

4/15/22 Friday

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Senate Marijuana Legalization Bill Delayed, to Be Introduced 'By August'
BY - Ian DeMartino

Marijuana is now legal according to state law in 18 states and the District of Columbia, but remains illegal according to federal law. Two bills are working their way through Congress but face an uphill battle in the Senate.

Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer, a Democrat from New York, has pushed back consideration of his long awaited marijuana legalization bill, saying that it will get to the floor before the August recess but not later this month as originally planned.

The Cannabis Administration and Opportunity Act is being worked on by Schumer, New Jersey Senator Cory Booker and Oregon Senator Ron Wyden.

The bill will remove marijuana from the Federal Controlled Substance Act, leaving it to the states to decide the drug's legality. It also plans to address past convictions, implement taxes and regulation, among other issues.

Schumer has been promising action on the legalization of marijuana since last year when on April 20, the unofficial holiday of cannabis, he stated on the Senate floor, "Hopefully the next time this unofficial holiday 4/20 rolls around, our country will have made progress in addressing the massive over-criminalization of marijuana in a meaningful and comprehensive way."

Progress has certainly been made on the issue of legalization since then, just not in the Senate. New York, Virginia, New Mexico and Connecticut joined the ranks of states where marijuana is legal by state law and in May of last year, the House of Representatives passed their own marijuana legalization bill, the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement Act, but the Senate never put it up for a vote. The House passed the bill again this year on April 1 with the hope that the Senate would act on it this time.

Booker does not think the House bill could pass the Senate, [according to Rollcall](#), and believes the bill he is helping craft with Schumer and Wyden is a better bet.

Either bill faces an uphill climb. Democrats hold 50 seats in the Senate but will require 60 votes to break a likely Republican filibuster, and it is not clear if Schumer has gotten the entirety of his party on board, much less ten additional Republicans.

Both Senator Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire and Jon Tester of Montana indicated as recently as last year that they oppose legalization. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, Bob Casey of Pennsylvania and Mark Kelly of Arizona have all indicated that they are undecided on the issue of federal legalization.

Schumer will likely have to convince them along with 10 Republicans to vote for his bill. He may be able to find support with libertarian leaning Republicans like Rand Paul of Kentucky and Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming, but that may require the removal of the restorative justice and racial equity aspects of the bill. Restorative justice in any marijuana reform bill is an important issue for Booker, who [pledged earlier this year](#) to prevent the passage of a marijuana banking

bill if the Senate does not address restorative justice issues such as allowing those with past marijuana convictions to open marijuana dispensaries.

Beyond that, President Biden may also present an obstacle, as he stated during the campaign that he supported decriminalization of cannabis but not full legalization. However, with Joe Biden's plummeting poll numbers, particularly [among young voters](#), vetoing a marijuana legalization bill will likely sink his party's chances in the November midterm election.

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Confirmed COVID-19 Cases Spiking in Washington, DC, Despite Lack of Tracking
BY - Ian DeMartino

Fewer jurisdictions are reporting daily COVID-19 cases, making it more difficult for individuals to judge the risk of infection. The metrics that do exist paint a mostly grim picture.

The nation's capital is experiencing another wave of COVID-19 infections just months after the city dropped vaccine mandates for restaurants and indoor mask mandates city wide.

According to the latest available data, Washington, DC, has seen a seven day average increase of 54%. Maryland is experiencing a 43% increase, while Virginia is up 27%. Nationwide COVID-19 cases are up 27%.

The number of cases are likely underreported. Health departments are providing less publicly available data and what data is coming out is weeks old. Washington, like many places around the country, is no longer providing daily numbers. Instead, it only provides a weekly case rate per 100,000 residents and that was last reported on April 3, nearly two weeks ago.

That statistic still paints a bleak picture, however. 51 cases per 100,000 residents were reported for the week of March 6; it was 204 on April 3.

Even if health departments wanted to provide more accurate data, doing so would be difficult.

The popularity of at-home testing means that even confirmed cases are underreported.

The number of confirmed cases is still far below what the area experienced in December and January when the first omicron variant swept through the city, but the rapid rise does have some officials concerned.

American and George Washington universities have reinstated mask mandates and 140 miles up I-95, indoor mask mandates have been reinstated in Philadelphia.

"The sad reality is there's no longer a good set of metrics that you can look at to gauge your risk today as opposed to last week or two weeks ago," Neil J. Sehgal, an assistant professor of health policy at the University of Maryland [told the Washington Post](#). "What we've done is we force people to rely on their intuition."

There is another data point that the CDC is still reporting that can be used to provide a gauge of COVID-19 infection rates, though it is extremely broad: wastewater.

COVID-19 is excreted in the waste of both symptomatic and asymptomatic infected individuals, so officials can track the concentration of the genetic materials in untreated sewage water to get an idea of how the virus is spreading through a population. The concentration can be affected

by rain and other environmental factors but it is still a decent gauge when other data points are lacking.

The treatment plant in Washington, DC, which includes wastewater from Prince Georges County, Montgomery County, Loudon County as well as the capital, has seen COVID-19 material [increase](#) by 827% over the last 15 days.

Officials do have hope that this wave will not be as bad as previous spikes. Higher vaccination rates and natural immunity being built up thanks to the last omicron outbreak mean that the hospitalization and death rates may not skyrocket as they did earlier this year. So far, that has proven true, hospitals are not currently experiencing a huge surge in cases. However, as more people become infected, that may change.

The last wave was blunted with mask and vaccine mandates but it is unlikely that the public will support a return to lockdowns and mandates. According to an Ipsos poll [released on Tuesday](#), only 9% of Americans currently see the pandemic as a serious crisis.

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Ditch the Swab, FDA Approves COVID-19 Breathalyzer For Emergency Use
BY - Ian DeMartino

Traditional COVID-19 tests take time, are uncomfortable for the patient and are expensive for everyday use. A system that is multi-use and more comfortable would provide huge advantages in the fight against COVID-19.

The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has granted emergency use authorization for a new COVID-19 test on Thursday that works by detecting chemicals in the patient's breath, rather than through an uncomfortable nose swab.

The test, called the InspectIR COVID-19 Breathalyzer, is about the size of a suitcase and correctly identifies 91% of positive cases and nearly 100% of negative cases. It is also effective at detecting the omicron variant, [according to CNN](#).

That means a positive case will still need to be followed up by a traditional PCR test, but the tool does enable patients to avoid having their nasal passages swabbed when they only suspect a COVID-19 infection or want to test before traveling or going into the office.

