

**4/25/22 Monday**

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UN Pledges Probe of Killing of At least 168 in Sudan's West Darfur, Attributed to Janjaweed Militia

While Sudan's Darfur region is severely economically depressed and underdeveloped, its high concentration of copper and uranium deposits has made it a subject of great interest by Western extraction-minded politicians.

The Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Sudan and the Head of the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), Volker Perthes, has called for an end to the violence in Sudan's West Darfur region and an "in-depth and transparent investigation, the results of which should be made public and help to identify the perpetrators of violence and bring them to justice."

UNITAMS said in [a Sunday statement](#) that Volker "deplores the heinous killings of civilians in Kereneik, West Darfur as well as the attacks on health facilities" and "calls for an immediate end to the violence."

"The UN reminds the authorities and armed groups of their international legal obligation to protect all civilians, and civilian infrastructure, including health facilities, schools and water systems," UNITAMS added. "SRSG Perthes takes note of the measures taken today by the Sudanese Armed Forces in this regard, which included a commitment to evacuate injured civilians and calls for the acceleration of the deployment of the joint security keeping forces as per the Juba Peace Agreement."

The 2020 deal, signed in the South Sudanese capital of Juba, [aimed to resolve decades of conflicts](#) with the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF) in Darfur, as well as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement – North (SPLM-N) in South Kordofan and Southern Blue Nile regions. Despite the peace treaty, [violence has continued](#), as not all active militant groups were included in the accords and much of Sudan remains in dire need of economic support.

At the same time, [western Sudan also has](#) the third-largest copper and the fourth-largest uranium deposits worldwide, and it produces two-thirds of the highest quality gum Arabic in the world - a major ingredient in Coke and Pepsi sodas.

Earlier on Sunday, Adam Regal, a spokesperson for the General Coordination for Refugees and Displaced in Darfur, [said that at least 168](#) people had been killed since violence erupted on Thursday.

[According to Africa News](#), the violence started in the Krink region, where Arab nomads set upon Massalit communities with fire and heavy weapons, driving thousands from their homes. In the provincial capital of Genena, homes were set on fire and hospitals were attacked and looted. Rights groups said the violence was started by an Arab militia called the Janjaweed, a nomadic group long at odds with the region's settled populations over scarce food and water supplies. In the early 2000s, they were the principal force implicated in the genocide in Darfur against the Massalit as well as the Fur and Zaghawa tribes. By 2013, the [UN had estimated](#) that 300,000

people had been killed, while many more were wounded or raped, and more than 1 million were displaced by the violence.

That same year, the Janjaweed became part of the Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary force controlled by the Sudanese government. Since its formation it has been commanded by [General](#) Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, better known as Hemedti, who has been deputy chairman of the interim Sudanese government since longtime ruler Omar al-Bashir was overthrown in April 2019.

Despite the popular democratic revolution, the Sudanese military has held onto power, in large part by [using the Janjaweed against protesters](#). In October 2021, the head of the Sovereignty Council, Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, forced the civilian Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok from power, reigniting the [massive democratic movement](#). Dozens have been killed by police in clashes in almost every major Sudanese city in the months since.

Before Bashir's overthrow, he also sent some 10,000 Janjaweed fighters to serve under Saudi command in the Riyadh-led war in Yemen against the Houthi movement. [Used as shock troops](#) in Houthi-controlled cities, the Janjaweed have suffered heavy losses in Yemen.

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Twitter Reportedly Restricts Dutch Politician Geert Wilders for Calling Islam 'Intolerant Ideology'

Twitter has temporarily restricted the account of Geert Wilders, a right-wing politician who leads the country's Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom), after posting a tweet violating its rules against Islamophobia.

Wilders apparently drew the wrath of Twitter moderators after responding to a tweet by Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, who leads the center-right Pakistani Muslim League.

"You know what hurts Prime Minister @CMShehbaz, is the violence of the intolerant ideology called Islam, the fatwa's and death threats by people from [Pakistan], who are inspired by the fake prophet [Mohammad]. We always choose freedom over Mohammedanism. And you'll never win," the tweet read, Wilders told [Dutch news site RTL Nieuws](#).

Wilders said that he got a notification from Twitter saying if he deleted the offending tweet, he would get access to his account within 12 hours. However, the PVV leader has appealed Twitter's decision, with his account remaining suspended until the company rules on his appeal, he said.

The offending tweet is no longer visible. Wilders' account hasn't tweeted anything since April 20, when he retweeted an op-ed by him in which he lamented the years he has lived under police guard due to the many death threats made against him by Muslims offended by his anti-Islam positions. Wilders has called for banning the Quran, mosques, and Muslim immigration to the Netherlands, and compared the Islamic holy book to Nazi leader Adolf Hitler's antisemitic treatise Mein Kampf.

Twitter has not publicly commented on the reported suspension.

In 2020, Twitter [outlined a new policy](#) of "Countering anti-Muslim hatred" on the platform and has temporarily suspended several prominent accounts since then, including a [cartoon posted](#)

[by India's ruling](#) Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that showed Muslim men being hanged, and a [tweet by Spain's right-wing Vox Party](#) falsely claiming that Muslim men from North Africa are responsible for virtually all calls to police in Spain.

The sequence of events with Wilders has taken place during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, as well as [rising violence](#) between Jews and Muslims in Israel, centering on Israeli police [raiding al-Aqsa mosque](#) in East Jerusalem.

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### US Marine Corps Declares Delayed Heavy-Lift King Stallion Helicopter Operational

After years of delays, Sikorsky's CH-53K King Stallion helicopter has been declared operational by the US Marine Corps (USMC). The heavy-lift chopper is expected to play a key role in the Corps' restructuring plan directing it away from the heavy land-based combat of the early 21st century.

Lt. Gen. Mark Wise, the USMC's deputy commandant for aviation, announced on Monday that the King Stallion had completed its initial operational test and evaluation (IOT&E) period, with more than 3,000 mishap-free hours of flying.

"My full confidence in the CH-53K's ability to execute the heavy-lift mission is the result of successful developmental and operational testing conducted by Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (HX) 21 and Marine Operational Test and Evaluation Squadron (VMX) 1," Wise [said in a news release](#).

The ultra-powerful helicopter is an improvement over the CH-54E Super Stallion, boasting redesigned engines that produce 57% more horsepower with 63% fewer parts. It can lift a maximum weight of 27,000 pounds up to 110 nautical miles - about three times what its predecessor was capable of. Hovering, the King Stallion has proven capable of [lifting 36,000 pounds](#).

The Super Stallion is itself an upgraded version of the Sea Stallion helicopter, which first flew nearly a half-century ago and has filled a wide variety of roles since, ranging from submarine hunter to cargo hauler and search and rescue missions.

However, the King Stallion's path to operational status has been fraught with delays, thanks to [several design flaws](#) that required correction, including the engine ingesting its own exhaust, a short life span for parts of the main rotor gearbox, and deficiencies with its tail rotor and driveshaft.

The [most recent estimate](#), in June 2021, suggested the price for each King Stallion could be \$125 million - almost 1.5 times the cost of the infamously expensive F-35 stealth fighter. Still, that's lower than the [\\$138 million per helo](#) anticipated in 2018.

That heavy lifting power is vital to the Pentagon's plans for restructuring the Marine Corps. First pitched two years ago, the plan now known as "[Force Design 2030](#)" calls for [reorienting the USMC away](#) from the heavy land-based combat in which it was often used during the US War on Terror, and toward an amphibious and naval role. The pivot has accompanied Washington's shift toward great power competition with Russia and China, and the USMC's new role is ideal

for facing China's numerically superior naval force and [operations on the strings of islands](#) off the east coast of Asia.

The early stages of those operations, according to the Corps, would include what it calls Expeditionary Advance Base Operations (EASO), an extension of the Forward Operating Base (FOB) concept applied to amphibious warfare. Mobile anti-ship and anti-air missile systems, hoisted by King Stallion helicopters, would be lifted off warships like the USMC's amphibious assault ships and carried to shore on the islands, [quickly setting up "no go zones"](#) for Chinese aircraft and warships.

Earlier this month, Col. Jack Perrin, the heavy-lift helicopter program manager at Naval Air Systems Command, [told reporters](#) that the King Stallion is expected to enter full-rate production at Sikorsky by fiscal year 2023. According to the UMSC release, the Corps plans to deploy the first CH-53K Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) detachment the following year.

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'Catastrophic' US Sanctions on Afghanistan Hit Women, Children Hardest - UN

A group of United Nations human rights experts condemned the ongoing economic sanctions against Afghanistan by the United States, blaming them for an "epic humanitarian crisis on the verge of a development catastrophe."

"We are gravely concerned about the growing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, which puts at serious risk the lives of more than half of the country's population, with disproportionate impact on women and children," the [Monday statement reads](#).

"While gender-based violence has been a long-standing and severe threat to women and girls, it has been exacerbated by the measures imposed by the US, together with the drought and widening gender-based discrimination adopted by the de facto authorities," it added.

Some of the experts who drafted the statement included Alena Douhan, the UN Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of the unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights; Reem Alsalem, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences; Saad Alfaragi, and Special Rapporteur on the right to development.

The experts noted that US policies have seriously exacerbated the Central Asian country's humanitarian crisis since August 2021, when the Taliban\* seized power amid a messy US withdrawal. Not the least of those policies is the freezing of \$7 billion in foreign assets owned by Da Afghanistan Bank, Kabul's central bank, [some \\$3.5 billion of which](#) Washington has kept explicitly for payouts to victims of terrorism in the United States.

"We note with concern the provisions in Section 3 of the Presidential [Executive Order no. 14064](#), which prohibits 'any transaction that evades or avoids, has the purpose of evading or avoiding, causes a violation of, or attempts to violate any of the prohibitions' and 'any conspiracy formed to violate any of the prohibitions set forth in this order,'" the experts said. "Such overly broad formulations may exacerbate the climate of uncertainty among relevant actors, including banks, businesses and humanitarian donors, resulting in over-zealous

compliance with sanctions thus preventing people of Afghanistan from any access to basic humanitarian goods," they added.

After the Taliban takeover, almost all \$8.5 billion in international aid to Afghanistan was canceled, equivalent to [43% of its gross domestic product](#) (GDP). In the months since, only a small fraction of that has returned, with the US saying it refuses to support the Taliban government.

In late March, [a damning report](#) from the Afghan Ministry of Public Health revealed the scope of Afghanistan's economic collapse: 13,700 children newborns had died of hunger and malnutrition-related diseases since the start of the year. Further, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator [Ramiz Alakbarov said](#) in a March 15 statement that "a staggering 95% of the population is not eating enough food, with that percentage rising to almost 100% for female-headed households."

The Afghan population is roughly 39 million, [including 2.6 million](#) who fled the country as refugees.

"It is a figure so high that it is almost inconceivable. Yet, devastatingly, it is the harsh reality," he said. Alakbarov is also deputy head of the UN assistance mission, UNAMA.

As a result, poor Afghan women have turned to selling their children and prostituting themselves, despite harsh bans on sex work.

"I heard the news on the TV that people are selling their children. It had been more than a week that we didn't have any food or money. That is when I decided to sell my youngest daughter," Hawa, a 30-year-old, widowed mother of four from Kabul's Dasht-e-Barchi district, [told Nikkei Asia](#) in early April.

