

4/27/23 Thursday

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Raging Feud: Disney Files Lawsuit Against DeSantis Over 'Government Retaliation'

The feud between the mega-corporation and the Republican governor began after Disney publicly objected to the Parental Rights in Education Act, also known as the "Don't Say Gay bill." Disney filed a lawsuit on Wednesday against Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, accusing him of operating a "campaign of government retaliation" and violating the company's First Amendment rights.

The lawsuit comes as the latest development in a long-running feud between the Florida governor and the state's largest employer, which started when the Republican legislature passed a controversial law mandating what can be taught in Florida schools.

The Parental Rights in Education Act was signed into law in March 2022. Often called the "Don't Say Gay bill" by critics, it prevents teachers from discussing LGBTQ+ issues until after the third grade and also requires teachers and school administrators to inform parents if a student expresses confusion about their gender identity or sexual orientation.

The legislation also forbids teachers from using a student's preferred name or pronoun without getting permission from the parents first.

Disney CEO Bob Chapek later said he would work behind the scenes in Florida to overturn the law and pledged to stop political donations in the state while the law stands. In 2020, Disney gave a total of \$4.8 million in donations to Florida politicians during the 2020 election cycle, including both Democrats and Republicans, and \$50,000 to DeSantis' gubernatorial campaign. In response, DeSantis slammed Disney as going "woke" and urged lawmakers to pass a bill stripping Disney of its self-governing authority. Since 1967, Florida has given Disney special status allowing it to ignore zoning laws, impose its taxes, issue bonds and build roads, among other special privileges.

The new law would have put into place a new governing board that would replace the one picked by the Disney corporation. However, Disney appeared to outmaneuver DeSantis when it passed a resolution before the bill took effect, ceding power from the board back to Disney and leaving the board authority only on mundane issues like road maintenance.

However, DeSantis' handpicked board, which includes multiple DeSantis donors and anti-LGBTQ+ activists, voted to invalidate that agreement, leading Disney to file its lawsuit against the Republican governor.

The lawsuit calls the action "patently retaliatory, patently anti-business, and patently unconstitutional."

DeSantis' board claims the resolution passed by Disney's board is invalid because Disney failed to notify all parties and the resolution first needed to be approved by the district's two cities. Disney claims it did give proper notice and the company put out an announcement in the Orlando Sentinel on January 27 for the meeting that took place on February 8.

It remains unclear how DeSantis' feud may help him politically. A Reuters-Ipsos poll found that 44% of Republicans said their opinions on DeSantis improved because of his fight with Disney, whereas 73% of the general population said they were less likely to support a candidate who seeks to punish a company for its political views.

DeSantis has long been rumored to be considering a presidential run in 2024, and is seen as the biggest challenger for former President Donald Trump in securing the Republican nomination.

At present, DeSantis is abroad but his communication director Taryn Fenske told US media the lawsuit is "yet another unfortunate example of [Disney's] hope to undermine the will of the Florida voters and operate outside the bounds of the law."

Prior to the lawsuit being filed, current Disney CEO Bob Iger stressed the actions taken by DeSantis were retaliatory.

"The governor got very angry about the position Disney took," Iger said, referring to the Parental Rights in Education Act, "and it seems like he's decided to retaliate against us, including the naming of a new board to oversee the property and the business."

He added: "In effect, it seems, to punish a company for its exercise of a constitutional right. And that just seems really wrong to me."

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Hunter Biden's Legal Team Meets With DoJ Officials Amid Criminal Probe

In December 2020, weeks after his father was elected president of the United States and months after the contents of his infamous laptop were exposed to the public, Hunter Biden announced that the US Attorney's Office in Delaware was investigating his "tax affairs."

Lawyers working for Hunter Biden met with Justice Department officials on Wednesday to discuss the yearslong criminal investigation into the president's son.

Hunter Biden's long-time lawyer Chris Clark and several other attorneys were seen entering the Justice Department headquarters on Wednesday; however, Clark declined to comment on the matter when contacted by US media.

According to sources who spoke to CNN, the meeting also included officials from the Justice Department's tax division and the Delaware US attorney's office. The Biden legal team previously called the Justice Department to ask for an update on the investigation.

There have been no public developments in the case since prosecutors narrowed down the possible charges last year.

Sources cited by US media say prosecutors are considering two misdemeanor failure to file taxes charges, a single felony tax evasion charge and a false statement charge relating to a gun purchase.

David Weiss, a Delaware US attorney appointed during the Trump administration, has been overseeing the investigation. Last week, it was reported some of the FBI agents involved in the case were growing frustrated that prosecutors have yet to file charges. One agent told US media the investigation was completed more than a year ago.

Also last week, an IRS whistleblower requested immunity through a lawyer so he could speak to Congress about an alleged coverup in the case. The whistleblower also alleges Attorney General Merrick Garland lied to Congress about the Hunter Biden case.

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Ex-San Francisco Fire Commissioner Accused of Spraying Homeless Individuals With Mace

A former San Francisco Fire Commissioner who was allegedly beaten with a metal pipe by a 24-year-old homeless man named Garret Doty is now being accused of spraying homeless people with bear mace.

On April 5, in a case that made national headlines, Don Carmignani was struck with a metal pipe by an assailant outside of his mother's home. His injuries required a multiple-day hospital stay where his jaw was wired shut and a metal plate put into his skull.

Doty was arrested as the suspect a short time later. But things got more complicated when a prosecutor reportedly told Carmignani's lawyers that the case would be dropped due to "new evidence" in the case.

The District Attorney's Office [quickly shot down](#) those claims but Doty's lawyer, a public defender named Kleigh Hathaway, said the new evidence appears to be video footage and police reports of a man matching Carmignani's description using pepper spray or bear mace on homeless people.

The District Attorney's Office blamed the miscommunication on a less-experienced attorney erroneously telling Carmignani's attorneys that the charges would be dropped.

The eight incidents occurred between November 2021 to January 2023 and all happened near Carmignani's mother's house in the Marina district in San Francisco, California.

In one video from November, a man with a similar build to Carmignani wearing a baseball cap, medical mask and black jacket can be seen casually walking down the street holding a can of what appears to be bear mace. When the man approaches a homeless man sleeping on the sidewalk, the man sprays him in the face for a few seconds and then continues walking away. Carmignani also had bear spray during the incident with Doty. A recently released video of that incident shows a man - allegedly Carmignani - chasing Doty while wearing a medical mask, a different baseball cap and a black jacket. Hathaway says the can in the November video appears to be "exactly like" the one Carmignani had during the incident with Doty.

Videos that were released to the public immediately after the incident but which occurred after the video that appears to show Carmignani chasing Doty with a can of bear mace, shows Doty chasing Carmignani, sans medical mask, with a metal pipe he retrieved from a trash can and striking him in the head with it.

"I would say my client is acting in lawful self-defense," Hathaway said in court, after expressing dismay that the case against Doty is continuing despite the accusations against Carmignani. However, Nick Colla, who represents Carmignani, has insisted his client is not the man in the videos attacking homeless people. "Our client vehemently denies that he is the alleged individual who is committing these acts against homeless people," he said.

Another lawyer who is said to be “close” to Carmignani told US media he did not believe Carmignani was the man in the video, explaining he saw a picture of the suspect and that it looked nothing like Carmignani.

At a news conference, District Attorney Brooke Jenkins said that her office plans to continue the case against Doty but noted he would have to be released from jail if the case does not proceed by Thursday. Jenkins said the hold-up in the case is that her office needs Carmignani to testify at the hearing.

Jenkins has stated that Carmignani has not agreed to testify or speak to the police. “Without him present to testify, that created evidentiary problems for us,” Jenkins said.

Carmignani has not been charged with a crime related to the attacks on homeless individuals, and the San Francisco Police Department has declined to confirm or deny they are investigating Carmignani in relation to the incidents.

In 2013, Carmignani resigned as San Francisco’s fire commissioner after he was arrested on suspicion of felony domestic violence and criminal threats stemming from an incident reported by his then-wife.

He later pleaded guilty to a lesser misdemeanor charge and was sentenced to probation, a fine, counseling and was ordered to return several firearms.

Carmignani, who lasted only four months at the post, is also known as “Cannabis Don” and as of 2016 was the largest holder of medical marijuana licenses in the city.

Carmignani claimed in an earlier interview that he did not confront Doty with the intention of starting a fight. “I didn’t go out there to fight anyone,” he told US media. “I’m trying to get them down the road, go to the park.”

Doty is facing charges of assault with a deadly weapon and battery causing serious bodily injury.

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Pentagon Leaker Allegedly Has History of Making Violent Threats, Researching Mass Shootings

Jack Teixeira was arrested by an FBI tactical team on April 13 for allegedly leaking classified documents on a Discord chatroom. The leaked documents revealed a variety sensitive issues, ranging from the US' interests in the Ukraine conflict and tracking on key foreign allies.

In a hearing considering the potential bail for alleged Pentagon leaker Jack Teixeira, prosecutors claimed that the US service member had a history of making violent threats and researched mass shootings.

The Thursday hearing saw the presiding judge sidestep a decision on bail for Teixeira, opting to instead listen to arguments and make a decision at an unspecified time. He did not state whether he would issue a written ruling or if the court would reconvene before he issues his final decision.