But much will depend on how widely the system is adopted and how expensive it is. The device will likely first be distributed to medical offices and mobile testing sites before it becomes available to the general public, if it ever does.

Pricing and availability have not yet been revealed by InspectIR, who says its system provides test results in under three minutes, a massive step up from traditional tests that can take 15 minutes, or in the case of PCR tests, days.

The system uses chemical mixtures to detect five compounds that are found in COVID-19 patients, rather than looking for the virus itself.

InspectIR has long-term goals of getting its breathalyzers in office settings, saying in a 2021 blog post that the system could be used instead of the invasive and expensive tests that are traditionally used, or fever screening that is largely ineffective.

The same technology can be used to detect THC (the primary psychoactive chemical in cannabis) and opioids on the user's breath, according to the company's website, but it seems they are focused on COVID-19 detection for now.

"Today's authorization is yet another example of the rapid innovation occurring with diagnostic tests for COVID-19," said Jeff Shuren, director of the FDA's Center for Devices and Radiological Health in a statement. "The FDA continues to support the development of novel COVID-19 tests with the goal of advancing technologies that can help address the current pandemic and better position the U.S. for the next public health emergency."

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Pro-Democrat Operative Sparks Outrage by Condemning Amazon Labor President Over Fox News Appearance
BY - Wyatt Reed

Cracks emerging between grassroots labor organizer and liberal elites were brought into focus this week as social media users reacted with scorn to apparent efforts to drive a wedge between Amazon organizers and working-class Fox audiences.

Outrage among Democrat-affiliated media over the appearance Thursday by Amazon Labor Union President Chris Smalls on Fox News Channel's "Tucker Carlson Tonight" has led to fierce denunciations of liberal elites on social media for being 'out of touch' with ordinary people. Just days after pro-Democrat outfit Media Matters for America [complained](#) "Fox News largely ignored" the Amazon Labor Union's "historic unionization of an Amazon warehouse" in Staten Island, one of their high-ranking employees drew heavy criticism on Twitter when he attacked the Fox News host for doing just the opposite.

In a Thursday night tweet, Andrew Lawrence, the Deputy Director of Rapid Response for Media Matters [condemned](#) the Amazon union president for appearing alongside Carlson, who he labeled "a hateful bigot," and supposedly giving the host of the most-watched program in US cable news "credibility he doesn't [sic] deserve."

But the response received by the apparent Democratic Party media operative (Media Matters founder was [once labeled](#) "one of the most influential political operatives in the Democratic party" by Time magazine) probably wasn't the one he was looking for.

The collective reaction by Twitter was perhaps best typified by assistant professor of journalism at Northwestern University Steven Thrasher, who said it's "very curious how many liberals want Chris Smalls, whose rising coalition is winning in arenas they never have, expect him to conform to their norms and behaviors—even as their coalitions are consistently losing."

But according to labor organizer Yasemin Zahra, "bringing the union message to every major audience" is a crucial part of the labor struggle.

"President Smalls is being a union leader, which comes with engaging an audience of workers that wouldn't normally tune into CNN or MSNBC," Zahra told Sputnik News, explaining that Smalls' "willingness to engage with conservative viewers shows he's ready to build this movement."

Smalls, the former Amazon worker-turned-organizer whose David-versus-Goliath style campaign to unionize the world's biggest corporation's huge Staten Island "fulfillment center," has previously drawn the ire of supposedly-progressive media voices for criticizing US Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's lack of support for unionizing workers.

"She doesn't deserve this moment," Smalls [quipped](#) when asked about Alexandria Ocasio Cortez immediately after news surfaced that the Amazon Labor Union emerged victorious in New York. Ocasio-Cortez's message of congratulations to Amazon workers was met with skepticism by The Hill journalist Krystal Ball, who said the Democratic representative "couldn't be bothered to show up" until organizers were "on the cusp of victory."

Within days of successfully organizing a massive Amazon facility, Chris's historic achievement was similarly dismissed by other liberal media voices. "No one wins a massive union election alone," wrote The Nation's Sarah Jaffe, who complained she was seeing "way too many" many people give Smalls more credit than she believed he was due.

As others pointed out on social media, the reporter in question has "never mentioned Chris Smalls by name... until yesterday, after an historic labor victory."

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Musk: Twitter Board's 'Economic Interests Simply Not Aligned With Shareholders'
BY - Wyatt Reed

Influential observers say the public fight for control of Twitter could represent a battle over the future of free speech itself.

The battle between the board of social media giant Twitter and the world's richest person continued Saturday as Elon Musk responded to a [post](#) claiming that in light of co-founder Jack Dorsey's departure, the board of Twitter collectively owns a mere 0.12% of the company's total shares:

"Wow, with Jack departing, the Twitter board collectively owns almost no shares!" The Tesla CEO went on to explain that the board's minuscule financial exposure means that "objectively," the board's "economic interests are simply not aligned with shareholders."

Just hours before, Musk [voiced his agreement](#) with a viral tweet claiming that a successful effort to thwart Musk's Twitter takeover bid would prove "the game is rigged."

On Friday, it was revealed that Twitter's board of directors had voted unanimously to adopt a 'limited duration shareholder rights plan,' otherwise known as a '[poison pill](#),' to allow other shareholders to purchase the shares of anyone who acquires more than 15% of Twitter stock, in an apparent attempt to sabotage Musk's takeover plans. This came just a day after Musk announced his "final offer" to purchase the company outright for \$42 billion, at a mark up of around \$6/share.

His public showdown with Twitter has seen Musk launch a number of barbs at the company, ranging from impassioned demands for free speech—a "social imperative" he said Twitter will not "serve" in its current form—to the absurdist suggestion that the social media giant's San Francisco HQ be transformed into a homeless shelter since "no one shows up anyway."

But the billionaire hasn't just been locking horns with Twitter's board of relative business unknowns, he's also taken on asset management behemoths like Vanguard and Blackrock, whose combined assets were said to exceed \$16.5 trillion in 2021 and who now reportedly control 16.8% of all Twitter shares after Vanguard increased its stake to 10.3% on the heels of Musk's April 4th announcement that he'd become the company's largest shareholder. Musk admitted at a TED talk event in Vancouver that he's "not sure" if his attempt to purchase Twitter will ultimately succeed, but told host Chris Anderson that "there is" a 'Plan B,' before declining to elaborate on what that might entail.

Fox News host Tucker Carlson has [publicly suggested](#) Musk could call on those who want to help him "restore free speech" and "democratize" Twitter by buying Twitter shares and pledging their votes to support his takeover effort.

