

4/11/22 Monday

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China Could Soon Ratify Forced Labor Conventions in Effort to Assuage EU's Xinjiang Fears

Chinese lawmakers on Monday prepared to consider ratification of several international agreements on forced labor that have stood in the way of implementing an investment deal with the European Union.

On Monday, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, a body that meets in lieu of a full session of the full legislative body, included in its agenda for next week's session reviewing ratification of the 1930 Forced Labor Convention and the 1957 Abolition of Forced Labor Convention, according to [Xinhua News Agency](#).

The two conventions ban most forms of compulsory labor, with the 1957 agreement amending the 1930 convention by barring forced labor as punishment for strikes and for holding certain political views. They are part of the UN-affiliated International Labor Organization's (ILO) eight core conventions, which also include abolition of child labor and protection for the right of workers to collectively bargain with their employer.

All but a handful of states have ratified the two conventions the NPC is taking up on Tuesday. China's absence from either agreement has raised objections in the European Union, which paused ratification of the massive Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with China last year.

"I take the concerns of some MEPs seriously, and talk to them frankly," [Zhang Ming, China's ambassador to the EU](#), told the European Policy Center in March 2021, just weeks before the CAI was paused.

"Some MEPs care about the ratification of ILO conventions on forced labor. I said that China has sound institutions for labor rights protection. The Labor Law prohibits any format of forced labor. China will fulfill its commitments in the CAI, including making sustained and continuous efforts toward ratification of the relevant ILO conventions. I also expressed the wish that the EU honors its commitments, as well," she added.

The European Parliament (EP) [froze ratification of the CAI](#) in May 2021 after Beijing sanctioned 10 EU politicians, as well as think tanks and diplomatic entities, in [response to sanctions](#) imposed against China by the US, EU, UK, and Canada over alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang. EU lawmakers said that China must lift the sanctions if it wants the CAI to be ratified, but so far, Beijing has not backed down on what it considers to be an internal matter. In a February phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping, French President Emmanuel [Macron said he would push](#) a positive agenda in the EU on its relations with China and would champion ratification of the CAI.

US-backed human rights groups have accused Beijing of subjecting millions of Muslim Uyghurs in its western Xinjiang Autonomous Region to forced labor, brainwashing and genocide, and several Western governments have issued [sanctions over the claims](#). However, their claims rest on little evidence and many have been proven to be totally fraudulent.

[Beijing denies](#) that a genocide is taking place in Xinjiang. The ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) also denies accusations that it forcibly sterilizes Uyghur women or restricts Uyghur culture and the practice of Islam, saying that its rehabilitation and training programs for former extremists are [voluntary and in line](#) with guidelines contained within the United Nations [Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism](#). The CPC additionally asserts that Uyghurs have been voluntarily enrolled in vocational training centers as part of a deradicalization program aimed at eliminating support for groups like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a separatist terrorist group aligned with al-Qaeda*.

Last month, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [Michele Bachelet announced](#) that an agreement for her to visit Xinjiang had been reached and she would make the trip in May, along with other parts of China.

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'Not a Criminal Matter': Texas AG Drops Murder Charge Against Woman for Self-Induced Abortion

The state of Texas has dropped murder charges against a woman arrested last week in connection with an abortion, even though Texas law ostensibly prevents women from being charged in connection with a self-induced abortion.

In a Monday statement, Starr County District Attorney Gocha [Allen Ramirez announced](#) he was filing a motion to dismiss the murder charge against 26-year-old Starr County resident Lizelle Herrera, saying that "In reviewing applicable Texas law, it is clear that Ms. Herrera cannot and should not be prosecuted for the allegation against her."

Herrera was arrested on Thursday on accusations she had "intentionally and knowingly cause the death of an individual by self-induced abortion," as Sheriff's Major [Carlos Delgado put it](#) at the time. She was released on a \$500,000 bond on Saturday.

It's unclear under what law she was charged with murder. Lynn Paltrow, executive director of National Advocates for Pregnant Women, [told The Guardian](#) on Sunday that "there is no law in Texas that authorizes treating people who have miscarriages, still births or abortions as murderers."

In fact, Texas law specifically prevents women from being charged with murder for aborting their own pregnancy.

"In reviewing this case, it is clear that the Starr County Sheriff's Department did their duty in investigating the incident brought to their attention by the reporting hospital. To ignore the incident would have been a dereliction of their duty," Ramirez continued. "Prosecutorial discretion rests with the District Attorney's office, and in the State of Texas a prosecutor's oath is to do justice. Following that oath, the only correct outcome to this matter is to immediately dismiss the indictment against Ms. Herrera ... The issues surrounding this matter are clearly contentious, however based on Texas law and the facts presented, it is not a criminal matter."

The Lone Star State's conservative-dominated government aroused fury in April of last year, when it passed the country's [most restrictive abortion law](#), banning abortions after six weeks of

pregnancy based on the ability to detect a so-called “fetal heartbeat.” The law has a novel third-party enforcement mechanism designed to frustrate attempts to strike the law down, which has [inspired copycat bills](#) in other states, such as Idaho.

The law, SB 8, has sharply curtailed abortions in the state and was complemented by a [second law in September](#) 2021, SB 4, that banned people “from providing an abortion-inducing drug to a pregnant woman without satisfying the applicable informed consent requirements for abortions.”

Texas SB 8 has stood up to several court challenges, including a request at the US Supreme Court level to block it from taking effect on September 1, 2021. In December, [the high court punted](#) on the question of SB 8’s constitutionality but said abortion providers could continue to bring challenges in lower courts, and in January [rejected an appeal](#) to revive the litigation.

In [a second abortion case](#) heard by the Supreme Court in December, Dobbs vs. Jackson Women’s Health Organization, the Mississippi state government asked the high court to also reconsider the validity of its ruling in Roe vs. Wade, a 1973 case in which the Supreme Court recognized a woman’s right to abortion access and laid out a framework for regulating it. The situation has alarmed liberals, and in response, the Democrats [mounted an ill-fated attempt](#) to make legal abortion access a part of the US law code.

Herrera isn’t the first in the US to face jail in connection with an ended pregnancy, either: in nearby Oklahoma, a Native American woman was [convicted of first-degree manslaughter](#) in October 2021 in connection with a miscarriage she suffered in January 2020. The fetus was between 15 and 17 weeks old, according to the [medical examiner’s report](#) - nowhere near old enough to survive outside the womb.

[According to the National](#) Advocates of Pregnant Women (NAPW), a pro-choice advocacy group, the state’s murder and manslaughter laws don’t apply to those who suffer miscarriages. Despite what the law says, [the NAPW has tracked](#) about 1,600 such cases between 1973 and 2020, with the vast majority of them happening in the last 20 years.

Pro-abortion rights activists have pointed out that banning abortion doesn’t end abortions, it only ends safe abortions. Two [2017 reports by the Guttmacher Institute](#) found that the rates at which women abort pregnancies is roughly equal between countries that have and have not banned abortions, but that botched abortions are responsible for a far higher [percentage of maternal deaths](#) in countries that ban abortion compared to countries that don’t.

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‘Never Forget’? EasyJet Comes Under Fire for Twitter Ad With Holocaust References

Bargain airline EasyJet has apologized after a Twitter post made over the weekend that centered around a reference to the Nazi-perpetrated Holocaust.

On Thursday, EasyJet posted an ad on its official Twitter account featuring a person rolling back his right sleeve to reveal a tattoo across his inner forearm of a string of letters and numbers.

“You never forget your first flight,” the caption read, hinting that the tattoo is likely of a customer’s ticket number.

However, the forearm tattoo sparked immediate comparisons to the identification tattoos given by the Nazis to many inmates in the concentration camp system as part of the Holocaust of the 1930s and 1940s. Although roughly 11.5 million people were exterminated in the Holocaust, [including 6 million Jews](#), or two-thirds of European Jewry, some 300,000 survived internment in the concentration camps, not all of whom were given ID tattoos.

In addition, the EasyJet ad's tagline included a reference to the Holocaust remembrance slogan "never forget."

Needless to say, social media users found the ad distasteful and immediately reacted with shock, fury and disgust. The post was quickly deleted, and on Friday, the low-cost British airline issued a formal apology for the incident.

"While this is a genuine picture of a customer's tattoo celebrating their first flight with us, we understand the concerns raised and as a result decided to remove the post," an EasyJet spokesperson told the [Times of Israel](#). "We are sorry for any offense unintentionally caused by the post."

This isn't the first time EasyJet has been forced to backtrack after using Holocaust imagery in an ad, either: in 2009, the airline apologized after an in-flight magazine it had printed and put on its aircraft [was found to have a series](#) of fashion photos taken of models posing at different Holocaust memorials across Europe. The locations included the Jewish Museum Berlin and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

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No Radiation Reported After Liquid Leak Found at Waste Plant for US Nuclear Weapons Manufacturing

A New Mexico waste storage facility has reported that no radioactive contamination has been found after liquid was found in the bottom of a storage container over the weekend.

On Saturday evening, workers at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in southeastern New Mexico evacuated after finding liquid at the bottom of a drum of nuclear waste. While the liquid was radioactive, no leak was found outside the container, including in the air or on any person, according to the [Carlsbad Current Argus](#).

The emergency protocols were deactivated at 11 p.m. local time, per an update from WIPP officials.

