptocurrency that ballooned last year and has been known to spike, or remain steady, based on Elon Musk's tweets, social media bandwagons, and rumors.

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Finland & Sweden May Reportedly Seek NATO Membership by Summer
By -- Evan Craighead

NATO officials told CNN last week that membership talks with both Finland and Sweden have intensified amid the situation in Ukraine, which has also elicited anti-Russian rebukes from Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin. Sweden's Prime Minister previously stated that a NATO application could possibly destabilize Europe.

Washington anticipates that NATO will increase from 30 to 32 member-states due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict's impact on nearby neighbors, including moves by Moscow that have been branded as a "massive strategic blunder," [according to a new report in The Times.](#)

Citing US officials, the British daily detailed that the topic of Finland and Sweden joining NATO was "a topic of conversation and multiple sessions" during talks held last week and attended by both Nordic countries.

Finland is reportedly expected to make a decision on the matter by June, while Sweden will announce its position later in the summer.

"Russia is not the neighbor we thought they were," Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin said on Saturday, stressing that a decision regarding a NATO membership application must be made "thoroughly, but quickly."

"I think we will have very careful discussions, but we are also not taking any more time than we have to in this process, because the situation is, of course, very severe," Marin added.

Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson has said Stockholm will keep an open mind regarding possible NATO membership. At the same time, the country is amid a security policy review that takes precedence, and is anticipated to wrap by the end of May.

"I do not exclude NATO membership in any way," Andersson said.

The two Nordic nations are said to be working in tandem to build domestic consensus, although their final decisions will be made independently.

Anti-Russian sentiments have grown in both nations as NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg readies some 40,000 troops under its command on Europe's eastern flank. The rise reportedly represents a tenfold increase from the force's manpower prior to February 24, when Russian President Vladimir Putin and Moscow began its special operation.

Stoltenberg told The Sunday Telegraph that forces will be repositioned to prevent further expansion or invasion. The NATO Secretary-General said such positioning will be "a new normal for European security."

"Therefore, we have now asked our military commanders to provide options for what we call a reset, a more longer-term adaptation of NATO," Stoltenberg told the outlet. "I expect that NATO leaders will make decisions on this when they meet in Madrid at the NATO summit in June."

On Friday, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told Sky News that the Nordic countries should remember the goal of mutual deterrence.

"Everything is about mutual deterring and should one side—and we consider NATO to be one side—be more powerful than the other, especially in terms of nuclear arms, then it will be considered a threat for the whole architecture of security and it will take us to take additional measures," Peskov said.

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MBS Overruled Panel, Ignored Financial Advisers in \$2 Bln Investment With Trump Admin's Kushner

By - Evan Craighead

As of a March 31 filing with the US Securities and Exchange Commission, the primary coffers of Jared Kushner's Affinity Partners firm have some \$2.5 billion under management—including around \$2 billion from the Public Investment Fund (PIF) led by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The Saudi Crown Prince defied PIF advisers' warnings when he invested some \$2 billion in Affinity Partners—a fledgling firm with no declared focus as of late, according to a Sunday report in the New York Times.

Jared Kushner, son-in-law and former adviser of former US President Donald Trump, reportedly secured the multibillion-dollar investment within six months of leaving the White House. MBS was reportedly issued a number of warnings and objections about Kushner's fund, including "the inexperience of the Affinity Partners management"; the possibility that the kingdom would be responsible for "the bulk of the investment and risk"; an asset management fee that "seems excessive"; and "public relations risks" in associating with a former White House official.

However, the Saudi Crown Prince ultimately decided to go against the advisement of the fund's screening panel, according to the report.

Amid the PIF investment with Kushner, MBS also invested a smaller \$1 billion in Trump-era Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin's new fund.

The funds linked to Kushner and Mnuchin are themed around sectors prioritized by Saudi Arabia, like cyber security, entertainment, and financial technology.

Kushner notably played a key role in the Trump administration's defense of MBS after US intelligence agencies deduced that the Saudi Crown Prince approved the 2018 killing and subsequent dismemberment of Saudi columnist Jamal Khashoggi, of the Washington Post. Ethics experts cited by the outlet have suggested that the Saudi Crown Prince's timely investment may be repayment for Kushner's support amid the Khashoggi murder saga. It would also give more weight to the political aspirations of Donald Trump, Kushner himself, or even his wife, Ivanka Trump.

"Affinity, like many other top investment firms, is proud to have PIF and other leading organizations that have careful screening criteria, as investors," an Affinity Partners spokesperson told the NYT.

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Biden White House to Release Rule on Ghost Guns as Soon as Monday - Report
By - Mary Manley

Ghost guns are firearms sold online as D.I.Y. kits that can be assembled without a license or a background check. About 80% of the firearms are complete when the consumer receives it, leaving them to assemble the remaining 20%. The packages are also known for being cheap to assemble, with an AR-15 only costing buyers about \$345.

The Biden administration is expected to roll out a long-awaited rule on ghost guns - unregulated and untraceable firearms built from kits - as soon as Monday, according to the Associated Press.

Under US [federal](#) law, firearms are required to be labeled with serial numbers by every manufacturer, importer, or "anyone making a firearm."

The [announcement](#) for the rule on ghost guns has not yet been made available, but the rule is expected to change the current definition of a firearm under federal law to include unfinished parts like the frame of a handgun or the receiver, as well as require firearm dealers to run background checks before selling the D.I.Y. kits.

Biden's "ghost gun rule" comes at a crucial time, as an increase in shootings is expected this summer after an ominous spring, which saw a string of shootings in America occur in a single weekend last [month](#) and left a total of eight people dead and at least 60 injured. That weekend of bloodshed made up some of the total 129 mass shootings that have taken place across the US [in 2022](#) to date.

On February 28, a little over a month before a mass shooting in downtown Sacramento that killed six people, David [Mora, 39](#), killed his three daughters, a chaperone and himself during a supervised visitation at a church. Mora used an unregistered ghost gun in the shooting despite his restraining order, which prohibited him from possessing one.

While ghost guns have existed for decades, the market saw its growth begin to climb starting in 2009. The issues surrounding ghost guns increasing stole nationwide headlines after a single shooter went on a killing spree in 2013 at the Santa Monica College campus and its surrounding area. Six people, including the gunman were killed during the shooting.

The Santa Monica [shooter](#) was deemed ineligible in 2011 by the California Department of Justice to purchase a firearm, so he built his own at home. Sales of ghost gun parts are unregulated, except for the lower receiver. Websites that sell ghost gun kits and parts market them as "80-percent receivers" which do not require a background check, as they are only 80% complete, but that doesn't necessarily mean putting them together is difficult.

"Within an hour or two, you should be breaking it in at the range," [boasts](#) one online merchant. Another site said that the jigs which are included in the ghost gun kits could make it easy enough for anyone to assemble a gun in under 15 minutes.

Between 2016 and 2020, the Justice Department reported that nearly 24,000 ghost guns were found by law enforcement at crime scenes, and the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives reported that law enforcement recovered about 10,000 ghost guns in 2019. In [Philadelphia](#), Pennsylvania, 250 ghost guns were recovered by authorities in 2020, compared to 99 that were found the year prior. And in Baltimore, Maryland, 126 ghost guns were found compared to just 29 from the year before. Meanwhile in California, a state that has been ramping up its gun restrictions, authorities said that in 2019, nearly a third of the firearms they recovered were homemade, unserialized, and untraceable.

In 2022 alone, 131 ghost guns were recovered in New York City by the NYPD, marking a 351% increase in the city from the 29 ghost guns that were recovered by police in 2021. Former Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr. said in 2021 that [ghost guns](#) are "a significant public safety threat in a way that they weren't even two years ago."

In October 2021, New York Governor Kathy Hochul signed legislation in order to crack down on the untraceable firearms, which would make it illegal to possess an unfinished gun frame or receiver by anyone other than a licensed gunsmith or dealer.