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Separate But Equal? Israeli Defense Minister Repeats Demand For Subservient Palestinian 'Entity'
BY - Wyatt Reed

The refusal by Benny Gantz to concede the possibility of a Palestinian state comes amid mounting anger over the Israeli siege of historic Al Aqsa mosque.

Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz once again rejected Palestinians' aspirations for national sovereignty Friday, saying in an interview with the podcast of Israeli outlet Walla that he sees "the need for a reality of two political entities," claiming such a step is necessary "so that the State of Israel has a security superiority in the entire region," [per Arab 48](#).

Gantz went on to call for a "separation" between the Jewish population and Christian and Muslim Palestinians that is "political, not geographic" and said that rather than "ruling the Palestinians," Israelis wanted to "concentrate on" being "a democracy—a safe and solely Jewish state." Under such a system, Middle East Monitor [reported](#), Gantz claimed 'Palestinian geographical integrity' would 'only be based on a transportation system that facilitates it.' Gantz's remarks largely escape scrutiny as they came amid the armed incursion by Israeli security forces on the historic Al Aqsa mosque which left hundreds of Palestinian worshippers injured and arrested Friday. However, the Defense Minister's rejection of Palestinian statehood is likely to only add to simmering tensions that analysts warn are in danger of reaching a boiling point amid the [IDF raid](#) on the world's second oldest mosque.

But it's not the first time Gantz has suggested any possible Palestinian "entity" would be dependent on Israel for security guarantees. [In February](#), Gantz explained why he'd adopted the phrase "two-entity solution" in place of "two-state solution".

"Two-state solution takes us to a former framework. It's a phrase that gives the illusion of [a return to] 1967 with the borderlines," an eventuality which Gantz insisted "cannot happen." The repeated rejection of Palestinian statehood by the Israeli Defense Minister is likely to only strengthen calls from more militant factions among the Palestinians, many of whom have long viewed a two-state solution as an increasingly remote possibility and are likely to see such

developments as further evidence that Palestinian statehood can only come at the expense of seemingly- ceaseless territorial ambitions of Israeli settlers.

Adding fuel to the fire, Gantz has also suggested that in the political process, Mahmoud Abbas, "the one who heads the Palestinian Authority, is the partner," and [threatened](#) that "whoever tries to fight the State of Israel will receive heavy blows from me."

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Johnson & Johnson Agrees to \$99Mln Settlement in West Virginia Opiates Lawsuit - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 18 (Sputnik) - The international pharmaceuticals giant Johnson & Johnson announced in a statement on Wednesday that it has agreed to a \$99 million settlement with the US state of West Virginia to resolve opioid-related claims against it.

"Johnson & Johnson and its US-based Janssen Pharmaceutical Companies today announced a settlement agreement with the State of West Virginia and its participating subdivisions resolving their opioid-related claims against the company," the statement said.

The agreement removes the company from an ongoing trial in Kanawha County, West Virginia, the statement said.

"The \$99 million settlement will directly support local community efforts to seek meaningful progress in addressing the opioid crisis in West Virginia ... [but] is not an admission of liability or wrongdoing and marks continued progress in resolving opioid-related claims and litigation by states, cities, counties, and other subdivisions in the United States," the statement added. Janssen no longer sells prescription opioid medications in the United States as part of its ongoing efforts to focus on transformational innovation, according to the statement.

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UN Security Council to Discuss Ukrainian Refugees on Tuesday – Source

UNITED NATIONS, April 18 (Sputnik) – The UN Security Council will convene on April 19 to discuss Ukrainian refugees during the ongoing conflict in the country, a diplomatic source told Sputnik on Monday.

The meeting is scheduled for 3:00 p.m. EST (19:00 GMT), the source said.

Earlier on Monday, Ukrainian border guard spokesman Andriy Demchenko said that most Ukrainian refugees will no longer be able to leave the country without international passports, and an exception can be made only for those who are fleeing regions hit by hostilities.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, more than 4.2 million people have fled Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation on February 24. Russia said it launched the operation after the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help in defending

themselves from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. Russia said it aims to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine.

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Ambassador Antonov Accuses US of Stealing Russian Money After Central Bank Assets Frozen

WASHINGTON, April 18 (Sputnik) - Russia's ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Antonov, has accused the United States of stealing Russian money in relation to sanctions, which include a freeze on the Russian central bank's assets in the West.

"You steal our money. We decided to keep our money, our savings [in US and European banks]. How is it possible to trust you?" he told Politico in an interview.

The diplomat noted that Moscow has "made a lot of mistakes on the international scene."

"We trusted the United States that we could become a real partner," he explained.

Moscow and Washington are still "doomed" to cooperate on a number of issues, Antonov added.

"It's impossible to imagine even under such circumstances that problems of strategic stability, climate change, coronavirus, fighting against terrorism, fighting against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction could be solved without active engagement of the United States and Russia," he stated.

Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine on February 24 in response to calls from the Donbas republics for help in countering intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only.

In response, the US and its allies have rolled out comprehensive sanctions, including export control measures, SWIFT cutoff for select banks, closure of airspace to all Russian flights, and a freeze of Russia's international reserves. Finance Minister Anton Siluanov estimated that about half, or \$300 billion of the country's foreign reserves, have been frozen.

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US to Co-Host Second Global COVID-19 Summit Online in May - White House

WASHINGTON, April 18 (Sputnik) –The United States will co-host the second virtual global COVID-19 summit on May 12 with Belize, Germany, Indonesia and Senegal as the chairs of CARICOM, G7, G20 and the African Union, respectively, the White House said on Monday. The first global COVID-19 summit was held virtually by the United States on September 22, 2021.

"The Summit will redouble our collective efforts to end the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for future health threats," the White House said in a statement.

The co-hosts are calling on the international community to make additional commitments to fight the global pandemic, including solutions to vaccinate the world and improve health security, the statement read.

The summit organizers plan to focus on joint efforts to provide more vaccines, deploy tests and treatments, especially for the highest-risk populations, and expand and protect the health workforce while minimizing disruptions to routine and essential health services.

They also emphasized the need to enhance access to medical research and development; increase and diversify local and regional manufacturing; and generate sustainable financing for pandemic preparedness.

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Senior US Delegation to Visit Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands This Week - NSC

WASHINGTON, April 18 (Sputnik) - US Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt Campbell and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink will lead a delegation this week to Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands, National Security Council spokeswoman Adrienne Watson said on Monday.