"There is no risk of radiological release and there is no risk to the public or the environment," the facility said in a news release. "The activation occurred as a result of an abnormal event during routine waste handling at the WIPP site, located 26 miles east of Carlsbad, New Mexico."

The [massive facility is operated](#) by the US Department of Energy and stores radioactive waste produced by the manufacturing of the US' nuclear arsenal, which includes thousands of nuclear warheads made from uranium and plutonium. Through natural processes, radioactive elements like uranium and plutonium decay into isotopes of smaller elements as they emit alpha radiation, and those decay products can be just as radioactive, if not more so, than the material they came

from. Eventually they will decay until they reach a stable isotope, but that process can take tens of thousands of years.

However, the waste stored in Carlsbad isn't just uranium metal, it's also materials used in the manufacturing process, such as lab coats, gloves, tools and other items contaminated by the radioactive materials.

That's why the US decided to store this waste deep in the thick salt deposits of the Delaware basin, where it can be safely kept for up to 10,000 years. Two other similar deep geological repositories exist in Germany, at Morsleben and Schacht Asse. Washington originally intended to use Yucca Mountain in Nevada to store all its nuclear waste, including from power plants, but construction of the site was canceled in 2009 amid [widespread local resistance](#) to the plan due to radioactive leakage concerns and Native American objections to desecration of a site sacred to them.

As a result of the Yucca Mountain cancellation, US nuclear power plants have been forced to [store their own](#) spent nuclear fuel in above-ground facilities. One large facility in Washington state, known as the Hanford Site, was responsible for refining most of the plutonium used in some 65,000 nuclear weapons built by the US since 1945. Today, it is a nuclear waste storage site, but [has become infamous](#) for radioactive leaks.

However, WIPP hasn't been without its problems: several leaks in 2014, [including one large accident](#), raised doubts about whether the Delaware Basin would be a safe alternative to Yucca Mountain, even though the area has been geologically stable for 200 million years and the highly compressed salt has a unique attribute enabling it to seal cracks that form. The accident shuttered the facility for three years and has cost roughly \$486 million to fix.

Last month, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) auditing agency [warned in a report](#) about the high risk of runaway costs associated with fixing the site's safety issues.

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McCarthy Dismisses GOP Calls for Biden's Impeachment, Warns Against Politicizing Process
By - Evan Craighead

Rep. Greg Murphy (R-NC) has proclaimed that he believes members of Congress are being hesitant to act on so-called 'impeachable offenses' committed by US President Joe Biden. Murphy is one of several lawmakers recently endorsed by Trump following their objections to the certification of the 2020 US presidential election.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) is refusing to throw support behind his GOP colleagues' meek calls for articles of impeachment to be brought against US President Joe Biden.

"Look, one thing we learned that the Democrats did is they – they used impeachment for political reasons," the House Minority Leader told Fox Business host Maria Bartiromo, following up a clip from Rep. Greg Murphy (R-NC).

Murphy argued that US lawmakers' hesitance to form a united front on the introduction of impeachment articles stemmed from a lack of confidence in US Vice President Kamala Harris.

“We believe in the rule of law,” McCarthy said. “We’re not going to pick and choose just because somebody has power. We’re going to uphold the law. At any time, if someone breaks the law and the ramification becomes impeachment, we would move towards that. But we’re not going to use it for political purposes.”

In addition to Murphy, Reps. Madison Cawthorn (R-NC), Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), Randy Weber (R-TX), Bill Posey (R-FL.) and Bob Gibbs (R-OH) have all pushed for the process to be introduced against Biden.

As of late, impeachment calls substantially peaked around the time of Biden’s botched pullout of US forces from Kabul, Afghanistan. The rushed departure of US forces led to the deaths of 11 US Marines, one US Navy corpsman, and a US Army soldier. Afghan civilian casualties included an excess of 100 deaths and 100 injuries.

Former US President Donald Trump was notably impeached twice during his four-year stint.

On December 18, 2019, a Democrat-led House voted in favor of charging Trump with two articles of impeachment: abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. The counts came amid allegations that he withheld aid to Ukraine for personal political gain.

The Republican-controlled Senate later moved to acquit the US president of the charges.

Trump would go on to become the first US president to be impeached twice—a feat achieved when he was slapped with an “incitement of insurrection” charge related to the January 6, 2021, US Capitol riot. The Senate, in a repeat move, acquitted Trump of the charge.

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Apple to Face Additional Antitrust Charge Amid EU Regulators’ Music Streaming Probe
By - Evan Craighead

Back in 2019, Spotify filed a complaint with the European Commission alleging that Apple was “acting as both a player and referee” in its enforcement of App Store rules that, in part, “disadvantage other app developers” and “purposely limit choice and stifle innovation at the expense of the user experience.”

Antitrust regulators in the EU are readying an additional charge against Apple amid a yearslong probe initiated by a March 2019 complaint filed by Spotify, [according to a Reuters report citing an individual familiar with the ongoing matter](#).

Spotify has remained firm in its claim that Apple’s policy for managing in-app payments was stifling market competitors with a 30% fee tacked on to in-app purchases for subscription-based companies.

Because the fee is nonexistent for subscriptions offered through Apple’s own affiliated apps, Spotify and other music streaming services were more costly for users, despite having similar base prices.

The music streaming service pointed out that subscription services not utilizing Apple’s in-app payment system are subject to “a series of technical and experience-limiting restrictions.” Apple has also been accused of locking Spotify and other competitors out of compatibility with company services like Siri, HomePod, and Apple Watch.

Just last year, the [European Commission issued a preliminary conclusion](#) stating Apple was in breach of competition law and distorted the music streaming market “as it abused its dominant position for the distribution of music streaming apps through its App Store.”

“By setting strict rules on the App store that disadvantage competing music streaming services, Apple deprives users of cheaper music streaming choices and distorts competition,” European Commission Executive Vice-President Margrethe Vestager said in a quoted statement.

“This is done by charging high commission fees on each transaction in the App Store for rivals and by forbidding them from informing their customers of alternative subscription options.”

Apple has denied the claims of anti-competitive behavior leveled against the company. It also took specific aim at Spotify, accusing the music streaming service of weaponizing “misleading rhetoric.”

US State Department Orders Non-Essential Personnel to Leave Shanghai Amid COVID-19 Surge

By - Evan Craighead

The US on Saturday warned of "arbitrary" COVID-19 measures that would likely take place in response to a recent surge of infections within the locked-down financial hub of Shanghai, China. Washington also expressed that it would let some staffers leave the consulate, which is based in the city of some 25 million inhabitants.

The US Department of State issued an order on Monday calling for the departure of non-emergency US government employees, as well as their family members, from the Consulate General Shanghai consular district.

The release highlighted that Beijing's "response" to the surge in COVID-19 infections prompted the department's order.

"Do not travel to the PRC's Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), Jilin province, and Shanghai municipality due to COVID-19-related restrictions, including the risk of parents and children being separated," the travel advisory warned.

Americans are advised to also "reconsider travel to the PRC's Hong Kong SAR due to arbitrary enforcement of local laws."

On Monday, Shanghai reported 22,348 new asymptomatic COVID-19 cases, and 994 symptomatic cases of the contagious disease.

The financial hub's government noted that new asymptomatic cases were down from 25,173 cases the day prior.

Shanghai logged more than 130,000 COVID-19 cases since March 1, but officials have reported zero related deaths, and only one individual is believed to have a severe illness from the disease.

Shanghai's absence of COVID-19-related death has raised some eyebrows, as major cities in other countries have typically experienced a wave of COVID deaths following an outbreak or spike in infections.

Sean Sylvia, an assistant professor of health policy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, stressed to the Wall Street Journal that estimates should not be viewed as a true measure of the novel disease.

"That is true globally, too. We have estimates. But in a lot of places, it's very uncertain, and China's one of those places," Sylvia told the outlet.

Nevertheless, estimates in Hong Kong show that new COVID-19 infections are progressively decreasing. However, a report from the region last month logged 5,000 for Hong Kong between December 31 and mid-March. Experts have since said that unvaccinated, elderly individuals represented a disproportionate amount of the fatalities that occurred alongside the Omicron outbreak.

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Federal Jury Convicts Ex-Virginia Cop Who Lost Job Over Armed Role in Jan. 6 Insurrection
By - Evan Craighead

Thomas Robertson, a former officer with Virginia's Rocky Mount Police Department, was indicted on six counts—including five felony charges—and was jailed pending trial over an illegal firearm stockpile obtained after he and other Trump supporters violently stormed the US Capitol to disrupt the certification of 2020 Electoral College votes.

After two days of deliberation, a trial jury has moved to convict Thomas Robertson, 49, on all six counts including obstruction of the Senate's official proceeding, destruction of evidence, disorderly conduct at the US Capitol while armed with a dangerous weapon, interfering with police during a riot, and trespassing.

The charges are punishable by up to 20 years in prison.

"In our democracy, there is no room for vigilante justice, or mob rule, or counterinsurgency," said Assistant US Attorney Risa Berkower in closing arguments.

The verdict comes as the second time a DC court has ruled in favor of the prosecution in the US Capitol riot. Texas militia movement recruiter Guy Reffitt was convicted of five felonies last month.