For nearly a year, Biden's rule on ghost guns has been making its way through the federal regulation process, with gun safety groups and Democrats in Congress urging the Justice Department for months to finally wrap it up.

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Video: Home Depot Fire Creates Heat Signature Large Enough to See from Space
By - Mary Manley

San Jose firefighters were able to contain a five-alarm fire that broke out at a Home Depot store on Saturday. The fire prompted shelter-in-place orders for residents of the area, as well as an evacuation of an animal hospital near the store. No injuries to either firefighters nor citizens were reported.

The fire at the San Jose Home Depot raged at a temperature so hot that it was even visible from space, officials have revealed.

The fire plume also registered on local weather radar, but was confirmed to be “under control” at around 11:45 p.m. local time by the San Jose Fire Department (SJFD), close to seven hours after authorities first got to the scene. The SJFD reported that all Home Depot employees were accounted for and no injuries to either firefighters nor employees were reported.

Those who live in the surrounding area were ordered to shelter in place due to the intense drift smoke, but that order was lifted around 1 p.m. on Sunday. A local pet hospital was also evacuated.

ABC7 News reporter Dustin Dorsey tweeted that the smoke was visible about four miles away in Santa Clara County.

The SJFD also wrote on [Twitter](#) that fire investigators were on the scene and would “continue their investigation throughout the night.”

Twitter user Philip Hurst told [CNN](#) that he had just finished putting his shopping bags in his car when he heard an uproar and saw people running out of the store. He walked back to the entrance of the store and managed to capture a video of flames dropping down from the ceiling of the store. Hurst says SJFD arrived just minutes after he captured the video.

As for the future of the Home Depot location in San Jose, officials say it's lost.

"The Home Depot is pretty much a total loss, the roof is pretty much collapsed from the entire structure, so it's going to take some time to get in there if we even can- if it's going to be safe for our people to get in there," said SJFD battalion chief Brad Cloutier.

An investigation into the cause of the incident by the SJFD is currently ongoing.

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Art Found in Dumpster by Mechanic Set to Sell for Millions
By - Mary Manley

Jared Whipple, a car mechanic from Waterbury, Connecticut, discovered an enormous collection of artworks by artist Francis Hines in a dumpster in 2017. Whipple's friend, who is a contractor, spotted the canvases, which had car parts painted on them. Since the space and its contents were deemed “abandoned,” the two men dug into its contents.

[Whipple](#), 40, said he “immediately started researching” his new treasure trove and learned that the works were created by artist Francis Hines. Hines, born in Washington, DC, in 1920, was famous for his large-scale “wrappings.” Hines' best known of these public art installations was

the Washington Square Arch, which he wrapped in 1980 using white gauze-like material to weave geometric patterns over the large building.

Hines died in 2016 at the age of 96. A year later, his work was discovered by George Martin, 47, whose company was hired to clean out a barn and all its contents deemed "abandoned" in Watertown, Connecticut. The barn actually belonged to Hines, and it was where he had stored many of his artworks. To comply with a strict deadline, his estate deemed the barn and its surrounding area "abandoned," and that's when it was rescued by Martin and Whipple. Whipple says he was intrigued by what his friend had found, as he is a "collector of vintage items, especially anything Harley Davidson or automobile related." Once he and his friend arrived at the site, he said the experience was "upsetting."

"Upon arrival at the barn we were not able to wrap our heads around what we saw. It was gut-wrenching and very upsetting for us to get to see what looked like a lifetime of somebody's artwork being thrown into dumpsters and heading for the landfill," [recounted](#) Whipple. "It did not sit right with either of us and within minutes we decided that part of the collection should live on."

Whipple says that once they began to unwrap the work from plastic, they were stunned by not only the great condition the works were in, but by the quality of the works, too. Whipple, who is a mechanic, appreciated the biomechanical theme of Hines' paintings, an artist who was deeply engaged with the idea of peoples' dependence on technology.

Now after four years of caring for Hines' work, including the works proper storage and research -as well as a show of the work in his town of Waterbury last year- Whipple says he is working with curator and art historian Peter Hastings Falk. Falk says the Hines paintings, which are accented with the same fabric he used in his large-scale works, are estimated to be worth \$22,000 each, while his drawings are estimated to be \$4,500.

Whipple and Martin discovered hundreds of abandoned pieces, making the collection potentially worth millions.

With permission from Hines' family who told him to keep the work, Whipple had recently decided to sell some of the collection. He is working alongside the New York City gallery Hollis Taggart, and will display Hines' work in their Southport location from May 5 to June 11. Other pieces will also be shown at the gallery's Chelsea location in New York City. Between 35 and 40 pieces of the discovered collection will go to market, but Whipple said he doesn't plan on selling all of the artworks.

"I pulled it out of this dumpster and I fell in love with it," Whipple said. "I made a connection with it. My purpose is to get Hines into the history books."

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Welcome to the Himalayas: Biden's Latest Bizarre Tangent Leaves Observers Baffled

The US president's most recent digression confounded social media users and politicians alike, sparking another round of speculation about the commander-in-chief's mental acuity and renewed claims that he might be unfit for office.

US President Joe Biden deviated from scripted remarks commemorating the confirmation of future Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson Thursday and stumbled through a puzzling anecdote in which he falsely claimed for [the eleventh time](#) to have traveled “17,000 miles” with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

“America is a nation that can be defined in a single word: I was in the foothills of the Himalayas with Xi Jinping, traveling with him, that's when I traveled 17,000 miles when I was vice president,” Biden told reporters at the White House. “I don't know that for a fact,” he concluded. A video of the remarks has racked up millions of views on Twitter in just hours.

One post said the episode showed “[Biden's cognitive decline on display](#).” It's just the latest in a series of incidents which numerous Republicans and independents say are lending further credence to suggestions that the president's failing mental faculties may represent a serious threat to the US.

After Biden called for regime change in Russia in a widely-condemned ad lib last month, popular Fox News host Tucker Carlson labeled the president a “[national security risk](#),” insisting that “as Joe Biden himself put it: for God's sake, this man cannot remain in power.”

Biden has long been known for his habit of embellishment, distortion, and other “gaffes,” and many argue it's gotten worse with age.

In 2019, even the Washington Post acknowledged the obvious in an article headlined “Echoes of Biden's 1987 plagiarism scandal continue to reverberate.” In 2020, Biden's campaign aides were forced to [walk back his claim](#) that he'd been “arrested” while visiting Nelson Mandela and that the legendary South African dignitary subsequently “threw his arms around” Biden in gratitude. Among other falsehoods, he claimed to have once driven an 18-wheeler professionally and to have “had a house burn down with my wife in it.”

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Nicaragua Says Russia's HRC Suspension 'Violation of Int'l Law' as LatAm Powers Snub US-Led Vote

By - Wyatt Reed

The Sandinista government's condemnation of the Western campaign to remove Russia from the UN body highlights a large bloc of Latin American governments asserting their independence from Uncle Sam.

The Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry described efforts to suspend Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council as a “violation of international law” and an act of aggression against the people of Russia.

Managua voted against the US-backed resolution at the UN Wednesday, explaining in a press release issued Thursday that “any action aimed at excluding or suspending the participation of countries” is “incompatible with the Charter of the United Nations.”

Meanwhile, regional powerhouses like Brazil and Mexico—whose combined GDP represents at least a whopping 60% of Latin America's total—appeared to defy reported US pressure on UN member states to vote against Russia and abstained from voting on the matter.

In his address before the UN, Mexico's UN ambassador Juan Ramón de la Fuente declared that "to suspend" Russia "is not the solution" after Brazil's Ronaldo Costa Filho warned, "We must at all cost avoid repeating the mistakes of the old commission on human rights—particularly concerning politicization, double standards, and selectivity," which Filho called "the main flaw" of the UN's previous human rights body, the UN Commission on Human Rights.

Nicaragua has stood firmly with the Russian Federation as it carries out its ongoing special military operation in Ukraine.