Prosecutors during the hearing pointed to Discord chats and Teixeira's 2018 high school suspension as proof he is too dangerous to be released while awaiting trial. The suspension stemmed from Teixeira's discussions about guns at the time.

In a court filing released ahead of the hearing, prosecutors argued Teixeira posted on an unidentified social media website that he wanted to kill “a ton [expletive] of people,” which he saw as “culling the weak minded.” He had also told a fellow Discord user he was thinking about converting a minivan into an “assassination van.”

The document further claims Teixeira sought advice on which rifles would be easily fired from the back of an SUV, adding that he would be shooting in a “crowded urban or suburban environment.”

The filing also states Teixeira had a gun locker in his room at his mother’s residence that included “AK” and “AR” -style rifles, handguns and other weapons. Some media outlets erroneously reported that the documents claim he had a bazooka near his bed but the documents only say that authorities found a bazooka in one of the residences he resided in (the other being his father’s house) and does not state where it was stored.

Prosecutors also alleged Teixeira used government computers to research multiple mass shootings, including Ruby Ridge, the Las Vegas shooting, the Buffalo supermarket shooting and the Uvalde elementary school shooting.

It is important to note that bail hearings are not trials. Prosecutors typically try to paint defendants in the worst possible light and the standard of evidence is much lower than in trial. The documents also do not provide any context to Teixeira’s alleged chat room comments. Prosecutors have further argued that Teixeira remains a threat to the community not only because of the potential for violence but the potential he has to reveal more classified information.

Officials claim Teixeira accessed classified information that “far exceeds what has been publicly disclosed on the Internet to date,” and that he studied the information extensively so would be able to recite some from memory without access to the actual documents.

This, they say, would not only risk him leaking more information online but would make him a prime candidate for adversarial countries to recruit who could then help him flee the United States.

Prosecutors also note Teixeira attempted to obstruct justice in the case, saying that authorities found a smashed laptop, tablet, iPhone and Xbox gaming console in a dumpster near one of his homes. Officials also say he changed his number, shut down the Discord chatroom and encouraged other users to delete their messages and not cooperate with law enforcement.

What's the Defense Saying?

Teixeria’s defense lawyers say the government is being “hyperbolic” and have argued he no longer has access to classified information, underscoring the government is greatly exaggerating his threat to the community.

“[T]he government presents messages it contends were posted by Mr. Teixeira without any indication that he ever committed even a single act of violence,” defense attorneys argued.

The defense team has argued “there is no allegation in the affidavit that Mr. Teixeira had any intent for these documents to become widely available on the internet or desired to disrupt the geopolitical affairs of the United States.”

However, the judge overseeing the case has countered that he found it hard to believe Teixeira was unaware documents shared online were likely to move beyond the chatroom he shared them on.

The team has also argued Teixeira has proven he has no intention to flee justice, noting that when his identity became public “he sat on his mother’s porch reading a Bible in his uniform-compliant undershirt, awaiting the arrival of law enforcement.”

Teixeira is asking to be released to his father’s home. His father, also named Jack Teixeira, is a former correctional officer and military veteran. He says all the weapons in his home have been removed and he is willing to cut off television and internet access inside the home.

The defendant’s father also told US media outside the courtroom that he would turn his son in if he violated the conditions of his release. “My son is well aware of the fact that if he is released and does anything against probation, I will report it to his probation officer or anyone else,” the elder Teixeira said.

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Manchin Claims He'll 'Win Any Race' as New Contenders Emerge for His West Virginia Seat

The West Virginia senator has become known for being a controversial figure, often angering his own party by refusing to vote for keystone Democratic bills during his time in the Senate chamber.

Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV) bragged on Thursday that he would win any race he enters after it was revealed the senator would be facing a challenge for his seat in the upcoming election cycle.

“I am laser focused on doing the job West Virginians elected me to do – lowering health care costs, protecting Social Security and Medicare, shoring up American energy security and getting our fiscal house in order,” Manchin said in a statement. “But make no mistake, I will win any race I enter.”

Manchin, who is up for reelection in 2024 and has not said if he will run again, has declined to shoot down rumors that he may run for president. He is one of three Democrats in the Senate who serve in a state that former president Donald Trump won in 2020, indicating that they are vulnerable to challenges by the GOP.

The senator’s comments surfaced as West Virginia Governor Jim Justice filed paperwork to run for Manchin’s seat on Thursday morning. Justice, who cannot run for reelection because of term limits in West Virginia, announced his official bid during an event in White Sulphur Springs.

“I am officially announcing my candidacy for the United States Senate,” Justice told supporters. “And I absolutely will promise you to God above that I will do the job, and I will do the job that will make you proud.”

Justice’s entry into the fray marks him as the third major candidate seeking the Republican nomination to run for Manchin’s seat. Representative Alex Mooney announced a bid shortly after the midterm elections last November and Chris Rose, a fourth-generation coal miner with ties to Trump, has also announced a run.

The latest comes as Manchin has also been facing criticism from his party. While no candidate has announced a bid to face Manchin in the primary, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) teased he may support a potential challenger for the Democratic nomination.

It is not known which candidate GOP leadership will support in the Republican primary but a GOP-funded poll released in February indicated that Justice would be the most formidable challenger for Manchin. Justice flipped his party affiliation from Democrat to Republican in 2017. Manchin's seat seems to be vulnerable for reasons other than Trump's popularity in the state. According to a Morning Consult poll taken in October, only 42% of West Virginians approve of Manchin's job performance while 51% disapprove. Even among West Virginia Democrats, Manchin is struggling. The same poll said that only 52% approve of Manchin's job performance.

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Two US Army Apache Choppers Crash in Alaska During Training Flight

The Thursday incident marks the second military helicopter crash in the Last Frontier state in as many weeks.

Two Army Apache helicopters crashed in Fairbanks, Alaska, on Thursday, leaving three dead and one person hospitalized.

First responders are on the site, a statement from the US Army Alaska said. Alaska State Troopers are not part of the response, a spokesperson for the department told US media.

The AH-64 Apache helicopters were reportedly participating in training exercises at the time of the crash. According to the 11th Airborne Division, the helicopters were from the 1st Attack Battalion, 25th Aviation Regiment and were stationed in Fort Wainwright.

The incident marks the third major military helicopter crash in the United States this year.

In February, two soldiers were injured when an Apache rolled after takeoff from Talkeetna, Alaska. Then in March, nine soldiers were killed during routine nighttime training when two Army Black Hawk medical helicopters crashed about 30 miles northeast of Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Officials say more information will be made available after an investigation is completed.

The Thursday crash occurred near Haley, Alaska, a town of about 1,000 people. It is located 10 miles from the Denali National Park and Preserve, which is home to Denali, North America's tallest mountain.

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Three French Protesters Facing Prison for Flipping Macron the Finger

France has been immersed in protests for months but saw tensions kicked up in January when the government proposed a bill to reform the country's pension plan. The bill, which was signed into law on April 14, raises the retirement age in France from 62 to 64 years old.

Three protesters from the French commune of Selestat, which sits near the border of Germany, are facing prison time for giving the middle finger to French President Emmanuel Macron during his visit to the town on April 19.

The three protesters have pleaded guilty to contempt of a person holding public authority, according to a statement issued by prosecutor Catherine Sorita-Minard.

Due to their gesture to the French president, the three protesters are facing up to a year in prison and a €15,000 fine. None of the protesters have a criminal history. A fourth person was also arrested but the charges were dropped due to a lack of evidence.

When Macron arrived in Selestat he was met with a crowd demanding his resignation and a chorus of boos. Macron's approval rating in the country has been plummeting since he decided to move forward with pension reforms despite massive monthslong protests around the country against the reforms.

At the time, Macron said that he believed in the right to protest. "I am not naive, I have just passed a difficult and unpopular law, but I look forward to keep in touch [with the population]. People should be able to express themselves freely, but the country must move forward," Macron told reporters after the protests.

Protesters have followed Macron around the Alsace region, banging on pots and pans to interrupt his speeches. That resulted in the government hastily passing a ban on "portable sound devices" hours before Macron arrived in the village of Ganges. Police there confiscated pans from protesters, classifying them as falling under that law.

French trade unions have so far refused further dialog with Macron, and the French president has reportedly resorted to carrying generators everywhere he goes because unions have been shutting off power in areas he is visiting.

"We have a president who has turned a deaf ear to our cries, so we do not want to hear him either. As long as Macron continues to oppose the majority of the population, we will continue to strike," a trade union representative told French media.

Protesters have also promised to shut down and cut power to popular events, including the Cannes film festival and the Monaco Grand Prix.

Macron's approval rating sits at just 26%, according to a BVA poll. Despite the slump, he has pledged not to back down on his pension reforms and has ordered his government to "restore peace" over the next 100 days.

Another poll, conducted by L'Opinion en direct, said the 2022 candidate for the right-wing National Rally party, Marine Le Pen, would easily beat Macron if the election were held today, with 55% of the hypothetical vote.

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US Fed Inflation Tracker PCE Index Up 4.2% in Year to March, Down From 5% in February

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The Personal Consumption Expenditure (PCE) Index, a US inflation indicator closely followed by the Federal Reserve, grew at a slightly higher-than-expected 4.2% in the year to March while slowing significantly from a month earlier, data from the Commerce Department showed on Thursday.

