

4/29/22 Friday

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California Could Use Nuclear Power Bailout Funds to Save Plant Ordered Closed for Safety Reasons

The California government is seeking to use money from a federal infrastructure program to save from closure a nuclear power plant that's being shuttered after refusing to implement necessary safety upgrades.

Speaking to the editorial board of the [Los Angeles Times](#) on Thursday, California Governor Gavin Newsom said the Golden State needed to act quickly if it wanted to get money from a [Department of Energy program](#) intended to prop up the budgets of nuclear power plants in danger of closing.

"The requirement is by May 19 to submit an application, or you miss the opportunity to draw down any federal funds if you want to extend the life of that plant," Newsom said. "We would be remiss not to put that on the table as an option."

However, the plant in question, the Diablo Canyon Power Plant near San Luis Obispo, is scheduled for closure in three years not because it's going bankrupt, but because owner Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) has refused to [implement necessary upgrades](#) to make it more environmentally friendly and safer in case of earthquakes.

Like Japan, California straddles a series of seismic faults that help make up the Pacific Ring of Fire, a geologically unstable region where earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are common. After a March 2011 earthquake off the coast of the Japanese city of Sendai created a massive tsunami, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant lost all power and suffered three partial nuclear meltdowns, ejecting radioactive material and causing more than 150,000 people to evacuate.

A [recent poll by the LA Times](#) and the University of California at Berkeley found that only 44% of state voters would support building more nuclear plants in the state and 39% oppose shutting down Diablo Canyon.

Diablo Canyon is California's last nuclear power plant and the single largest producer of electricity in the state, accounting for 6% of its power production last year. Newsom and the Biden administration would like to save plants like Diablo Canyon in order to ease the country's transition off fossil fuels, which provide 57% of the United States' net electricity consumption, according to [US Energy Information Agency](#) data.

"PG&E is committed to California's clean energy future," company spokesperson Suzanne Hosh told the [San Luis Obispo Tribune](#). "The people of PG&E are proud of the role that Diablo Canyon Power Plant plays in our state. We are always open to considering all options to ensure continued safe, reliable, and clean energy delivery to our customers."

Paradoxically, after deciding to ban Russian petroleum imports last month, the Biden White House is now pushing for an [expansion of oil production](#) to alleviate rising gasoline prices.

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Beijing Considering Easing Tech Giant Regulations After Lockdowns Stunt Economic Growth - Reports

Four months of rolling COVID-19 lockdowns have put a damper on China's economic growth, forcing national leaders to look for new ways to buttress its private sector, including backing off recent attempts to step up regulation efforts.

The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), the country's top tech regulator, is scheduled to host a symposium with several of the largest Chinese technology companies next week. The decision follows an announcement earlier on Friday by the Politburo of the Communist Party of China, the country's top political leadership, that it would accelerate tax cuts and other means of economic support, as well as leverage new monetary policy tools to encourage investment.

"The pandemic has to be contained, the economy should be stabilized, and the development should ensure security," the statement said, according to the [South China Morning Post](#) (SCMP). "We must insist on the policies of preventing both inbound infections and a domestic rebound of cases, and [adhere to] dynamic zero-Covid, doing our best to protect people's lives and minimize its impact on the national economy and society."

According to two anonymous sources who [spoke with the SCMP](#), the regulator will assure business executives they won't face surprise fines or rectifications for errors. Beijing is also considering distributing coupons through internet platforms to encourage consumption.

According to unnamed people "familiar with the matter" who spoke with the [Wall Street Journal](#), regulators will also pause planned restrictions on the time young people can spend on mobile apps and are considering pushing some tech firms to offer the government a 1% equity stake, making it a part of the internal decision-making process - something it's done with several of the biggest tech companies already, such as ByteDance and Weibo. According to the WSJ, it could pitch the idea to Tencent and Meituan as well.

Some of the companies reportedly invited to the meeting include ByteDance, which owns Tiktok; Alibaba Group, which owns AliExpress and AliPay; Tencent, which owns WeChat and QQ; and Meituan, which offers a massive delivery service for food, consumer products, and retail services.

The CAC has stepped up its regulation of the Chinese tech sector in recent years in a bid to improve ease and safety of use of their products and to [halt certain monopolistic practices](#), such as creating exclusive families of apps that cannot work with those made by other companies. The most recent changes were handed down earlier this month, with the CAC announcing on-site inspections of the facilities of certain public-facing websites, platforms, and products and a clamping down on product and content recommendation algorithms that disseminate "fake news," [according to Jing Daily](#).