Russian-Nicaraguan cooperation has been viewed with suspicion and resentment by Washington since the Soviet Union began helping Sandinista revolutionaries—who'd deposed a brutal American-backed dictator in 1979—to resist the resulting illegal US proxy war on Nicaragua which the CIA [funded with cocaine profits](#) in the 1980s.

Now, with Russia back in the focus of US headlines, familiar Cold War-era attitudes aren't far behind. In March, a senior program associate at influential pro-US thinktank Freedom House [insisted in The Hill](#) that Russia's so-called "interference in Nicaragua" represents "a hemispheric threat."

But despite veiled threats from the US intelligentsia, Nicaragua hasn't budged.

In an apparent allusion to the current situation, Vice President Rosario Murillo [stated in a speech Wednesday](#) that "the world, and above all, the [international] organisms... who make up that human community, cannot afford to privilege some and condemn others." Referencing the corporate media's participation in the failed 2018 coup d'état in Nicaragua, Murillo acknowledged "we are in a world where, unfortunately, tendentious communication and communication fabrications are used, manipulated, abused." But "no matter how much nonsense, falsehoods, lies" Western decision-makers try "to impose, the truth always comes out," she concluded.

And Nicaragua isn't alone in resisting Washington's efforts to draw the Global South into a new proxy war with Russia. Other countries in the region, like Bolivia and Cuba, voted down the measure as well. Cuba's UN Ambassador, Pedro Luis Pedrosó Cuesta, [told the international body Wednesday](#) that the removal of Russia from the Human Rights Council "will not favor finding peace, lasting and negotiated resolution to the conflict in Ukraine." He cited a "serious risk" that the move would create a precedent that "could be used by specific countries that favor a double standard, selectivity, and polarization of human rights issues."

"Human rights shouldn't be instrumentalized to attack sovereign nations," agreed Venezuelan Permanent Representative to the United Nations Samuel Moncada. Venezuela almost certainly would have voted against the resolution but its voting privileges were suspended in January after US sanctions reportedly made it impossible for the country to pay its dues.

The country's Middle Eastern allies, who've managed to retain their voting rights despite unilateral US sanctions, echoed Venezuela's concerns.

"We are against the exploitation of UN human rights machinery for political ends," noted Iran's UN Representative Majid Takht-Ravanchi.

Syria's permanent UN representative, Bassam al-Sabbagh, took a similar line, declaring that the "coordinated Western move to denounce the Russian Federation has no relation to human rights in Ukraine or any other country—rather, it is an effort by Western countries to impose their hegemony and control over the world through besieging Russia for its independent foreign policy."

“When the United States and its allies destroyed the Syrian city of Raqqa and killed thousands of innocent people there, we did not see such international media and political mobilization to expose the perpetrators of human rights violations.”

The weightiest condemnation of the “hasty move” to strip Russia’s HRC membership over unconfirmed allegations of war crimes [came from China](#), which argued that the US-led campaign was “adding fuel to the fire.”

“Dealing with the membership of the Human Rights Council in such a way will set [a] new dangerous precedent, further intensify confrontation in the field of human rights... and produce serious consequences,” said Chinese Permanent UN Representative Zhang Jun.

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Over a Dozen Reportedly Arrested as Protesters Blockade Coal Plant Owned by Sen. Joe Manchin

Anger over the wealthy West Virginia Senator’s personal profits from the coal industry led protesters to block access to his power plant.

Hundreds braved the snow and hail to rally at the “Coal Baron Blockade” in Grant Town, West Virginia outside a coal power plant owned by Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV) Saturday to protest the Senator’s climate policies. Organizers with the Poor Peoples’ Campaign also cited Manchin’s refusal to support the Build Back Better Act as a motive for the blockade.

“Joe Manchin has done nothing but block important legislation. Now, we’re blockading his family business,” they wrote Saturday.

Climate scientist Peter Kalmus [reported that 16 activists were arrested](#) outside the power plant Wednesday as numerous demonstrators locked themselves together in an effort to impede operations at the facility.

Liberal-leaning media outlets have come down hard on Manchin in recent weeks for holding up the Democratic policy agenda and he’s come to be seen as the public face of the party’s impotence. Sen. Manchin has long been a frequent target of protest and criticism from environmental advocates and local residents who view the fact that the senator personally profits off coal sales with alarm. A local resident and ‘primary organizer’ of the protest explained the activists’ rationale to [progressive outlet Truthout](#):

“Here [Manchin] is, sitting on the chairmanship of the U.S. Senate Energy Committee — probably, aside from the president of the United States, the most powerful position to be in if you’re dealing with fossil fuels — and he’s treating that position like an ATM. He’s getting very wealthy from his own influence.”

On their Twitter page, “Coal Baron Blockade” organizers quoted retired West Virginia coal miner Michael Whitten: “If there is one thing we have to deal with, it’s climate change. And it will take years but Manchin is stopping us. Where does he think his grandchildren will live?”

Environmental activists in the US and Europe have pushed back at the suggestion by energy industry lobbyists that rising fuel prices brought on by Western sanctions on Russia should lead to an easing of environmental regulations. They point instead to record profits among Big Oil as

the real reason for the surge in prices that the Biden administration [has unsuccessfully attempted](#) to label the “Putin price hike.” Across the Atlantic, “Just Stop Oil” protesters using similar tactics to blockade ten oil terminals [were accused](#) of “playing into Putin’s hands to sow discord in the UK” by a Conservative MP.

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Iran Blacklists 24 US Officials Over Terrorism Charges & ‘Gross Violations of Human Rights’
By - Wyatt Reed

Tehran’s sanctions on US officials involved in both the Trump’s so-called “maximum pressure” campaign and the assassination of Gen. Soleimani signals the chances of nuclear deal restoration are looking more remote.

Iran moved Saturday to sanction another 24 American officials were “designated for their role in imposing and intensifying the imposition of the US’ unilateral coercive measures against the Iranian government and the people,” according to Iranian public broadcaster Press TV. Nearly 100 US citizens have been sanctioned by the Islamic Republic since the US government withdrew from the Iranian nuclear deal, imposed a brutal sanctions regime on Tehran, and assassinated Iranian General Qassem Soleimani.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry says the new group, which includes former US Army Chief of Staff George W. Casey Jr, former US Central Command chief Joseph Votel, and former Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani, was blacklisted from the Islamic Republic for “involvement in terrorist acts, glorification and supporting terrorism and gross violations of human rights.”

The terrorist activities referenced are almost certainly an allusion to high-ranking former US officials’ alleged involvement in the illegal drone-based assassination of Soleimani, who was widely credited with the destruction of Daesh*.

Other Americans facing Iranian sanctions for alleged gross violations of human rights were involved in crafting the so-called “maximum pressure” sanctions campaign that’s devastated the Iranian economy and which former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo admitted in 2019 was designed to encourage the Iranian people to “change the government.” The New York Times [wrote at the time](#) that the admission “appeared to be an endorsement of regime change.”

Pompeo himself was previously subjected to Iranian sanctions in January of 2021 which also included a ban on travel to the country and a freeze of any potential assets in Iran. While few of the figures who’ve been placed on the country’s blacklist are likely to keep serious investments there, if [a recent AP report](#) is to be believed, lingering Iranian outrage over the extra-judicial murder of General Soleimani could still be having an impact; the US State Department insists it’s forking out over \$2 million a month to protect Pompeo and former US Special Envoy to Iran Brian Hook from what [it claims](#) are “serious and credible” threats of retaliation from Iran. Western media is largely portraying the move by Iran as “symbolic,” but the timing is important. Negotiations aimed at restoring the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) deal—which the US effectively shredded with its unilateral Trump-era departure—have stalled in recent weeks

as US President Joe Biden's refusal to remove sanctions on the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) imperils the possibility of a d'etante. But that's long been a red line for Iranians, with former Foreign Minister Sayyid Kamal Kharrazi explaining at the Doha Forum in late March, "a national army cannot be listed as a terrorist group."