Economists polled by US media had expected the PCE Index to grow 4.1% for the year to March versus 5% in February.

The so-called core PCE Index, stripped of food and energy prices, was, however, unchanged from February, growing 4.6% for the year to March.

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Just 29% of South Koreans Say US Snooping Warrants Change in Relationship – Poll

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Almost 80% of South Koreans are concerned about the consequences that the recent Pentagon leak might have on their country's national security, but less than a third believe Seoul should review its relationship with the United States in the wake of the snooping revelations, according to a Morning Consult poll published on Friday.

Thirty-two percent of South Koreans are "very concerned" and 45% are "somewhat concerned" by the effects of the leak on national security, the findings showed.

At the same time, a majority, 54%, believe US spying on allies is expected.

When asked whether South Korea should change its relationship with the US after the leak suggested Washington spied on the ally as the latter debated arms supply to Ukraine, just 29% replied in the affirmative, while 51% answered in the negative.

The survey was conducted from April 21-23, among a representative sample of 1,000 adults in South Korea, with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points.

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RPT - Faith, Russian Culture Inspired Legendary Cellist Rostropovich and His Music - Priest

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - More than 15 years after his death, internationally acclaimed Russian musician and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich is still widely regarded as one of the best cellists of all time.

But according to his close friend, archpriest Victor Potapov, the rector of the Russian Orthodox St. John the Baptist in Washington, two salient characteristics distinguished him from other highly accomplished musicians: his Russian culture and his profound faith in God.

"I am not a musicologist or a specialist, and cannot say for sure, but I think that Slava's faith in God, his Orthodox Christianity helped him perform and gave him extra inspiration, I would say," Potapov told Sputnik.

The musician and the priest met each other after both came to Washington in 1977, when Rostropovich became a music director and conductor at the US National Symphony Orchestra, and Potapov was given a position at a parish in the US capital.

"I began serving in Washington, Rostropovich would come to church because he was a pious Christian and liked coming to church, watching services, and we met that way," Potapov

recalled.

When parishioners began rebuilding their church into a large cathedral, Rostropovich took an active role in the project by collecting funds, organizing musical performances and providing gifts to the parish to fund the construction.

Each time he returned to Washington between his international tours, he would meet with the builders, who would describe to him in detail how the project was progressing, according to the priest.

"He was very interested in seeing to it: In Washington, DC a really classically beautiful Russian church would stand as a wonderful, glorious testimony to our rich Russian culture," Potapov recalled.

Rostropovich was the kind of person that many would call their friend, the priest said, noting that he was always kind and sociable, and never afraid to express his opinion directly or support his fellow artists.

"One of the most famous things that he did during the Soviet time was he gave Alexander Solzhenitzyn, the great Russian writer of the 20th century, a place to live and write when he was constantly followed by the KGB and harassed by them. That was a heroic act from Rostropovich," Potapov said.

The priest pointed out that Rostropovich never hid his Orthodox belief and would ask God to help him before every concert, crossing himself going on stage. He also built chapels inside his homes in Moscow and in Jordanville, New York, where he bought a mansion close to the Russian Holy Trinity monastery.

"For Slava, it was very important to have these chapels, to place icons in his dressing room, and to pray," the priest recalled.

When Rostropovich was diagnosed with intestinal cancer and his health began deteriorating, Father Victor flew from Washington to Paris to support him and to hear his confession. He also gave him Holy Communion and Holy Unction.

Rostropovich died on April 27, 2007, a month after celebrating his 80th birthday, and Potapov concelebrated his funeral services in Moscow's Christ the Savior cathedral and at the cemetery of the Novodevichy monastery.

"Of course, the family was devastated by their loss, and we spent a good several days with the family, comforting them," the priest said.

He consoled them by noting that Rostropovich was a very pious, sincere Orthodox Christian, who believed in the afterlife and who believed in the Kingdom of Heaven.

"Slava, during his lifetime, was a very generous person, He helped many poor musicians, many poor people, because he had the means to do it. And he never ever turned his back to the needy," he said. "Slava was just an amazing individual. I have not yet met anyone else in my life who could match the character and the personality of Mstislav Rostropovich."

Rostropovich was a recipient of 125 awards from different countries, a member of six music academies, a Doctor of Music of 38 different universities across the world, the founder of a foundation to improve the health of sick children worldwide, and an ardent fighter for democracy and human rights.

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RPT - Mideast Nations Distancing From US Influence, Diminution Concerns Washington - Ex-Envoy

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US partners in the Middle East are beginning to distance themselves from American influence amid efforts to stabilize the region, which may be a concern to Washington, former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Chas Freeman told Sputnik.

Saudi Arabia recently took diplomatic action to thaw relations with Iran, Syria, and Hamas, while Bahrain and Qatar agreed to resume diplomatic ties. In mid-April, Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad traveled to Saudi Arabia, marking his first visit to the country since 2011, to discuss efforts to reach a possible political solution to the crisis.

At the UN on Monday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the world must boost efforts to reach political settlements and stabilize conflict zones in the Middle East now more than ever as the region undergoes deep transformation. Lavrov also said a multilateral approach is required to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli crisis, instead of what he called the "destructive" one-sided actions of the US and EU that have harmed the Mideast peace process.

"The countries of West Asia are coming to see themselves as members of what [Russian political scientist] Sergei Karaganov has called 'the world majority' and distancing themselves from the United States," Freeman said. "All this represents a diminution of American influence that is naturally of concern to Washington."

The Eastern part of the Arab world, Freeman added, has long been subjected by external powers, but it is now in the midst of a self-driven rearrangement of regional relationships.

"Its major actors have seized control of their own destiny for the first time since Napoleon's 1798 invasion of Egypt and are seeking their own answers to their region's problems," Freeman said.

According to Freeman, the Middle East is now led by assertively independent leaders with their own determination about how their national interests will be best served, and they do not respond well to outside efforts to dictate policy in the region.

"These leaders have learned the hard way that the use of force and covert action not only solves few problems but is often costly and counterproductive," Freeman said. "The result is a search for peace and stability between the countries of the region without regard to the views of the United States and the former colonial powers."

Mideast nations, Freeman said, are expanding their outreach to rising and resurgent powers like China, India, Brazil, and Russia and by identification with post-Cold War institutions like the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, entailing the adoption of a nonaligned stance on matters between external great powers like the contention between the United States, Russia, and China.

Freeman is an American retired diplomat and writer who served in the US Foreign Service, and in the departments of State and Defense, in many different capacities over 30 years.

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US Awards Lockheed Martin \$4.8Bln GMLRS Contract

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon said it awarded aerospace giant Lockheed Martin a contract worth almost \$4.8 billion for Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (GMLRS), the munitions fired by the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) the United States provides to Ukraine.

"Lockheed Martin Corporation, Grand Prairie, Texas, was awarded a \$4,791,431,928 modification to contract W31P4Q-23-D-0003 for Lots 18 and 19 for the Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System," the release said on Thursday.

Work locations and funding will be determined with each order with an estimated completion date of October 30, 2026, the release added.

Lockheed Martin has reportedly struggled to make and deliver military aid such as the GMLRS on time to Ukraine and for refilling US stockpiles. Lockheed Martin said sales of the GMLRS, fell in the latest quarter from a year ago, according to The Wall Street Journal.

Earlier in April, the Pentagon said it awarded a \$215 million contract to Aerojet Rocketdyne to expand and modernize the production of GMLRS munitions, Javelins and Stingers for Ukraine.

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Maintaining Parameters of Humanitarian Assistance to Syria in UNSC 'Pointless' - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, April 28 (Sputnik) - Continuing to preserve the existing parameters for the provision of humanitarian aid to Syria in the UN Security Council is "pointless" due to the behavior of the Western countries, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said.

"It would be pointless to continue to maintain the current parameters for the provision of humanitarian assistance in the Council. Our Western colleagues have a choice here," Nebenzia said during a meeting of the UN Security Council on Thursday.

The United Nations should not ignore the pressure Western states exert on the Syrian government by utilizing the humanitarian assistance as a tool for that purpose, Nebenzia said.

Earlier on Thursday, US Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said the United States is not seeking a conflict with Russia in Syria and will continue to use the existing deconfliction channel to prevent any miscalculations.

Earlier this week, the defense ministers of Turkey, Russia, Syria and Iran met in Moscow for talks and characterized the meeting as having a "constructive atmosphere." The participants reaffirmed their desire to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria and intensify efforts for the speedy return of Syrian refugees.

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Former Vice President Pence Testifies to Jan 6 Federal Grand Jury - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Former Vice President Mike Pence testified to a federal grand jury investigating the events that took place on January 6, 2021, and the actions of former President Donald Trump and his associates, CNN reported on Thursday.

During Pence's testimony, which marks the first time a vice president has been asked to testify about the president he served with, the former vice president was asked to describe his conversations with Trump ahead of the January 6 events, where Trump may have been acting corruptly, said the report.

The testimony comes after both Pence and Donald Trump tried to hold off Pence's subpoena in court, but trial and appellate judges ordered Pence to testify about direct conversations he had with Trump during the time between November 2020 and January 6, 2021, which have been of interest to investigators, said the report.