At a legislative meeting in early March, Premier Li Keqiang announced a downward-revised economic growth rate for 2022, [projecting a modest 5.5% increase](#) in gross domestic product. According to prior economic planning, a growth rate of more than 6% for 2022 was expected

late last year - before the Omicron variant of COVID-19 hit China, triggering the country's worst outbreak since the Hubei outbreak in 2019-2020 that kicked off the pandemic.

At the Friday Politburo meeting, CPC leadership said they expected to still be able to meet the 5.5% goal.

The government's "zero Covid" approach to outbreaks has kept the country from experiencing the kind of uncontrolled sickness and associated mass death seen in Western countries like the United States, but has also created headaches for business as ports, airports, railways, and shops repeatedly close amid attempts to find, isolate and treat all COVID-19 cases.

With prior variants of the virus, such lockdowns have been very successful, with the country recording [just two COVID-19-related deaths](#) last year, but with the ultra-transmissible Omicron variant and its successive sub-variants, detection is much harder and [a high proportion of contagious](#) cases show no symptoms, [frustrating attempts to halt](#) the spread.

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'Basically No Answers': GOP Rep Says White House Hiding Ukraine's Control of US Spending

The Biden administration's top diplomat gave lawmakers on Thursday few firm answers about how US sanctions against Russia might be lifted and how the White House intends to pay for rebuilding Ukraine after Moscow's special operation is complete.

Speaking to Fox News' "Fox & Friends" show on Friday, Rep. Brian Mast (R-FL) accused the Biden administration of "trying to do a garbage dump on Capitol Hill" in order to "overwhelm" lawmakers with information "and cover things up" about its policies in Ukraine.

Mast pointed out that it wasn't just US Secretary of State Antony Blinken from the administration who testified before Congress on Thursday, but also US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and John Brooks, the chief medical officer for COVID-19 response at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"But Blinken specifically, he came to Capitol Hill and gave basically no answers to Republicans or Democrats. And even at one point, as he was speaking to me, went so far as to say that Ukraine would be making decisions about US sanctions, US commerce and what we choose to regain with Russia, basically saying United States of America, who Ukraine is coming to for assistance, we're not in the driver's seat, we're not determining red lines, we're not even determining our own commerce," [Mast told Fox & Friends](#).

"That's all going to be figured out by another nation over in Europe. That's not the United States of America," he added.

During Blinken's [three-hour testimony](#) before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Thursday, the foreign minister told Mast that "We will support whatever it is the democratically-elected government of Ukraine wants to do. These are our sanctions but ... the Ukrainians that we are supporting in every way that we can, it's vital that they determine the actions that would be most effective - we want to hear from them and allies and partners about what would be most effective and when."

Blinken denied that Kiev would determine when US sanctions would end. However, he would not say if all Russian troops would have to leave Ukrainian soil - according to the US definition of that term - before Washington would lift its sanctions against Russia. Blinken also said "there will have to be accountability" but would not answer Mast's question about if he expected Russian President Vladimir Putin to be put before a war crimes tribunal.

Mast told Blinken that it was a "weak strategy" not to spell out a path out of the present situation. "We have to negotiate from strength, not from weakness."

Russia launched its [special military operation](#) in Ukraine on February 24 after the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, two Russophone breakaway states in the Donbass region, came under intense attack by the Ukrainian military and appealed to Moscow for aid. The operation is intended not only to eliminate the [threat posed to the Donbass](#) and and to all Russophone Ukrainians, but also to eliminate the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO and serving as a base from which the US-led alliance can attack Russia. Moscow has said the operation will end [when Kiev agrees to neutrality](#) and purging neo-Nazis and extreme nationalists from its security forces.

Instead of pressing for peace, NATO nations have [rushed more weapons](#) into Ukraine in an effort to wage a proxy war against Russia.

Giving Russian Assets to Ukraine?

Blinken also said on Thursday that the White House was considering trying to use not only the assets of Russian businessmen that have been seized by the US, but also Russia's massive foreign currency reserves that Western governments froze after February 24. According to Russian [Finance Minister Anton Siluanov](#), roughly \$300 billion of the country's foreign reserves have been frozen - about half of Moscow's total holdings.