It seems that when EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell claimed the day before that a restoration of the JCPOA [was "closer than ever,"](#) his US counterparts didn't quite get the memo. On Wednesday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken once again [accused the IRGC](#) of being a "terrorist organization" and said he wasn't "overly optimistic" that a restoration of the deal was possible.

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Twitter Shares Fall After Musk Says He Will Not Join Board

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Twitter shares fell on Monday after the company revealed that its largest shareholder Elon Musk has dropped his plans to join the board of directors. On Monday morning the shares of Twitter were down 2.66% at \$45, CNBC reported, citing market data.

On Sunday, Twitter CEO Parag Agrawal said that the SpaceX and Tesla chief decided against joining the Twitter board. He noted that the board of directors had many discussions about Musk joining and believed that it "was the best path forward," but at the same time was "clear about the risks."

On April 4, the US Securities and Exchange Commission said that Musk had acquired a 9.2% stake in Twitter. On the same day, the microblogging company's shares jumped by 28%.

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Canada Targets Developer of Iskander Missile Systems, MIPT Institute With Sanctions
WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Canada's new sanctions list includes the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology (MIPT), Machine Building Design Bureau in Kolomna, Vympel Shipyard, and Komsomolsk-on-Amur Aircraft Plant, Global Affairs Canada said on Monday. Machine Building Design Bureau, located in the city of Kolomna in the Moscow region, is the developer of Iskander mobile short range ballistic missile systems, and Shipyard Vympel develops Project corvettes.

Earlier in the day, the country introduced sanctions against 33 entities in the Russian defense sector in response to the ongoing military operation in Ukraine.

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Canada Imposes Restrictions on 33 Entities in Russian Defense Sector

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - Canada has introduced sanctions against 33 entities in the Russian defense sector in response to the ongoing military operation in Ukraine, Global Affairs Canada said on Monday.

"These new measures impose restrictions on 33 entities in the Russian defence sector," the statement said.

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US Expands Export Restrictions for Russia, Belarus - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States expanded export controls on Russia's and Belarus' access to everything on the US commerce control list to now cover categories such as chemicals, materials processing components, and nuclear-related items, the Commerce Department said in a statement.

"In response to the Russian Federation's (Russia) ongoing aggression in Ukraine following its further invasion of the country, as substantially enabled by Belarus, this rule expands license requirements for Russia and Belarus under the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) to all items on the Commerce Control List (CCL)," the Commerce Department said in a press release on Friday.

The new rule also removes license exception eligibility for aircraft registered in, owned or controlled by, or under charter or lease by Belarus or a national of Belarus, the release said. As a result of the latest change, the restrictions will now cover all ten commerce control list categories (numbers 0-9). The Commerce Department is now tightening export controls across categories 0-2, which include items related to chemicals, microorganisms, minerals, fertilizer, materials processing parts like valves, along with dual purpose nuclear-related materials and equipment.

Previously, the US export restrictions targeting Russia were in categories 3-9, which covered items related to electronics, computers, telecommunications, lasers, marine materials, and aerospace and propulsion materials.

The United States and its European partners have imposed a series of sanctions and export controls on Russia over its opposition to Russia's 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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EU Bans Provision of Crypto Wallets to Russian Accounts With Over 10,000 Euros

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The European Union announced that it has imposed restrictions on the provision of cryptocurrency wallets to Russian accounts with more than 10,000 euros in total value, according to the Official Journal of the European Union.

"It shall be prohibited to provide crypto-asset wallet, account or custody services to Russian nationals or natural persons residing in Russia, or legal persons, entities or bodies established in Russia, if the total value of crypto-assets of the natural or legal person, entity or body per wallet, account or custody provider exceeds EUR 10 000," the journal said on Friday.

In addition, the European Union is prohibiting accepting deposits from Russian individuals or entities in excess of 100,000 euros, the journal added.

On Friday, the European Union announced a fifth sanctions package against Russia in response to the ongoing special military operation in Ukraine. The sanctions targeted 217 individuals and 18 organizations to bolster pressure on the Kremlin and limit Russia's resources, according to the European Union.

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Biden Signs Into Law Bills Banning Russian Oil, Suspending Trade Ties - White House

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed two bills that will ban US imports of Russian oil and suspend normal trade relations with Russia and Belarus, the White House said.

"On Friday, April 8, 2022, the President signed into law: HR 6968, the 'Ending Importation of Russian Oil Act,' which statutorily prohibits the importation of energy products from the Russian Federation; and HR 7108, the 'Suspending Normal Trade Relations with Russia and Belarus Act,' which suspends normal trade relations with the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus and seeks to further leverage trade and human rights sanctions," the White House said in a press release on Friday.

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ACLU Curbs US Bill to Seize Assets of Sanctioned Russians, Give Funds to Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) played a role in curbing legislation working its way through Congress that would have allowed the United States to liquidate the assets of sanctioned Russians and transfer their money to Ukraine, the Washington Post reported

ACLU officials expressed concerns that the bill could violate constitutional due-process protections due to the lack of a mechanism to challenge the actions in a court of law, the report said on Friday, citing two individuals familiar with the matter.

The lawmakers were warned that the measure would likely be struck down by US courts, granting Russia a possible propaganda victory, the sources said.

The bipartisan bill would have enabled the US government to take assets belonging to sanctioned Russian individuals and sell them for cash to be given to Ukraine for military and humanitarian aid, potentially amounting to billions of dollars.

Lawmakers voted to change the legislation into a "Sense of Congress" resolution that would not empower any new authorities, but rather, give the Biden administration 60 days to determine mechanisms through which the US government could legally confiscate the assets, the report added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* The Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday that the Ukrainian forces fired the Tochka-U missile at the Kramatorsk train station from Dobropilya settlement located 45 kilometers (28 miles) southwest from the city.

* Kiev will not be able to evade responsibility for the Tochka-U tactical missile attack on Kramatorsk, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* The city of Kramatorsk in Kiev-controlled Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) territory was attacked by the same Ukrainian military brigade that fired missiles at the center of Donetsk in mid-March, DPR People's Militia spokesman Eduard Basurin said.

* The Ukrainian military organized a provocation at a railway station the city of Kramatorsk in the Donetsk region, which killed about 30 people, Basurin said.

* The United Kingdom will send Ukraine \$130 million worth of military equipment to Ukraine, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said.

SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The European Union published on Friday in the Official Journal The 5th package of sanctions against Russia in connection with the situation in Ukraine: Sberbank CEO Herman Gref, as well as businessmen Oleg Deripaska, Boris and Igor Rotenbergs, faced personal sanctions, according to the document.

* The United States has additional options for imposing sanctions on Russia and will continue to do so until Moscow de-escalates the conflict in Ukraine, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

* Japan will ban imports of the machinery equipment, some types of wood and vodka from Russia, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said.

ELECTION IN FRANCE

* The United States is watching the French presidential election, but does not have any predictions, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Friday.

* The last polls ahead of the first round of the presidential election in France predict the victory of the incumbent, Emmanuel Macron, with a minimal gap from his main rival, right-wing candidate Marine Le Pen.

ENERGY MARKETS

* The EU ban on coal imports from Russia will not affect existing contracts to allow countries to find alternative solutions for coal supplies until August, a French Foreign Ministry spokesperson said at a briefing on Friday.

* The United States is not aware of any plans to allow some foreign oil imports from Venezuela to replace Russian energy shipments, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said.

* German Economy Minister Robert Habeck said on Friday that gas storage facilities are 26% full, they fill up at 0.3-0.5% per day and it will take over 150 days to fully fill them.

DIPLOMAT EXPULSIONS

* Russia is expelling 45 employees of the Polish diplomatic mission in response to the actions by Warsaw and they must leave the country by the April 13, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

* Russia is expelling two Bulgarian diplomats from the country in a tit-for-tat response, the Foreign Ministry said.