"Who likes to do this work?" said Zeba, a widow in Kabul who engages in prostitution to feed her family of six. "But my landlord threatened me that if I didn't pay the rent, already due for two to three months, he would throw me out. My kids hadn't eaten good food in days, and they sometimes asked for shoes or new books. It is for their happiness that I decided to earn money in whichever way possible."

"I didn't tell anyone, not even my kids," Zeba said. "I tell them that I get money from begging. If my brother ever finds out that I do this work, he will kill me."

The Taliban originally came to power in 1996, triumphing in the chaos of the collapse of the Soviet-backed People's Republic of Afghanistan. The Islamist group instituted one of the world's harshest interpretations of Sharia, effectively banning women from public life, and allowed al-Qaeda shelter in the country, from which it planned the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the US.

In the invasion launched by the US weeks after the terrorist bombings that killed 3,000 Americans, the Taliban was forced from power in Kabul, but regrouped in the Afghan countryside and waged an insurgency war against the US and the new US-backed Afghan government. By the time the US and the Taliban arrived at a peace deal in February 2020, [some 241,000 people](#) had been killed in the war, 71,300 of whom have been identified as civilians by experts. Another 360,000 people are believed to have [died due to indirect causes](#) of the war, such as shortages of medicine, stresses caused by the conflict or being a refugee, or illnesses caused by food and water shortages or spoilage.

In the final months of the US occupation, as its troops began to withdraw from the country, the Taliban launched a new offensive that quickly crushed the US-backed government in Kabul, bringing the Taliban back to power several weeks before the US had even left.

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Couple Found Dead With Children Told Police They Were Being Followed - Reports  
By - Ian DeMartino

Aschod Ewing-Meeks and his girlfriend Ashton Brown, both 26, were found dead with their two children, Bella, 4 and Brixx, 8 months, on April 18 after a passerby saw smoke emanating from their windows and alerted the fire department.

Earlier that day, at 12:11pm, the couple and their two children [were captured](#) on surveillance cameras in the Davie County Sheriff's office, media reported.

They allegedly asked a receptionist if they could speak to a deputy but would not specify the reason for their visit. The receptionist gave them a number they could call if they felt they were in danger. They left the premises just four minutes later.

Not long after, Ashton Brown called 911 and again asked to speak to a deputy. A deputy called her back and she immediately handed the phone to Ewing-Meeks. The two had a series of 30 second to two minute phone calls during which Ewing-Meeks refused to provide a location where they could meet up or return to the Sheriff's office. It was then Ewing-Meeks told the deputy that he believed they were being followed.

Ewing-Meeks then stopped answering the deputy's calls with two subsequent attempts to contact the couple going straight to voicemail.

Neighbors would later report that they saw the couple fighting outside of their home around 2pm, shortly before the fire was reported to authorities.

Police believe Ewing-Meeks shot and killed his girlfriend and two children before setting fire to the house and turning the gun on himself. He was found dead with the suspected murder weapon still in his hand.

The case is being treated as a murder-suicide. At a press conference last Wednesday, Davie County Sheriff J.D. Hartman said it was among the most disturbing crime scenes he has experienced.

"I've seen a lot in 30 years but children, and especially children that are killed by gunshots and burned, is pretty heinous," Sheriff Hartman said. "[This case was] close to one of the worst if not the worst."

The investigation is ongoing.

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## Mike Tyson Says He Is Ready to Fight Jake Paul By - Ian DeMartino

Mike Tyson has only fought once in the past sixteen years. Jake Paul rose to fame as a YouTube star but has since won five fights on pay-per-view.

On a special "4/20" episode of his podcast "Hotboxin," former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson said he is ready to fight Jake Paul, aiming to break the record for pay-per-view buys with the YouTube star turned professional boxer.

"Hell yeah, only to break the record," Tyson said about the potential bout. The current pay-per-view record was headlined by the 2015 Floyd Mayweather vs Manny Pacquiao fight that drew 4.6 million pay-per-view buys.

"Let's do it Jakey," the former baddest man on the planet said.

Tyson, other than [punching a fan](#) who was allegedly harassing him on a plane last week, was last seen in action in an exhibition match against fellow boxing legend Roy Jones Jr. in November 2020. That match ended in a draw and was co-headlined with Jake Paul's fight against former NBA star Nate Robinson, a match that Paul won.

Tyson and Paul have become friends recently and were spotted partying in St. Barts. In January, multiple reports came out that Tyson and Paul's teams had [been in discussions](#) for a potential fight, but nothing came of it. Tyson said "It's all love" between him and Paul.

Paul has made a name for himself by fighting in and usually winning gimmick matches against athletes who are not boxers. He last fought former UFC champion Tyron Woodley, winning in the sixth round by stoppage. Despite Woodley not being a boxer, it was still impressive.

Woodley is a professional fighter and Paul showed a strong right hand in his bouts.

During the podcast, which is co-hosted by Tyson and former NBA star Paul Pierce, Tyson told guest Joe Rogan that he was worried about Paul while partying with him.

"Hey man, you're going to go to jail for real, chill out," Tyson says he told Paul, "This dude's crazy, he would be throwing stuff at people, bottles and stuff."

The conversation turned to Tyson's career about an hour into the podcast, when Rogan asked Tyson if he was open to another fight. "I was going to stop and then they started offering some real dough."

Money seems to be a motivating factor for Tyson. Both he and Jones Jr. accused Tiller, who promoted the fight, of not paying them in full. Tiller vehemently denied the accusations. Jake Paul was also fighting under Tiller promotions until recently when he left for Showtime Sports.

"This guy brings like 80 million people," Tyson said of Paul "[I'd do it] only to break the record."

Since his return fight against Jones Jr. Tyson has been linked to several dream exhibition matches. He was rumored to fight Lennox Lewis and to have a third match with Evander Holyfield. Tyson's boxing career started to fall off the rails after losing to Holyfield twice, with the second match ending after Tyson intentionally bit Holyfield's ear, ending the match in disqualification.

Paul has a fight scheduled in August but his opponent has not been announced yet. It is unlikely that Tyson could be ready for that bout, with him also complaining about health problems and losing muscle mass during the podcast.

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Majority of US Voters Would Consider Third Party if Faced With Trump vs Biden Rematch  
By - Ian DeMartino

No third party candidate has won the presidency in the United States. The best performance was by Theodore Roosevelt, who came in second in 1912, gaining 27.39% of the vote. A new poll by Harvard CAPS-Harris has found that 58% of registered voters [would consider a third party or independent candidate](#) if faced with the prospect of choosing between Joe Biden and Donald Trump again.

Both men are extremely unpopular, with the poll also showing that a majority of Americans do not want either man to run. Sixty-three percent of respondents said they do not want Biden to seek a second term and 55% said they do not want Trump to run for president again.

Biden has seen his poll numbers plummet over the past year. [A Gallup poll](#) released last week showed that Biden's 41% job approval rating is the second lowest since the 1950s for any president at this point in their term. The lowest was his predecessor, Trump.

It should come as no surprise then that voters would consider someone else with Biden and Trump at the top of the ticket, but third party candidates have not fared well in the United States since Ross Perot's attempt in 1992.

Perot held a lead against rivals Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush but then dropped out in the middle of the campaign season. He reentered the race in October but by then the damage had already been done and Clinton won the presidency. Perot [explained his behavior](#) by accusing the Bush campaign of blackmailing him with doctored photos of his daughter. The Bush administration denied the claim.

The Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) excluded Perot from the 1996 debates and no third party candidate has gotten a significant share of the vote since.

This new poll is a ray of hope for third party advocates. Mark Penn, the co-director of the Harvard CAPS-Harris poll, told The Hill that he has "never seen a number this high for an independent run." He also called it "an unprecedented opportunity for an independent candidate to run and win."

Trump has hinted that he may run again in 2024, but has said he will not make a decision until after the midterm elections. Biden was non-committal on running for reelection during the campaign but reportedly told former President Obama that he will seek another term. Age will be a factor for both men, Biden is 79 and Trump is 75.

Both men are likely to win their party's primary if they run. Thirty-seven percent of voters said they would vote for Biden in a primary, higher than any other Democratic candidate. Trump has higher support among his base, with 58% of respondents saying they would vote for him.

With those numbers, it seems possible, if not likely, that a Trump versus Biden rematch is in the cards. And with the Republican party pulling out of the CPD, there may be no better opportunity for a third party candidate to make waves in the next election.

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#### **Pentagon Says Aware of Blasts in Transnistria, Too Soon to Assign Liability**

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has seen reports of explosions in Transnistria, but it is too early to judge what happened and who is responsible, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Monday.

"We've seen reports of these explosions. It is difficult to know ... exactly what happened here or who is responsible. We are watching this as best we can. It is too soon to know exactly what is significance here," he told CNN.

When asked if it might be a "provocation" on the side of Russia, Kirby said that "certainly we are going to be looking if that is the case."

"We cannot rule anything out at this time," he added.

A series of explosions occurred on Monday in Tiraspol in the building of the Ministry of State Security of the unrecognized republic. On Tuesday, two explosions hit the Maiac town in the Grigoriopol district of Transnistria. No casualties were reported following the blasts.

Later, a Transnistrian government source told Sputnik that Kiev is seeking to drag Moldova and the breakaway republic of Transnistria into the Ukraine conflict.

The Kremlin has expressed concerns over the developments, noting that it is closely monitoring the situation.

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#### **Biden to Hold Virtual Meeting With Mexican President on April 29 – White House**

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – The presidents the United States and Mexico will hold a virtual meeting on April 29, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"On Friday, April 29, President Joe Biden will meet with President Andrés Manuel López Obrador virtually. In this virtual event, the two leaders will discuss their vision for the Ninth Summit of the Americas and how North America can lead on priority initiatives for the region," Psaki said in a statement.

The two leaders will also discuss cooperation on migration, joint development efforts in Central America, competitiveness and economic growth, security, energy, and economic cooperation, she added.

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#### **RPT - US WWII Veteran Says Destroying Monuments to Soviet Soldiers 'Stupid'**

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) – The current campaign against monuments to Soviet soldiers in Europe, which was liberated from Nazism by the Red Army, is stupid, US WWII veteran Frank Cohn told Sputnik.

Acts of vandalism against monuments to Soviet troops have swept Europe in recent weeks. In Berlin, police have recorded over a dozen such cases, including a Soviet war memorial in Treptower Park being splashed with paint and defaced with swastikas and calls of "Death to all Russians," and tanks in a memorial in Tiergarten being covered with Ukrainian flags. In Poland, three monuments to WWII Soviet soldiers were demolished on Wednesday in an effort to remove Soviet-era monuments throughout the country. In Lithuania, a monument to the victims of Nazi terror in World War II has been defaced for the third time in a month.

"Destroying monuments which reflect past friendships is stupid. Stopping athletes from participating because they are Russians, even though they have no political engagement, is stupid. Every individual needs to be assessed on his or her own merits," Cohn said.

Cohn, now a retired colonel, joined the US army in 1943, a year later landing in France. In April 1945, he took part in the historic meeting of American and Soviet troops on the Elbe river, an event recognized as the symbolic pinnacle of both nations' alliance to defeat the Nazis and liberate Europe.

The veteran disagrees with the position that the Ukraine crisis has solid links to the rise of neo-Nazism in Ukraine.

"There have always been and there are currently neo-Nazis everywhere, in the US, in Ukraine, in Russia, but they are in very small numbers and do not have an impact," the veteran argued. On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. Russia has said that the aim of the special operation is to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine and that it is targeting the country's military infrastructure only.