Robertson's passion for firearms was a constant variable in the months following his felony indictment. After being released on personal recognizance, the 50-year-old was jailed pending trial in July after authorities discovered he illegally stockpiled 34 firearms.

Per his release, Robertson was barred from firearms possession. The prosecution argued that the 50-year-old's actions proved he had been "further radicalized."

Despite three days of court proceedings, the case against Robertson was overwhelming as video footage from the insurrection showed the now-49-year-old among the first wave of pro-Trump rioters to break into the Senate chamber.

Additional body camera footage presented by the prosecution showed Robertson, equipped with a three-foot stick, refusing to move for a DC squad car.

Thomas and Jacob Fracker, a 30-year-old who was also fired by the Rocky Mount Police Department, ventured to the nation's capital together on January 6, 2021, in an attempt to stop or overturn the actions of Congress.

Fracker pleaded guilty last month to conspiring to obstruct Congress in its 2020 Electoral College vote count. As part of his plea agreement, the 30-year-old agreed to provide federal authorities his full cooperation in their case against Thomas.

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Nevada Student Charged With Attempted Murder, Sexual Assault of Teacher After Dispute Over Grades

By - Mary Manley

The 16 year-old student physically and sexually assaulted his teacher after school hours during a discussion over grades. The student was charged with attempted murder, sexual assault, battery with intent to commit sexual assault, first-degree kidnapping, and robbery. A student attending Nevada's Eldorado High School was recently arrested and slapped with several charges after allegedly attacking an instructor after a dispute broke out between the pair over the student's grades.

The student allegedly went to see his teacher and at "some point, got violent and began punching the victim and strangled her until she lost consciousness," [police](#) said.

Jail records have identified the student as 16 year-old Jonathan Eluterio Martinez Garcia. Garcia is currently being held on a \$500,000 bail after being taken to the Clark County Detention Center.

After attacking his teacher, Garcia fled the scene. The victim was then discovered by a colleague.

Officers were called to Eldorado High [School](#) in Clark County, Nevada at 3:30 p.m. local time on Thursday, and found the teacher being treated by medical personnel for multiple injuries. She was then transported to a hospital and is said to be stable.

Garcia was found about a mile from the school on Cedar Avenue, and was taken into custody by police without incident. He is expected to appear in court again on Tuesday, and was ordered to have no contact with the victim.

The assault prompted the Clark County Education Association to demand a safer environment for teachers after a dozen [fights](#) were reported at Desert Oasis High School last month, and a loaded [gun](#) was found at Cheyenne High School on Thursday. Both schools are a part of the Clark County School District (CCSD).

"I am devastated, and the CCSD family hurts for the teacher assaulted at Eldorado High School," Clark County School District Superintendent Jesus Jara wrote in an email to staff Friday afternoon. "Our hearts are heavy because of the violence committed against her, and we pray for her full recovery."

"While this incident is now in the hands of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, rest assured that this suspect will be held to account for his actions," the email added.

Nevada Governor Steve [Sisolak](#) called the assault an "absolutely tragic and horrendous situation" in a statement on Friday.

Marie Neisess, president of the Clark County Education Association, said that teachers are fearful due to the rise in violence among their students.

“We have been warning the district that this is going to escalate to a point of someone seriously getting injured, and that’s what has occurred to an educator,” said Neisess. “They really feel unsafe.”

She says the association is now calling on the school district to reactivate disabled cameras on campus, to consider panic alarms in classrooms, as well as hire more staff throughout the schools. The assault at Eldorado High School occurred before spring break, and Neisess says she hopes to see immediate changes once classes resume.

“We don’t have enough staff members,” she said. “We don’t have enough social workers. We do not have enough campus monitors or school police who are ready to respond to this.”

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Biden Reveals New Restrictions to Crack Down on ‘Ghost Guns’, Names New ATF Nominee
By - Mary Manley

The new rule will require makers of ghost gun kits to include serial numbers on the firearms so they will be easier to trace. Ghost guns are firearms sold online as D.I.Y. kits, and can be assembled without a license or a background check. The weapons are effectively unregulated and untraceable because they are sold as “uncompleted” parts.

US President Joe Biden, joined by Vice President Kamala Harris, announced on Monday that the US Department of Justice has finally issued a [rule](#) to crack down on the rapid growth of ghost guns - the unserialized, privately-made firearms that have been showing up in criminal investigations time and time again over the past few years.

“Folks, a felon, a terrorist, a domestic abuser can go from a gun kit to a gun in as little as 30 minutes,” Biden said during his Monday announcement in the White House Rose Garden.

“These guns are a weapon of choice for many criminals, we’re going to do everything we can to deprive them of that choice, and finally put them in jail for a long, long time,” he added.

The rule will ban the business of manufacturing the most accessible ghost guns, such as the “buy build shoot” kits which can be purchased online or at a store without a background check and can be assembled in less than 30 minutes.

“Ghost guns can be purchased on the internet and assembled at a kitchen table. They can be bought without a background check by people who would otherwise be legally prohibited from gun ownership: domestic abusers, gun traffickers, individuals convicted of violent crimes, and even young children,” Harris said during the [event](#).

“Traditional guns are required to have serial numbers which can help law enforcement identify a firearm that has been stolen from its lawful owner or found at the scene of a crime- ghost guns have no serial numbers, they are practically untraceable, making it difficult for law enforcement to hold to account those who use weapons to do violence,” she added.

The US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) reported that last year alone, about 20,000 ghost guns were recovered by law enforcement during criminal investigations.

And while ghost guns are sold as “uncompleted” parts, which is why they’ve gone unregulated for so long, they are actually rather easy to [build](#). The kits are assembled 80% of the way, leaving consumers to put together the other 20% themselves. One online merchant bragged that the gun can be assembled in under 15 minutes if the customer uses the jigs included in the kits.

The kits are relatively cheap too, an AR-15 for example, costs a consumer \$345.

The ATF reported that ghost guns have been showing up at a rate that is 10 times greater than where it was in 2016. But because ghost guns are sold without serial numbers, law enforcement have a harder time persecuting criminals who use the guns for illegal means.

The rule will count ghost gun kits as legitimate “firearms” under the Gun Control Act. Under the new rule, commercial manufacturers will also be required to be licensed, and label the frames or receivers in their kits with a serial number. Commercial sellers will be required to be licensed as well, and run a background check on anyone who wishes to purchase a kit. Ghost guns which are already in circulation - no matter how they were made - will also be required to be labeled with a serial number before they can be resold.

The president also announced plans to nominate Steve Dettelbach, who is a former US attorney from Ohio, as his new pick to head the ATF, after having to withdraw his first nominee, gun-control advocate David Chipman.

Chipman was a 25-year veteran of the ATF who was focused on tightening gun laws. His nomination stalled due to opposition from pro-gun Republicans, as well as the NRA and their lobbyists. The withdrawal of his nomination was deemed a “critical win” by the [NRA](#).

Dettelbach will most likely face an uphill battle in the process to be nominated as head of the ATF. Neither Democrats nor Republicans have been able to successfully nominate a person to the position since it was made confirmable in [2006](#). The current Acting Director is Marvin G. Richardson, who has been working in his role since June of 2021.

As reports surfaced of Biden's initiative, the National Rifle Association issued a statement calling the ghost gun ban not "truly sincere" when it comes to curbing violent crimes. The pro-gun group also proved to be no fan of Dettelbach's nomination, [suggesting](#) that he would "neither be fair nor objective" once placed in the ATF position.

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Alabama Governor Signs Bill Criminalizing Health Care for Trans Youth
By - Mary Manley

The new law will make providing hormone treatment, puberty blockers, as well as surgery to underage transgender peoples as felonies punishable of up to 10 years in prison. The

legislation makes Alabama the third US state to pass a transgender care restriction, but is the first to include criminal penalties.

Alabama Governor Kay Ivey signed on Friday a bill into law that will criminalize gender-affirming health care for transgender people under the age of 18, despite warnings from both medical and mental health care professionals who say gender-affirming care can help prevent depression and suicide.

"I believe very strongly that if the good Lord made you a boy, you are a boy, and if he made you a girl, you are a girl," Ivey said in a [statement](#). "We should especially protect our children from these radical, life-altering drugs and surgeries when they are at such a vulnerable stage in life." The Alabama governor also signed a second bill on Friday that will ban transgender students from using whatever sex-based school facility best aligns with their gender identity, as well as ban the discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in grades K-5. The bill mirrors Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' Parental Rights in [Education](#) act, which is now known across social media as the "Don't Say Gay" bill.

Critics of the "Don't Say Gay" bill and those adjacent to it say that these bills are pretending to address an issue that doesn't exist. A 2018 study from the Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law said there are no increase in safety risks when transgender persons are allowed to access public facilities that align with their gender identities.

"The level of legislative overreach into the practice of medicine is unprecedented. And never before has legislative overreach come into pediatric examination rooms to shut down the parent voice in medical decision making between a parent, their pediatrician and their child," Dr. Morissa Ladinsky, a medical provider, [told](#) the Associated Press in an interview.

The new law will become effective in less than 30 days, on May 8, but will most likely face challenges in court by civil rights groups. The American Civil Liberties Union has vowed to challenge the law in court. Meanwhile, families with transgender teens have already begun to sue the state of Alabama in federal court on Monday.