Thus far, what is known about Trump's discussions with Pence during this period of time comes from the memoir Pence published last year and has been promoting on tour since, in addition to testimony from individuals questioned during the investigation into the January 6 events.

Pence's appearance before the grand jury also comes as he is considering challenging his former boss for the 2024 presidential nomination, said the report, with Thursday's testimony likely to draw Trump's ire.

The grand jury sits in Washington DC and its proceedings are generally kept secret.

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US Could Support Homeless Veterans Using Small Fraction of Money Given to Ukraine - Trump

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The United States could support all of its homeless veterans using a fraction of the amount of money being sent to Ukraine, former US President Donald Trump said during remarks in New Hampshire.

"I will use every possible authority to get the homeless off the streets immediately," Trump said on Thursday. "For a small fraction of what we spend in Ukraine, we could take every single homeless veteran in America and take care of them."

Trump said he would transfer the homeless off the streets and into tent cities, shelters, rehabilitation and mental institutions.

Living on the streets is neither good for the homeless nor for the communities, Trump added.

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Powell's Spokesperson Confirms Call With Pranksters But No Sensitive Info Discussed - Fox

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell was tricked into speaking with Russian pranksters posing as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, his spokesperson confirmed, but no sensitive data was discussed.

"Chair Powell participated in a conversation in January with someone who misrepresented himself as the Ukrainian president," a Federal Reserve spokesperson told Fox News on Thursday. "It was a friendly conversation and took place in a context of our standing in support of the Ukrainian people in this challenging time."

The report said, citing the spokesperson, that no sensitive or confidential information was discussed during the interview, and the matter has been reported to law enforcement.

According to media reports, Russian comedians Vladimir Kuznetsov and Alexei Stolyarov posed as Zelenskyy during a phone call with Powell, and they discussed issues ranging from inflation to Russia's banking system.

The call took place in January and lasted about 15 minutes.

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Biden After New Sanctions Calls on Russia, Iran to Release 'Wrongfully Detained' Americans

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden urged Russia and Iran to release "wrongfully detained" Americans.

US administration officials said earlier in the day that the Biden administration is imposing the first batch of sanctions on Russia and Iran for "wrongful detention" of American nationals abroad.

"Today, I am proud to announce that my Administration will for the first time deploy a new tool to impose severe economic costs on governments and groups that hold hostage or wrongfully detain Americans around the world," Biden said in a statement on Thursday.

Biden reminded that the US sanctioned "four individuals and two security services" in Russia and Iran who they consider as linked to detention of Americans.

"Today - and every day - our message to Russia, Iran, and the world is holding hostage or wrongfully detaining Americans is unacceptable. Release them immediately," Biden said.

Steps taken by Washington are cutting off designated actors from legitimate financial system, he added.

In particular, the United States sanctioned Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Intelligence Organization.

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Mideast Nations Distancing From US Influence, Diminution Concerns Washington - Ex-Envoy

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US partners in the Middle East are beginning to distance themselves from American influence amid efforts to stabilize the region, which may be a concern to Washington, former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Chas Freeman told Sputnik.

Saudi Arabia recently took diplomatic action to thaw relations with Iran, Syria, and Hamas, while Bahrain and Qatar agreed to resume diplomatic ties. In mid-April, Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad traveled to Saudi Arabia, marking his first visit to the country since 2011, to discuss efforts to reach a possible political solution to the crisis.

At the UN on Monday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the world must boost efforts to reach political settlements and stabilize conflict zones in the Middle East now more than ever as the region undergoes deep transformation. Lavrov also said a multilateral approach is required to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli crisis, instead of what he called the "destructive" one-sided actions of the US and EU that have harmed the Mideast peace process.

"The countries of West Asia are coming to see themselves as members of what [Russian political scientist] Sergei Karaganov has called 'the world majority' and distancing themselves from the United States," Freeman said. "All this represents a diminution of American influence that is naturally of concern to Washington."

The Eastern part of the Arab world, Freeman added, has long been subjected by external powers, but it is now in the midst of a self-driven rearrangement of regional relationships.

"Its major actors have seized control of their own destiny for the first time since Napoleon's 1798 invasion of Egypt and are seeking their own answers to their region's problems," Freeman said.

According to Freeman, the Middle East is now led by assertively independent leaders with their own determination about how their national interests will be best served, and they do not respond well to outside efforts to dictate policy in the region.

"These leaders have learned the hard way that the use of force and covert action not only solves few problems but is often costly and counterproductive," Freeman said. "The result is a search for peace and stability between the countries of the region without regard to the views of the United States and the former colonial powers."

Mideast nations, Freeman said, are expanding their outreach to rising and resurgent powers like China, India, Brazil, and Russia and by identification with post-Cold War institutions like the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, entailing the adoption of a nonaligned stance on matters between external great powers like the contention between the United States, Russia, and China.

Freeman is an American retired diplomat and writer who served in the US Foreign Service, and in the departments of State and Defense, in many different capacities over 30 years.

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Biden's Approval Rating Reaches New Lows Ahead of 2024 Election - Poll

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's approval rating has decreased further and reached a record low of 37%, a new Gallup poll revealed.

The poll was completed on Tuesday, the day Biden formally announced his bid for reelection in the 2024 presidential race, and released on Thursday.

The president's approval rating has fallen among Democrats and Republicans, but has particularly fallen with Independent voters - down nine points to 31% from February, a report on the poll said.

Biden's approval decreased by six points since March and one of the main reasons is the Americans' recognition of a declining US economy, the report said.

While 75% of voters see the economy as getting worse, only 16% of voters said they believe the economy is "good" or "excellent," the release said.

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NASA Chief Says ISS Expected to Deorbit Between 2030-31

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The International Space Station (ISS) will be deorbited between 2030 and 2031, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said during a congressional hearing.

"We are going to get out of the business of an International Space Station, we're going to deorbit it, it's aging, we're going to deorbit it in 2030-31," Nelson told the Science, Space and Technology Committee on Thursday. "We are going to turn it over to commercial and so we are now giving contracts to several commercial companies to create commercial space stations."

The firm that eventually wins the contract to create a new space station will attach its first module to the ISS, which will act as the core to start building the new space station, Nelson explained.

Earlier this month, the Russian government extended the lifespan of the Russian segment of the International Space Station (ISS) until 2028.

The United States, Japan, Canada, and the participating countries of ESA (European Space Agency) have confirmed they will support continued space station operations through 2030, according to NASA.

Nelson also touched on US-Russia relations in space, pointing out that both countries are required to integrate their space programs and assets in order to adequately operate the ISS.

The United States can have a cooperative relationship with Russia regardless of the differences over Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine, according to Nelson.

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UN Security Council Adopts Resolution Condemning Taliban For Banning Women Working in NGOs

UNITED NATIONS, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Security Council on Thursday adopted a resolution condemning the Taliban for banning Afghan women from working for NGOs, including the UN, and called on the Taliban to lift the policies.

The resolution expresses "deep concern that the recent decision by the Taliban to ban Afghan women from working for the United Nations in Afghanistan, in addition to the earlier restrictions that banned Afghan women from working for international and national non-governmental organizations, will negatively and severely impact United Nations operations in the country."

The resolution also calls "for the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation of women and girls in Afghanistan, calls upon the Taliban to swiftly reverse the policies and practices that restrict the enjoyment by women and girls of their human rights and fundamental freedoms..."

The United Nations has had a long-term presence in Afghanistan. The UNAMA was launched in 2002 and is the UN's special political mission tasked with assisting the people of Afghanistan. After the Taliban came to power in August 2021, the UNAMA stayed in the country to continue its work.

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US At 'Particularly Dangerous Place' With Russia Amid Ukraine Conflict – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) – The United States is at a "particularly dangerous place" with Russia amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the Kremlin's unwavering commitment to achieving its objectives in the country, US Defense Intelligence Agency Director Lt. Gen. Scott Berrier said in congressional testimony.

"We are at a particularly dangerous place with Russia. [Russian President Vladimir] Putin is not seeking an off-ramp and Moscow has asserted publicly that it remains committed to achieving its objectives in Ukraine through military force," Berrier said on Thursday.

Earlier on Thursday, Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said that Washington is also not seeking a conflict with Russia in Syria and will continue to use the existing deconfliction channel to prevent any miscalculations.

The countries of the so-called collective West ramped up their military support for Ukraine after Russia launched a special military operation there on February 24, 2022. The assistance includes air defense missiles and guns, multiple launch rocket systems, tanks, self-propelled artillery, armored vehicles, and various kinds of ammunition.

Russia has repeatedly warned against such supplies as they would further prolong the conflict and escalate it, possibly leading to the United States and NATO getting directly involved in the conflict.

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Biden Not Getting Pre-Approved Questions From Reporters - White House

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is not getting questions from reporters that are pre-approved ahead of his press conferences, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said.

"We do not have specific questions in advance, that is not something that we do," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing on Thursday.

Jean-Pierre made the comment in response to the outcry that Biden is receiving pre-approved questions from reporters after a photographer captured a small note in Biden's hand during a press conference with South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, which revealed he was aware about a question from a Los Angeles Times reporter.