"The delegation—which will include representatives from the National Security Council, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the United States Agency for International Development—will seek to further deepen our enduring ties with the region and to advance a free, open, and resilient Indo-Pacific," she said.

In Hawaii, the officials will consult with military officials and regional partners at US Indo-Pacific Command, while In Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands, they will meet with senior government officials "to ensure our partnerships deliver prosperity, security, and peace across the Pacific Islands and the Indo-Pacific," Watson said.

"They will also meet with representatives of the Pacific Islands Forum, a critical driver of regional action, to discuss issues of importance to the Pacific as a whole," she concluded.

According to Watson, the trip builds on Secretary of State Antony Blinken's travel in February to the region, during which the US released the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US.

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Russian Tourism to US Won't Recover for At Least 2-3 Years - Sister Cities International

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) – Tourism from Russia to the United States is unlikely to rebound for at least the next two to three years due to visa issues and the absence of direct flights between the two countries, Chairman Emeritus of Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit Sister Cities International, Bill Boerum, told Sputnik.

"I do not expect any tourism in the US from Russia for the foreseeable future, at least 2-3 years, mainly because we have no flights from Russia to the US," Boerum, who is also a certified tourism ambassador and conducts tours to wineries in California, said.

Sanctions imposed by the US over Russia's special military operation in Ukraine have a negative impact on tourism, but major problems arose earlier, when Washington decided to cut the number of Russian diplomats in the US and the Kremlin retaliated, Boerum noted.

"Russians have a difficult time getting visas to come to the US with fewer places to have an interview. There are no consulates, you have to go to Moscow," he explained.

Boerum does not expect a significant number of tourists from Russia, calling the situation "unfortunate."

In April of 2021, Moscow banned the US embassy from hiring Russian citizens. It came after the US put sanctions on 32 Russian entities and individuals over alleged cyberattacks and other hostile acts, and ordered 10 Russian diplomats out of the country.

In May 2021, the US Embassy in Moscow suspended all non-diplomatic and non-immigrant visa services. The provision of consular services by American diplomats at the consulates in Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok has also been suspended.

Later, the US told more staffers of the Russian embassy and consulates to leave.

On March 1, 2022, the US announced a closure of its airspace to all Russian flights in response to the military operation in Ukraine.

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Many US Regions Maintain Ties With Russia Despite Political Tensions - Sister Cities Intl.

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - Many regions in the United States have decided to follow the recommendations issued by Sister Cities International (SCI) to maintain cooperation with their partners in Russia on a people-to-people level despite the current political tensions between the two countries, SCI Chairman Emeritus Bill Boerum told Sputnik.

"Our organization has a policy not to terminate or to suspend relationships because of political reasons. In that line, our President and CEO Leroy Allala gave a statement on March 1 in which he urged our member cities not to suspend or terminate relations with their Russian city partners," Boerum said.

SCI is a US-based global organization that has established more than 2,000 partnerships between cities in 146 countries. About 60 Russian and 70 US cities have so-called "sister relations."

On March 22, the SCI conducted a meeting with representatives of US regions that have sister relations with Russia.

"That was our Global Awareness Team, and the consensus of the people in the meeting was an agreement with our policy not to suspend these relationships," Boerum said.

While the SCI has its policy, the local authorities are not obliged to follow it and are free to make their own decisions.

Boerum expressed regret that some elected officials in the United States, including the governors of Maryland and Iowa, choose to take unilateral actions and terminate the existing relationships with the respective territories in Russia.

"They just made their own decisions without consulting anyone," Boerum said.

The relationships between sister cities and regions are established by city councils and in a number of cases they took up the issue, Boerum said.

"There are mixed results, but at least in 15 cases the local committees saved the relationships," he said. "I spoke in a couple of those meetings and urged to maintain relationships because they were built over many years and we do not get into political issues. We say, it is better to keep the people-to-people relationships. It is not really about governments, it is about people-to-people."

With respect to the potential economic and cultural impacts of severing relations between sister cities, Boerum said that it is simply a practical matter to maintain them given that Russians and Americans can not visit each other now due to recently implemented travel restrictions.

"I know that people in US and Russian cities continue keeping Zoom meetings. They also communicated by mail. I think it is a practical matter, because it will be difficult in the near term to have much activity or impact," he said, adding that many Russians and Americans hope to continue their relationships.

Asked to provide the best example of partner relations between the US and Russian regions, he said the decision by the local authorities of Roanoke, Virginia and Durham, North Carolina to keep all partnerships with Russia.

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US Energy Group Applauds Biden Lifting Drill Ban, Calls for Expediting Permit Approvals

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration decision to open up more federal land for oil and gas drilling is a welcome move but the US also needs to expedite permit approvals to boost domestic energy production, the American Exploration and Production Council (AXPC) said in a statement.

Earlier, the Biden administration said it will resume onshore oil and gas lease sales on public lands, reversing a ban imposed by President Joe Biden when he took office in January of 2021. The US will open up roughly 144,000 acres, which is an 80 percent reduction from the acreage originally requested by energy companies.

"While today's announcement is a step in the right direction, to really unleash American energy the Biden Administration should continue to hold ongoing lease sales pursuant to the Mineral Leasing Act, issue permits more expeditiously, and provide consistent regulatory certainty," AXPC CEO Anne Bradbury said in a statement on Friday with respect to the administration's decision to resume oil and gas lease sales on public land.

The AXPC explained that some leases are delayed because they await new leases to be issued within a development unit, because development units oftentimes include multiple leases.

"The vast majority of leases are actively producing oil and natural gas, and the remaining leases are going through a complex regulatory process - one the Administration could speed up," the release said.

The AXCP added that environmental reviews need to be completed before development on federal leases is allowed, which often takes years, and after the exploratory work and geological surveys, energy producers may determine that there is not enough recoverable oil and natural gas on the land.

However, the AXCP said the United States still benefits from leasing revenue paid on these leases throughout the duration of their term.

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UPDATE - Biden Admin. to Resume Onshore Oil, Gas Lease Sales on Public Lands - Interior Dept.

(Adds details in para 9, fixes typo in lede)

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is planning to resume onshore oil and gas lease sales on public lands following a suspension period that began in January of 2021, the US Interior Department said in a press release.

"Today the Department [of Interior] announced that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will post notices for significantly reformed onshore lease sales," the release said on Friday. "On Monday, the BLM will issue final environmental assessments and sale notices for upcoming oil and gas lease sales."