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RPT - Russian Consulate General in Houston Gets Threats, Law Enforcement Reacts Quickly - Consul

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Russia's diplomatic mission in Houston receives threats, but law enforcement has responded to their reports promptly, Consulate General Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.

"Several mass anti-Russian actions took place here. Demonstrations continue, they did not stop. There are threats that we report to local law enforcement. But, let's say, we haven't recorded such actions aimed at the physical safety of employees yet," Zakharov said.

Zakharov underscored that the American authorities respond to reports in connection with threats quickly.

"They Promptly look into and contact," he added. "During the mass action, which was here on February 26, increased police squads were present."

Zakharov also shared that the problem with the mission staffing remains.

"Several people are waiting for visas that cannot come here. We have had to increase our service hours," he said. "We have a very large consular district now - 13 states. This is not only these 13 states, because those who find it more convenient to contact us, they do. Let's say it's closer to fly from California than, say, to Washington. Therefore, we are looking at what we can do as much as possible in this area."

Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov said on Saturday that the Russian Embassy in Washington is facing a blockade from US government organizations, including Bank of America's closure of the accounts of two consulates general in Houston and New York. Antonov also said that they received threats by phone and mail.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Pentagon Chief Set to Host Ukraine-Related Defense Ministerial in Germany

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Tuesday will hold a Ukraine-related ministerial meeting at the Ramstein Air Base in Germany with more than 20 counterparts from allied and partner countries just as Washington continues to escalate security aid to Kiev.

The US Defense Department announced it plans to organize a meeting of allied and partner nations' defense ministers on Thursday and said that some 40 invitations were sent, including to countries that are not members of NATO.

On April 22, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said the meeting is not being done under the NATO umbrella and the invited nations will take part "in a sovereign" way and not as part of the alliance. At the same time, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg will take part in the meeting.

Kirby explained that the United States sees the upcoming meeting as the beginnings of a discussion with like-minded nations about long-term defense relationship that Ukraine will need going forward, Kirby said.

The meeting is not expected to result in US posture changes in Europe, but Austin hopes it will lead to some kind of a framework for getting specific decisions on Ukraine going forward when the conflict in the country ends, Kirby said.

Austin will head to the Ramstein Air Base from Ukraine where he and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken are scheduled to meet with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The visit to Kiev was the first by high-level US representatives since the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine on February 24.

While in Kiev, Blinken and Austin announced that US diplomats were going to return to Ukraine starting this week and added that Washington will provide Kiev with more than \$700 million in additional military aid.

The ministerial meeting will take place as the United States is attempting to ramp up Ukraine's military capabilities amid Russia's special military operation, now in its second phase.

Last week, US President Joe Biden announced that the United States will be providing Ukraine with another \$800 million security aid package. The eighth US security aid package for Ukraine

includes 72 Howitzers, 144,000 of artillery rounds, more than 121 Phoenix tactical drones, parts and other equipment.

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RPT - US WWII Veteran on Canceled Elbe Meeting Ceremony: Shame Not to Celebrate This Event

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The cancellation of the traditional commemorative ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington to mark the anniversary of the meeting between American and Soviet troops on the Elbe River in April 1945 is pitiful, US veteran and participant of the historic meeting Frank Cohn told Sputnik.

On Sunday, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov announced that the US authorities had canceled the annual ceremony held at the Spirit of the Elbe war memorial at Arlington National Cemetery. Russian diplomats, their colleagues from the Commonwealth of Independent States, World War II veterans and US officials participated in the ceremony in previous years.

"All I can say is that the entire situation is pitiful and that it is a shame that we are not celebrating the most important event in my generation and in the generations since, the fact that we were friends and allies during World War II," Cohn said.

Speaking of the Ukraine conflict, Cohn, now a 96-year-old retired US Army colonel, said it should never have happened.

"We have so many common goals in this world - fighting the coronavirus, fighting global warming, improving the world's economy and the economy of our respective nations," he stated. The veteran, who has participated in the ceremonies at the Arlington cemetery for many years, and was the first to bring flowers to the monument from the American side, said he would like to place his wreath next to the wreath from the Russian side. He expressed the hope that both Washington and Moscow will not go further in their tensions over Ukraine, but is afraid that the new cold war may last longer than the previous one.

"My meeting with the Russians at the Elbe will always be remembered. It took me years to understand that what was celebrated on the Russian side was their survival, since they had to fight their way to the Elbe, every meter at a time and the sight of an American uniform meant that there were no more Germans in front of them," Cohn said.

Asked to share personal memories, the veteran noted that it was the first time he, then nineteen, tried Russian vodka. "It was too strong for me," he smiled.

Soviet and American troops met on the Elbe River in Germany on April 25, 1945, which is considered the highest point in relations between the countries of the anti-Nazi alliance.

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RPT: PREVIEW - UN Secretary-General to Meet With Putin Tuesday Ahead of His Trip to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will visit Russia on Tuesday to meet with President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov amid the ongoing special military operation in Ukraine.

The situation in Ukraine will likely be the main focus of discussions in Moscow, where Guterres will head from Ankara, Turkey, after meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Monday.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko said earlier in the day that Moscow expects to discuss with Guterres issues related to the situation around Mariupol and the Azovstal steel plant area. On Monday, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq confirmed that Guterres is expected to raise the situation in Mariupol during his upcoming visits to Moscow and Kiev.

The Russian Defense Ministry announced the suspension of hostilities at Azovstal in order to allow the remaining civilians, if there are any, to leave the combat zone.

Last week, Guterres called for a four-day humanitarian pause in Ukraine beginning on Holy Thursday and running through Christian Orthodox Easter on Sunday for civilians to leave the embattled areas of Ukraine and enable humanitarian convoys to reach the cities of Donetsk, Luhansk, Mariupol and Kherson.

After meeting with Putin and Lavrov, Guterres will then travel to Kiev to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba as well as with the staff of various United Nations agencies to discuss the scaling up of humanitarian assistance to the people of Ukraine.

The corresponding meetings in Moscow and Kiev will be held at the request of Guterres, who delivered letters to Russian and Ukrainian missions at the UN on April 19 asking for a meeting with the leadership of both countries to stop fighting and bring peace. The UN Secretary General sent the requests even though he personally admitted on April 13 that he did not see any possibility for a comprehensive ceasefire in Ukraine at the moment.

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 Ukraine's military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

Azovstal remains the last stronghold of Ukrainian nationalists in Mariupol, including members of the infamous Azov regiment. The Donetsk People's Republic authorities said they estimate at least 400 Ukrainian troops are at the plant, including an unspecified number of foreign mercenaries.

Last week, Putin ordered stopping any attempts by the Russian military to capture the plant in order to avoid potential losses.

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RPT - Russia Hopes Banking Services Resume at Diplomatic Posts in US After Urgent Steps - Consul

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The Russian Foreign Ministry has taken a number of urgent measures to resume banking services for diplomatic missions in the United States and hopes operations will return to normal soon, Russian Consul General in Houston Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.

Zakharov confirmed that in March, Bank of America terminated services for the consulates general in Houston and in New York and the accounts have become frozen.

"We are grateful to the leadership of the embassy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which took a number of urgent steps in the bilateral area, thanks to which the situation was rectified, and we hope that it will return to normal," he said.

Zakharov did not specify the measures taken, but noted that ways of resolving the issue have been identified.

The diplomat noted The Consulate General is also a kind of economic entity with financial obligations and mutual settlements with service providers.

"This includes the office rent, renting living spaces for employees, which accordingly became impossible, of course," he said. "We hope that in the near future we will have such opportunities [for banking operations]... We hope that everything related to banking services will be normalized."

On Sunday, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov said that Bank of America closed the accounts of two Russian consulates general in Houston and New York.

4/25/2022 8:04:33 PM -04:00

**Biden Officials Worried Elon Musk Will Allow Trump to Return to Twitter - Reports**

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - Biden administration officials are concerned SpaceX founder and Tesla CEO Elon Musk will allow former US President Donald Trump to return to Twitter after he reached a deal to acquire the social media company.

Earlier on Monday, Twitter 's board of directors accepted Musk's \$44 billion offer to buy the company, but the deal is still subject to shareholder and regulatory approval, the report said.

The report said on Monday, citing sources, that Biden administration officials are concerned that misinformation on Twitter will increase under Musk's control, which could be critical in the upcoming 2024 US presidential election.

However, Trump told Fox News he did not intend to return to Twitter, where he had 88 million followers before he was banned from the platform, which accused him of spreading false information that was blamed for fueling the riot at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Trump did not have much success launching his own social media company, Truth Social, in February.

Musk has repeatedly complained that free speech is restricted on Twitter. He said in a statement after the deal was reached that Twitter is a "digital town square" where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated.

Musk also said Twitter has tremendous potential to unlock and he intends to enhance the platform with "new features, making algorithms open source to increase trust, defeating spam bots, and authenticating all humans."

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UPDATE 2 - Musk Buys Twitter, Biden Worried About Social Media Power

(Adds lawmakers reactions in paras 11-18)

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is more concerned about the power of large social media platforms than about who owns them, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters when asked about Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter.

Musk, the billionaire businessman, reached a deal to buy Twitter for around \$44 billion in a move that will delist the social media giant from the New York Stock Exchange and make it privately-held, the company said in a statement.

"I'm not going to comment on a specific transaction. What I can tell you, no matter who owns or runs Twitter, the President has long been concerned about the power of large social media platforms, the power they have over our everyday lives. He has long argued that tech platforms must be held accountable for the harms they cause," Psaki said on Monday when asked to comment on the acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk.

Psaki noted that Biden has been a strong supporter of antitrust reforms that would require more transparency from large media platforms and he is encouraged that there is a bipartisan interest in Congress to accomplish that.

Musk had earlier bought a 9.1% stake in Twitter from the open market for nearly \$3 billion before making a bid for its remaining shares that he did not already own.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in a statement also expressed concerns about Musk's move.

"We should be worried about any powerful central actor, whether it's a government or any wealthy individual - even if it's an ACLU member - having so much control over the boundaries of our political speech online," the human rights group said in a tweet.

Musk stuck to his narrative of wanting to be a "free speech absolutist" who would revolutionize Twitter's role in public debates. Musk earlier described Twitter as "the digital town square" of US democracy.

"Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated," Musk said in statement posted on Twitter.

Many voiced concerns that Musk might reinstate former President Donald Trump's account, but the New York real estate magnate told FOX News he is not going back to Twitter.

Republicans and Democrats were split on the reaction, with the former applauding the acquisition as a win for free speech.

Congressman Jim Jordan in a tweet said "free speech is making a comeback," and attached an article about Musk's buyout. Senator Marsha Blackburn was also encouraged by the announcement.

"I am hopeful that Elon Musk will help rein in Big Tech's history of censoring users that have a different viewpoint," Blackburn said in a tweet.

Democrats saw it as another example of why the rich need to be taxed.

"This deal is dangerous for our democracy. Billionaires like Elon Musk play by a different set of rules than everyone else, accumulating power for their own gain. We need a wealth tax and strong rules to hold Big Tech accountable," Senator Elizabeth Warner tweeted.

Before calling for a wealth tax, Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal said from 2014-2018 Musk paid an effective tax rate of 3.27% while working families paid 13 percent.

Meanwhile, one lawmaker suggested Musk has proven at least one thing today about the wealthy.

"If they can afford to buy Twitter, they can afford to pay their fair share in taxes,"

Congresswoman Katherine Clark added.