The Los Angeles Times denied submitting questions to the president in advance, as did Jean-Pierre.

"I would point out, the question that was asked was different that was on the card that you all saw," she said.

Jean-Pierre said it is "absolutely normal" for the relevant White House staff to brief the president about reporters who are attending press conferences and the possible questions from them.

"It is not surprising that yesterday we would anticipate questions that he did receive on the visit of the South Korean president, with the South Korean president standing to his right, or about 2024 - that was completely expected, or about the debt ceiling," she said.

Jean-Pierre also said the White House staff was trying to choose media outlets who previously did not have a chance to ask questions.

"We picked the Los Angeles Times, which has not gotten a question in some time," she added.

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Trump Says Transferring 'Crooked' Title From Clinton to Biden Ahead of 2024 US Election

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said he will be transferring the "crooked" nickname from Hillary Clinton to Joe Biden ahead of the 2024 presidential election.

"I will be retiring the name 'crooked' from Hillary Clinton and her moniker," Trump said during a speech in New Hampshire on Thursday. "I'm going to retire the name 'crooked' so that we can use the name for Joe Biden, because he'll be known from now on as Crooked Joe Biden... because there has never been anyone in the history of American politics so crooked or dishonest as Joe Biden."

The mainstream media refuses to report on Biden's corruption due to their own crookedness, Trump added.

Trump, who launched his 2024 campaign late last year, also criticized Biden's campaign reveal earlier this week, claiming it took him several attempts to film the video announcement.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) -

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Nova Kakhovka city in the Kherson region was subjected to a massive shelling by Ukrainian troops on Thursday and suffered power cuts, the local administration said.

* Ukraine continues to escalate tensions around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant and hostilities in the area may intensify, Russian state nuclear agency Rosatom head Alexey Likhachev said.

* Russian navy ships have delivered a strike using sea-based long-range precision weapons on the point of dislocation of Ukrainian troops' reserves, which prevented the advancing of Kiev's marine units into the combat areas, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Ukraine lost more than 400 soldiers and mercenaries as well as 14 equipment units in the Donetsk area in the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

NEW US SANCTIONS ON RUSSIA, IRAN

* The United States is imposing the first round of sanctions on Russia and Iran for "wrongful detention" of US nationals abroad, Biden administration officials said on Thursday.

* The United States is imposing sanctions on Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) for its alleged role in the "wrongful detention" of US nationals abroad, the officials said.

* The United States has imposed sanctions on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Intelligence Organization and four of its leaders for their alleged involvement in "wrongful detention" of US nationals, the officials said.

SUDAN CRISIS

* The Sudanese Foreign Ministry on Thursday denied reports about an alleged consent for the army's commander-in-chief to negotiate with the opposing Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

* The Sudanese armed forces agreed to extend the 72-hour ceasefire with the RSF.

TURKEY-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan can set goals for himself and vigorously pursue them, Russia supports him, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday.

* Russia will do everything possible to meet Turkey's energy needs, Putin said.

* Turkey will save \$1.5 billion per year on gas imports thanks to the Akkuyu NPP, Erdogan said.

* Russia and Turkey will continue working on implementing the Black Sea Grain Initiative, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik.

* The first unit of Turkey's Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) is almost ready, the installation of equipment is being completed, Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom head Alexey Likhachev said.

CLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS LEAK IN US

* US Judge David Hennessy did not reach a decision during a detention hearing on Thursday on whether alleged Pentagon leaker Jack Teixeira will be detained prior to his trial, media reported.

* The US Air Force has temporarily suspended two leaders within the unit of the accused Pentagon leaker Teixeira, Department of Defense spokesperson Pat Ryder said.

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UPDATE - Pentagon Leaker's Pretrial Detention Status 'Under Advisement'- Court Filing (Updates with details in paras headline, paras 1, 3,4)

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - Pentagon leaker Jack Teixeira's pretrial detention status is under consideration after a federal judge heard arguments on the matter from prosecutors and the defendant, a court filing revealed on Thursday.

Teixeira, a 21-year-old Massachusetts Air National Guardsman, was arrested on April 13 and charged in Boston federal court the next day with unauthorized removal and transmission of national defense information and classified documents or materials. Teixeira is being held without bail pending a decision on his detention.

"Court takes the matter under advisement. Defendant returned to custody of USMS [US Marshals Service]," the court filing said.

Prosecutors are seeking to keep Teixeira in jail while he awaits his trial, but his legal team is trying to get him released under certain conditions and monitoring, the court filing said.

During the detention hearing, federal prosecutors argued that Teixeira may try to flee or obstruct justice if he is not detained leading up to his trial, media reported.

According to court documents, Teixeira tried to conceal his leak of classified military documents by telling his online friends not to say anything or to delete messages from him. Court records also showed he destroyed electronic devices, such as a laptop and tablet, prior to his arrest.

Prosecutors, according to media reports, said Teixeira conducted hundreds of searches related to the Ukraine conflict and mass shootings.

The judge pointed out during the hearing that the classified documents Teixeira leaked regarding the Ukraine conflict are a legitimate concern, media reported.

In early April, more than 100 classified US government documents were leaked on social media, apparently showing sensitive intelligence documents on the state of the Ukrainian military and the US and NATO's efforts to strengthen it.

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US House Rejects Resolution Directing Biden to Remove US Troops From Somalia

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives rejected a resolution on Thursday that would have directed President Joe Biden to remove all US troops from Somalia, except those guarding the US embassy.

House lawmakers rejected the concurrent resolution, introduced by Congressman Matt Gaetz, in a vote of 102-321. The measure received bipartisan support, with 50 Democrats voting in favor alongside 52 Republicans.

The resolution would have directed Biden to remove all US armed forces from Somalia not assigned to protect the US embassy within 365 days of its adoption.

Last month, US Africa Command chief Gen. Michael Langley said he is "cautiously optimistic" about Somalia's progress in countering al-Shabab militants (linked to al-Qaeda, banned in Russia).

In February, the US killed seven al-Shabab militants in an airstrike in Somalia, carried out at the request of the country's government.

Last year, Biden reversed an order by predecessor Donald Trump to remove all US military forces from Somalia, sending several hundred US personnel to the country as a persistent presence.

"The future of Somalia must be determined by its people, not the United States," Gaetz said in a statement on the bill.

The US should not be engaged in "nation-building" in Somalia, the Middle East or elsewhere, Gaetz added.

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US Banking System Sound, But Government Ready Use Tools to Support It -White House

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) –The US banking system remains sound but the Biden Administration is ready to use tools to support it, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

"As the President [Joe Biden], and Secretary [of the Treasury Janet] Yellen, and [Federal Reserve] Chair [Jerome] Powell have said, we have used important tools to quickly stabilize the banking system. We could use those tools again if needed," Jean-Pierre told reporters.

She underscored that the Biden administration has taken "decisive and forcible" actions to support Americans' confidence that their deposits are safe.

"Since our administration took those actions, we have deposits stabilized at regional banks. That is something that we have seen in the data," she said, adding that the government is monitoring the situation very closely.

Jean-Pierre reassured people that the US banking system "remains sound and resilient."

The US banking sector saw the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) on March 10. US federal regulators closed SVB, the largest US bank to fold since the 2008 financial crisis and the second largest implosion in the country's history. Later that week, the New York-based Signature Bank was seized in the third largest bank collapse in US history. Both lenders, who catered largely to the tech sector, became victims of a bank run.

Yellen said the US banking system has stabilized since the March crisis.

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UN Ready to Reconvene Syrian Constitutional Cmte. Talks in Spirit of Compromise - Official

UNITED NATIONS, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is ready to restart the Syrian Constitutional Committee talks in Switzerland in a "spirit of compromise," UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen said on Thursday.

"Let me in this context also reiterate my readiness to facilitate Syrian-Syrian dialogue, including to reconvene the Constitutional Committee. It is surely past time for us to move beyond the non-Syrian issues that have been stalling the process. The Committee should resume its work in Geneva in a spirit of compromise, with substance and at pace," Pedersen said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

Pedersen also said that he will continue to involve a broader spectrum of Syrians in Geneva who have more in common than what divides them.

Earlier this week, the defense ministers of Turkey, Russia, Syria and Iran met in Moscow for talks and characterized the meeting as having a "constructive atmosphere." The participants reaffirmed their desire to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria and intensify efforts for the speedy return of Syrian refugees.

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US Chairs Meeting in Brussels on Accelerated Supplies of Security Aid to Ukraine –Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) – Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment William LaPlante is chairing a session of the National Armament Directors' group in Brussels, Belgium this week with a focus on ways to accelerate the delivery of vital security capabilities to Ukraine, Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Thursday

"Dr. LaPlante is chairing a session of the National Armament Directors' group in Brussels this week. The meeting includes armament directors and representatives from more than 40 Nations, the European Union, and NATO focused on the global effort to accelerate the sourcing, production, and sustainment of capabilities that are vital to Ukraine's defense against Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion," Ryder said during a press briefing.

The countries of the so-called collective West ramped up their military support for Ukraine after Russia launched a special military operation there on February 24, 2022. The assistance includes air defense missiles and guns, multiple launch rocket systems, tanks, self-propelled artillery, armored vehicles, and various kinds of ammunition.