* Finland has decided to expel two employees of the Russian embassy, the presidential administration said.

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Two Acquitted, 2 More Freed in Michigan Governor Kidnap Plot Trial - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - A federal jury has acquitted two men charged with plotting to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer in 2020 and the judge freed two more defendants and declared a mistrial, CNN media reported on Friday.

Daniel Harris and Brandon Caserta were found not guilty of kidnapping conspiracy. The jury also found Harris not guilty on other charges, the report said.

The same jury failed to agree on a verdict for the other two defendants Adam Fox and Barry Croft and then US District Judge Robert Jonker declared a mistrial for them and set them free, the report added.

The four defendants actively plotted in kidnapping in detail and reconnoitered the governor's house, the court was told. All four pleaded not guilty and could have faced life imprisonment if convicted, according to the report.

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Wall Street's Big Tech Plunges Most in Week Since January on US Interest Rate Hike Fears

YORK, April 8 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's Big Tech sector suffered its biggest weekly loss since January as investors dumped pricey stocks on fears that US interest rates might go up their most in 40 years to offset runaway inflation.

The three key US stock indexes - the S&P 500, the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the Nasdaq Composite - closed down 1.1% on the average on Friday. For the week, they fell by an average of 1.9%.

Nasdaq Composite, which houses the biggest technology names of the world, including Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, fell 1.3% on the day and 3.9% on the week. It was its biggest weekly loss since the week to January 14, when it fell 7.6%.

Stocks tumbled this week as policy-makers at the Federal Reserve signaled readiness to embark on the sharpest interest rate hikes since the 1980s to blunt inflation also ramping-up at the fastest rate in four decades.

Often, when crisis strikes on Wall Street, Nasdaq is the first target of selloffs by investors who typically run toward value stocks as bond yields rise.

Likewise, this time around, "Wall Street is looking at surging Treasury yields and swapping out tech stocks for more defensive plays such as energy, financials, healthcare and materials", Ed Moya, analyst at the online trading platform OANDA, said.

In line with that, the Dow Jones Industrial Average, which lists travel, aviation and other so-called value stocks compared to the Nasdaq, finished up 0.4% on Friday 34,721. For the week though, the Dow was down 0.3%, extending last week's dip of 0.1%.

The S&P 500 - which groups the top 500 US stocks - fell 0.2% on the day to 4,491. For the week, it lost 1.2%.

After slashing rates to nearly zero at the height of the COVID-19 outbreak, the US central bank'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 this year.

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

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Pentagon Says Ukraine Could Use US-Provided Intelligence to Counterattack Russian Forces

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The Ukrainian forces could use intelligence information provided by the United States to conduct counterattacks against Russia, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"When we say we want to help the Ukrainians defend themselves, we're talking about the aggregate effort here... We're trying to give them useful information and intelligence that allows them to defend themselves, to push back, to resist, to fight against – you can call it whatever you want – this Russian invasion, and if they were to use some of that information to conduct a counterattack, then so be it," Kirby said during a press briefing.

However, US intelligence collection has been constrained due to the ongoing special operation in Ukraine, US media reported citing Senate sources.

The United States has multiple channels open and is sharing information with the Ukrainian government, but the intelligence is specific and being conveyed more slowly, the report said. The shared intelligence is also being downgraded to protect sensitive sources and methods due to logistical issues with setting up secure lines with Ukrainian authorities, the report added.

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US Approves \$73Mln Deal to Maintain Argentina's T-6 Aircraft - Defense Security Agency

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has approved a \$73 million deal to provide maintenance equipment for the upkeep of Argentina's force of T-6 pilot training aircraft, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) announced in a press release on Friday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the government of Argentina of T-6 aircraft sustainment and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$73 million," the release said.

The DSCA delivered the required certification notifying Congress of the possible sale earlier on Friday, the release said.

The equipment will include "airframe and avionics improvements for reliability and integration of training munitions and external fuel tanks; aircraft and engine support equipment, components, consumables, spare parts and repair/return; publications and technical documentation," the release added.

The proposed renewal of the T-6 force will provide Argentina with the capability to meet current and future threats by revitalizing the nation's trainer aircraft capabilities and will aid in the overall development of a professional pilot corps, according to the release.

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One Teenager Dead, 2 Wounded in Shooting Outside High School in New York - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - At least one teenager is dead and two more wounded as a result of a shooting incident outside a high school in the New York borough of the Bronx, NBC New York reported on Friday.

The shooting occurred outside South Bronx High School with first reports starting to come in at around 1:45 p.m. (17:45 GMT), the report said.

The only fatal victim of the shooting was a 16-year-old girl who was shot in the chest while the other two were shot in the thigh and buttocks and are expected to survive, the report said citing the New York Police Department.

A male suspect is currently at large and being wanted by police, the report added.

The suspect was seen wearing a gray sweatsuit and black vest, according to the report.

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Austin to Meet With India Counterpart, Hold Ministerial on Monday - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will meet with Indian counterpart Rajnath Singh on Monday morning before participating alongside him in a ministerial meeting with Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said.

"On Monday morning, the Secretary will welcome here to the Pentagon the Indian Minister of Defense Rajnath Singh... The Secretary and Minister Singh will join Secretary of State Blinken and Indian Minister of External Affairs Jaishankar for the fourth US-India 2+2 ministerial dialogue," Kirby said during a press briefing on Friday.

Austin and Singh will participate in an enhanced cordon ceremony on Monday morning, Kirby said.

The US-India ministerial dialogue will include discussions on an array of issues including defense, science, public health, and climate change, Kirby added.

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US Defense Chief 'Comfortable' With Shipbuilding Request in Defense Budget Plan - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is satisfied with the shipbuilding request in the 2023 defense budget proposal, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"The Secretary is very comfortable with the shipbuilding request that we are making for 2023, which includes nine new battle force ships," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Austin is much more concerned about capability and the proper mix of modern capabilities in the US naval force than he is about numbers of ships, Kirby said.

The Defense Secretary understands that numbers of ships have a quality of their own but his concern is making sure the United States brings ship into the fleet that have the right mix of capabilities, Kirby also said.

The Defense Department supports the US Navy's efforts to develop new classes of ships, with more capability than the Littoral-class combat ship, that will be suitable for the kinds of fights the United States believes it could face in the future, Kirby added.

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Oil Rebounds after 3-Day Loss, But Still Logs 2nd Weekly Loss

NEW YORK, April 8 (Sputnik) - Crude prices closed up on Friday for the first time in four days but still registered losses for a second week in a row after the United States and other oil consuming countries announced a massive release of oil from their emergency reserves to mitigate a supply crunch.

London-traded Brent, the global crude benchmark, settled up \$2.20, or 2.2%, at \$102.78 per barrel, after losing a cumulative 7% in three previous days of trading. For the week, Brent lost 1.5%, after last week's slide of 13.5%, which marked its worst weekly performance since April 2020 when oil demand plummeted in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic.

New York-traded US crude benchmark West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, settled up \$2.23, or 2.3%, at \$98.26. WTI lost 1% for the week, adding to the previous week's 13% fall, which also marked its worst weekly performance since the COVID-19 outbreak.

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 United States and EU sanctions imposed on Russia for its 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.

Crude prices were down earlier this week as investors fretted over oil demand after the worst coronavirus outbreak in Shanghai in two years that forced a lockdown in China's second largest city. China is the world's biggest oil consumer after the United States.

Friday's rebound in oil came as the announcement of the reserves release and the Shanghai lockdown appeared to have run their course, Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.

"The oil market is still tight, but if China's lockdowns have no end in sight, crude prices could still weaken by another 3-5%," Moya said.

Notwithstanding the drop of the past two weeks, Brent is still up 32% on the year while WTI shows an annual gain of 30%.

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North Carolina Proud Boys Leader Pleads Guilty to Role in January 6 Conspiracy

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – Charles Donohoe, a leader of North Carolina Proud Boys chapter who admitted to planning and taking part in the January 6 riot, pled guilty on Friday to felony charges in the attempt by Trump supporters to protest the certification of electoral votes by the US Congress, the Department of Justice said.