The new lease sales will include ensuring tribal consultation and broad community input, as well as a first-ever increase in the royalty rate to 18.75%, the release said.

The BLM is considering to lease acreage in Alabama, Colorado, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Utah and Wyoming, the release also said.

The Biden administration's move comes in spite of the fact that, according to the very Interior Department, the United States faces an urgent need to undercut greenhouse gas emissions and accelerate transition to a clean energy economy.

This announcement has already received some criticism from environmental organizations.

Thus, The Center for Biological Diversity argues that the resumption of lease sales for oil and gas is a direct violation of the promises made by President Joe Biden during the 2020 presidential race.

"The Bureau of Land Management announced today that it will resume oil and gas leasing on public lands, violating President Biden's campaign promise to end new oil and gas leasing and locking in new extraction that thwarts his pledge to reduce greenhouse gas emissions," the Center for Biological Diversity said.

The environmental organization believes that the Biden administration approved more drilling permits in 2021 than former US president Donald Trump did in the first year of his presidency. Meanwhile, according to NBC, industry experts estimated it would 6-12 months before new drilling on federal land would produce enough to bring down gas prices.

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"Today the Department [of Interior] announced that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will post notices for significantly reformed onshore lease sales," the release said on Friday. "On Monday, the BLM will issue final environmental assessments and sale notices for upcoming oil and gas lease sales."

The new lease sales will include ensuring tribal consultation and broad community input, as well as a first-ever increase in the royalty rate to 18.75%, the release said.

The BLM is considering to lease acreage in Alabama, Colorado, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Utah and Wyoming, the release also said.

The Biden administration's move comes in spite of the fact that, according to the very Interior department, the United States faces an urgent need to undercut greenhouse gas emissions and accelerate transition to a clean energy economy.

This announcement has already received some criticism from environmental organizations.

Thus, The Center for Biological Diversity argues that the resumption of lease sales for oil and gas is a direct violation of the promises made by President Joe Biden during the 2020 presidential race.

"The Bureau of Land Management announced today that it will resume oil and gas leasing on public lands, violating President Biden's campaign promise to end new oil and gas leasing and locking in new extraction that thwarts his pledge to reduce greenhouse gas emissions," the Center for Biological Diversity said.

The environmental organization believes that the Biden administration approved more drilling permits in 2021 than former US president Donald Trump did in the first year of his presidency.

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UPDATE - US Embassy in Jerusalem Urges All Parties to Refrain From Escalating Tensions (Adds new quote from State Department in paras 7-10)

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The US embassy in Israel called on all parties in the Middle East to refrain from escalating tensions amid recent clashes between the Israeli police and the Palestinians in Jerusalem as thousands gathered for prayers during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

"We are closely monitoring events in Jerusalem during this sacred holiday period for Jews, Muslims and Christians. We urge everyone from actions that further escalate tensions," the US embassy said in a statement on Friday.

Earlier on Friday, local media reported that more than 150 Palestinians were injured during clashes with Israeli police at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The police raided the mosque, which is the third holiest site in Islam, and used rubber bullets, noise bombs and tear gas to control the crowd.

The US embassy urged all parties to work jointly to ensure the enjoyment of religious holidays. "We encourage all parties to work together to ensure calm and the quiet enjoyment of all religious holidays," the statement said.

In the past several weeks, the security situation in Israel has deteriorated, including four terror attacks that resulted in the killing of 14 people.

Later in the day, State Department spokesperson Ned Price spoke more specifically about the situation.

"The United States is deeply concerned by the violence in Jerusalem today on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount," Price said in a statement. "We call on all sides to exercise restraint, avoid provocative actions and rhetoric, and preserve the historic status quo on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount."

The US urges Palestinian and Israeli officials to work cooperatively to lower tensions and ensure the safety of all, Price added.

The State Department also said the US will continue to be in close contact with senior Israeli and Palestinian officials on developments.

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Austin, German Defense Chief Discuss Efforts to Support Ukraine, Defend NATO - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin spoke by telephone with his German counterpart Christine Lambrecht and discussed the joint efforts to continue supporting Ukraine and defend NATO's eastern flank, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke with German Minister of Defense Christine Lambrecht to thank Germany for its continued strong commitment to providing critical defensive capabilities to Ukraine alongside other NATO Allies and partners. Secretary Austin and Minister Lambrecht discussed efforts to both help Ukraine and defend NATO territory along the Eastern Flank," Kirby said in a statement on Friday.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. Russia has said that the aim of the special operation is to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine and that it is targeting solely the country's military infrastructure.

The United States and its allies have responded by imposing comprehensive sanctions on Russia and by providing significant amount of lethal weapons to Kiev in the amount of multiple billions of dollars.

On Wednesday, President Joe Biden announced an additional \$800 million in military aid to Ukraine, which includes 18 155mm Howitzers, 40,00 shells, 300 Switchblade drones, 500

Javelin anti-armor missiles, 200 M113 armored personnel carriers and 16 Mi-17 helicopters, among other military equipment.

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US Intelligence Cannot Support Claims Russia Committing Genocide in Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) - The US intelligence agencies do not have information collected to support President Joe Biden's claims that Russia is allegedly committing genocide in Ukraine, NBC News reported citing senior Biden administration officials.

The report said on Friday that Biden administration officials have said US intelligence reports on Ukraine do not support Biden's claims that genocide is taking place in Ukraine.

A US intelligence official said in the report that genocide includes the goal of destroying an ethnic group or nation but so far that is not what they are seeing in Ukraine.

Biden has previously spoken emotionally about the actions of the Russian military more than once. On Tuesday, he used the word "genocide" to refer to the situation in Ukraine and its impact on the world.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded by saying Russia considers such allegations to be attempts to completely distort the situation on the ground and that they are unacceptable.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. Russia said that the aim of its operation is to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine and its activities are solely targeting the country's military infrastructure.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 16 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Mikhail Mizintsev, the head of the Russian Defense Ministry's National Defense Control Center, said on Friday that Ukrainian "militants" have detained over 830 people in the Lyman city in Donbas, adding that they are accused of being pro-Russian.

* Russia has sent a note over providing military assistance to Ukraine to all countries, including the United States, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told Sputnik .

* Russian forces have intercepted two Tochka-U missiles fired by the Ukrainian military at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov said.

RUSSIA EXPELS EU DIPLOMATS

* Russia has declared 18 employees of the European Union's mission in Moscow personae non gratae, the Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

* The European Union deplores the expulsion of diplomats from the EU diplomatic mission in Moscow, the European External Action Service said in a statement.