Russia has repeatedly warned against such supplies as they would further prolong the conflict and escalate it, possibly leading to the United States and NATO getting directly involved in the

conflict.

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Syrian Talks at Important Juncture Given Renewed Attention by Regional States - Pedersen

UNITED NATIONS, April 27 (Sputnik) - The talks on advancing a political solution to the conflict in Syria are at an important juncture given the renewed attention on the matter by regional countries, United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen said on Thursday.

"To summarize my key message: we are at a potentially important juncture, with renewed attention on Syria - particularly from the region - that could assist our efforts in advancing a political solution to this conflict," Pedersen said during a meeting at the UN Security Council.

Pedersen vowed to continue keeping in close contact with all parties to the conflict in Syria to advance the talks.

Earlier this week, the defense ministers of Turkey, Russia, Syria and Iran met in Moscow amid a "constructive atmosphere" to advance a political solution to the Syrian conflict. The participants reaffirmed their desire to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria and intensify efforts for the speedy return of Syrian refugees.

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US Cannot Defend Space as Secure Domain Without Allies - Pentagon Space Chief

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United States cannot defend all its strategic assets in space without working closely with its allies and partners, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy John Plumb said on Thursday.

"We are at a pivotal moment in space," Plumb told an Atlantic Council podcast conference. "We can't keep space as a safe, stable and secure domain on our own so we're going to have to work with our allies and partners."

The Department of Defense is also looking to harness commercial sector capabilities and research to refuel military satellites in orbit, Plumb told the conference.

"The Department of Defense doesn't have any refuel[ing] tank in space. We don't have any in-orbit services to replenish satellites when they run low on fuel. The commercial sector is working on that. And since it turns out fuel can be a limiting factor in the operational life of a satellite, there is a whole capability out there waiting [to be harnessed]," he added.

The US government also needs to declassify many of its policies to enable cooperation both with allies and the commercial sector in space to be carried out effectively in real time in order to keep up with rapidly evolving security challenges, Plumb said.

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US Air Force Temporarily Suspended Two Leaders Within Suspected Leaker's Unit - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) – The US Air Force has temporarily suspended two leaders within the unit of the accused Pentagon leaker airman Jack Teixeira, Department of Defense spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

“The Air Force has initiated an investigation as you know, the Air Force Inspector General is investigating the [102nd Intelligence] wing. My understanding is they have temporarily suspended two leaders within that unit,” Ryder said during a press briefing.

Earlier on Thursday, the US government told a federal court that Teixeira should remain in pretrial detention because he may still have access to sensitive information that could benefit hostile states.

In early April, more than 100 classified US government documents were leaked on social media, apparently showing sensitive intelligence documents on the state of the Ukrainian military and the US and NATO's efforts to strengthen it.

Teixeira, a 21-year-old Massachusetts Air National Guardsman, was arrested on April 13 and charged in Boston federal court the next day with unauthorized removal and transmission of national defense information and classified documents or materials, to which he pleaded not guilty. Teixeira is being held without bail pending the detention hearing.

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US Judge Reaches No Decision on Whether Pentagon Leaker Receives Pretrial Detention

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US Judge David Hennessy during a detention hearing on Thursday reached no decision on whether Pentagon leaker Jack Teixeira will be detained prior to his trial, media reported.

Teixeira, a 21-year-old Massachusetts Air National Guardsman, was arrested on April 13 and charged in Boston federal court the next day with unauthorized removal and transmission of national defense information and classified documents or materials. Teixeira is being held without bail pending the detention hearing.

During the detention hearing, federal prosecutors argued that Teixeira may try to flee or obstruct justice if he is not detained leading up to his trial, media reported.

According to court documents, Teixeira tried to conceal his leak of classified military documents by telling his online friends not to say anything or to delete messages from him. Court records also showed he destroyed electronic devices, such as a laptop and tablet, prior to his arrest.

Prosecutors, according to media reports, said Teixeira conducted hundreds of searches related to the Ukraine conflict and mass shootings.

The judge pointed out during the hearing that the classified documents Teixeira leaked regarding the Ukraine conflict are a legitimate concern, media reported.

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Pentagon Says Working With State Dept. to Identify US Nationals Seeking to Leave Sudan

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Defense is working closely with the State Department to identify those American citizens who want to leave Sudan amid the ongoing military clashes in the country, Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"We are committed to assisting State Department with the evacuation of US citizens that are seeking to depart the country and we're looking to help do that in the most safe and secure way possible," Ryder said during a press briefing. "We're working very closely with the State Department to identify the number of Americans who want to leave Sudan."

So far, the number of US nationals who want to depart Sudan is "relatively low," Ryder noted. The spokesperson reiterated that the Pentagon remains primarily focused on a land evacuation route from the country as the best way to get large numbers of American citizens out of the country.

The United States does not have any military forces on the ground in Sudan and because of that, the Pentagon and the State Department will work together to hire local nationals to assist in the process of evacuation, Ryder added.

Sine mid-April, Sudan has been gripped by intense fighting between the armed forces and the rival paramilitary group Rapid Support Forces, with the epicenter in Khartoum.

The parties have since introduced a number of temporary nationwide ceasefires but the conflict has not been settled yet. On Tuesday, UN Special Representative Volker Perthes said that there are no clear signs that either of the parties to the conflict in Sudan is ready to negotiate yet.

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Nashville Police Say Reviewing Manifesto of Christian School Shooter for Public Release

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The Metro Nashville Police Department (MNPD) is reviewing the manifesto of Christian school shooter Audrey Hale in preparation for a potential public release, MNPD said on Thursday.

In March, Hale shot and killed three children and three adults at Covenant Christian school in

Nashville, Tennessee. Investigators found writings related to the shooting at Hale's residence, which have yet to be released to the public.

"The investigation has advanced to the point that writings from the Covenant shooter are now being reviewed for public release," the MNPD Public Information Office said, as quoted by a local Fox affiliate. "That process is underway and will take a little time."

Police first identified Hale as transgender, later clarifying the shooter was assigned female at birth. The incident has sparked debate over the potential links between transgender treatments and violence.

Earlier this month, former US president and 2024 candidate Donald Trump promised to launch an investigation into the potential link between transgenderism and violence if elected.

Last week, Metro Nashville Council member Courtney Johnston told US media that the FBI was reluctant to release the manifesto, claiming it would be "astronomically dangerous" in the wrong person's hands. Johnston characterized the manifesto as a "blueprint on total destruction."

Police have said that the writings recovered from Hale's residence suggested that the shooter had potential targets other than the school.

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US to Continue Using Deconfliction Line With Russia – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) – The United States will continue to use the deconfliction line as well as both public and private means to communicate with Russia on what is not appropriate, Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"We'll continue to use the deconfliction line [with Russia], we'll continue to use both public and private means to communicate with the Russians on what is not appropriate," Ryder said during a press briefing.

Ryder added that the deconfliction line with Russia continues to be open and used by the United States.

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US Eroded Competitiveness in Critical Technologies Creates Nat'l Security Risk - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United States has lost its manufacturing and eroded competitiveness in critical technologies that create a critical economic risk for national security, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.

"America didn't just lose manufacturing, we eroded our competitiveness in critical technologies that would define the future," Sullivan said during a discussion hosted by the Brookings Institution. "This creates a critical economic risk and a national security vulnerability."

Sullivan noted that the United States manufactures only around 10% of the world's

semiconductors while the production of the most advanced chips is located elsewhere.

The United States produces only 4% of the lithium, 13% of the cobalt, 0% of the nickel and 0% of the graphite required to meet the current demand for electric vehicles while more than 80% of critical minerals are processed by China alone, Sullivan said.

The Biden administration will continue to use export controls that are narrowly focused on technology that could change the existing military balance with respect to China, Sullivan added.

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US Asks Brazil to Extradite Russian National Sergey Cherkasov - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United States has asked Brazil to extradite Sergey Cherkasov charged by the Justice Department with acting as an illegal foreign agent in the US while posing as a Brazilian student, The Washington Post reported on Thursday.

Last month, the US charged Cherkasov, 38, with operating as an "illegal" agent for a Russian intelligence service under the Brazilian alias of Victor Muller Ferreira, which he used to obtain a US visa in 2017. Cherkasov allegedly gathered information about US persons of interest and passed it to his Russian intelligence handlers, according to the Justice Department.

The US extradition request, filed on Tuesday, will be handled by Brazil's Supreme Court, The Post said, citing Brazilian officials.

The court has reportedly indicated that it will not rule on any extradition request until an ongoing probe of Cherkasov's alleged espionage activities in Brazil is completed, officials told the newspaper.

In 2022, Cherkasov was sentenced to 15 years in Brazil for document fraud related to his fake identity. Brazil has a dueling extradition request from Russia, which has denied that Cherkasov is a secret agent and wants him on heroin trafficking charges.

The US extradition request comes as the US demands Russia release Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, who was arrested last month on espionage charges.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Russia's FSB for 'Wrongful Detention' of US Nationals - Officials (Provides additional details in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing sanctions on Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) for its alleged role in the wrongful detention of US nationals abroad, Biden administration officials said on Thursday.