One set of parents pursuing the lawsuit said they were fearful that their transgender daughter would try to commit suicide or harm herself in some way if she was no longer allowed access to the puberty blockers she has already been taking for the past year.

"Transgender youth are a part of Alabama, and they deserve the same privacy, access to treatment, and data-driven health care from trained medical professionals as any other Alabamian," Tish Gotell Faulks, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Alabama, said in a statement. [Faulks](#) then accused politicians of using children as "political pawns for their reelection campaigns." Governor primaries start next month.

The Alabama legislation was initially [cleared](#) by state lawmakers on Thursday. At the time, Mark Del Monte, the CEO of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), remarked in a statement that the measure puts minors at "great risk of physical and mental harm."

"Criminalizing evidence-based, medically necessary services is dangerous," Del Monte underscored.

To date, over a dozen US states have either passed or introduced bills similar to Alabama's Senate Bill 184, according to the UCLA School of Law. Aside from Alabama and Florida, measures have been taken up in Arizona, Mississippi and Utah, among other states.

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Over 60% of American Public Experiencing Higher Stress Levels Than at Start of Pandemic - Study

By - Ian DeMartino

The pandemic and its lockdowns caused Americans a great amount of stress, but stress levels are still high, even as COVID-19-era restrictions are dropping around the country.

More than 60% of Americans say that their stress levels are higher than they have ever been before.

A survey [by OnePoll](#) asked 2,000 Americans about their stress levels, and 63% said that their levels are at an all-time high, higher even than when the pandemic first started in early 2020. Loneliness was the biggest factor according to the survey, with 56% of respondents indicating that they feel alone and are hesitant to share their struggles with friends and family.

The survey comes as pandemic restrictions are dropping around the country, indicating that the effects of lockdowns could be felt long after the country opens back up.

While loneliness was cited as the biggest factor in the OnePoll, there also seems to be a lack of enthusiasm for where the country is headed. According to RealClearPolitics' [Poll Average](#), 64.8% of the country believes the nation is on the wrong track.

Music, watching TV and exercise were listed as the primary ways Americans cope with stress, and an increasing number of Americans are seeking therapy, with 63% of respondents saying they are seeking "some form" of therapy to deal with the increased stress.

After releasing [a 2021 study](#) that found similar levels of stress as the OnePoll survey, Dr. Arthur C. Evans Jr., CEO for the American Psychological Association (APA), had some advice:

"Without addressing stress as part of a national recovery plan, we will be dealing with the mental health fallout from this pandemic for years to come."

Taking breaks from the news and social media, practicing self-care and staying connected with friends and family are suggested by the APA as ways to relieve stress.

The APA survey also noted that all Americans were feeling stressed out, regardless of political affiliation.

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Schultz to Unionizing Baristas: If You Don't Like Starbucks, You Can Get Out

By - Ian DeMartino

Starbucks stores across the country are starting to vote on union membership, part of a growing trend that includes Amazon warehouse workers, farmworkers, meatpacking plants and Hershey factory workers.

During his cross country tour talking to Starbucks employees, interim CEO Howard Schultz allegedly got into a tense discussion with pro-union employees on Friday, saying “If you hate Starbucks so much, why don’t you go somewhere else?”

The line brings to mind the common conservative rallying call of [telling critics of American policies](#) to leave the country if they don’t like how the nation is being run.

The [confrontation took place](#) at a Long Beach Airport conference center, where 25 year-old barista Madison Hall was invited to join roughly 20 other Starbucks workers from the area in what was described to them as “an opportunity to meet with senior-level management.”

The event began with a video replay of the hour-long speech Schultz gave to the company via a livestream on April 8, in which he repeatedly attacked unionization efforts, saying that the Starbucks Workers Union are “outsiders trying to take our people.”

Hall says she first tried to ask Schultz about unionization, but was shut down. “We’re not going to talk about that,” Schultz reportedly replied.

When asked about complaints filed by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and after he was challenged on if Starbucks offers the best benefits in retail, Hall says Schultz went on a “rant” about how he was once poor.

In response, Hall says she asked Schultz more unionization questions. ““You say you’re not anti-union, but on July 1, 2021, [Starbucks was] found guilty of retaliation in Philadelphia,” but was again told that they would not be talking about that.

The NLRB ruled that Starbucks illegally spied on and then fired two baristas in Philadelphia that were talking about unionization efforts.

It is unclear by the recounting in More Perfect Union when the “If you hate Starbucks so much, why don’t you go somewhere else?” line was uttered by Schultz, but Hall says it was in response to one of her unionization questions.

In response to questions about the event, a Starbucks spokesperson told More Perfect Union that “Howard and others in the room requested to get back on track and shift the focus back on the whiteboarding sessions and what they were working on together.”

In addition to Schultz’s comments, the CEO has a long history of busting up unions. Starbucks was originally two different franchises that Schultz combined to form the company. One of those franchises was unionized and Schultz convinced them to disband the union.

He also fought against unionization efforts in Starbucks in the 1990s and lobbied Congress to [prevent the passage](#) of the Employee Free Choice Act, which would have made unionization efforts easier.

Despite his attempts, unionization has been gaining steam in Starbucks: six stores in upstate New York recently voted to unionize, and another 130 are planning votes in the coming months.

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Dark Money Already Flooding 2024 Presidential Campaign, Report Finds
By - Ian DeMartino

The 2022 midterms are still more than half a year away, but dark money is already funneling into potential 2024 presidential candidates, and there is no way for the American people to find out who is funding their politicians.

According to [a report](#) from Politico, at least a dozen potential presidential hopefuls are receiving dark money to their Super PACs through nonprofit organizations.

However, it's worth noting that until a candidate officially declares their political bid, there is no requirement for the nonprofit to disclose who their donors are.

Nonprofit organizations do have limits on how much of their spending can be politically motivated, but even that small restriction seems to go largely unenforced. In 2016, Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) raised \$22 million, the vast majority of which came from [either one or two](#) anonymous donors. That was not known to the public until the nonprofit filed its taxes at the end of the year, and even today, the identity of the donors remain unknown.

While the group - Conservative Solutions Project - spent millions on ads and research, its nonpolitical activities seem to be scant or nonexistent, despite the requirement that nonprofits limit their political activity to less than half of their expenditures.

The nonprofit groups allow candidates to start the groundwork of a campaign before declaring their intentions and subjecting themselves to more campaign contribution regulations. Such start-up operations include locking down staff they want to use in their actual campaigns, building email lists, performing polling and research.

Those activities cost a lot of money: \$14.4 billion was [reportedly spent](#) on the 2020 election, and significant funding is happening without any disclosure to the American voter who is bankrolling their leaders.

According to Politico, more nonprofits are supporting Republican candidates this election cycle than Democrats, likely because US President Joe Biden is expected to run for reelection in 2024.

Biden and former President Donald Trump's associated nonprofits are suspected to be the two largest dark money groups this year, but there are two other significant Democratic politicians with dark money groups.

Current Secretary of Transportation and former 2020 primary hopeful Pete Buttigieg is associated with Win the Era Action Fund, though the organization has been quiet since the former mayor joined Biden's cabinet.

Democratic Governor Phil Murphy of New Jersey launched an organization in February, leading to speculation that he may be considering a presidential run, but he has repeatedly denied that he has presidential aspirations in 2024. He [has declined](#) to say if the group's donors will be publicly revealed.

Republican figures receiving funding from nonprofit groups include: Trump (America First Works); former Vice President Mike Pence (Advancing American Freedom); Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton (America One Policies); Maryland Governor Larry Hogan (An America United); former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley (Stand for America); the aforementioned Florida Senator Marco Rubio (Stand Up to China); Nebraska Senator Ben Sasse (America 101); Former Secretary of the State Mike Pompeo (Champion American Values Fund); and South Carolina Senator Tim Scott (Opportunity Matters Network).

There have been several attempts to reform campaign financing since the last major reform passed in 2002. [Most recently](#), the Voting Rights Act included campaign finance regulations aimed at reducing money in politics, but it failed in the Senate.

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Multiple People Shot in Brooklyn Subway, 'Undetonated Devices' Found at Scene - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - Multiple people have been shot at a Brooklyn subway station, with several "undetonated devices" found at the scene, CNN reported on Tuesday, citing the New York Police Department.

Meanwhile, the NY police department issued an advisory for the affected area.

"ADVISORY: Due to an investigation, avoid the area of 36th Street and 4th Avenue area in Brooklyn. Expect emergency vehicles and delays in the surrounding area," NYPD said.

New York Daily News said that the police are also investigating a possible explosion at the subway station.

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Biden to Unveil Plan to Tackle Gasoline Cost Spike on Tuesday

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will lay out a strategy on Tuesday to combat rising gasoline prices, which involves expanding the use of biofuels and blending gasoline with ethanol, the White House said.

"The President will announce today that the EPA Administrator is planning to allow E15 gasoline—gasoline that uses a 15 percent ethanol blend—to be sold this summer. This is the latest step in expanding Americans' access to affordable fuel supply and bringing relief to Americans suffering from Putin's Price Hike at the pump," the statement said.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is expected to issue a national, emergency waiver.

"Without this action, E15 cannot be used in most of the country from June 1st to September 15th, and the EPA plans to take final action to issue the emergency waiver closer to June 1st.

E15 is currently offered at 2,300 gas stations in the country, where it can serve as an important—and more affordable—source of fuel," the statement added.