ENERGY MARKETS

* Gazprom's exports to non-CIS countries decreased by 26.4% year-on-year to 44.6 billion cubic meters in the first three and a half months of 2022, the company said.

* Over the past winter, Europe withdrew 51 billion cubic meters of gas from underground storage, that is, 107.8% of the volume pumped there in summer, ending the season on March 19 at one of the lowest levels in terms of reserves in many years, Gazprom said.

INTERNATIONAL RESTRICTIONS RELATED TO RUSSIA, BELARUS

* Vessels under the Russian flag will be banned from entering Belgian ports starting April 17 due to EU sanctions, and the document has already been prepared, a spokesman for the economy minister's office said on Friday.

* Belarus is banning the entry of cars and tractors, registered in the European Union, across the border of the Eurasian Economic Union, the Transport Ministry said.

TENSIONS IN JERUSALEM

* The US embassy in Israel on Friday called on all parties in the Middle East to refrain from escalating tensions amid recent clashes between the Israeli police and the Palestinians in Jerusalem as thousands gathered for prayers during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

* The Turkish Foreign Ministry condemned the actions of the Israeli security forces in Palestine and expressed deep concern about rising tensions in the Middle East.

* Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian has condemned the actions of the Israeli police in the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and expressed his support for the Hamas movement, the Iranian Foreign Ministry said.

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Biden, First Lady Report Joint Gross Income of \$610,702 in 2021 - White House

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden have reported a joint gross income of \$610,702 in 2021 and paid \$150,439 in federal income tax, the White House said on Friday.

"Today, the President and First Lady released their 2021 federal income tax return," the White House said in a press release. "The President and First Lady filed their income tax return jointly and reported federal adjusted gross income of \$610,702. They paid \$150,439 in federal income tax, and their 2021 effective federal income tax rate is 24.6 percent."

In 2021, the Bidens spent \$17,394 for charity contributions, including providing \$5,000 to the Beau Biden Foundation, the release said.

US Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband Douglas Emhoff reported a joint gross income of \$1,655,563 and paid \$523,371 in federal tax income while contributing \$22,100 to charity in 2021, the release added.

It was not until Richard Nixon, the 37th President of the United States, that incumbent US presidents started to make public their tax returns. The only exceptions to date have been Donald Trump and Gerald Ford.

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NASA Fails 3rd Fuel Loading Test on Artemis I Rocket, May Reattempt on April 21 - Official

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - NASA failed a third fuel loading rehearsal on the unmanned Artemis I moon rocket system this week but may reattempt another test on April 21 if possible, Artemis Mission Manager Mike Sarafin said on Friday.

"We are preserving the option to reattempt the wet dress [rehearsal] as early as next week, Thursday [April] the 21 is kind of the earliest time that the team is comfortable doing that," Sarafin said.

During the third attempt, engineers encountered some issues with the cryogenic loading operations on the hydrogen and liquid oxygen side, Sarafin said.

Moreover, while engineers were working to address the issues with cryogenic loading operations, they also discovered a liquid hydrogen leak on the tail service mast unit.

The previous wet dress rehearsal last week was suspended after a faulty valve controlling helium flow was identified, but the issue had been dealt with, according to the the Artemis mission flight director.

The Artemis program was created to establish a sustainable presence on the Moon to prepare for missions to Mars.

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US, Russian Spacefarers Share Meals, Movies at Weekends on Space Station - Astronaut

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - US astronauts and Russian cosmonauts currently serving together on the International Space Station (ISS) continue to enjoy warm personal relations and cooperation, and they share meals and movies together at weekends, NASA commander Tom Marshburn told a press conference from the orbiting platform on Friday.

"There is open traffic between the US/ESA (European Space Agency) and Russian segments [of the ISS]," Marshburn said. "On weekends, we usually have a meal together [and] usually watch a movie together."

The astronauts and cosmonauts meet every day personally and continue to work and cooperate smoothly together, Marshburn said.

"We go over every day: [It is a] very collegial, very friendly relationship. We rely on each other for our survival. It is a dangerous environment: We are all up here for the same purpose - to explore and keep performing the science ... It has been a real pleasure working with our colleagues [the Russian cosmonauts]," he said.

The smooth cooperation was the continuation of a now almost 40 year history of US and Soviet/Russian human cooperation in space, Marshburn reminded his audience.

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Zelenskyy Urges Biden to Designate Russia as State Sponsor of Terrorism - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy spoke by telephone with US President Joe Biden and urged him to designate and sanction Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism, the Washington Post reported on Friday.

Zelensky made a direct appeal to Biden to designate Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism - a designation that allows to imposes some of the most significant sanctions at the US disposal, the report said.

The United States did not even sanction the Soviet Union under the such designation despite Moscow's support in the 1970s and 1980s for groups that could be considered terrorist actors, the report said.

Designating Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism would allow imposing additional sanctions, including imposing further restrictions on the ability of Russia to do business with other countries, freezing Russian assets and prohibiting an array of dual-use exports, the report added.

Cuba, North Korea, Iran and Syria are the four countries currently designated by the US government as state sponsors of terrorism, according to the report.

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Two Ukrainian Neptune Missiles Hit, Sunk Russian Guided Missile Cruiser Moskva - Pentagon
WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The Russian guided missile cruiser Moskva was hit by two Ukrainian anti-ship missiles in the Black Sea that eventually caused the vessel to sink, a senior US Defense Department official said on Friday.

"We can confirm the Russian ship Moskva was struck by two Ukrainian Neptune missiles," the official said in a statement.

On Thursday, the Russian Defense Ministry said the guided missile cruiser Moskva was damaged in a fire and ammunition explosion and sunk during stormy weather on its way to the port of Sevastopol for repairs.

The incident took place on Wednesday while Moskva was operating in the northern part of the Black Sea and experienced a heavy fire and ammunition detonations. All the crew members were safely evacuated and the cause of the fire is currently being investigated.

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

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Twitter Adopts 'Poison Pill' Plan to Prevent Hostile Takeover by Musk

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Twitter announced on Friday that its board of directors adopted a shareholder rights plan that would reduce the likelihood that any person, entity or group would be able to gain full control over the company without paying a premium.

On Thursday, Musk filed an offer with the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to purchase 100% of Twitter for \$54.20 per share, valuing the company at \$43 billion. Musk is currently Twitter's second largest shareholder, having purchased 9.2% of the company earlier in April. Only Vanguard owns a larger percentage at 10.29%, according to an April 8 SEC filing. "The Board adopted the Rights Plan following an unsolicited, non-binding proposal to acquire Twitter," the company said in a press release. "The Rights Plan... will reduce the likelihood that any entity, person or group gains control of Twitter through open market accumulation without paying all shareholders an appropriate control premium or without providing the Board sufficient time to make informed judgments and take actions that are in the best interests of shareholders."