"We will be announcing sanctions today against Russia's Federal Security Service, often known as the FSB, for being responsible for or complicit in, directly or indirectly engaged in, or responsible for ordering, controlling or otherwise directing the wrongful detention of US national

abroad. The FSB has repeatedly been involved in the arrest, investigation, and detention of US Nationals wrongfully detained in Russia," the officials said during a press briefing.

The officials said work on a new sanctions package was "well underway" before the Russian authorities detained Wall Street Journal correspondent Evan Gershkovich last month on charges of espionage.

Later in the day, the US Department of the Treasury announced that it has added FSB to its list of designated entities under the executive order from July 2022 on efforts to bring US nationals in "wrongfully detained" status home.

Previously, FSB was present on four sanctions lists that were introduced by a host of executive orders and regulations, including those related to non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, cyber sanctions, countering America's adversaries through sanctions act, and blocking property with respect to specified harmful foreign activities of the government of the Russian Federation.

At the same time, the Department of the Treasury issued a new perpetual general license authorizing certain transactions with FSB that are necessary for the importation, distribution, or use of information technology products in the Russian Federation that do not exceed \$5,000 in any calendar year.

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NASA Chief Says SpaceX May Take 2 Months to Rebuild Starship Launch Pad, Ready 2nd Rocket

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said on Thursday that SpaceX will need two months to rebuild its launch pad at Starbase, Texas, and prepare another Starship and Super Heavy rocket for a second flight test.

Last week, SpaceX carried out the first combined launch of the Starship spacecraft and the Super Heavy first-stage booster. The spacecraft was deliberately blown up during the test flight after it began to lose altitude when multiple engines failed. The spacecraft climbed to an apogee of about 39 kilometers (24 miles) over the Gulf of Mexico, which is the highest point any Starship spacecraft has reached to-date.

"As of today, SpaceX is still saying that they think it will take at least about two months to rebuild the launch pad and concurrently about two months to have their second vehicle to launch," Nelson said.

The explosion of the first Starship rocket was not a big downer in the way SpaceX does things because the company is hardware rich and has a lot of rockets ready to go for further tests after corrections are made, Nelson also said.

In addition, the NASA administrator pointed out that he expects more Starship launches to take place at Boca Chica, Texas.

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with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UPDATE - US GDP Growth Slows to 1.1% in First Quarter of 2023 - Commerce Dept.

(Adds comments, context and details, paragraphs 6-8)

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The US economy grew at a yearly rate of just 1.1% in the first quarter of 2023, less than half of the growth experienced in the fourth quarter of last year, the Commerce Department reported.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 1.1 percent in the first quarter of 2023," the Bureau of Economic Analysis, a unit within the Commerce Department, said in its "advance", or first three, readings for the quarter.

The growth estimated by the department for the first quarter compared with a 2.6% expansion in the fourth quarter of 2022.

Economists polled by US media had expected a GDP growth of 1.9% for the first quarter.

President Joe Biden, responding to the slower-than-expected GDP number, said the United States was transitioning to a steady and stable growth.

"This past quarter, real personal disposable income increased and American consumers continued to spend, even as the overall pace of growth moderated," Biden said in a statement issued by the White House. "This follows reports that our economy added more than 300,000 jobs per month during the quarter, the unemployment rate remained near a 50-year low, and workforce participation for working-age Americans is the highest in 15 years."

The US economy grew 2.1% for all of last year, slowing from a 5.9% expansion in 2021, as exports and consumer spending declined.

Policymakers at the Federal Reserve have projected that the United States will experience a "mild recession" later this year that could take two years to overcome, minutes from the March policy meeting of the US central bank showed.

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UN Concerned by Use of Depleted Uranium Anywhere, Including in Ukraine - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is concerned about the use of depleted uranium anywhere in the world, including Ukraine, spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Thursday, after the United Kingdom confirmed having sent depleted uranium armor-piercing rounds for Challenger 2 tanks to Kiev.

"You are well aware of our concerns about the use of depleted uranium anywhere in the world and this would apply here," Haq told a briefing.

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Pentagon Says Received Nearly 9,000 Reports of Sexual Assault in 2022

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department said on Thursday that it received nearly 9,000 reports of sexual assault in fiscal year (FY) 2022, which represents a 1% increase over the previous year.

"In this year's report, the department received a total of 8942 reports of sexual assault in fiscal year [20]22, which is an increase of 76 reports over the 8866 received in fiscal year [20]21. This amounts to about a 1% increase in the report from FY 21 to FY 22," executive director of the Defense Department's Office of Force Resiliency Beth Foster said during a press briefing citing a new annual report's data.

According to the report, 7,378 service members reported sexual assault during military service in 2022 and 580 service members reported that a sexual assault occurred prior to their military service.

Foster pointed out the higher number cannot be characterized as an increase in the prevalence of the crime of sexual assault within the military because the prevalence survey was not conducted in fiscal year 2022.

The new report also showed that US military commanders were able to take disciplinary action in 66% of cases of sexual assault in 2022.

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US Sanctions IRGC Intel Organization for 'Wrongful Detention' of Americans - Officials

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United States introduced sanctions against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Intelligence Organization and four of its leaders over their alleged involvement in "wrongful detention" of American nationals, senior administration officials said on Thursday.

"In addition, we will be announcing sanctions against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps intelligence organization, better known as IRGCIO, for being responsible or complicit in, directly or indirectly engaged in or responsible for ordering, controlling or otherwise directing the wrongful detention of US nationals abroad," the officials told reporters.

The officials also announced the designations of four IRGCIO leaders, including IRGCIO chief Mohammad Kazemi, for "suppressing civil society, arresting Iranian dissidents, and overseeing the brutal crackdown against protests," the officials added.

"And obviously, as with all of these folks, we think he is tied to the wrongful detention of Americans," the officials stated.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Russia's FSB for 'Wrongful Detention' of US Nationals - Officials

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United States is imposing sanctions on Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) for its alleged role in the wrongful detention of US nationals abroad, Biden administration officials said on Thursday.

"We will be announcing sanctions today against Russia's Federal Security Service, often known as the FSB, for being responsible for or complicit in, directly or indirectly engaged in, or responsible for ordering, controlling or otherwise directing the wrongful detention of US national abroad. The FSB has repeatedly been involved in the arrest, investigation, and detention of US Nationals wrongfully detained in Russia," the officials said during a press briefing.

The officials said work on a new sanctions package was "well underway" before the Russian authorities detained Wall Street Journal correspondent Evan Gershkovich last month on charges of espionage.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Russia, Iran for 'Wrongful Detention' of Americans – Officials

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration is imposing the first batch of sanctions on Russia and Iran for "wrongful detention" of American nationals abroad, US administration officials said on Thursday.

"Today, we are announcing the first set of sanctions under this executive order against actors in Russia and Iran that have previously or are currently holding hostage or wrongfully detaining Americans. These actors in Russia and Iran have tried to use Americans for political leverage or to seek concessions from the United States," the officials said during a press briefing.

The US officials underscored that this is the first tranche of measures against actors in the two countries, with more sanctions to come in response to "wrongful detentions" of US citizens.

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US, South Korea, Japan Must Boost Security Ties Against N Korea Nuclear Threat - Yoon

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United States, South Korea and Japan need to accelerate their joint security collaboration in order to effectively counter the increasing nuclear threat from North Korea, President Yoon Suk-yeol told a joint session of the US Congress on Thursday.

"We need to speed up [South] Korea and the United States and Japan's trilateral cooperation to counter the increasing North Korean nuclear threat," the Seoul leader said.

Yoon said he still hoped for peaceful cooperation with Pyongyang and reiterated his willingness to renew talks to offer economic support to North Korea in return for scrapping its nuclear

weapons development program.

"We will keep the door open for dialogue for North Korea's denuclearization," he said.

Yoon also condemned North Korea's human rights violations which he said included executing people for watching South Korean television, reading the Bible and not taking ordered precautions against the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Migration to US Southern Border to Rise When Title 42 Expulsion Policy Ends May 11 - DHS

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The United States will experience an increase of migrants arriving on its southern border when the Title 42 expulsion policy ends on May 11, mostly due to smugglers spreading disinformation about the border being open, US Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said on Thursday.

"We have been preparing for this transition for more than a year-and-a-half, notwithstanding those preparations, we do expect that encounters on our southern border will increase as smugglers are seeking to take advantage of this change and already are hard at work spreading disinformation that the border will be open after that," Mayorkas said during a press briefing.

A high rate of migrants arriving on the border with Mexico will strain the US immigration system, including the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) workforce and border communities, Mayorkas said.

Mayorkas emphasized that the US southern border is not open and migrants who do not use legal pathways to the United States will be deported within days or weeks.

The United States is establishing regional processing centers in Colombia and Guatemala that are designed to reduce the number of migrants making the journey to the US-Mexico border. The centers will begin processing up to 6,000 migrants each month, but that number is expected to grow in time.

An all-time record number of migrants have arrived on the US southern border under the Biden administration, hitting two consecutive records in 2021 and 2022. More than 2.3 million migrants were encountered on the US southern border in 2023. So far in fiscal year 2023, more than 1.2 million migrants have been encountered on the southern border.