In addition, the administration will provide \$700 million for biofuel producers, \$5.6 million in grants through the Higher Blends Infrastructure Incentive Program, and \$100 million for biofuel infrastructure. EPA, for its part, is seeking new approval for canola oil, adding "new pathways for fuels to participate in the Renewable Fuel Standard program to provide renewable diesel, jet fuel and other fuels."

Fuel prices in the US have been surging over the past several months, with a further spike during the Russian special military operation in Ukraine and a US ban on Moscow's energy imports.

On March 31, the Biden administration announced that it will release a record 1 million barrels per day of oil from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) over the next six months to alleviate a global supply crunch.

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World Bank Preparing \$1.5Bln Aid Package for Ukraine – Malpass

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) – The World Bank is preparing a \$1.5 billion aid package for Ukraine, President David Malpass said on Tuesday.

"I am pleased to announce today that the World Bank is currently preparing a \$1.5 billion operation for Ukraine to support continuation of essential government services during the war. This was enabled by yesterday's approval of IDA [International Development Association] support of \$ 1 billion to Ukraine and \$100 million to Moldova by IDA donor and recipient countries," Malpass said in his speech in Warsaw.

The World Bank will be ready to help Ukraine in reconstruction "when the time comes," he added.

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US Inflation Sets New 40-Year High as Consumer Prices Rise by 8.5% - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - US inflation has set a new 40-year high in March as the consumer price index rose by 8.5% over last year, the US Labor Department said on Tuesday. "The all items index continued to accelerate, rising 8.5 percent for the 12 months ending March, the largest 12-month increase since the period ending December 1981," the Labor Department said.

Energy prices rose 32.0 percent over the previous year, while the food index increased 8.8 percent, the largest 12-month increase since May 1981, the department said.

In the year to February, US consumer prices rose by 7.9%, which was also a 40-year high, following a four-decade record of 7.5% in January.

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Blinken After US-India 2+2 Calls on Allies Not to Increase Russian Energy Imports
(Updates headline, adds details, context, and background in paras 2-9)

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said after the talks with senior Indian officials that the Biden administration hopes its allies and partners will not increase purchases of Russian energy.

Earlier this month, India began purchasing oil from Moscow at a discount just as the US and its allies have tried to encourage energy independence amid Russia's operation in Ukraine. Moscow has said Russia has the capacity to offer India even more hydrocarbons and at a better price.

"Every country is differently situated, has different needs, requirements, but we're looking to allies and partners not to increase their purchases of Russia's energy," Blinken said during a joint press conference with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and their Indian counterparts on Monday after a 2+2 ministerial.

Blinken and Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin had just finished a meeting with Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and Defense Minister Rajnath Singh.

During the post-meeting presser, Blinken, in addition to not buying Russian oil, called on allies to avoid doing any weapons transactions with Moscow.

Austin announced that the two countries signed military and space cooperation agreements.

Earlier on Monday, US President Joe Biden and Indian Prime Minister Narendra discussed during a virtual meeting Russian energy imports amid sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies against.

White House spokesperson Jen Psaki on Monday refused to say whether Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had promised US President Joe Biden not to increase his country's oil imports from Russia.

A senior Biden administration official said on Monday that the United States does not think India should increase its imports of Russian energy products and Washington is prepared to help Delhi diversify its energy imports.

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US Sanctions Irish Crime Group Over Alleged Drug Trafficking, Money Laundering - Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The United States sanctioned Ireland's Kinahan organized crime group for engaging in drug trafficking and money laundering, the US Department of Treasury said.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated the Kinahan Organized Crime Group (KOCG) along with seven of its key members, including its Irish leaders Christopher Vincent Kinahan Senior, Daniel Joseph Kinahan, Christopher Vincent Kinahan Junior, and three associated businesses," the Treasury said in a press release on Monday.

The Kinahan crime group operates in Ireland but has a presence in the United Kingdom, Spain, and the United Arab Emirates, the release said.

The group has been involved in a gang war with another group in Ireland and Spain since February 2016, the release added, resulting in numerous murders, including those of two innocent bystanders.

All the property and interests in property of the designated individuals or entities that are in the United states or in control of US persons will be blocked, the release said.

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UPDATE - Ukrainian Energy Firms Sue Russia in US Court for \$34.5Mln Over Seizure of Assets - Filing

(Adds details, background in paras 5-7)

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - Eleven Ukrainian energy firms are suing Russia in a US federal court for \$34.5 million combined over seizure of their assets in Crimea since 2014, court documents revealed.

"Petitioners are Ukrainian companies seeking confirmation of an arbitral award awarding them compensation for the Russian Federation's seizure of their assets... [in] Crimea," the court documents said.

The Ukrainian energy companies named in the court document include Stabil LLC, Rubenor LLC, Rustel LLC, Novel-Estate LLC, PII KirovogradNafta LLC, Crimea-Petrol LLC, Pirsan LLC, Trade-Trust LLC, Elefteria LLC, VKF Satek LLC and Stemv Group LLC.

The eleven companies in the lawsuit cite a 1998 Ukrainian-Russian bilateral investment treaty and a 2019 ruling approving the award amounts by a Swiss tribunal under the auspices of the Permanent Court of Arbitration. The lawsuit also alleged that the federal court in Washington, DC had jurisdiction because Russia was party to the New York Convention, a UN arbitration treaty.

The document said the New York Convention applies "to the recognition and enforcement of arbitral awards made in the territory of a State other than the State where the recognition and enforcement of such awards are sought."

Moscow argues that the Ukrainian energy companies' dispute was not valid because the status of Crimea had changed when it was integrated into Russia, the court document said.

Crimea rejoined Russia in 2014, after a referendum determined that over 96 percent of the peninsula's voters were in favor of reunification. Despite the vote, Ukraine still considers the peninsula to be part of its territory, referring to it as temporarily occupied. Moscow has repeatedly stated that Crimean residents decided to rejoin Russia through a democratic procedure in compliance with international law and the UN Charter.

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Over 70 at Elite Washington Dinner Contract Covid - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - As many as 72 White House officials, National Security advisers, cabinet members, lawmakers, journalists, and other government officials have tested positive for COVID-19 who attended the annual white-tie Gridiron Dinner, several outlets reported.

This was the first time since 2019 that organizers held the annual shindig which had 630 invitees at what some in the media have dubbed a "super-spreader."

Guests were required to be vaccinated, but did not have time to receive a negative test to attend the event. No one who announced they tested positive have described severe symptoms, media reported. Most have complained of mild symptoms, others are said to be symptomless.

There is growing concern that President Joe Biden could be infected but there are no reports of his getting infected thus far, and with his aides trying to allay fears by pointing out that he has been vaccinated and boosted.

Among those who have tested positive are Attorney General Merrick Garland; New York City Mayor Eric Adams; Maine Senator Susan Collins; and California Rep. Adam Schiff; Florida's Debbie Wasserman Schultz; Texas' Joaquin Castro, Rep. Gina Raimondo and others, including White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, Jamal Simmons, Vice President Kamala Harris' communications director; and an untold numbers of journalists who attended the dinner. Last week, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi – who was not at the Gridiron Dinner –announced that she also had COVID-19.

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Ukrainian Energy Firms Sue Russia in US Court for \$34.5Mln Over Seizure of Assets - Filing

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Ex-Homeland Security Official Convicted of Plan to Fleece US Government - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 12, (Sputnik) - Former Homeland Security Department IT division branch chief Murali Venkata has been convicted on charges arising from the theft of proprietary software and sensitive databases from the US government, the Justice Department said.

"Venkata was convicted for his role in the conspiracy, which included ex-filtrating proprietary source code and sensitive databases from DHS-OIG facilities, as well as assisting [co-conspirator Charles] Edwards in setting up three computer servers in Edwards's residence so that software developers in India could access the servers remotely and develop the commercial version of the case management system," the Justice Department said in a press release on Monday.

Venkata and Edwards, who previously served as the Acting Inspector General of DHS's Office of the Inspector General, concocted a plan to steal confidential and proprietary software from the government, as well as the personal information of hundreds of thousands of federal employees, the release said.

The Justice Department said Venkata stole sensitive data from the government and set up three computer servers at Edwards's home so Indian software developers could have remote access and create a commercial version of the government's case management system.

Venkata had been on administrative leave since 2017 after being charged in the case, the release added.

In January, Edwards pleaded guilty for stealing property from the US government, according to the release.

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NASA to Hold Wet Dress Rehearsal for Artemis Rocket Main Core on Thursday - Officials

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - NASA will carry out the latest part of the repeatedly delayed and halted wet dress rehearsal for its unmanned Artemis 1 moon rocket system on Thursday, April 14, senior space agency officials said during a press conference.

"We intend to go through [the] terminal count a second time but without [including] the upper stage", Flight Director Charlie Blackwell-Thompson told the press conference on Monday.

The last wet dress rehearsal last week was suspended after a faulty valve controlling helium flow was identified, but the issue has now been dealt with, Blackwell-Thompson said.

"Some helium leakage was identified. ... They replaced the leaking helium component and reduced the ... pressure," Blackwell-Thompson said.

NASA is planning to proceed with the modified wet dress rehearsal test focused on using the ground systems at Kennedy Space Center to load propellant into the Space Launch System rocket's core stage tanks, with minimal propellant operations on the upper stage, NASA said earlier.