Musk said during a TED Talk forum that there was an alternative plan to take over the company if his offer was rejected. However, he also expressed doubts about whether he would be able to complete the acquisition.

As one of Twitter's most-prolific users, Musk said his main concern is with the platform's overreach in moderating content and censorship. In March, he tweeted out a poll that asked Twitter users whether the site adhered to the principle of free speech.

"Given that Twitter serves as the de facto public town square, failing to adhere to free speech principles fundamentally undermines democracy," he said. "What should be done?"

He subsequently declared himself a "free speech absolutist."

Twitter said its rights plan will expire on April 14, 2023. It also said more details would be provided in an 8K to be filed with the SEC.

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South Carolina Inmate Chooses Execution by Firing Squad Over Electric Chair - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - South Carolina death row inmate Richard Moore has decided to be executed by firing squad instead of electric chair despite legally objecting to both forms of execution, local news outlet The State reported on Friday.

Moore, a 57-year old who has spent the last 21 years on death row for a murder committed during a convenience store robbery in 1999, was forced by the court to pick between the two options due to the inaccessibility of the drugs used for lethal injection.

"I believe this election is forcing me to choose between two unconstitutional methods of execution, and I do not intend to waive any challenges to electrocution or firing squad by making an election," Moore reportedly said in a statement accompanying the decision.

Moore chose to be executed by a firing squad because he more strongly opposes execution by electrocution, the statement said. The firing squad will consist of three volunteers.

Moore is scheduled to be executed on April 19 in the first execution in South Carolina since 2011. However, attorneys representing Moore continue to challenge South Carolina's execution methods, arguing that they cannot retroactively apply the firing squad option to his case, since it was only allowed by state law starting in 2021.

Moore's attorneys in court filings have also called both the electric chair and firing squads "antiquated, barbaric methods of execution."

The state law was passed in 2021 due to an inability to obtain the drugs necessary for lethal injection executions. Pharmaceutical manufacturers in recent years have been reluctant to provide states with the drugs.

South Carolina is one of four states in the United States that offers death row inmates the option of execution by firing squad. There are 35 men currently on death row in South Carolina.

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US Industrial Production Up 0.9% in March, Second Month in Row - Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - US industrial production grew by 0.9% for a second month in a row in March while expanding at almost twice the pace from a year ago in the first quarter amid brisk manufacturing and factory activity, the Federal Reserve said on Friday.

"Total industrial production advanced 0.9 percent in March and rose at an annual rate of 8.1 percent for the first quarter," the central bank said in a statement. In the first quarter of 2021, industrial grew by an annual rate of 4.4%.

Breaking down the expansion in the Industrial Production Index, or IPI, the Federal Reserve said there was a 0.9% gain in the output of manufacturing; 7.8% in motor vehicles and parts; and 0.4% in both factory and utility performance.

The IPI data follows Friday's announcement by the New York division of the Federal Reserve that manufacturing in New York State, a bellwether of US industrial performance, rebounded in April from three weak months after a surge in customer orders and fulfillment as the economy continues recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

New York's Empire State Manufacturing Index jumped 36 points to 24.6 in April, after a slide of 11.8 points in March, the New York Federal Reserve's survey showed. Economists polled by US media had forecast the manufacturing index to show just one point in the positive for April, making the survey's results a blowout to expectations.

After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by COVID-19 measures, the US economy expanded by 5.7% in 2021, growing at its fastest pace since 1982. For this year though, growth is forecast at a more modest 2.8% by the Federal Reserve due to inflationary pressure, which has also been expanding at its fastest since the 1980s.

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State Dept. Says 'Possible' Ukraine Crisis May Last Through Year End, Trying to Shorten It

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that it is possible that the conflict in Ukraine may last through the end of the year, and is doing its utmost to shorten it, State Department spokesman Ned Price told CNN.

Earlier in the day, CNN reported, citing sources, that Secretary of State Antony Blinken told EU allies that the United States believes Russia's military operation in Ukraine may last through the end of 2022.

"It is possible," Price said when asked whether the Ukraine conflict could continue through the end of the year. "What we are trying to do is to shorten this conflict."

Price noted that they believe that they can shorten it by strengthening Ukraine's position at the negotiating table, providing security assistance, and pressuring Russia with sanctions.

"Ultimately, a diplomatic agreement can be achieved to bring this senseless violence and aggression to an end," the spokesman said.

Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine on February 24 in response to calls from the Donbas republics for help in countering intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only, but later accused Ukrainian forces of using typical terrorist methods, such as hiding behind civilians and positioning weapons systems in civilian areas.

The US and its allies have responded with comprehensive sanctions on Moscow and lethal aid to Kiev. On Wednesday, President Joe Biden announced an additional \$800 million in military aid to Ukraine, which includes 18 155mm Howitzers, 40,00 shells, 300 Switchblade drones, 500 Javelin anti-armor missiles, 200 M113 Armored Personnel Carriers, and 11 Mi-17 helicopters among other military equipment.

It comes on top of the \$1.7 billion in military aid already provided to Ukraine since the beginning of Russia's operation.

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US Has Not Determined Any Need to Change Nuclear Posture At Present - State Dept

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The United States has assessed that it does not need to change its nuclear posture at the present time, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"We are constantly monitoring Russia's nuclear posture," Price said. "At this time, we haven't felt, we haven't determined any need to change our own nuclear posture but this is something that we are continuing to take a very close look at."

On Thursday, CIA Director William Burns said President Joe Biden is deeply concerned about avoiding a third world war as well as avoiding the threshold in which a nuclear conflict becomes possible amid Russia's special operation in Ukraine.

Burns pointed out that although Russia has ordered its forces to be a high nuclear alert level, the United States has so far not seen a lot of practical evidence of the kind of deployments or military dispositions that would reinforce that concern.

However, the CIA is monitoring the situation very carefully and no one takes lightly the threat posed by a potential resort to tactical nuclear weapons or low yield nuclear weapons, Burns added.

US media reported that the White House has assembled a team of security officials to develop response plans for the United States and its allies in case Russia uses weapons of mass destruction in Ukraine. The response team was established by US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan's memorandum in February, four days after the start of Russia's special operation in Ukraine.