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South Korea Will Work Actively to Safeguard Ukraine - President Yoon Tells US Congress

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - South Korea will work to "safeguard" the people of Ukraine and support the reconstruction of the country after the current conflict ends, President Yoon Suk-yeol told a joint meeting of the US Congress on Thursday.

"We will actively work to safeguard the people of Ukraine and to support their work in

reconstruction," Yoon said in his address.

Yoon, who took office last year, pledged to maintain his country's close alliance with the United States

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Unexpectedly Fell, Add to Federal Reserve's Inflation Challenge

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - Jobless claims in the United States fell unexpectedly by 16,000 last week to reach 230,000, the US Labor Department reported on Thursday in what would be another challenge to the Federal Reserve as it needs unemployment numbers to rise to effectively fight inflation.

A consensus of economists had expected initial jobless claims to rise to 248,000 from the previous week's revised level of 246,000, US media polls showed. Instead, the drop meant more inflationary pressure for the Fed to contend with.

One of the Fed's biggest challenges has been positive jobs data as the nation's labor market continues to surprise economists with better-than-expected performance.

To fight inflation, the Fed needs to see an easing of labor conditions that are a little "too good" now - unemployment at more than 50-year lows and average monthly wages that have grown without stop since March 2021.

Such job security and earnings have cushioned many Americans from the worst price pressures since the 1980s and encouraged them to continue spending, further feeding inflation.

Economists say monthly jobs numbers need to grow meaningfully below expectations to create some effect at least in employment and wage security.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, hit a 40-year high of 9.1% in the United States during the year to June. It has moderated since, to an annualized growth of 5% in March, but remains well above the Fed's target of just 2% per year.

To fight inflation, the Fed has added 475 basis points to interest rates in nine increases since March 2022. Rates now stand at a peak of 5%, compared with just 0.25% at the start of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. Another quarter point hike is expected on May 3 that will increase rates to a peak of 5.25%.

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Schumer Calls Republican Debt Limit Plan 'Ransom Note,' Says Bill Will Fail in US Senate

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The plan put forth by US House Republicans to raise the debt ceiling in exchange for cuts in government spending is a "ransom note" to the United States that will not pass the Senate, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Thursday.

"Yesterday, House Republicans passed, through the narrowest possible margin, a bill that

amounts to little more than a hard-right ransom note to the American people," Schumer said during remarks on the Senate floor. "It has no hope of ever becoming law."

The House's actions have made the United States' chance of default even more likely by locking lawmakers into an "unacceptable position," Schumer said.

Schumer called for Congress to raise the debt ceiling without attaching other economic policy proposals. However, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy has said a "no-strings-attached" debt limit increase would not pass the lower chamber.

The legislation, dubbed the Limit, Save, Grow Act, passed the House on Wednesday in a vote of 217-215. Following the bill's passage by the House, the White House released a statement claiming the bill has no chance of becoming law.

The bill was introduced after talks between McCarthy and US President Joe Biden on the debt ceiling stalled.

The Republican plan would reduce budget deficits by approximately \$4.8 trillion over the 2023-2033 period, the Congressional Budget Office said earlier this week.

The US national debt is approximately \$31.46 trillion, according to Treasury Department data.

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Ukraine Authorities Attempting to Completely Destroy Canonical Church - Metropolitan

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The Ukrainian government is not simply trying to ignore the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), they also seek to completely destroy it, Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) Metropolitan of Berlin and Germany Mark told Sputnik.

"The danger is not only in the fact that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church will be ignored, but there will also be attempts to completely destroy it," Metropolitan Mark said.

The metropolitan noted that the clergy at the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra - a major Ukrainian Orthodox monastery - is occupying the lower part of the complex and is not agreeing to vacate it voluntarily despite significant pressure from the authorities to vacate the premises by March 29. The monks have said the unilateral eviction order is illegal.

"This is a persecution of the UOC to which the majority of the Ukrainian population belongs," Metropolitan Mark said.

Ukrainian Minister of Culture Oleksandr Tkachenko has said he believes the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra's buildings should instead be used as a medical rehabilitation center for the country's military or as a folk craft center, according to statements credited to him.

Tkachenko said the monks could stay in the monastery if they join the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU).

Metropolitan Mark pointed out that the UOC is the only canonical Orthodox church in Ukraine and is being persecuted because of its links to the Moscow Patriarchate amid attempts by the Ukrainian government to show that the country has nothing to do with Russia.

"This is crazy because the whole culture of Ukraine is intimately connected with Russia and Russian culture," he said.

Metropolitan Mark expressed confidence that the absolute majority of the UOC clergy and flock

will remain faithful to the church and will not go over to the schismatic OCU.

Tensions between the Ukrainian government and the UOC escalated after Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine in late February of 2022.

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Lawmaker Calls on Senator Feinstein to Step Down as Her Absence Risks Democratic Majority

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US Senator Dianne Feinstein ought to step down from her position gracefully, Congressman Ro Khanna said on Thursday after Feinstein's absence during a Senate vote allowed Republicans to overturn a Biden administration environmental rule.

"Because Senator Feinstein was absent, the Senate overturned a Biden rule that would cut pollution from heavy duty trucks and causes harm to people's lungs," Khanna said in a statement via Twitter. "It's time for Senator Feinstein to step down gracefully."

Feinstein, who is 89, has been absent from the Senate in recent weeks after contracting shingles last month.

Democrats are putting "decorum over democracy" by allowing Feinstein to hold her Senate seat while missing votes, the statement also said.

In February, Feinstein announced that she will not run for reelection in 2024 after serving for more than three decades in the Senate.

Last year, US media reported that Feinstein's colleagues were questioning her mental fitness, claiming her memory has deteriorated.

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Trump Responds to Biden Election Video Saying Current President Poses Threat to Democracy

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden poses a threat to democracy and is grossly incompetent, former President Donald Trump said in response to Joe Biden's video announcing his 2024 re-election campaign.

"Biden announced his presidential campaign by, get this, a prepackaged video, one that took 7 takes to get it 'right,' if right is what you want to call it," Trump wrote in a post on TruthSocial on Thursday. "In it he says TRUMP & MAGA pose a threat to Democracy. NO, IT IS BIDEN WHO POSES THE THREAT TO DEMOCRACY IN THAT HE IS GROSSLY INCOMPETENT AND BASICALLY, DOESN'T HAVE A CLUE!"

Trump also said that the United States was in serious decline, had lost its way and was being led by a clueless person.

Earlier this week, Biden announced his intention to run in the 2024 by issuing a video in which he claimed that he spent his first year in office fighting for US democracy but MAGA extremists - referring to Trump supporters - have been lining up to take away Americans' personal liberties.

Trump announced his campaign in November 2022.

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Percentage of US Adults Who Smoke Cigarettes Hits Historic Low - CDC

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - The percentage of adults in the United States who smoke cigarettes hit an all-time low in 2022, according to preliminary data published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Thursday.

Approximately 11% of adults identified as current cigarette smokers, the CDC said in an early release of select estimated data from the 2022 National Health Interview Survey.

The survey defined "current cigarette smoking" as having smoked at least 100 cigarettes in a lifetime and now smoking every day or some days.

The tobacco smoking rate in the US has steadily declined for decades amid an increase in smoking bans, public health campaigns and tax hikes.

However, the rate of e-cigarette use, including other electronic vaping products, rose to approximately 6%, the survey also found. The survey defines current e-cigarette use as having used such a device at least once in a lifetime, and now every or some days.

The survey sampled more than 27,600 adults in 2022, the CDC said. Differences between estimates calculated using preliminary data files and final data files were typically less than 0.1 percentage points, the CDC added.

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US to Announce Improved Access for Asylum-Seekers, Refugees, Migrants – Senior Official

WASHINGTON, April 27 (Sputnik) - US authorities will announce improved access for asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants legally coming to the country, a senior administration official said on Thursday.

"Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas will announce improved access to lawful pathways to the US for asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants," the official told reporters

The announcement is expected as early as Thursday and will take effect when the immigration measure known as Title 42 expires in May.

The United States will also announce efforts to increase border security and cooperation in South and Central America, the official said.

He underscored that addressing the challenges of irregular migration, providing protection for the refugees and asylum seekers, and offering legal lawful migration pathways are key priorities for the US Administration.

The Biden administration has recently rolled out new measures designed to help deter high

migration levels on the border.

Biden's plan includes admitting up to 30,000 migrants from Venezuela, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Cuba each month; admitting up to 20,000 migrant refugees from other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean; providing nearly \$23 million to Mexico and countries in Central America to help manage migration in the region; increasing funding to US border cities impacted by the border crisis; and surging immigration judges to the US southern border to help process migrants.

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Guterres Thanks US for Cooperation on Sudan in Meeting With Blinken

UNITED NATIONS, April 27 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday thanked the United States for its cooperation on Sudan, including for providing unmanned aerial vehicle overwatch of a UN convoy relocating from Khartoum.

"I wanted to particularly express my gratitude and appreciation for cooperation we have had recently on Sudan," Guterres said at a meeting with Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the State Department.

He mentioned joint efforts to try to broker a ceasefire in Sudan and thanked the US for its support during the operation to relocate members of UN staff and non-governmental organizations from Khartoum to Port Sudan.

Earlier this week, the Pentagon said it had provided unmanned aerial vehicle overwatch of the UN convoy.