The team achieved many of the wet dress rehearsal objectives during the two prior tests, and the modified test will enable engineers to achieve the remaining test objectives critical to launch success.

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India Providing Ukraine With Humanitarian Aid, Particularly Medicines - Foreign Minister

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - India has been providing Ukraine with humanitarian aid amid the ongoing Russian special military operation in the country, India External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said during a press conference.

"We are also addressing the humanitarian situation. In fact, the Ukrainians have been in touch with us especially for the supply of medicines. We've already provided humanitarian relief to Ukraine, to some of the neighbors. And even as we speak, a shipment of medicines is being delivered - or will be delivered very soon - to Kiev," Jaishankar said on Monday.

The press conference took place following a ministerial meeting between Jaishankar, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. US President Joe Biden also spoke virtually on Monday with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The US and Indian leadership during the meetings discussed a range of bilateral and global issues, including the situation in Ukraine and climate change, among others.

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US, India Working Together to Bring More Food to World Market - Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The United States and India are cooperating to deliver more food to the world market and make more fertilizer amid the shortage due to the Ukraine conflict, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

"Our countries are working together to try to bring more food to world markets as well as to the World Food Program," Blinken said on Monday. "The United States is also focused on securing

more funding for the World Food Program and the UN Food and Agricultural Organization. And producing more fertilizer so that we can help others sustain crop fields in the future.”

The World Food Program has warned that the conflict in Ukraine will lead to spiraling food prices and exacerbating hunger across the world due to disrupted supply chains and derailed crops production. Regions such as Africa and the Middle East may suffer the most as they are dependent on inexpensive grain exports, with a total of 811 million people worldwide exposed to the risk of malnutrition.

Ukraine is a key global grain producer, accounting for 9% of the world's wheat exports, 13.5% of corn products and 70% of sunflower products, therefore any disruption in supplies drives prices up, resulting in growing food insecurity across the world.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them against intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. In response, the United States and its allies have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia. The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only and the civilian population is not in danger.

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US Urges All Countries Not to Do Major Weapons Transactions With Russia - Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling on all nations not to have major weapons transactions with Russia, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a press briefing after meeting with top Indian officials.

“We continue to urge all countries to avoid major new transactions for Russian weapons systems particularly in light of what Russia is doing to Ukraine,” Blinken said when asked whether Washington is considering imposing sanctions on India over procuring S-400 air defense systems. “We have not yet made a determination regarding potential sanctions or potential waivers under the CAATSA law.”

The Indian military uses a variety of Russian-made weapons, including missile systems, tanks and artillery guns and has signed on additional deals, including the purchase of Russia's S-400 air defense system. India has taken a neutral stance in the ongoing conflict between Russia and the United States and its allies with respect to Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine, and has refused to join the Western sanctions against Russia.

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US Discussing Military Modernization With India, Ready to Offer Cheaper Weapons - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is actively discussing military modernization with India and is prepared to make weapons systems more affordable to Delhi,

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said during a press conference following meetings with top Indian officials.

"On the issue of future systems, we are engaged in active discussions with India on how to best support their modernization needs. As we look at the future, we want to make sure that we maintain the ability to operate together, and so we look forward to those continued discussions, and it also includes a range of options that would make our systems more affordable," Austin said on Monday.

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Blinken Says After India Talks He Hopes Allies Do Not Increase Russian Energy Imports

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said after the talks with senior Indian official that the Biden administration hopes its allies and partners will not increase purchases of Russian energy.

"Every country is differently situated, has different needs, requirements, but we're looking to allies and partners not to increase their purchases of Russia's energy," Blinken said during a joint press conference with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and their Indian counterparts on Monday.

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US, India to Cooperate on Air-Launched Drones Via Defense Tech-Trade Initiative - Austin
WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - The United States and India concluded an agreement that will allow cooperation on air-launched unmanned aerial vehicles through the Defense Technology and Trade Initiative, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said.

"We recently concluded an agreement to work together on air-launched unmanned aerial vehicles through our Defense Technology and Trade Initiative," Austin said during a press conference on Monday alongside Secretary of State Antony Blinken and their Indian counterparts.

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Pentagon Chief Says US, India Signed Bilateral Space Situational Awareness Agreement

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the United States and India signed a bilateral space situational awareness agreement.

"Just a few moments ago, we signed a bilateral space situational awareness agreement," Austin said during a press conference alongside US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and their Indian counterparts on Monday.

Austin added that the United States and India will also hold cyber exercises later this year and both countries will also expand information sharing across all war-fighting domains.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 12 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* The deadly missile strike on the train station in Kramatorsk must be investigated and any claims in the case should be based on the facts, China's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dai Bing said on Monday.

* The Kiev authorities have not provided a single humanitarian corridor toward Russia out of nine corridors declared for the current day in the Zaporizhzhia and Donetsk directions, Col. Gen. Mikhail Mizintsev, head of the Russian Defense Ministry's National Defense Control Center, said.

* The Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) head, Denis Pushilin, said that the DPR forces have captured the Mariupol port.

* French gendarmes who have arrived in Ukraine will engage in hiding war crimes committed by forces loyal to Kiev and making accusations against Russia, the head of the Russian National Defense Control Center, Mikhail Mizintsev, said.

US-INDIA TALKS

* Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi told President Joe Biden on Monday he has suggested to Russian President Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy that they have directs talks to resolve the conflict in Ukraine.

* The United States and India are positioning their militaries to operate and cooperate closely together as China seeks to refashion the Indo-Pacific region and the world more broadly, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN FRANCE

* Incumbent French President Emmanuel Macron has gained 27.84% of the votes in the first round of the presidential election after 100% of the ballots were processed, according to the results published by the interior ministry on Monday.

ARMS DELIVERIES TO UKRAINE

* EU foreign ministers agreed to continue military assistance to Ukraine, in particular, they will increase the supply of weapons amid fears of increased hostilities in the east of the country, EU

foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said following a meeting of the EU Foreign Council in Luxembourg.

- * Eight to 10 flights per day are carrying military materiel into Ukraine, a senior US defense official said.
- * The EU countries will jointly increase arms deliveries to Ukraine, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock told reporters.
- * German defense concern Rheinmetall is ready to supply Ukraine with up to 50 Leopard 1 tanks and up to 60 Marder infantry fighting vehicles, the Handelsblatt newspaper reported, citing Rheinmetall head Armin Papperger.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- * EU foreign ministers did not make decisions on sanctions against Russia's oil and gas, agreed to continue discussions, EU top diplomat Josep Borrell said following a meeting of the EU Foreign Council in Luxembourg.
- * Canada's new sanctions list includes the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology (MIPT), Machine Building Design Bureau in Kolomna, Vypel Shipyard, and Komsomolsk-on-Amur Aircraft Plant, Global Affairs Canada said.
- * 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.
- * The European Commission said that it had added 21 airlines certified in Russia to the EU Air Safety List, which introduces an operating ban or operational restrictions on airlines within the bloc.

AUSTRIA-RUSSIA TALKS

- * Austrian newspaper Kronen reported the completion of negotiations between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer, the meeting lasted about 90 minutes.
- * Nehammer said that his meeting with Putin was open and direct but tough.
- * The meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer on Monday was short according to recent standards, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- * The Biden administration is supportive of diplomatic efforts such as the recent meeting between Nehammer and Putin in Moscow, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

DIPLOMAT EXPUSIONS

- * Croatia is expelling 18 diplomats and six administrative and technical employees of the Russian embassy from the country, the Croatian Foreign Ministry said on Monday.
- * Russia will respond appropriately to the expulsion of 18 Russian diplomats and six embassy staff, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told Sputnik.
- * Six Russian diplomats have been declared personae non gratae in France, the French Foreign Ministry said.

RUSSIA'S ECONOMY

* Inflation in Russia will return to the target of 4% in 2024, the Bank of Russia said in its annual report on Monday.

* There are no reasons for default of Russia, the country has a potential to fulfill all obligations, but the non-constructive position of opponents can complicate the situation, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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US Lawmakers Call for Independent Investigation Into Hunter Biden Business Deals - Letter

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - A Special Counsel needs to be appointed to lead an independent investigation into Hunter Biden's business dealings in foreign countries that may have developed by using the influence of his father Joe Biden's previous position as Vice President, US lawmakers said in a letter to Attorney General Merrick Garland on Monday. "It is increasingly clear that Hunter Biden took advantage of his father's position as Vice President to develop business relationships with clients in Ukraine, China and Kazakhstan," the letter said. "We believe that in the case of Hunter Biden a Special Counsel must be appointed to preserve the integrity of this investigation and any subsequent prosecution."

The lawmakers expressed concern that the US Justice Department has a conflict of interest, or at least the appearance thereof, in the case that could prevent a fair and impartial investigation. A Special Counsel would ensure that there is no bias in the investigation or undue influence from the White House, the letter said.

Congressmen Tom Rice, Mo Brooks and Thomas Massie co-signed to letter to US Attorney General Merrick Garland.

The Bidens have faced scrutiny and criticism from Republicans and others for their alleged misconduct in Hunter Biden's foreign business dealings, which came into the public spotlight following the release of emails from a laptop abandoned by him at a computer repair shop in Delaware.