"On Jan. 6, 2021, Donohoe was part of a group of 100 or more Proud Boys who marched away from a rally near the Washington Monument towards the Capitol. Shortly after 12 p.m., the group was assembled two blocks west of the Capitol, and Donohoe understood that other Proud Boys leaders were searching for an opportunity to storm the Capitol," prosecutors said. "At approximately 1 p.m., the group arrived at the Capitol and began breaching the barriers surrounding the Capitol grounds. While in the West Plaza of the Capitol, Donohoe threw two water bottles at a line of law enforcement officers who were attempting to prevent the mob's advance in the West Plaza at the Capitol building."

Prosecutors said that as the events unfolded, Donohoe, other Proud Boys and a larger crowd pushed toward the Capitol, overran law enforcement officers on the stairs, and entered the Capitol building after Dominic Pezzola, Donohoe's co-defendant, smashed a window. The Proud Boys describes itself as a "pro-Western fraternal organization for men who refuse to apologize for creating the modern world, aka Western Chauvinists," prosecutors noted.

Donohoe, 34, of Kernersville joined the group in 2018 and served as president of the North Carolina chapter.

As of January 6, 2021, Donohoe was a fourth-degree member of the Proud Boys, the highest rank within the organization, prosecutors explain. Former Proud Boys national chairman Enrique Tarrío created a different chapter called the "Ministry of Self Defense" which concentrated on the planning and execution of national rallies including the January 6, 2021 riot. Donohoe led a group in this new chapter with 65 members.

Donohoe has been detained since his March 11, 2021 arrest. He pled guilty to conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding and assaulting, resisting, or impeding officers. As part of a plea agreement, Donohoe has agreed to cooperate with the government's ongoing investigation. He, along with five other people charged, including Tarrío and Pezzola, has been indicted in the District of Columbia on conspiracy and other charges; his colleagues have pled not guilty. Donohoe can get up to 20 years in prison if found guilty of the conspiracy charge and as much as eight years on the charge of assaulting, resisting, or impeding officers. Both charges also carry potential financial penalties. Currently, a sentencing date has not been set.

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Will Smith Banned From Academy Events, Programs for 10 Years After Oscars Slap

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – The Hollywood film academy said on Friday it is banning Will Smith from attending any Academy events or programs for 10 years after the actor slapped comedian Chris Rock during the 94th Oscars ceremony over a joke about his wife.

"Today, the Board of Governors convened a meeting to discuss how best to respond to Will Smith's actions at the Oscars, in addition to accepting his resignation. The Board has decided, for a period of 10 years from April 8, 2022, Mr. Smith shall not be permitted to attend any Academy events or programs, in person or virtually, including but not limited to the Academy Awards," the statement read.

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Former Goldman Sachs Banker Convicted in Mega Malaysian Fraud 1MDB - US Justice Dept.

NEW YORK, April 8 (Sputnik) - Former Goldman Sachs managing director Roger Ng has been found guilty by a US jury of defrauding Malaysia's 1MDB state fund in a multibillion dollar scam involving an international probe that stained the Wall Street bank's reputation and convicted the Asian country's ex-premier for corruption, the Justice Department said on Friday.

"Today's verdict is a resounding victory for justice and for the people of Malaysia who are the victims of this massive scheme carried out in a frenzy of greed by the defendant and his co-conspirators to get rich by stealing millions of dollars from the 1MDB fund intended to benefit that country's economy," Eastern New York District Attorney Breon Peace said in a statement. The statement did not say when Ng will be sentenced.

According to the facts of the case, the 49-year-old Malaysian-born Ng and his co-conspirators - including his former supervisor at Goldman Sachs, Tim Leissner, and a Malaysian financier called Jho Low - laundered billions of dollars misappropriated and fraudulently diverted from 1MDB.

The proceeds included funds 1MDB raised in 2012 and 2013 through three bond transactions executed with Goldman Sachs. The Wall Street bank itself agreed in October 2020 that Goldman Sachs has agreed to pay nearly \$3 billion to end a probe of its role in the scandal. Ng and other conspirators paid more than \$1 billion in bribes to 12 government officials in Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates to obtain and retain lucrative business for Goldman Sachs, including the 2012 and 2013 bond deals, the Justice Department said.

They laundered the proceeds through the US financial system, then funded the Hollywood film "The Wolf of Wall Street" and bought, among other things, a \$51 million Jean-Michael Basquiat painting; a \$23 million diamond necklace; millions of dollars in Hermes handbags; and a luxury real estate property in Manhattan.

Leissner turned government witness for the case against Ng, agreeing to forfeit \$43 million and shares of stock valued at more than \$200 million. He is awaiting sentencing.

An Abu Dhabi court in February sentenced Khademi Quabaasy, the former managing director of state-owned International Petroleum Investment Co (IPIC), and Mohamed Badawy Al Hussein, former chairman of IPIC unit Aabar Investments, to 15 years in jail for money laundering over the 1MDB scandal.

A Kuala Lumpur court sentenced former Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak to 12 years in prison in July 2020, after finding him guilty of corruption charges related to 1MDB. Malaysian prosecutors said Najib masterminded the scam with Low and diverted \$756 million of 1MDB's funds to himself. Najib is appealing the conviction.

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White House Not Aware of Plans to Allow Oil Imports From Venezuela to Replace Russia's

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States is not aware of any plans to allow some foreign oil imports from Venezuela to replace Russian energy shipments, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"We are not aware of any such consideration," Psaki told a briefing when asked if the Biden administration is considering easing sanctions to allow some imports from Venezuela as a way to replace banned energy shipments from Russia.

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US Watching French Election, Does Not Have Any Predictions - White House

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States is watching the French presidential election, but does not have any predictions, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Friday.

The last polls ahead of the first round of the French presidential race predict the victory of the incumbent, Emmanuel Macron, with a minimal gap from his main rival, right-wing candidate Marine Le Pen.

"We are watching the French election, we don't have any predictions," Psaki told a briefing. The first round of the presidential election in France will be held on Sunday and the second round is scheduled for April 24.

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US Has More Russia Sanctions Levers, Will Use Them Till Moscow De-Escalates - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has additional options for imposing sanctions on Russia and will continue to do so until Moscow de-escalates the conflict in Ukraine, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Friday.

"Until and unless Moscow de-escalates in its actions in Ukraine, we will continue to escalate," Price said in an interview with CNN. "We certainly have additional levers to pull, and we'll continue to pull those levers as long as we need."

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US Expresses 'Grave Concern' at Reports of Atrocities in Western Tigray - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has expressed "grave concern" at the latest reports of atrocities in the western Tigray province of Ethiopia, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"The United States reiterates its grave concern over continuing reports of ethnically-motivated atrocities committed by Amhara authorities in western Tigray, Ethiopia, including those described in the recent joint report by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International," Price said in a statement. "In particular, we are deeply troubled by the report's finding that these acts amount to ethnic cleansing."

The US government continued to insist that there must be credible investigations into and accountability for atrocities committed by any party to the conflict as part of any lasting solution to the crisis and it urged the government of Ethiopia to cooperate with the UN Commission of Experts on Human Rights in Ethiopia, the statement said.

"We note with the utmost alarm that thousands of Ethiopians of Tigrayan ethnicity reportedly continue to be detained arbitrarily in life-threatening conditions in western Tigray. We urge the immediate release of any such remaining detainees and call on relevant authorities to grant international monitors access to all detention facilities," the statement added.

The US government strongly supported the declarations of a cessation of hostilities by the government of Ethiopia and the Tigray regional authority and welcomed the news that they had been followed by initial convoys of life-saving assistance, according to the statement.

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Biden Admin. Celebrates Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson Conformation to US Supreme Court

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration on Friday held an event at the White House celebrating the confirmation of Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson's nomination to the US Supreme Court, where she will serve as the first black woman on the bench.