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UPDATE - Musk Buys Twitter, Biden Worried About Social Media Power

(Adds ACLU reaction, background in paras 6-10, updates headline)

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is more concerned about the power of large social media platforms than about who owns them, the White House press secretary told reporters, when asked about Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter.

Musk, the billionaire businessman, reached a deal to buy Twitter for around \$44 billion in a move that will delist the social media giant from the New York Stock Exchange and make it privately-held.

"I'm not going to comment on a specific transaction. What I can tell you, no matter who owns or runs Twitter, the President has long been concerned about the power of large social media platforms, the power they have over our everyday lives. He has long argued that tech platforms must be held accountable for the harms they cause," White house spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday when asked to comment on the acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk.

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### Canada Central Bank Chief Says Inflation to Remain High Due to Global Instability

TORONTO, April 26 (Sputnik) - Canada's high inflation rates are largely the result of global instability and will be felt for an extended period of time, Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem said.

Last week, the Canada's central statistics agency announced that the inflation rate rose to 6.7% year-on-year in March, the highest increase since January 1991, with skyrocketing energy and housing prices continuing to be largely responsible for keeping the inflation rate above 5% for the third straight month.

"Inflation is too high. It is higher than we expected, and it's going to be elevated for longer than we previously thought," Macklem told the Standing Committee on Finance on Monday.

Macklem, who last year projected that the Consumer Price Index (CPI) would dip to its target rate of 2% by 2022, blamed soaring costs on inflationary pressures "from beyond our borders," such as Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the resurgent COVID-19 pandemic in China and continued supply chain issues.

Macklem said the central bank would take aggressive measures, if needed, to combat the rising costs, warning Canadians and businesses that interest rate hikes are looming.

The Bank of Canada raised its benchmark interest rate by 50 basis points to 1% - the highest one-time hike in 20 years - in a bid to rein in inflation. Macklem said second such hike, which he termed "unusual," could be in the works.

Macklem's deputy, Carolyn Rogers, admitted that the Bank of Canada is aware of Canadians' high debt burden - a recent poll found that almost a third of Canadians are already unable to pay their bills and half are \$157 away from insolvency - and is anticipating that the impending interest rate hikes will be conducive to a "sensitive" effect on the economy.

Nevertheless, Macklem's assessment of the Canadian economy painted a rosy picture, with the central banker calling the economy "strong" on multiple occasions and touting dropping unemployment figures.

The governor also downplayed the possibility of a recession, saying that the country's economy can simultaneously grow and lower inflation, despite such a combination not occurring in the past half century, as pointed out a committee member.

Macklem's testimony flies in the face of a growing number of industry experts, who say signs are pointing to an impending recession, with inflation eventually giving way to stagflation - a combination of slow economic growth and high inflation - culminating in an economic downturn. Furthermore, there is growing evidence of an inverted yield curve - the negative spread between 2 and 10-year yields - in the United States, which is considered to be a measuring stick for an impending recession and were observed prior to the previous four major economic downturns. Parliamentarians also questioned Macklem and Rogers on the use of digital currency as hedging measure against inflation. However, the deputy governor pushed back saying cryptocurrencies is not a pathway to "opt out of inflation."

The Bank of Canada's next overnight rate announcement is due on June 1.

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### Three US States Temporarily Block Biden From Ending Title 42 Policy on US-Mexico Border

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - The Attorney Generals of the US states of Arizona, Missouri and Louisiana obtained a temporary restraining order in federal court to prevent the Biden administration from rescinding a public health policy that has deterred an influx of asylum-seeking migrants trying to cross the US southern border, Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt said.

"In a lawsuit originally filed by Missouri, Louisiana, and Arizona, our Office just obtained a temporary restraining order to keep Title 42 in place," Schmitt said in a statement on Monday. "This is a huge victory for border security, but the fight continues on."

The attorney generals filed a lawsuit in a federal court in the state of Louisiana in early April to delay President Joe Biden's plan to lift the Title 42 public health policy on May 23.

Title 42 is a public health policy imposed by the Trump administration that has served as a tool to deter the influx flow of illegal immigrants coming to the United States illegally, especially on the US southern border. The policy gives US immigration enforcement the authority to immediately deny entry to undocumented asylum-seeking migrants at the US southern border as part of an effort to mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus.

US lawmakers from both sides of the aisle, including Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, have asked Biden to postpone plans to end the policy due to concerns it will extremely overwhelm US immigration resources and create a lasting crisis.

White House Press Secretary said during a press briefing on Monday that Title 42 is not immigration policy, adding that the Biden administration has been preparing over the last several months to deal with the massive amount of migrants expected to come to the United States once the policy is terminated.

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### White House Says Not in Position to Put Limit on Assistance Sent to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - White House Jen Psaki said the Biden administration is not in a position to discuss imposing a limit on the amount of assistance the United States will provide Ukraine pending consultations between President Joe Biden and Congress.

"I'm not in a position to put a cap on it at this point in time," Psaki said during a press briefing on Monday.

The United States has provided more than \$5 billion to Ukraine in the form of military, humanitarian, and economic assistance since Russia launched its special military operation in the neighboring country.

Psaki noted that Biden will consult with US lawmakers and military leaders about Washington's future assistance for Ukraine.

On Sunday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced that the United States will provide \$713 million in foreign military aid to Ukraine and over a dozen of other countries will purchase new weapons to compensate for the arms they provided to Ukraine. Some \$322 million in military assistance will be allocated to Ukraine from this package.

Blinken said US support for Ukraine going forward will continue until they see a final success in the fight against Russia.

On Thursday, Biden announced that the United States is providing Ukraine with another \$800 million security aid package. The Defense Department said the new US security aid package would include 72 Howitzers, 144,000 of artillery rounds, more than 121 Phoenix tactical drones as well as parts and other equipment.

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White House Says Biden 'Concerned' by Power of Social Media After Musk Buys Twitter

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is more concerned about the power of large social media platforms than about who owns them, White House press secretary told reporters..

Billionaire businessman Elon Musk has reached a deal to buy Twitter for around \$44 billion, in a move that will delist the social media giant from the New York Stock Exchange and make it privately-held, the company said in a statement earlier on Monday.

"I'm not going to comment on a specific transaction. What I can tell you, no matter who owns or runs Twitter, the President has long been concerned about the power of large social media platforms, the power they have over our everyday lives. He has long argued that tech platforms must be held accountable for the harms they cause," Psaki said on Monday when asked to comment on the acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk.

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US Tries to Devalue Right of UNSC Veto by Transferring Prerogatives to GA - Lavrov

MOSCOW, April 26 (Sputnik) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the United States and a number of Western countries are trying to devalue the right of veto by transferring the prerogatives of the Security Council to the UN General Assembly.

"Now the Americans and other Western countries are trying to devalue this right of veto by transferring the prerogatives of the Security Council to the General Assembly, where they can, by twisting arms, by blackmail, threats... that relate to the places where the bank accounts of delegations are kept, the places where their children are educated - they get such a forcibly achieved majority, this trend is dangerous," the minister said on the air of the Bolshaya Igra (Big Show) on Channel One. "The Security Council with its five, with the right of veto of this five, this is such the last island of international law [and] everyone is trying to replace the rest."

Lavrov said the trend is not new. For several years the West has been breeding various platforms, appeals, and partnerships on topics that are already being considered by the UN, Lavrov added.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) -

#### UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- \* Poland has handed over a number of tanks to Ukraine, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said on Monday.
- \* Russia's Deputy Envoy to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said he sees no point in a Ukraine ceasefire now, as it would give Kiev room for new provocations.
- \* The US State Department has approved a \$165 million sale of ammunition to Ukraine, the Defense Department said.

#### UN CHIEF VISITS TO MOSCOW, KIEV

- \* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will raise the situation in Mariupol during his upcoming visits to Moscow and Kiev, his deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said on Monday.
- \* Guterres spoke with US officials before heading to Russia and Ukraine, Haq said.
- \* Guterres believes that there is a chance to improve the situation in Ukraine, Haq said.
- \* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will inform of the progress in the special military operation in Ukraine, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
- \* Russia plans to discuss issues related to the situation around Mariupol and the Azovstal plant area during the visit of Guterres on April 26, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko said.

#### RUSSIA-UKRAINE TALKS

- \* The negotiating process between Russia and Ukraine has not ended, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Monday.

\* A meeting between Russian and Ukrainian Foreign Ministers Sergey Lavrov and Dmytro Kuleba in Istanbul is not yet being prepared, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko said.

#### DIPLOMATIC DISPUTES

\* Russia has decided to declare 40 German diplomats personae non gratae in a tit-for-tat response to Berlin, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Monday.

\* Croatia has refused to organize a humanitarian flight for the employees of the Russian embassy in Zagreb, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said, adding that Moscow will respond accordingly.

\* The departure of Russian diplomats from the US in late June will seriously undermine the work of the Russian diplomatic mission, Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov said.

#### LAVROV INTERVIEW

\* The US and NATO are clearly planning to move the alliance's "line of defense" to the South China Sea, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in an interview with Channel One on Monday.

\* The United States denies Russia its right to protect its own borders but reserves the right to ensure own security whenever it sees fit, Lavrov said.

\* In the updated version of the draft treaty handed over to Ukraine, Russia took into account Kiev's remarks, but has not yet received a response to its proposals, Lavrov said.

#### SITUATION IN TRANSNISTRIA

\* Moscow does not see any risks of the Transnistria conflict escalation, and favors its peaceful settlement with respect for the Moldovan territorial integrity and the region's special status, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko said on Monday.

\* A series of explosions occurred in Tiraspol in the building of the Ministry of State Security of the unrecognized Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR), a Sputnik correspondent reports.

4/25/2022 5:00:00 PM -04:00

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The situation in Ukraine will likely be the main focus of discussions in Moscow, where Guterres will head from Ankara, Turkey, after meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Monday.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko said earlier in the day that Moscow expects to discuss with Guterres issues related to the situation around Mariupol and the Azovstal steel plant area. On Monday, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq confirmed that Guterres is expected to raise the situation in Mariupol during his upcoming visits to Moscow and Kiev.

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After meeting with Putin and Lavrov, Guterres will then travel to Kiev to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba as well as with the staff of various United Nations agencies to discuss the scaling up of humanitarian assistance to the people of Ukraine.

The corresponding meetings in Moscow and Kiev will be held at the request of Guterres, who delivered letters to Russian and Ukrainian missions at the UN on April 19 asking for a meeting with the leadership of both countries to stop fighting and bring peace. The UN Secretary General sent the requests even though he personally admitted on April 13 that he did not see any possibility for a comprehensive ceasefire in Ukraine at the moment.

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 Ukraine's military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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PREVIEW - Pentagon Chief Set to Host Ukraine-Related Defense Ministerial in Germany

WASHINGTON, April 26 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Tuesday will hold a Ukraine-related ministerial meeting at the Ramstein Air Base in Germany with more than 20 counterparts from allied and partner countries just as Washington continues to escalate security aid to Kiev.

The US Defense Department announced it plans to organize a meeting of allied and partner nations' defense ministers on Thursday and said that some 40 invitations were sent, including to countries that are not members of NATO.

On April 22, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said the meeting is not being done under the NATO umbrella and the invited nations will take part "in a sovereign" way and not as part of the alliance. At the same time, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg will take part in the meeting.

Kirby explained that the United States sees the upcoming meeting as the beginnings of a discussion with like-minded nations about long-term defense relationship that Ukraine will need going forward, Kirby said.