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First Flight With New US Military Aid for Ukraine to Arrive Within 24 Hours - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The first plane with new US military aid for Ukraine is expected to arrive in the region within the next 24 hours, CNN reported on Friday, citing a senior US Defense Department official.

The arms will arrive at the border of Ukraine, where the Ukrainians are expected to pick them up and deliver them to the country, the official said.

On Wednesday, President Joe Biden said the United States considers sending Humvee armored vehicles and sophisticated military equipment as part of the new aid package worth \$750 million. The package includes 300 Switchblade drone-missiles, 500 Javelin anti-tank missiles, 200 M113 armored vehicles as well as 16 Mi-17s helicopters.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. Russia said its special operation is targeting only Ukraine's military infrastructure. In response, the United States and its allies have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia and intensified supplying the Ukrainian military with lethal weapons.

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Russia's Warnings Will Not Dissuade US From Boosting Military Aid to Kiev - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Russia's statements about risks of increasing US military aid to Ukraine will not force Washington to change its position on the issue, State Department spokesman Ned Price told CNN on Friday.

"We have an obligation to continue to do what we are doing to support our Ukrainian partners, we are going to continue to do that. The Russians said some things privately, they said some things publicly - nothing will dissuade us from the strategy we embarked on," Price said.

Earlier in the day, The Washington Post reported that Moscow has sent a note to Washington, warning that NATO arms supplies to Kiev are exacerbating the Ukraine conflict and can lead to unpredictable consequences.

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Biden's Approval Rating at Lowest Point of Any US Presidents - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The approval rating of US President Joe Biden has hit the lowest point of any president before him after a year and three months in office, CNN reported on Friday, citing its own analysis of this week's polling data.

The new polling data released this week revealed that Biden's approval rating is ranging from the low thirties to the low forties. The lower end of the range (33%) was announced by Quinnipiac University, while the CBS/YouGov reported the most optimistic assessment (42%) of Biden's performance as president, the report said.

Biden is in a "lot of trouble" as three of the four pollsters this week showed the lowest tier numbers for Biden, the report said.

Moreover, at this point in his presidency, former US President Donald Trump's average approval rating at 42% is one point higher than Joe Biden's 41% at this point in his presidency, the report added.

The Biden administration today is dealing with a range of issues and challenges, including galloping inflation, surging crime, millions of illegal immigrants and aggressive foreign policy. At the same time, the US president is in no hurry to take responsibility for the negative phenomena in the economy and has already managed to repeatedly blame Russian leader Vladimir Putin for all the troubles that have fallen on the United States over the past several months.

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New York State Manufacturing Index Surges in April From 3-Month Slide - Federal Reserve

NEW YORK, April 15 (Sputnik) - Manufacturing in New York State, a bellwether for US industrial performance, has rebounded from three weak months to a strong April as rapid economic growth leads to a surge in customer orders and fulfillment, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York said in its Empire State Manufacturing Survey.

"After three months of sluggishness, manufacturing activity picked up significantly in New York State," a statement on the April 4-11 survey said on Friday. "Plans for capital and technology spending were solid."

The general business conditions sub-index of the Empire State Manufacturing Index jumped 36 points to 24.6, after a slide of 11.8 points in March, the survey said.

Economists polled by US media had forecast the manufacturing index to show just one point in the positive for April, making the survey's results a blowout to expectations.

But not all about the April survey was positive though. While new orders and shipments grew strongly, unfilled orders increased and delivery times lengthened, though at a slower pace than in recent months. Inventories also rose.

Labor market indicators, meanwhile, pointed to a small increase in employment and the average workweek, reflective of the tight employment market across the United States.

However, most material was the outlook for the six months ahead, which was steeped in caution as the survey's respondents expressed concerns about runaway inflation in an economy struggling with the worst price hikes in 40 years that cast a pall on economic growth that was also at its best since the 1980s.

"The index for future business conditions fell twenty-one points to 15.2, its lowest level since early in the pandemic," the survey said. It added that "longer delivery times, higher prices, and increases in employment are all expected in the months ahead," even as capital spending plans remained firm.

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

Inflation has expanded at an even faster pace. The Consumer Price Index expanded by 7% in the year to December and 8.5% in the 12 months to March, both also at their fastest in four decades.

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Blinken Tells EU Russia's Operation in Ukraine May Last Through End of 2022 - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken told EU allies that the United States believes Russia's military operation in Ukraine may last through the end of 2022, CNN reported on Friday, citing sources.

Blinken has reportedly shared with his counterparts his "concern" that the conflict could be "protracted," noting that "all of his engagements have revolved around how best to bring it to a halt as quickly as possible."

Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine on February 24 in response to calls from the Donbas republics for help in countering intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only, but later accused Ukrainian forces of using typical terrorist methods, such as hiding behind civilians and positioning weapons systems in civilian areas.

The US and its allies have responded with comprehensive sanctions on Moscow and lethal aid to Kiev. On Wednesday, President Joe Biden announced an additional \$800 million in military aid to Ukraine, which includes 18 155mm Howitzers, 40,00 shells, 300 Switchblade drones, 500 Javelin anti-armor missiles, 200 M113 Armored Personnel Carriers, and 11 Mi-17 helicopters among other military equipment.

It comes on top of the \$1.7 billion in military aid already provided to Ukraine since the beginning of Russia's operation.

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US Wants China to Pay 'Greater Price' for Its Actions Around World - Senator

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The United States wants China to pay a "greater price" for Beijing's actions around the world, including its alleged support of Russia and cyberattacks on Taiwan, US Senator Lindsey Graham said on Friday.

Graham is currently visiting Taiwan as part of a delegation of six US lawmakers, headed by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Menendez. The delegation arrived in Taiwan on an unannounced visit for talks with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and National Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng.

"We're going to start making China pay a greater price for what they're doing all over the world. The support for [Russian President Vladimir] Putin has come with a price. The never-ending cyber-attacks on your economy and your people by the Communist Chinese needs to come with a price," Graham said during a meeting with President Tsai Ing-wen.

Chinese Ministry of National Defense spokesperson Wu Qian said on Friday that US lawmakers' visit to Taiwan is severely undercutting the foundation of relations between China and the United States.

Speculations about the US lawmakers' visit have circulated over the past couple of weeks, with the visit initially anticipated last weekend. However, the delegation's visit was postponed after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

China has repeatedly criticized the United States for maintaining official contacts with Taiwan, saying such actions infringe on China's sovereignty and territorial integrity and provoke instability in the region.