"As I take on this new role, I strongly believe that this is a moment in which all Americans can take great pride. We have come a long way toward perfecting our union. In my family, it took just one generation to go from segregation to the Supreme Court of the United States," Jackson said in remarks during the event.

President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris also delivered speeches in which they praised Jackson and emphasized the significance of her confirmation to the US Supreme Court. Biden nominated Jackson in February after Justice Stephen Breyer announced his upcoming retirement, fulfilling his campaign promise to nominate the first black woman to the bench. Jackson, 51, spent eight years on the US District Court for the District of Columbia before she rose to the Washington, DC Court of Appeals last year.

The final confirmation vote in the Senate was 53 to 47, with all 50 Democrats voting for Jackson, along with Republicans Mitt Romney, Lisa Murkowski and Susan Collins.

Republican lawmakers criticized Jackson throughout the confirmation process for allegedly being lenient in sentencing those found guilty on child pornography, pedophilia and other sex abuse charges.

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US Deployment of Patriot Battery to Slovakia 'Temporary' - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The US deployment of a Patriot battery to Slovakia to provide Ukraine with an air defense capability is temporary but the United States is working on a long-term solution, a senior defense official said on Friday.

"This is a temporary deployment of a Patriot battery as we continue to work with Slovakia on what long term solutions make the most sense for Slovaks, and we're just not there yet," the defense official said during a conference call.

The defense official said the Patriot system deployment is not meant to be a permanent solution.

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US Believes Russia Used SS-21 Missile in Strike on Kramatorsk - Senior Defense Official

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States believes Russia used SS-21 missile in strike on the train station in Kramatorsk, Ukraine amid the ongoing conflict there, a senior US Defense Department official said on Friday.

"It's our full expectation that this was a Russian strike. We believe they used the short-range ballistic missile SS-21," the official said during a press briefing.

Earlier on Friday, Russian officials said that the Ukrainian forces fired a Tochka-U tactical missile at the Kramatorsk train station from the Dobropilya settlement located 45 kilometers (28 miles) away from their target.

Donetsk region Governor Pavel Kirilenko said that 39 people were killed in the missile attack during the evacuation of civilians from Kramatorsk, which is under control of Ukrainian troops. The Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) territorial defense headquarters said that in addition to the more than 30 people killed in the attack, 100 people were wounded. It also said the Tochka-U tactical missile system is not operational in the DPR, the Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) or in Russia, but is actively used by the Ukrainian troops.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the DPR and LNR requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. In response, the United States and its allies imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia that include airspace closures and restrictive measures targeting numerous Russian officials and entities, media and financial institutions.

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Moderna Recalls 765,000 COVID-19 Vaccine Doses Due to Contamination - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - More than 764,000 doses of Moderna's novel coronavirus vaccine have been recalled from a batch after one vial was found to be contaminated, the company said in a press release on Friday.

"Moderna and ROVI Pharma Industrial Services, SAU today announced a recall of one lot of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine," the release on Friday. "The lot is being recalled due to a foreign body being found in one vial in the lot manufactured at the Company's contract manufacturing site, ROVI, in Spain."

Moderna explained in the release that the impacted vial was punctured and was not administered.

The batch consisted of 764,900 doses that were distributed in Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Sweden from January 13-14, the release said.

There are currently no safety concerns reported in individuals who received the Moderna vaccine from this batch of vials, the release added.

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

WASHINGTON, April 8 (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 Kami 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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UN Says Missile Strike on Ukrainian City of Kramatorsk 'Completely Unacceptable'

UNITED NATIONS, April 8 (Sputnik) - The recent missile strike against civilians in the Ukrainian city of Kramatorsk is "completely unacceptable," United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"The strike on Kramatorsk railway station and other attacks against civilians are completely unacceptable. There is a gross violation of human right law ," Dujarric said.

Donetsk region Governor Pavel Kirilenko said that 39 people were killed in the missile attack during the evacuation of civilians from Kramatorsk, which is under control of Ukrainian troops. The Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) said that in addition to the more than 30 people killed, 100 people were wounded.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is urging all parties to protect civilians and enable access to humanitarian aid corridors, he added.

Earlier on Friday, Russian officials said that the Ukrainian forces fired a Tochka-U missile at the Kramatorsk train station from the Dobropilya settlement located 45 kilometers (28 miles) away from their target.

Russian Investigative Committee Chairman Alexander Bastrykin said that he has issued instructions to open a criminal probe into the Ukrainian military's provocation in Kramatorsk.

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US to Reposition Patriot Missile System Manned by American Soldiers to Slovakia -
Pentagon(Adds details, Biden's statement, background in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States is repositioning a Patriot missile system that will be manned by American service members to Slovakia, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Friday.

"I salute the generosity of the Slovak government in providing an S-300 air defense system - a critical defensive capability - to Ukraine," Austin said in a press release. "At my direction, and at the invitation of Slovakia, US European Command will reposition one Patriot missile system, manned by US service members, to Slovakia."

The battery and its crew will arrive in Slovakia in the coming days, Austin added.

Austin said there is no timeline for the length of the deployment of the Patriot system and its crew as the United States continues to consult with the Slovak government about more permanent air defense solutions.

US President Joe Biden in a separate statement also thanked the Slovak government for providing the S-300 air defense system to Ukraine, saying that it is a request Volodymyr Zelenskyy raised with him in their recent conversations.

Biden further said he has directed his administration to spare no effort to identify and provide to the Ukrainian military advanced weapons capabilities.

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.

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US Trade Rep. Says Will Continue Working With Congress on New Measures Against Russia

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - US trade representative (USTR) Katherine Tai said on Friday that she will continue working with Congress and with US trading partners on new measures against Russia in light of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine.

"Yesterday, the US Senate voted unanimously to cut off permanent normal trade relations with Russia and Belarus. Combined with a similar, overwhelming vote in the House of Representatives, this swift action shows our determination to isolate Russia from the global economy and multilateral institutions," Tai said in a statement. "USTR will continue work with Congress and our trading partners as we build a broad coalition in opposition to Russia's unjust actions."

On Thursday, the US House of Representatives followed the Senate initiative and passed legislation to ban US imports of Russian energy products, including crude oil. The House passed the Suspending Energy Imports from Russia Act in a 413-9 vote.

Also on Thursday, the US House and Senate passed legislation to suspend Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status with Russia and Belarus amid the ongoing special 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. In response, the United States and its allies imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia that include airspace closures and restrictive measures targeting numerous Russian officials and entities, media and financial institutions.

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UN Says Food Price Index Reaches New High in March Largely Due to Disruptions From Ukraine

UNITED NATIONS, April 8 (Sputnik) - The Food Price Index reached an all-time high in March largely due to export disruptions from Ukraine and Russia, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said in an update on Friday.

"The FAO Food Price Index (FFPI) averaged 159.3 points in March 2022, up 17.9 points (12.6 percent) from February, making a giant leap to a new highest level since its inception in 1990," the update said. "This month's increase reflected a surge in world prices of wheat and coarse grains, largely driven by conflict-related export disruptions from Ukraine and, to a lesser extent, the Russian Federation."

Concerns over crop conditions in the United States also contributed to a sharp rise in wheat prices in March, the update showed.

The sharpest rise was in the price of vegetable oils, which increased by more than 23% from February to March, also due largely to the situation in Ukraine. Russia combined with Ukraine accounts for almost 70% of sunflower-seed and safflower oil production, according to the Observatory of Economic Complexity, the update also showed.

The price of sugar is up more than 20% from March of 2021 due mainly to an increase in international crude oil prices, which raised expectations of greater sugarcane use for ethanol production in Brazil, according to the update.

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US to Reposition Patriot Missile System Manned by American Soldiers to Slovakia - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States is repositioning a Patriot missile system that will be manned by American service members to Slovakia, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Friday.