The meeting is not expected to result in US posture changes in Europe, but Austin hopes it will lead to some kind of a framework for getting specific decisions on Ukraine going forward when the conflict in the country ends, Kirby said.

Austin will head to the Ramstein Air Base from Ukraine where he and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken are scheduled to meet with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The visit to Kiev was the first by high-level US representatives since the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine on February 24.

While in Kiev, Blinken and Austin announced that US diplomats were going to return to Ukraine starting this week and added that Washington will provide Kiev with more than \$700 million in additional military aid.

The ministerial meeting will take place as the United States is attempting to ramp up Ukraine's military capabilities amid Russia's special military operation, now in its second phase.

Last week, US President Joe Biden announced that the United States will be providing Ukraine with another \$800 million security aid package. The eighth US security aid package for Ukraine includes 72 Howitzers, 144,000 of artillery rounds, more than 121 Phoenix tactical drones, parts and other equipment.

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US Maintains Right to Ensure Its Own Security, Denies Other Nations Same - Lavrov

MOSCOW, April 25 (Sputnik) – The United States denies Russia its right to protect its own borders but reserves the right to ensure own security whenever it sees fit, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Monday.

"At the same time, when the United States spontaneously decides that somewhere over 10 000 kilometers away something is threatening their interests, be it in Yugoslavia or in Iraq or other places in the Middle East, they send troops, bomb civilian infrastructure without a second thought, having no legal torments, without any attempts to even check with the international law and the UN charter, as they did it in Belgrade when they bombed bridges, passenger trains, a TV center," the minister said on the Bolshaya Igra ("Big Game") show on Channel One.

Lavrov also recalled how the US launched a military operation in Iraq, though the country posed no genuine threat to US territory.

"I will repeat, this was all an ocean away, this 'threat' to US security," the Russian minister said.

"They believe they are entitled to ensure their safety whenever they feel it's necessary, while denying us our right to protect our borders and territories where Russian people live and have been persecuted for a long time by bombings, by humiliation and encroachments on their rights to language, culture and traditions," he concluded.

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## US Supreme Court Grants Appeal to Texas Death Row Inmate for DNA Testing

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court said on Monday that it will grant Rodney Reed, a Texas man on death row for raping and strangling 19-year-old woman Stacey Stites in 1996, an appeal hearing because he is challenging the constitutionality of a state statute governing DNA testing that he believes would show his innocence.

A Texas judge recommended last year that Reed be denied a new trial before sending the case back to the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals. In agreeing to review Reed's appeal, the Supreme Court will consider the merit of Reed and his lawyers' claims that untested crime-scene evidence will help clear him.

Stites was reported missing after failing to turn up for her shift at a grocery store in Bastrop, Texas. A passer-by discovered Stites's body on a rural road. Reed was arrested primarily on the basis of DNA tests, but has always maintained his innocence. Reed argued he had an affair with Stites, which explains the presence of his DNA on her. Reed's lawyers say they have talked to witnesses who have corroborated that the pair was intimately involved.

The lawyers also contend that new evidence has come to light in the past few years that suggests Stites's fiancé, former police officer Jimmy Fennell, is involved or implicated in her murder.

Fennell, who the Innocence Project said served a ten-year prison sentence for a sex crime and kidnapping while he was a police officer, has denied killing Stites.

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## US Police Release Name of Officer Involved in Shooting of Patrick Lyoya - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The Grand Rapids Police Department (GRPD) released the name of the officer involved in the April 4 shooting of 26-year old Congolese immigrant Patrick Lyoya during a traffic stop encounter, GRPD said on Monday in a press release.

"In the interest of transparency, to reduce on-going speculation and to avoid any further confusion, I am confirming the name already publicly circulating - Christopher Schurr - as the officer involved in the April 4 Officer Involved Shooting," GRPD Chief Eric Winstrom said in the press release.

Schurr, after pulling Lyoya over due to a suspected license plate violation, shot him in the back of the head while grappling over the officer's taser device. A video shows that the exchange between Lyoya and the officer became heated after Lyoya refused to stay in his car as ordered. Lyoya then tried to run away, prompting the officer to run after him and begin grappling on a nearby front lawn.

The shooting sparked public outcry and protests in the city of Grand Rapids after video footage of the incident was released.

Schurr remains on administrative leave and has been stripped of his police powers until the conclusion of the investigation into potential criminal charges, the press release also said.

Although it has been the long-standing practice of GRPD to withhold the names of any employees under investigation until the conclusion of the process, police reform requires evaluating such practices to ensure actions are consistent with the best interests of the community, according to the press release.

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**Lavrov Says Would Not Want Risks of Nuclear War to Be 'Artificially Inflated'**

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The risks of nuclear war are now very significant and this danger should not be underestimated while there are many who are willing to artificially inflate this threat, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Monday.

The Russian Foreign Minister recalled that the five nuclear-weapon countries reconfirmed in January the position about the inadmissibility of nuclear war.

"This is our principled position. We proceed from it. I would very much not like that now, when, as you said, referring to respected political scientists, when the risks are really very, very significant, I would very much not like these risks to be artificially inflated, and there are many who want to. The danger is serious, it is real, it cannot be underestimated," Lavrov said in an interview on Channel One.

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**Russia Hopes Western Countries Will Not Allow NATO Troops to Be Sent to Ukraine - Lavrov**

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - Russia hopes that Western countries consider Volodymyr Zelensky's calls to send NATO troops to Ukraine in line with their own constant assurances about the inadmissibility of starting World War III, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Monday.

"I very much hope that - as everyone does the spell that we should by no means allow a third world war - that it is in this context that they consider the constant provocations of Zelensky and his team, who demand almost the deployment of NATO troops to protect the Ukrainian authorities," Lavrov said in an interview with Channel One.

The Russian Foreign Minister noted that many Western countries say they will provide weapons, which adds fuel to the fire, and they want to force Ukrainians to fight with Russia to the last soldier with these arms supplies. However, such actions contribute to the conflict dragging on longer in the hope that Russia will suffer more.

Lavrov also said that the leaders of the Western countries, with the exception of Poland, all declare that the issue of sending NATO troops to Ukraine is excluded.

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Biden Hosts Tampa Bay Lightning at White House to Celebrate 2020, 2021 Stanley Cup Wins  
(Updates with more details in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Monday hosted the Tampa Bay Lightning hockey team at the White House on Monday to celebrate the team's back-to-back Stanley Cup championship wins in the 2020 and 2021 seasons.

Biden delivered a speech celebrating and honoring the team's accomplishment, during which he noted that the team is one of only eight in the last century to win the Stanley Cup two seasons in a row.

The Lightning championship roster in 2020 and 2021 featured four Russian players, including goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy, defenseman Mikhail Sergachev, and forwards Nikita Kucherov and Alexander Volkov.

Kucherov and Vasilevsky, who were awarded the Conn Smythe Trophy as the league's most valuable post-season performers in the 2020 and 2021 playoffs, respectively, along with Sergachev remain on the team's roster for the ongoing 2022 season.

The Lightning defeated the Dallas Stars in six games to win the Stanley Cup in 2020 and retained the cup a year later winning four out of five games against the Montreal Canadiens in 2021.

The Lightning have clinched a playoff bid for the upcoming Stanley Cup Playoffs and are projected to begin their latest title defense against the Toronto Maple Leafs in the first round.

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Canada Defense Minister to Visit US, Germany to Discuss Support for Ukraine - Statement  
TORONTO, April 25 (Sputnik) - Canada's defense chief Anita Anand will visit Germany and the United States this week to discuss providing additional support for Ukraine, the Department of National Defense said on Monday.

"Anita Anand, Minister of National Defense, Chief of Defense Staff General Wayne Eyre and Deputy Minister of National Defense Bill Matthews will travel to Germany," Department of National Defense said in a statement.

The Canadian delegation will participate in meetings of the so-called Ukraine Defense Consultative Group, hosted by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin at the Ramstein Air Base in Germany.

The US Defense Department has claimed that the gathering is not a NATO meeting, despite being attended by many of the alliance's members.

Anand will then travel to the United States for her first official visit to Washington as Canada's defense chief, where she will discuss further military support for Ukraine as well as the modernization of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD).

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Sherman, EU Council President Cabinet Head Discuss Support for Ukraine - US State Dept

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and the head of Cabinet of EU Council President Frederic Bernard have spoken about military and humanitarian assistance for Ukraine during the meeting in Washington, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Monday.

"Deputy Secretary Sherman welcomed the European Union's strong financial, humanitarian, and military support to Ukraine and the unprecedented US-EU and transatlantic unity in response to Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war against Ukraine," Price said.

Sherman also reaffirmed the United States' continued strong support for Ukraine's aspirations to become an EU member, Price added.

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 forces. The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure.

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US WWII Veteran Says Destroying Monuments to Soviet Soldiers 'Stupid'

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) – The current campaign against monuments to Soviet soldiers in Europe, which was liberated from Nazism by the Red Army, is stupid, US WWII veteran Frank Cohn told Sputnik.

Acts of vandalism against monuments to Soviet troops have swept Europe in recent weeks. In Berlin, police have recorded over a dozen such cases, including a Soviet war memorial in Treptower Park being splashed with paint and defaced with swastikas and calls of "Death to all Russians," and tanks in a memorial in Tiergarten being covered with Ukrainian flags. In Poland, three monuments to WWII Soviet soldiers were demolished on Wednesday in an effort to remove Soviet-era monuments throughout the country. In Lithuania, a monument to the victims of Nazi terror in World War II has been defaced for the third time in a month.

"Destroying monuments which reflect past friendships is stupid. Stopping athletes from participating because they are Russians, even though they have no political engagement, is stupid. Every individual needs to be assessed on his or her own merits," Cohn said.

Cohn, now a retired colonel, joined the US army in 1943, a year later landing in France. In April 1945, he took part in the historic meeting of American and Soviet troops on the Elbe river, an event recognized as the symbolic pinnacle of both nations' alliance to defeat the Nazis and liberate Europe.

The veteran disagrees with the position that the Ukraine crisis has solid links to the rise of neo-Nazism in Ukraine.

"There have always been and there are currently neo-Nazis everywhere, in the US, in Ukraine, in Russia, but they are in very small numbers and do not have an impact," the veteran argued. On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. Russia has said that the aim of the special operation is to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine and that it is targeting the country's military infrastructure only.

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Elon Musk Reaches Deal to Buy Twitter for \$44Bln, Take Company Private - Statement  
(Adds details, context in paras 3-15)

NEW YORK, April 25 (Sputnik) - Billionaire businessman Elon Musk has reached a deal to buy Twitter for around \$44 billion, in a move that will delist the social media giant from the New York Stock Exchange and make it privately-held, the company said in a statement on Monday. "Twitter, Inc. ... has entered into a definitive agreement to be acquired by an entity wholly owned by Elon Musk, for \$54.20 per share in cash in a transaction valued at approximately \$44 billion," the statement said. "Upon completion of the transaction, Twitter will become a privately held company."

Musk had earlier bought a 9.1% stake in Twitter from the open market for nearly \$3 billion before making a bid for its remaining shares that he did not already own.

The final purchase price announced on Monday represents a 38% premium to Twitter's closing stock price on April 1, 2022, which was the last trading day before Musk disclosed his stake in Twitter, the statement said. Trading in Twitter's stock was suspended at \$51.63 on Monday, prior to the announcement.