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US Tightens Regulations on 'Ghost Guns,' Requires Serial Numbers on Kits - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration announced new regulations on so-called ghost guns designed to make tracing of the weapons parts possible by requiring serial numbers on the gun kits, the US Department of Justice said on Monday.

"[T]his rule will clarify that parts kits that are readily convertible to firearms are subject to the same regulations as traditional firearms," the Justice Department said in a press release.

"These regulatory updates will help curb the proliferation of 'ghost guns,' which are often

assembled from kits, do not contain serial numbers, and are sold without background checks, making them difficult to trace and easy to acquire by criminals."

The US government will require retailers to run background checks before selling kits that contain the parts necessary for someone to make a gun, the release said.

Moreover, under the new rule, federally licensed firearms dealers and gunsmiths will be required to have a serial number added to 3D printed guns or other un-serialized firearms they take into inventory, according to the release.

The rule also requires federal firearms licensees, including gun retailers, to retain records for the length of time they are licensed, which expands records retention beyond the prior requirement of 20 years, the release said.

The Justice Department said that from January 2016 to December 2021, US authorities received some 45,240 reports of suspected ghost guns recovered by law enforcement, which included 692 homicide or attempted homicide investigations.

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US, India Positioning Militaries to Cooperate Together as China Seeks Dominance - Austin

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The United States and India are positioning their militaries to operate and cooperate closely together as China seeks to refashion the Indo-Pacific region and the world more broadly, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Monday.

Austin made his remarks at a US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue meeting at the Department of State. He was joined by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Indian Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh. The meeting followed a video call between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who discussed Russian energy imports against the backdrop of Western sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies on Moscow.

"Today, we're positioning the US and Indian militaries to operate, cooperate closely together," Austin said.

He described the US-India partnership as an important building block of regional security architecture.

"China is seeking to refashion the Indo-Pacific region, a world more broadly," he stated.

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Top US Diplomat for Refugees to Visit Poland, Moldova - State Department

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The top-ranking US diplomat with responsibility for refugees and migration issues is visiting Poland and Moldova this week to discuss humanitarian response issues, the State Department said in a press release on Monday.

"Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) Julieta Valls Noyes will travel to Chisinau, Moldova and Warsaw, Poland April 12-15," the release stated.

In Chisinau, Noyes will meet with government officials to recognize Moldova's role in hosting tens of thousands of refugees who have fled Ukraine during the current conflict there, the State Department said. She will also visit a refugee hosting center to meet with refugees as well as humanitarian organization staff and volunteers.

In Warsaw, Noyes will meet with Polish and UN officials to discuss the ongoing humanitarian crisis response and with NGOs delivering critical humanitarian assistance for refugees in Poland, the release added.

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Israel Concerned Iran Nuclear Deal Will Not Bring Long-Term Stability to Region - Envoy

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - Israel fears the Iran nuclear deal will not help stabilize the region in the long-run and is concerned by the short length of the agreement, Ambassador to the US Michael Herzog said on Monday.

Negotiations are underway in Vienna to renew the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and lift Washington's sanctions against Tehran imposed after the Trump administration exited the deal. The eighth round started on December 27, 2021.

"This is a deal for a relatively short period of time," Herzog said during an online discussion hosted by the Washington Post.

The agreement provides Iran sanctions relief, related not only to Tehran's nuclear agenda but to other activities in the region, Herzog added.

The Israeli diplomat expressed concerns that the deal will allow Iran to receive "tens of billions of dollars", which, as Tel Aviv feared, will come to Tehran's "proxies for destabilizing the region". "For all these reasons we are very much concerned that this deal will not add stability," Herzog said.

In 2015, the United Kingdom, Germany, China, Russia, the US, France and Iran signed the JCPOA) which involved the lifting of sanctions in exchange for limiting Iran's nuclear program.

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Israel 'Very Much Concerned' About Raise of Anti-Semitism in US - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - Israel is very concerned about the raise of anti-Semitism in the United States, Israeli ambassador in Washington Michael Herzog said on Monday.

"We are very much concerned about the raise of anti-Semitism in America," Herzog said during an online discussion hosted by the Washington Post.

The ambassador welcomed the US government's efforts to confront violence against Jews, including the confirmation of Debora Lipstadt as the new United States envoy to combat anti-Semitism.

"We are going to cooperate with whomever is willing to partner with us to fight this ugly phenomenon," he said.

Herzog also urged the US government to take additional steps to prevent anti-Semitism, including providing additional education, increasing law enforcement actions and boosting security.

The United States has seen an increase in anti-Semitic attitudes that have led to violent crime. The most recent incident took place in January when UK citizen Malik Faisal Akram took four people hostage in the Congregation Beth Israel synagogue in Colleyville, Texas. The hostages managed to escape and Akram was shot dead by police.

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Biden, Modi Discuss Russian Actions in Ukraine With Focus on Global Food Supply

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden discussed the situation in Ukraine with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India as the leaders were inaugurating the fourth US-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, the White House said on Monday.

"The two Leaders... discussed the destabilizing impacts of Russia's war against Ukraine, with a particular focus on global food supply. President Biden and Prime Minister Modi looked forward to meeting in person later this spring, in Tokyo, for the Quad summit," the statement said.

The two leaders said they were committed to strengthening the US-India relationship via the cooperation on clean energy, technology and military cooperation.

"They also committed to continue cooperation - bilaterally and multilaterally - on ending the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthening global health security, advancing global food security, and ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific. They emphasized their shared commitment, as leaders of the world's largest democracies, to respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations in the Indo-Pacific and beyond," the statement concluded.

Meanwhile on Monday, a senior Biden administration official said that the United States does not think India should increase its imports of Russian energy products and Washington is prepared to help New Delhi diversify its energy imports. The issue will again be discussed by top US and Indian senior officials during a ministerial meeting scheduled for later on Monday, the senior Biden administration official said.

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White House Says Supportive of Diplomatic Efforts Like Putin-Nehammer Meeting

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is supportive of diplomatic efforts such as the recent meeting between Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Monday. "We've encouraged or supported any efforts at diplomacy. We'd go encourage anyone who is speaking with – or meeting with, however they're engaging – with President Putin to also engage with Ukrainians," Psaki said during a press briefing when asked about the White House's position on the meeting.

Nehammer arrived in Moscow on Sunday for talks with Putin on the situation in Ukraine. On Saturday, he visited Ukraine, where he met with Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, and Kiev Mayor Vitali Klitschko.

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Biden Set to Name New Commander of US, Allied Forces in Europe - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is going to name Army General Christopher Cavoli as the next head of military combat forces in Europe, putting him in charge of 100,000 US troops and 40,000 from Allied armies, The Wall Street Journal reported on Monday. Cavoli, a Eurasia expert and Afghan War officer, will move up from his current post as head of US Army Europe to take over European Command (EUCOM) which directs all US military operations across the continent, also making him Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), NATO's military chief, the report said citing US officials.

Cavoli assumed command of US Army Europe and Africa in October 2020 after commanding US Army Europe since January 2018. His staff experience includes service as the Director for Russia on the Joint Staff. He is a Foreign Area Officer with a concentration on Eurasia, and speaks Italian, Russian and French, the report added.

Since the start of the Ukraine conflict on February 24, Biden has sent 20,000 troops to Europe, in addition to the 80,000 previously there. NATO has deployed troops to Slovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania.

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White House Declines to Say Whether India Promised to Reduce Energy Imports From Russia

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Jen Psaki on Monday refused to say whether Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had promised US President Joe Biden not to increase his country's oil imports from Russia.

"I'll let Prime Minister Modi and the Indians speak to that... I will let them speak for themselves," Psaki said, when asked whether Biden has gotten any commitment from Modi not to accelerate oil imports from Russia.

Earlier on Monday, Biden and Modi discussed during a virtual meeting Russian energy imports amid sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies against Russia.

A senior Biden administration official said on Monday that the United States does not think India should increase its imports of Russian energy products and Washington is prepared to help Delhi diversify its energy imports,.

The issue will again be discussed by top US and Indian senior officials during a ministerial meeting scheduled for later on Monday, the senior Biden administration official said.

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US Not Planning at Present Biden Trip to Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The United States is not planning at present a visit by President Joe Biden to Ukraine, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday. "We are not currently planning a trip by the President of the United States to Ukraine," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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Some 10,000 Ukrainian Migrants Entered US Via Mexico in Past 2 Months - Reports
WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) has processed some 10,000 Ukrainian migrants via the US southern border in the past two months and many more are gathering in Mexico in an attempt to enter the United States, CBS reported on Monday.

CPB officials said in the report that the number of Ukrainian migrants has increased significantly in the past several weeks. Between February 1 and April 6, CBP intercepted and processed 9,926 Ukrainian migrants, but it also reported that 41,074 Ukrainian nationals legally entered the United States during the same period. The latter group includes tourists, short-term visitors and legal permanent residents.

The increasing numbers of Ukrainians seeking entry in the United States is a result of the conflict with Russia, the report cited CBP officials as saying.

However, immigration experts have criticized the Biden administration for the fact that Ukrainians fleeing their homeland seek to enter the United States via Mexico, the report said.

This development is another indication that the backlogged US immigration system is dysfunctional and unable to respond to burgeoning refugee crises despite the Biden administration announcing earlier it would allow 100,000 Ukrainian refugees into the United States, the report added.