"I salute the generosity of the Slovak government in providing an S-300 air defense system - a critical defensive capability - to Ukraine," Austin said in a press release. "At my direction, and at the invitation of Slovakia, US European Command will reposition one Patriot missile system, manned by US service members, to Slovakia."

The battery and its crew will arrive in Slovakia in the coming days, Austin added.

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Islamic Cultural Organization Says Cooperation With Russia Not Affected by Sanctions

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 8 (Sputnik) - The Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) does not believe the sanctions which the West has introduced against Moscow over the Ukraine crisis will affect its ties with Russia, Raheel Qamar, head of science and technology sector at ICESCO, told Sputnik.

"Not at all," Qamar said on the sidelines of the Space Symposium, when asked whether the cultural agency is concerned that the sanctions will have an impact on its cooperation with Russia.

The organization, he went on, believes very strongly in peace and advocates for peace across the globe.

"I think that is very important. Humanity needs to live in peace and respect each other so that we can get together and together we can advance to the next economic era where there would be a lot of technology and all that, and for sure, tremendous resources in those areas," Qamar stated.

ICESCO would prefer to be a "go-between" with Russia and other countries, he added.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian 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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OIC Agency Wants to Cooperate With Russia on Space Technology - Sector Head

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 8 (Sputnik) - The Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) wants to collaborate with Russia on space technology along with economic development in Africa and Asia, the head of the agency's science and technology sector, Raheel Qamar, told Sputnik on the sidelines of the Space Symposium.

"Space technology," Qamar said when asked about areas for cooperation with Moscow. "Russia has one of the most developed space technologies and space programs in the world, and that, I think, can be expanded to other nations completely."

ICESCO, an agency that operates under the 57-state Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), deals with some very impoverished countries that really cannot go into space exploration, he added.

"What we are leveraging with them is trying to focus their attention towards being part of the whole space ecosystem," he said. "So if we can leverage them to work with Russia, I think that would be very important. We can be the support of the Russian space exploration and everything. That is one of the very important aspects."

Another aspect, Qamar added, is small scale economic development, especially in Africa, where they are doing reverse engineering, disaster risk reduction, and risk management programs.

"We are conducting accelerators and boot camps there, basically to build a whole ecosystem of entrepreneurs," he said. "I think Russia has tremendous capabilities in that and we would love to work with Russia in Africa and in Asia also."

Qamar 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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Organization of Islamic Cooperation Cultural Agency Hopes Russia to Join as Member Soon

COLORADO SPRINGS, April 8 (Sputnik) - The Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) is hopeful that Russia will soon accept their invitation to join the body as a member, Raheel Qamar, head of science and technology sector at ICESCO, told Sputnik.

"Well, right now we are not very heavily engaged with Russia because they're just an observer nation, but we have asked them to become a member nation of ICESCO," Qamar said on the

sidelines of the Space Symposium. "Once they become that they can come together with us in joint partnership in developing the economies of the different parts of the world ... I think that is very important. Russia has been considering that for a while, and we are very hopeful that they will become a full member of ICESCO."

When asked when it may happen, Qamar stated, "That depends completely upon Russia."

"We are open to it, and we would love Russia to be part of our member states, and I'm hoping that it will happen sooner than later," he said.

ICESCO, he added, brings together 54 member states in Central Asia, Asia, the Middle East, Africa and South America. Russia, as an observer nation, has been assisting the Islamic Cooperation Organization's cultural agency in different activities, and ICESCO is very grateful for that, according to Qamar.

"Basically, the idea behind that is to uplift the economies of these nations and to uplift the science and technology capabilities," he emphasized. "I'm from the science and technology sector. I'm heading that at ICESCO, and our basic aim is economic development of these nations, moving away from an agro-based economy to a knowledge-based economy. And Russia being one of our Observer Nations, I'm sure in the future we will have more collaboration with them in developing these activities in all our member states."

Qamar spoke on the sidelines of the 37th Space Symposium, 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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Axiom-1 First All-Commercial Manned Mission to ISS Blasts Off From Cape Canaveral
(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The first all commercial crewed Axiom-1 mission to the International Space Station (ISS) blasted off on schedule on Friday morning at 11:17 am Eastern Daylight Time (EDT) from NASA's Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Florida. 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 successfully launched on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket aboard the Dragon Endeavour spacecraft on its third flight to the International Space Station (ISS). The second stage carrying the manned Dragon spacecraft made a successful separation and made a sustained four-and-a-half minutes burn to put it into orbit and on schedule for its planned rendezvous with the ISS. The reusable Falcon 9 first stage made a successful soft landing back on Earth.

During the ten-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 economy and the mission will be on "the leading edge" of that effort, NASA officials have said.

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Former President Trump Turns to Small US Lender Axos After Major Banks Shun Him - Reports

NEW YORK, April 8 (Sputnik) - Shunned by major financial institutions amid allegations he had illegally inflated his asset values to get loans, former President Donald Trump has taken to banking with one of America's least known and smallest lenders called Axos Financial, NBC News reported.

An obscure, internet-only institution based in San Diego and Las Vegas, Axos refinanced in February a \$100 million mortgage due in September for New York City-based Trump Tower, the report said, citing a document from the city's finance department.

Trump turned to Axos amid investigations by the New York Attorney General's office that he used illegally inflated financial statements to defraud US banks into providing him favorable loans. Mazars, an accounting firm used by Trump, told a New York court in February that it had informed the former president that it can no longer back financial statements it had prepared for the Trump Organization and his other private businesses.

Axos itself is scheduled to be in court later this month to defend itself from a lawsuit by a former internal auditor who alleges that he was wrongfully fired for raising an alert about the company's risky lending practices, the report noted. Axos denies all the allegations.

Axos was founded in 2000 and had some \$15.5 billion in assets at the end of last year. This makes it a relatively small lender compared with America's largest bank, JPMorgan, which has assets worth over \$3 trillion.

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US Excludes Norway, Switzerland From Certain Export Controls on Russia - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has added Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland to the list of excluded countries from certain export controls imposed on Russia, a document in the US Federal Register revealed on Friday.

"To recognize partner countries implementing substantially similar export controls on Russia and Belarus, the Department of Commerce published a list of countries excluded from certain US export controls related to foreign-produced items. In this rule, the Department of Commerce adds Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland to the list of excluded countries," the document, scheduled to be published on April 12, said.

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Relationship Between US Astronauts, Russian Cosmonauts Steady, Professional – NASA Chief

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – The relationship between US astronauts and Russian cosmonauts remains steady and professional, and this cooperation will not stop despite the Ukraine crisis, NASA administrator Bill Nelson told CNN.

"[T]he professional relationship in the civilian space program between the cosmonauts and the astronauts is just steady, very professional. Remember, we started in the midst of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. We had Apollo-Soyuz that rendezvoused and docked and lived together in space that started this civilian cooperation with Russia and it continues to this day and it's not going to stop because of the war [in Ukraine]," Nelson said in an interview.

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Shell Buys Russian Oil If Blended With Crude of Another Origin - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 8 (Sputnik) – Shell has amended its terms and conditions of contracts by allowing purchase of Russian oil only if it is blended with crude of another origin in a move that keeps Russian energy supplies flowing to Europe while letting the British-Dutch company publicly claim it is not funneling money into Russia, Bloomberg reported on Friday.

In February, Shell withdrew from joint ventures with Gazprom and Gazprom Neft, including the Sakhalin II LNG project, and terminated its participation in the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project due to the military operation in Ukraine. The following month, it said it is ending its involvement in all Russian hydrocarbons, adding that it will stop all spot purchases of Russian oil as a first step.

Now, Shell markets a barrel in which only 49.99% comes from Russia, and the other 50.01% is sourced elsewhere, which technically means oil is not of Russian origin, according to Bloomberg.

Europe, unlike the United States, has not imposed sanctions on imports of Russian oil or gas, but the blending allows Shell to "say one thing and do another," the report noted. The oil mix is referred to as a "Latvian blend," as the blending takes place in the port of Ventspils.