"The proposed transaction will deliver a substantial cash premium, and we believe it is the best path forward for Twitter's stockholders," Bret Taylor, Twitter's independent board chair, said, in the statement released by the company.

Concerns about Musk's so-called "undervaluation" of Twitter and how he would fund the deal were what led the company to initially oppose a deal with the billionaire entrepreneur.

Twitter's reservation came after Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, one of its substantial shareholders, described Musk's offer of \$54.20 versus this year's high of \$54.57 hit on April 5 as basically devoid of a premium. The Twitter board subsequently adopted a shareholder rights plan — or so-called Poison Pill — to reduce the likelihood that any person, entity or group would be able to gain full control over the company without paying a premium.

But all that appeared to be water under the bridge on Monday as both sides raved about the deal and the future direction of the company.

"The Twitter Board conducted a thoughtful and comprehensive process to assess Elon's proposal with a deliberate focus on value, certainty, and financing," chairman Taylor said.

Twitter's Chief Executive Officer Parag Agrawal said the microblogging site has a "purpose and relevance that impacts the entire world" and that its work "has never been more important" than now.

Musk stuck to his narrative of wanting to be a "free speech absolutist" who would revolutionize Twitter's role in public debates.

"Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated," Musk said. "I also want to make Twitter better than ever by enhancing the product with new features, making the algorithms open source to increase trust, defeating the spam bots, and authenticating all humans. Twitter has tremendous potential – I look forward to working with the company and the community of users to unlock it."

One of Twitter's most-prolific users, Musk's main concern with the microblogging site appeared to be over its moderation policies. In March, he tweeted out a poll that asked Twitter users whether the site, which has banned former president Donald Trump, among others, adhered to the principle of free speech.

Estimated by Forbes to be worth \$270 billion, making him the world richest man, Musk is also chief executive of electric car company Tesla, a keen space travel explorer and cryptocurrency advocate, among other things.

Analysts have cited other concerns about Musk's style of management should he become the boss of Twitter. While he could revolutionize Twitter as a free-speech model, Musk could also use his influence on the platform to silence criticism against decisions he makes in his other businesses, they said.

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US WWII Veteran on Canceled Elbe Meeting Ceremony: Shame Not to Celebrate This Event  
WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) – The cancellation of the traditional commemorative ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington to mark the anniversary of the meeting between American and Soviet troops on the Elbe River in April 1945 is pitiful, US veteran and participant of the historic meeting Frank Cohn told Sputnik.

On Sunday, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov announced that the US authorities had canceled the annual ceremony held at the Spirit of the Elbe war memorial at Arlington National Cemetery. Russian diplomats, their colleagues from the Commonwealth of Independent States, World War II veterans and US officials participated in the ceremony in previous years.

"All I can say is that the entire situation is pitiful and that it is a shame that we are not celebrating the most important event in my generation and in the generations since, the fact that we were friends and allies during World War II," Cohn said.

Speaking of the Ukraine conflict, Cohn, now a 96-year-old retired US Army colonel, said it should never have happened.

"We have so many common goals in this world - fighting the coronavirus, fighting global warming, improving the world's economy and the economy of our respective nations," he stated.

The veteran, who has participated in the ceremonies at the Arlington cemetery for many years, and was the first to bring flowers to the monument from the American side, said he would like to place his wreath next to the wreath from the Russian side. He expressed the hope that both Washington and Moscow will not go further in their tensions over Ukraine, but is afraid that the new cold war may last longer than the previous one.

"My meeting with the Russians at the Elbe will always be remembered. It took me years to understand that what was celebrated on the Russian side was their survival, since they had to fight their way to the Elbe, every meter at a time and the sight of an American uniform meant that there were no more Germans in front of them," Cohn said.

Asked to share personal memories, the veteran noted that it was the first time he, then nineteen, tried Russian vodka. "It was too strong for me," he smiled.

Soviet and American troops met on the Elbe River in Germany on April 25, 1945, which is considered the highest point in relations between the countries of the anti-Nazi alliance.

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#### Trump Not Returning to Twitter Despite Elon Musk's Purchase of Company

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump told Fox News he will not return to Twitter despite the social media company's takeover by entrepreneur Elon Musk. "I am not going on Twitter, I am going to stay on TRUTH," Trump said. "I hope Elon buys Twitter because he'll make improvements to it and he is a good man, but I am going to be staying on TRUTH."

Musk reached a deal on Monday to buy Twitter for around \$44 billion, in a move that will delist the social media giant from the New York Stock Exchange and make it privately-held, according to a company statement.

The Trump Media and Technology Group (TMTG) in October said it will become a publicly listed company as an alternative to liberal media and will launch a social network named "TRUTH" Social.

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#### Biden Discusses West Bank, Israeli-Palestinian Tensions With Jordanian King - White House

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden spoke to Jordanian King Abdullah II on Monday to discuss recent tensions between Israel and Palestine and the situation in the West Bank, the White House said.

"President Joseph R. Biden spoke today with His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan to consult on a range of regional and global issues. The two leaders discussed in detail recent efforts to

stem violence in Israel and the West Bank, including at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount complex in Jerusalem," the statement read.

Biden welcomed recent steps to reduce tensions and expressed his hope that the final week of Ramadan will pass in peace.

"He underscored the need to preserve the historic status quo at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, and recognized the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan's role as the custodian of Muslim holy places in Jerusalem. The King briefed the President on his recent engagements in the region and the President emphasized the U.S. commitment to the Middle East and regional stability," the statement concluded.

Last week, the Israeli police said that hundreds of Palestinians, some wearing masks and flying the Hamas flag, engaged in mass riots on the Temple Mount. According to Israeli law enforcement officers, the demonstrators were throwing stones, setting off fireworks and building barricades, thus creating a threat to Israelis praying at the Western Wall. The Israeli police said they waited for the end of morning prayer for worshipers to leave and then used special equipment to disperse the crowd and restore order.

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Northwest DC Shooting Gunman Fired 200 Rounds, Had Fully Automatic Rifles - Police

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The gunman of the shooting in northwest Washington, DC, last week fired 200 rounds indiscriminately and had three fully automatic rifles in his possession, Metropolitan Police Department Chief Robert Contee said on Monday.

On Friday, Raymond Spencer, 23, opened fire near a high school and university in northwest DC. Police found Spencer dead in his apartment from an apparent suicide. The gunman injured four people, two of them remain in critical condition

"We know that an excess of over 200 rounds were fired from this sniper from the apartment on Van Ness Street," Contee told a press conference. "We know that 200 rounds were fired and we know that he had an excess of over 800 rounds unspent, unshot rounds, at his disposal inside of the location at Van Ness."

Contee said six firearms were recovered from Spencer's apartment, four rifles and two handguns. Three of the rifles were fully automatic, the police chief added.

Law enforcement recovered an additional three firearms and thousands of rounds of ammunition at a second apartment Spencer had in Fairfax County, Virginia, Contee said.

The gunman served several months in the US Coast Guard in 2017, but it is unclear why he was discharged, Contee said. Law enforcement is still investigating the shooting, including the gunman's motive, Contee said.

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### Elon Musk Reaches Deal to Buy Twitter for \$44Bln, Take Company Private - Statement

NEW YORK, April 25 (Sputnik) - Billionaire businessman Elon Musk has reached a deal to buy Twitter for around \$44 billion, in a move that will delist the social media giant from the New York Stock Exchange and make it privately-held, the company said in a statement on Monday. "Twitter, Inc. ... has entered into a definitive agreement to be acquired by an entity wholly owned by Elon Musk, for \$54.20 per share in cash in a transaction valued at approximately \$44 billion," the statement said. "Upon completion of the transaction, Twitter will become a privately held company."

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### Biden Hosts Tampa Bay Lightning at White House to Celebrate 2020, 2021 Stanley Cup Wins

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden hosted the Tampa Bay Lightning hockey team at the White House on Monday to celebrate the team's back-to-back Stanley Cup championship wins in the 2020 and 2021 seasons.

Biden delivered a speech celebrating and honoring the team's accomplishment, during which he noted that the team is one of only eight in the last century to win the Stanley Cup two seasons in a row.

The Tampa Bay Lightning in their 2020 and 2021 seasons had four Russian players on the team, including goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy, defensive player Mikhail Sergachev, and forwards Alexander Volkov and Nikita Kucherov.

Vasilevskiy, Kucherov and Sergachev remain on the team's roster for the ongoing 2022 season. The Tampa Bay Lightning beat the Dallas Stars to win the Stanley Cup in 2020, and beat the Montreal Canadiens in 2021 to win the championship again.

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### Canada Federal Police Weighed Charging Trudeau With Fraud Over Aga Khan Scandal - Reports

TORONTO, April 25 (Sputnik) - Canada's federal police considered charging Prime Minister Justin Trudeau with fraud following a scandalous trip to a private island funded by the Aga Khan, a report from The Globe and Mail revealed on Monday.

Documents obtained through an access to information request by the outlet revealed that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) believed there was "reasonable grounds" proceed with charges against Trudeau but doing would have been against the public interest because of ambiguity around rules for accepting gifts.

Trudeau also received gifts from the Ismaili spiritual leader, whose organization includes a lobbying group registered with the Canadian government, the report said.

It is unclear whether Trudeau can be prosecuted under section 121(1)(c) of the Criminal Code, since the section has a provision which allows officials to accept benefits from individuals with government dealings, provided the official has the written consent of the head of their branch of government, the report quoted a briefing note by RCMP Corporal Michael Kiperchuk to his superiors.

The Canadian prime minister's trip, the details of which were initially concealed from the public, triggered the first of three ethics investigations of Trudeau. The prime minister was eventually found in violation of conflict-of-interest rules by the country's Ethics Commissioner.

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US Canceled Meeting of Elbe Ceremony, Did Not Participate in Moscow - Russian Official

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US officials did not take part in the traditional annual events to honor the historical meeting of the Soviet and US troops at the Elbe River in Germany in 1945 and canceled the ceremony in Washington, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Crimea and Crimean Permanent Representative to the Russian President, Georgiy Muradov, said on Monday.

"Unfortunately, representatives of the US embassy in Moscow did not take part in our events in Moscow. The ceremony at the Arlington National Cemetery in Washington was simply forbidden by the US side," Muradov said during the online event in honor of the 77th anniversary of the historical meeting between the US and Soviet troops.

In completing the defeat of Nazi Germany, Soviet and US troops met at the Elbe River on April 25, 1945, a date considered to be the highest point in relations among the Allies fighting the Axis coalition.

Muradov expressed regret that some US authorities have decided to ignore the historical memory of that event, noting that the West is now flirting with Nazism just as it did just before World War II.

"It seems that the consequences and results of such flirting have not taught anything the politicians in the United States and Europe," he said.

Edward Lozansky, a member of the organizing committee of the "Spirit of the Elbe" commemorative event, recalled that he told Sputnik in April of 2020 that US and Russian Presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin issued a joint declaration saying the event is an example of how the two countries can put aside differences, build trust and cooperate in pursuit of a greater cause.

"These words are even more important today when the world is on the brink of World War III. Therefore, on the eve of the 77th anniversary of Elbe Day, why not recall this statement and make an attempt to avoid this disaster by giving a chance to diplomacy instead of adding fuel to the fire?" Lozansky said.