Ukrainians are often permitted to enter the United States after being processed and given a year of humanitarian parole to live and work legally in the United States, according to the report.

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Austin, Blinken to Talk Anti-Russia Sanctions, Energy With Indian Counterparts - Official

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken will discuss with their Indian counterparts on Monday anti-Russia sanctions compliance and energy, a senior US administration official told reporters.

"Throughout the course of the 2 plus 2 today, Secretary Blinken and Secretary Austin of course will have a chance to go over these issues and many more including sanctions compliance, again, cooperation on food supply... [and] energy," the official said.

The meetings will also cover science and technology, partnership initiatives, people to people ties, counterterrorism, operationalizing the major defense partnership, space, cyber and emerging technologies, and multilateral cooperation on certain matters, the US official added.

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US Does Not Think India Should Increase Imports of Russian Energy - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The United States does not think that India should increase its imports of Russian energy products and Washington is prepared to help the country diversify its energy imports, a senior Biden administration official said on Monday.

"We don't think India should accelerate or increase imports of Russian energy and the United States is ready to support India, remain in a conversation with India, about its diversification of imports," the official said.

Earlier on Monday, US President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Narendra Modi discussed during a virtual meeting Russian energy imports. The issue will again be discussed by top US and Indian senior officials during a ministerial meeting scheduled for later on Monday, the official said.

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Russia Informs UN of Preparations for Staged Discovery of Mass Grave Near Kiev - Official

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - Moscow has informed the United Nations that a number of provocations are being prepared in Ukraine, including a staged discovery of a mass grave in Rakovka, near Kiev, to frame Russia, deputy envoy to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Monday.

"Just over the past few days we have transmitted to the UN information on the following provocations that are being prepared," Polyanskiy said. "A staged discovery of mass graves in the town of Rakovka near Kiev."

In addition, Western journalists have arrived in the town of Kreminna ahead of a false flag attack by Ukrainian forces which is intended to accuse Russian troops of shelling ambulances carrying patients.

"In the town of Bilohorivka a chlorine reserve has been mined on the territory of a water canal. The plan is to blow it up when units of the national militia of the Luhansk People's army approach," he continued. "In the town of Irpin, in the Kiev region, a provocation using the same script as in Bucha is being prepared. Members of the Ukrainian security forces intend to transport bodies from the morgue of the local hospital, put them in the basement in the suburb of the town. Then, the Ukrainian forces will organize a staged event of the shooting and elimination of the supposed special operation group from Russia that came from Irpin to kill witnesses of 'Russian war crimes.'"

"We expect the circulation of videos of the staged events by western media," he added.

The alleged atrocities, intended to blame the Russian armed forces, are being staged with the support of British film directors, the deputy envoy said.

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Missile Attack on Kramatorsk Train Station Must Be Investigated - China Envoy to UN

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The deadly missile strike on the train station in Kramatorsk must be investigated and any claims in the case should be based on the facts, China's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United NDai Bing said on Monday.

"China deplores that dozens of civilians including women and children were killed or injured in the attack on Kramatorsk train station," Dai told a UN Security Council meeting. "The relevant circumstances and specific cause for the incident must be investigated and any claim should be based on facts."

On April 8, the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) headquarters said that Ukrainian troops used a Tochka-U missile in an attack on the railway station in Kramatorsk. The DPR authorities said at least 50 people were killed and 87 others were injured in the attack.

The Russian Defense Ministry has refuted claims that it had hit the Kramatorsk train station, stressing that the photos of the missile's fragments shared by witnesses show that such missiles are only used by Ukrainian troops.

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US Working With Allies to Get Long-Range Air Defense Systems to Ukraine – Official

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) – The United States is working with its allies and partners to try to get long-range air defense systems into Ukraine as Russia continues its military operation in the country, a senior US defense official said on Monday.

"We are continuing to work with allies and partners to try to get long range air defense systems into Ukraine and Slovakia's S-300 announcement was in lieu of some of the work that we've done," the official told a press briefing.

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Over Half of Americans Fear Possibility of Metaverse Data Access Abuse - Poll

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - More than half of all Americans worry that their personal data could be accessed and abused in the metaverse, or digital realm, a new Morning Consult poll revealed on Monday.

"According to the survey, 55% of adults said they have major concerns about how their personal data could be tracked and misused in the metaverse, while another 24% said they have minor worries about the possibility," a release on the poll said.

Meta, formerly Facebook (banned in Russia as an extremist organization), has already has given an indication of its intentions for the metaverse through a series of patent approvals this year, which include letting users have authentic eye and body movements. However, elected officials worry that tracking those movements will mean Meta will collect scads of data on its users, the release added.

Also, 35% of adults said they had major concerns about the mental health impacts of entering the metaverse, while 29% said they were worried about motion sickness from virtual reality technology, according to the release.

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Modi Tells Biden He Suggested Direct Talks Between Putin, Zelenskyy

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi told President Joe Biden on Monday he has suggested to Russian President Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy that they have directs talks to resolve the conflict in Ukraine.

"I spoke several times on the phones to the presidents of both Ukraine and Russia not only appealed for peace, but also suggested that there be direct talks between President Putin and the president of Ukraine," Modi said during a virtual meeting with Biden.

Modi added that he hopes negotiations between Russia and Ukraine lead to peace.

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US Says Not Aware of Any Plans to Provide S-400 Air Defense Systems to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The United States is not aware of any plans to provide the S-400 air defense system to Ukraine, a senior US Defense Department official said on Monday. "I know of no plans to provide S-400 systems to Ukraine from anybody. This is not a system as you know, it's very, very much more advanced. It's not a system that the Ukrainians are trained on and know how to use," the senior said during a press briefing.

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Ukraine Receives 8-10 Airlifts With Military Aid Per Day - US Defense Official

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) – Eight to 10 flights per day are carrying military materiel into Ukraine, a senior US defense official said on Monday.

"You're talking about 8 to 10 flights per day into the region and there are constant convoys on the ground of materiel that are moving into the country and that continues and we want to preserve that," the official told reporters.

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White House Says Will Announce Billions in Funding for US Rural Development Across April

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will be announcing billions of dollars worth of funding for rural development projects in the United States throughout the month of April, the White House said on Monday.

"Across the month of April, the Biden-Harris administration will announce billions for rural areas including rural water projects, flood mitigation, transportation, healthcare, and tribal community grants, along with new technical assistance programs for rural and tribal communities," the White House said in a press release.

The administration also announced a \$1 billion America the Beautiful Challenge that seeks to leverage federal investments with private contributions to accelerate conservation efforts across the country, the release said.

The announcements came amid the release on Monday of the administration's so-called "Rural Playbook" to help state, local and tribal governments make use of the funding made available by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, among other officials, will take part in events during April to talk about the impact of Bipartisan Infrastructure Law investments, according to the release.

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Several Nations Considering Tank Deliveries to Ukraine - US Defense Official

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) – Several countries are considering tank deliveries to Ukraine, a senior US defense official said on Monday.

"As far as I know, there are several nations that are considering that [tank deliveries to Ukraine]. And some tanks by some nations have been delivered to Ukraine. These are tanks that they know how to use - largely T-72s," the official told reporters.

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell said on Saturday that the Ukrainian conflict will end on the battlefield, pledging an additional 500 million euros (\$543 million) from the European Peace Facility to Kiev.

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US Imposes Corruption-Related Sanctions on 7 Individuals, 1 Entity in Balkans - Treasury (Adds details in paras 3-7, edits throughout)

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed a number of corruption-related sanctions on seven individuals and one entity in the Western Balkans, the US Treasury Department announced on Monday in a press release.

Among those targeted by the sanctions are former Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro Svetozar Marovic and former Prime Minister of Macedonia Nikola Gruevski, according to the press release. Gruevski served in the position from 2006 to 2016, at which point he resigned under an EU- and US-backed deal for an early election.

"The people designated today constitute a serious threat to regional stability, institutional trust, and the aspirations of those seeking democratic and judicious governance in the Western Balkans," Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian E. Nelson said in the press release.

Marovic in 2016 admitted to corruption charges against him and was sentenced to multiple years in prison, but fled to Serbia before serving the sentence, the press release said. Gruevski was convicted on corruption charges in 2018 and remains a suspect in a number of other corruption cases as well, but has continuously evaded capture by authorities, according to the press release.

Gruevski's Hungarian-registered company I.C.I.C. KFT was also targeted by the sanctions, the press release added.

The US government is sanctioning the parties for their corruption-related activities in the Western Balkans, resulting in the blockage of their property and assets in the US and restrictions on transacting with US persons, the press release said.

Other individuals hit with the sanctions include former Albanian member of parliament Aqif Rakipi, former Chief Prosecutor in Bosnia and Herzegovina Gordana Tadic, and former Macedonian counterintelligence chief Sasho Mijalkov, according to the press release.

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US Imposes Balkans-Related Sanctions on 7 Individuals, 1 Entity - Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed a number of Balkans-related sanctions on 7 individuals and 1 entity, the US Treasury DEpartment announced on Monday.

Among those targeted are Nikola Gruevski, who served as prime minister of Macedonia from 2006 until his resignation due to a US- and EU-supported regime change operation, and Svetozar Marovic, former deputy prime minister of Montenegro.