Joseph Wolff, son of US participant Joseph Polowsky, recalled that the Spirit of the Elbe event marked the end of the Third Reich and the destruction of Adolf Hitler's evil empire. "At this moment, the Russian Federation has an ongoing special operation underway in Ukraine. Whatever the rationale for that decision, I strongly believe that the contributions of everyone in a defeat of Hitler evil empire need to be acknowledged and credited," Wolff said. On Sunday, Russian Ambassador in Washington Anatoly Antonov announced that the US authorities had canceled the annual ceremony held at the Spirit of the Elbe war memorial at the Arlington National Cemetery. Russian diplomats, their colleagues from the Commonwealth of Independent States, World War II veterans and US officials participated in the ceremony in previous years.

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Russia Hopes Banking Services Resume at Diplomatic Posts in US After Urgent Steps - Consul

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The Russian Foreign Ministry has taken a number of urgent measures to resume banking services for diplomatic missions in the United States and hopes operations will return to normal soon, Russian Consul General in Houston Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik.

Zakharov confirmed that in March, Bank of America terminated services for the consulates general in Houston and in New York and the accounts have become frozen.

"We are grateful to the leadership of the embassy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which took a number of urgent steps in the bilateral area, thanks to which the situation was rectified, and we hope that it will return to normal," he said.

Zakharov did not specify the measures taken, but noted that ways of resolving the issue have been identified.

The diplomat noted The Consulate General is also a kind of economic entity with financial obligations and mutual settlements with service providers.

"This includes the office rent, renting living spaces for employees, which accordingly became impossible, of course," he said. "We hope that in the near future we will have such opportunities [for banking operations]... We hope that everything related to banking services will be normalized."

On Sunday, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov said that Bank of America closed the accounts of two Russian consulates general in Houston and New York.

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Russian Consulate General in Houston Gets Threats, Law Enforcement Reacts Quickly - Consul

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - Russia's diplomatic mission in Houston receives threats, but law enforcement has responded to their reports promptly, Consulate General Alexander Zakharov told Sputnik on Monday.

"Several mass anti-Russian actions took place here. Demonstrations continue, they did not stop. There are threats that we report to local law enforcement. But, let's say, we haven't recorded such actions aimed at the physical safety of employees yet," Zakharov said. Zakharov underscored that the American authorities respond to reports in connection with threats quickly.

"They promptly look into and contact," he added. "During the mass action, which was here on February 26, increased police squads were present."

Zakharov also shared that the problem with the mission staffing remains.

"Several people are waiting for visas that cannot come here. We have had to increase our service hours," he said. "We have a very large consular district now - 13 states. This is not only these 13 states, because those who find it more convenient to contact us, they do. Let's say it's closer to fly from California than, say, to Washington. Therefore, we are looking at what we can do as much as possible in this area."

Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov said on Saturday that the Russian Embassy in Washington is facing a blockade from US government organizations, including Bank of America's closure of the accounts of two consulates general in Houston and New York. Antonov also said that they received threats by phone and mail.

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#### Canada to Probe Trudeau's Emergencies Act Declaration - Statement

TORONTO, April 25 (Sputnik) - A Canadian commission has been formed to probe Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's decision to invoke the Emergencies Act in response to peaceful protests against the COVID-19 vaccine mandates earlier this year, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) announced on Monday.

Trudeau invoked the previously unused Emergencies Act, which granted the Ottawa sweeping powers to crack down on the so-called Freedom Convoy, on February 14. Canada's Emergencies Act includes the provision that its use must trigger an inquiry within 60 days of the declaration.

"Trudeau, today announced the establishment of the Public Order Emergency Commission, an independent public inquiry following the invocation of the Emergencies Act," the PMO said in a statement. "The Commission will examine the circumstances that led to the declaration being issued and the measures taken in response to the emergency."

The commission will be led by Paul Rouleau, a former Ontario Superior Court of Justice judge, who will have to submit the final report to the Canadian government by February 20, 2023. Rouleau vowed in a separate press release that the process will be "as open and transparent as possible."

Trudeau's use of the Emergencies Act, which among other measures allowed the government to seize protesters' bank accounts, received widespread condemnation, with some civil liberties groups taking the government to court and the prime minister becoming the focal point of unflattering international media coverage.

The emergency declaration was revoked on February 24, just two days after it passed with the backing of the opposition New Democrats in parliament.

The wave of protests across Canada began in mid-January, with tens of thousands of truckers and other demonstrators converging upon Ottawa to express strong opposition to vaccine mandates for truckers crossing the US-Canada border. The protest eventually evolved and various political groups united in opposition of Trudeau's government.

The Ottawa leg of the protests were routed by law enforcement shortly after the emergency declaration.

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**Biden Congratulates Macron on Re-Election, Ready to Continue Joint Work - White House**

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden spoke over the telephone with French President Emmanuel Macron and congratulated him on his re-election in the race against National Rally party candidate Marine Le Pen, the White House said in a readout of the conversation on Monday.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. spoke today with President Emmanuel Macron of France to congratulate him on his re-election. He underscored the close and enduring relations between the United States and France, our oldest ally, based on shared democratic values, economic ties, and security cooperation. President Biden conveyed his readiness to continue working closely with President Macron on our shared global priorities," the readout said.

Earlier on Monday, Macron beat Le Pen in the runoff of the French presidential election by winning 58.55% of the votes cast. Le Pen won 41.45% of the votes.

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**Judge Fines Trump \$10,000 Per Day for Ignoring Subpoena - New York Attorney General**  
(Updates with more details, context in paras 3-8)

NEW YORK, April 25 (Sputnik) - Former US president Donald Trump has been held in contempt of court and fined \$10,000 per day by a judge for ignoring subpoenas by the New York State's Attorney-General Letitia James, the prosecutor said in statement on Monday.

"In a major victory, a court has ruled in our favor to hold Donald Trump in contempt of court," James, who is investigating allegations that Trump illegally inflated the value of his assets to obtain loans beyond merit, said. "Donald Trump must pay \$10,000 per day for every day that he continues to defy the court's order to turn over documents to my office."

New York judge Arthur Engoron, who ruled against Trump on Monday, had made an earlier ruling in February that Trump and his two adult children could not refuse subpoenas by James to question them over her probe into the Trump Organization, which represents the family's business interests.

Prior to Judge Engoron's February ruling, the accounting firm Mazars informed Trump in a letter that it could no longer back financial statements prepared for the Trump Organization. The Mazars letter was used by James to back her argument that Trump's private businesses had engaged in "fraudulent or misleading" practices in the valuation of its assets.

"Today, justice prevailed," James said in a fuller statement after Monday's ruling by Judge Engoron. "For years, Donald Trump has tried to evade the law and stop our lawful investigation into him and his company's financial dealings. Today's ruling makes clear: No one is above the law."

Trump became US president after beating Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election, campaigning as an independent businessman who would reshape politics in Washington. He left office in January 2021 after losing to another Democrat candidate, Joe Biden.

Trump has indicated that he will run again in the 2024 election, although it is not known what impact the case brought against the Trump Organization will have on his chances of doing that. Trump and his company have denied any wrongdoing. The former president had previously called the probe "a continuation of the greatest Witch Hunt of all time". He did not immediately react to Monday's ruling.

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#### Simulator Problems Continue to Delay F-35 Operational Testing - US Government Watchdog

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - Difficulties in developing a working simulator for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter continue to delay the massively expensive and behind schedule project, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Monday.

"Operational testing of the F-35 continues to be delayed - primarily by holdups in developing an aircraft simulator - even as [the Defense Department] goes forward with the purchase of up to 152 aircraft a year," the report said.

The more aircraft produced before testing is complete, the more it might cost to retrofit those aircraft if issues are discovered, the GAO cautioned.

"If [the Defense Department] moves forward as planned, it will have bought a third of all F-35s before determining that the aircraft is ready to move into the full-rate production phase," the report said.

The GAO noted that the overall cost of the F-35 program is now estimated at \$1.7 trillion.

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#### US Charges 2 Europeans in Plot to Help American Evade N. Korea Sanctions - Justice Dept

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) -The United States charged two European nationals for conspiring with an American citizen to help Pyongyang evade US sanctions, the Justice Department announced in a release on Monday.

"[The US] ... announced today the unsealing of a Superseding Indictment charging ALEJANDRO CAO DE BENOS, a citizen of Spain, and CHRISTOPHER EMMS, a citizen of the United Kingdom, with conspiring to violate United States sanctions on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea by working with US citizen Virgil Griffith to illegally provide cryptocurrency and blockchain technology services to the DPRK," the release said.

The Department pointed out that both charged individuals are currently at large, while Griffith previously pleaded guilty to conspiring to assist Pyongyang in evading sanctions, and was sentenced to 63 months in prison and a \$100,000 fine.

In early 2018, Cao de Benos, the founder of the "Korean Friendship Association" and Emms, a cryptocurrency businessman, partnered to jointly plan and organize the "Pyongyang Blockchain and Cryptocurrency Conference" to benefit the DPRK.

Cao de Benos and Emms recruited Griffith, an American cryptocurrency expert, to provide services to Pyongyang at the Conference and arranged his travel to North Korea in April 2019, in violation of US sanctions, according to the release.

After the Cryptocurrency Conference, the Department added, Cao de Benos and Emms continued to conspire with Griffith to provide additional cryptocurrency and blockchain technology services to North Korea.

They planned to hold a second cryptocurrency conference in the North Korea in 2020, according to the release.

Cao de Benos and Emms are charged with one count of conspiring to violate and evade US sanctions, and face a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison, according to the release.

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CORRECTION - Judge Holds Trump in Contempt, Fines Him \$10,000 Per Day for Ignoring Subpoena - NY AG

(Corrects amount in headline, lede to \$10,000)

NEW YORK, April 25 (Sputnik) - Former US president Donald Trump has been held in contempt of court and fined \$10,000 a day by a judge for ignoring subpoenas by the New York State's Attorney-General Letitia James, the prosecutor said via Twitter on Monday.

"In a major victory, a court has ruled in our favor to hold Donald Trump in contempt of court," said James, who is investigating allegations that Trump illegally inflated the value of his assets to obtain loans beyond merit. "Donald Trump must pay \$10,000 per day for every day that he continues to defy the court's order to turn over documents to my office."

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### US F-35 Jet Modernization Program Now 3 Years Behind Schedule - Report

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter's Autonomic Logistics Information System (ALIS) continues to face major problems of technical complexity, poor usability and inaccurate or missing data, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Monday.

"The ALIS has faced long-standing challenges, including technical complexity, poor usability, and inaccurate or missing data," the report said.

Initially, the F-35 program intended to develop a new system to replace ALIS. However, the program office now plans to make gradual improvements to ALIS and eventually rename it. These planned improvements include smaller hardware and improved program data access, the report said.

"The program has yet to identify a date for when it will consider this transition complete but has mapped out the improvements it intends to make over the next 3 years," the report added.

The F-35 program office has changed plans from originally replacing its entire logistics system to now taking incremental steps to improve and modernize it, according to the report.

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### US Officials Find Body of Texas Soldier Who Drowned While Helping Migrants - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - An interagency search team on Monday found and identified the body of Texas Army National Guard specialist Bishop Evans, who went missing on Friday while trying to help migrants drowning in the Rio Grande river, the Texas Military Department said on Monday.

"The missing Texas Army National Guard Soldier, Specialist Bishop E. Evans, assigned to Operation Lone Star, has been found deceased following an exhaustive interagency search. SPC Evans went missing while trying to selflessly help migrants who appeared to be drowning as they tried to cross the river from Mexico into the US on Friday April 22, 2022," the Texas Military Department said in a press release.

The Texas National Guard is devastated by the loss of Evans and recognizes his selflessness in service to the state and national security, Maj. Gen. Tom Suelzer, Adjutant General for Texas, said in the release.

Several hundred National Guard troops are currently deployed to the US border with Mexico to help the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) deal with the record number of illegal immigrants coming to the United States.

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### Axiom-1 Private Space Mission Splashes Down Successfully Off Florida Coast - SpaceX

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The four-astronaut Axiom-1 mission Dragon spacecraft successfully splashed down in the Atlantic Ocean at 1:06 p.m. EDT off Jacksonville in the US state of Florida, SpaceX announced on Monday. The splashdown was podcast live. Initially, SpaceX expected the splashdown to occur on April 19, but unfavorable weather conditions off the coast of Florida led to several postponements of the Axiom-1 crew's return. The first all commercial crewed Axiom-1 mission to the International Space Station blasted off from NASA's Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Florida, on April 8. Initially, the mission was expected to last about ten days. The Axiom-1 crew members include Commander Michael Lopez-Alegria of the United States and Spain, pilot Larry Connor of the United States, mission specialist Eytan Stibbe of Israel and mission specialist Mark Pathy of Canada.

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Judge Holds Trump in Contempt, Fines Him \$100,000 Per Day for Ignoring Subpoena - NY AG

NEW YORK, April 25 (Sputnik) - Former US president Donald Trump has been held in contempt of court and fined \$100,000 a day by a judge for ignoring subpoenas by the New York State's Attorney-General Letitia James, the prosecutor said via Twitter on Monday. "In a major victory, a court has ruled in our favor to hold Donald Trump in contempt of court," said James, who is investigating allegations that Trump illegally inflated the value of his assets to obtain loans beyond merit. "Donald Trump must pay \$10,000 per day for every day that he continues to defy the court's order to turn over documents to my office."

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UN Chief Likely to Visit Another Country During Trip to Russia, Ukraine - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, April 25 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is expected to visit an additional country in-between his visit to Russia and Ukraine, United Nations deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said on Monday. "I do believe that there will be an additional country he travels into between the visits to Moscow and Kiev," Haq said during a press briefing. On Friday, a spokesperson for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced the United Nations had confirmed the UN chief's upcoming visit to Moscow to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. The Kremlin has also confirmed Guterres' visit, saying Putin and Lavrov will receive the UN Secretary-General for talks on April 26. Guterres is expected to meet with Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kiev on Thursday.

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Guterres Spoke to US Officials Before Visits to Moscow, Kiev, Did Not Talk to Biden - UN

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres spoke with US officials before heading to Russia and Ukraine, deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said on Monday. "Not with the President," Haq told a briefing. "He has been speaking to senior US officials and indeed many other senior officials by phone in recent days."

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UN Chief to Discuss Situation in Mariupol During Visits to Moscow, Kiev - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will raise the situation in Mariupol during his upcoming visits to Moscow and Kiev, his deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said on Monday.

"I am sure that the situation in Mariupol will be one of the topics that will be discussed with his interlocutors and we'll see what progress we make on that as a result of the meetings that he is having," Haq told a briefing.

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UN Chief Believes Chance Exists to Improve Situation in Ukraine - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, April 25 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres believes that there is a chance to improve the situation in Ukraine, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Monday.

"He believes there is a chance to get a better situation and he is willing to take that," Haq told reporters when asked to comment Guterres' visits to Russia and Ukraine this week.

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US Anti-Drone Plan Urges Legislative Action, Global Cooperation - White House

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's new anti-drone action plan calls for congressional action and enhanced global cooperation among other initiatives to address threats posed by unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), the White House said on Monday. "Today, the Biden administration is releasing the first whole-of-government plan to address UAS threats in the Homeland. Through the Domestic Counter-Unmanned Aircraft Systems National Action Plan, the administration is working to expand where we can protect against nefarious UAS activity, who is authorized to take action, and how it can be accomplished lawfully," the White House said in a fact sheet.

The plan provides eight recommendations, including working with Congress to expand existing counter-UAS authorities for the Defense, Justice, State and Homeland Security Departments, as well as the CIA and NASA in limited situations, the fact sheet said.

The plan also recommends enhancing cooperation with the international community on counter-UAS technologies and the systems designed to overcome them, the fact sheet added. Moreover, the plan recommends establishing a National Counter-UAS Training Center to promote interagency cross-training and collaboration, creating a federal database to track UAS incidents, and working with Congress to close loopholes in existing federal UAS laws and develop adequate penalties to deter UAS-related crimes, according to the fact sheet.

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UN Chief Calls for Immediate End to Violence in West Darfur - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, APRIL 25 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed deep concern about inter-communal clashes in West Darfur that have resulted in more than 200 people being killed and scores more injured, and called for an immediate end to the violence, United Nations deputy spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Monday.

"The Secretary-General extends his deepest condolences to the families of those killed and wishes a speedy recovery to those injured," Haq said. "The Secretary-General deplores the killings of civilians in the Kreinik locality, West Darfur, as well as the attacks on health facilities on 24 April. He calls for an immediate end to violence."

The Coordinating Committee for Refugees and Displaced People said the existing conflict between Masalit farmers and Arab nomads jostling for grazing space and water led to the violence that erupted on Friday in Kreinik in West Darfur. By Monday, the violence had spread to Al Geneina, the capital of West Darfur.

Guterres emphasized that the government of Sudan is accountable for ensuring that civilians in Darfur are protected, Haq said.

However, Guterres praised the Sudanese authorities for attempting to mitigate the situation by evacuating injured civilians but called for quick deployment of the joint security-keeping forces as proscribed by the Juba Peace Agreement, Haq also said.

Guterres also appealed to Sudanese authorities to allow unrestricted humanitarian access while calling for an independent investigation of this and other instances of inter-communal violence so that those liable for are held to account, Haq added.

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**Biden Says Will Be Briefed by Blinken, Austin on Their Trip to Ukraine**

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Monday that Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will brief him on their weekend trip to Ukraine.

"I'm going to be doing that now. I spoke with them before and on the way," Biden said when asked if he has talked with Blinken or Austin since their trip, according to a White House pool report.

Blinken and Austin on Sunday visited Kiev to meet with Volodymyr Zelenskyy, marking the first visit by high-level US officials to Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation at the end of February.

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**Biden Says Tried To Speak With Macron After Election Victory, Will Be Talking To Him Today**

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Monday that he tried to speak with French President Emmanuel Macron last night to congratulate him on his reelection and will be talking to him today.

"I feel good about the French election, number one. Number two, I tried to talk to him last night. I spoke to his staff and he was at the Eiffel Tower having a good time. And I'm going to be talking to him today," Biden said, as quoted by the White House pool.

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**US Pushing Indonesia to Include Ukraine at November G20 Summit - Reports**

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - The United States and other countries are pushing Indonesia to include Ukraine at the G20 summit being hosted in Bali in November, Bloomberg reported on Monday, citing unnamed sources.

The US is among the countries urging Indonesia as host to invite Ukraine to the summit as a guest, the sources reportedly said. The US is also frustrated at Indonesia's refusal to rescind an invitation to Russian President Vladimir Putin, the report added.

Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati of Indonesia confirmed on Thursday that invitations had been sent to all G20 leaders, including President Putin. However, no decision has been made yet as to whether Putin will participate in the summit, spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday. Delegates of Ukraine, the US, the United Kingdom, Canada, the European Central Bank president and others walked out of a recent G20 ministerial meeting in Washington as part of a boycott on Russia's participation in the group.

Indrawati, who chaired the meeting as part of Indonesia's G20 presidency, said that the walkout did not disrupt the ministerial and member states remain committed to multilateral discussion of common challenges.

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#### **Toll Holdings Reaches \$6.1Mln Settlement With US in Sanctions Dispute - Treasury**

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) - Toll Holdings has agreed to remit more than \$6.1 million to settle a potential civil suit with the US government over the alleged violation of sanctions, the Department of the Treasury announced in a press release on Monday.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) today announced a settlement with Toll Holdings, an international freight forwarding and logistics company headquartered in Melbourne, Australia," the release said.

Toll Holdings agreed to remit \$6.1 million to settle its potential civil liability for 2,958 apparent violations of the Iranian Transactions and Sanctions Regulations, the North Korea Sanctions Regulations, the Syrian Sanctions Regulations, the Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferators Sanctions Regulations and the Global Terrorism Sanctions Regulations, the release said.

"The apparent violations occurred when Toll originated or received payments through the US financial system involving sanctioned jurisdictions and persons," the release added.

The payments were in connection with sea, air, and rail shipments conducted by Toll, its affiliates, or suppliers to, from, or through the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Iran, or Syria, or the property or interests in property of an entity on OFAC's list of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons, according to the release.

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#### **Canada Plans \$780Mln Radar to Protect North American Cities From Arctic Threats - Reports**

TORONTO, April 25 (Sputnik) – Canada is preparing to build a radar system worth over \$780 million to protect North American cities from potential threats over Arctic airspace, the Ottawa Citizen reported on Monday.

Canada's air force briefed defense industry officials on the matter in Ottawa on April 7, according to the newspaper.

The system, which would monitor Arctic airspace to detect threats against major American or Canadian cities, is expected to become operational in 2028.

The Arctic Over-the-Horizon Radar would "provide long-range surveillance of northern approaches to the major population centers in North America by establishing a northward-aimed high frequency over-the-horizon radar system in southern Canada," the report said, quoting excerpts from the briefing.

Canada and the United States have recently ramped up efforts to modernize the aging North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), with senior defense officials from both countries engaging in regular meetings on the issue.

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Russian Envoy Says No Point in Ukraine Ceasefire, It Would Give Kiev Room for Provocations

UNITED NATIONS, April 25 (Sputnik) - Russia's deputy envoy to the UN, Dmitry Polyanskiy, said on Monday that he sees no point in a Ukraine ceasefire now, as it would give Kiev room for new provocations.

"I don't think so," he said, when asked whether it is time for a ceasefire. "I think he [a journalist] asked about Easter ceasefire and Easter ceasefire is over right now. We are not supposed to comply with the calls. We don't see that a ceasefire is a good option right now because it would give Ukrainian forces room to regroup and to stage more provocations," he said.

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FBI Seizes Works of Art, Boots, Sunglasses in Raid of Homes Linked to Deripaska – Reports

WASHINGTON, April 25 (Sputnik) – The FBI seized works of art, boots and sunglasses during a raid of the homes linked to Russian businessman Oleg Deripaska in New York and Washington last year, Bloomberg reported on Monday.

The United States introduced sanctions against Deripaska and dozens of other Russian individuals and entities in April 2018 over their alleged ties to the Russian government, which Washington has repeatedly accused of malign activities.

While the FBI did not explain its decision to seize the items, the federal authorities appear to suspect Deripaska has been evading US sanctions, according to the news agency.

During the raids last October, officers confiscated several works of fine art, sunglasses, hiking boots, housewares, financial records, telephone bills and other documents, the report said, citing sources in the know. In doing so, they tried to uncover information on how the billionaire is moving his money around, it added.

Searching the property in New York, FBI agents were looking for documents related to Gracetown Inc., the company that has managed property tax payments on a Greenwich Village townhouse linked to the Russian businessman since 2013, the report noted.

Deripaska acknowledged at the time of the raids that he has ties to the properties being searched in New York and Washington, but said they belonged to his relatives.