The question about it, posed by Rep. Tom Malinowski (D-NJ), was based on a [fact sheet for providing](#) additional aid to Ukraine that was released by the White House that same day. That release includes a proposal for "legislation to streamline the process to recoup proceeds from seized and forfeited assets and use them to remediate the harm caused in Ukraine."

Malinowski asked Blinken if that would "apply to state assets, for example, the much larger amount of money that has been frozen around the world belonging to the Russian Central Bank?"

"We've asked our own lawyers to look at ... what authorities would be needed potentially to seize those assets, but not only to seize them but to use them" to rebuild Ukraine, Blinken said. Earlier this month, Russian Ambassador to the United States [Anatoly Antonov told Politico](#) that Moscow was naive to have believed Washington intended to treat it as an equal partner after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

"You steal our money," Antonov said, referring to the asset freeze. "We decided to keep our money, our savings [in American and European banks]. how is it possible to trust you?"

In order to give those currency reserves to Ukraine, the White House will have to change several existing laws designed to guarantee the security of other nations' foreign assets in the United States: the 1977 International Emergency Economic Powers Act and the 1976 Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act.

However, doing so could come back to hurt the US in several ways, including damaging America's reputation as a safe place to invest.

“Confiscating the frozen central bank assets is not something to be done lightly, if at all,” University of Virginia law school professor [Paul Stephan wrote in Lawfare](#) on Monday.

“US policymakers should not be comfortable about flouting international law, even if the law produces a result they find repugnant. Since the end of the Cold War, US foreign policy has presented the international rule of law as one of the linchpins of the global society that the US wants to build,” Stephan wrote.

He also pointed out that Russia “will not always be a pariah,” and when Moscow and Washington inevitably return to normal relations, Russia “will want its money back.”

“Almost certainly the United States will comply with the request for repayment, which means that US taxpayers will have to foot the tab for the money that went to Ukraine,” Stephan added.

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Twitter CEO Fields Employee Concerns of Musk Triggering Mass Exodus, Loss of Investors
By - Evan Craighead

Reuters reported on Friday that entrepreneur Elon Musk, shortly after his \$44 billion buyout offer was accepted by Twitter Inc., has already lined up a new chief executive officer for the tech company, and intends to cut its costs by adjusting the pay provided to its executives and board members.

As the world continued to react to the developments of Elon Musk’s Twitter buyout, company CEO Parag Agrawal attempted to quell employee concerns by hosting an internal town hall meeting on Friday.

Employees voiced a variety of concerns, ranging from personal salary to potential investor back-outs, not long after Musk made his pitch to banks tied to the \$44 million acquisition.

“I’m tired of hearing about shareholder value and fiduciary duty,” asserted a Twitter employee to Agrawal during the meeting. “What are your honest thoughts about the very high likelihood that many employees will not have jobs after the deal closes?”

“I believe the future Twitter organization will continue to care about its impact on the world and its customers,” the CEO responded.

While the details of Musk’s pitch to investors are not legally binding, he did specifically mention company-wide job cuts as a way to slash costs, and grow the business revenue of the platform through the monetization of tweets, [according to Bloomberg News](#). Sources claimed Musk floated charging third-party websites a fee for the rights to quote or embed a tweet posted by verified individuals or organizations.

Higher-ups at the tech company pledged to begin tracking the post-buyout attrition rate, which reportedly remains unchanged since it was reported that Musk was interested in the social media platform.

“The PR speak is not landing,” another Twitter employee told Reuters following the internal meeting. “They told us don’t leak and do a job you are proud of, but there is no clear incentive for employees to do this.”

[A same-day report from the outlet](#) cited a source who claimed Musk has already lined up a new CEO to replace Agrawal, who has held the role since Jack Dorsey stepped down late last year. However, the current CEO will remain until Musk's deal is officially completed, claimed one source.

Per Equilar, a research firm, Agrawal is estimated to receive a \$42 million payout if terminated within 12 months of the social media company changing control.

Twitter has said the deal—unanimously approved by the company's board—will likely close by the end of the year, following shareholder and regulatory approval and “the satisfaction of other customary closing conditions.”

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Attorney Eastman to Produce 10,000 Pages of Trump-Related Emails to Jan. 6 Panel
By - Evan Craighead

Back in March, a federal judge presiding over a civil suit involving the US House Select Committee probing the January 6 insurrection proclaimed that former US President Donald Trump and right-wing attorney John Eastman likely sought to disrupt the congressional certification of the 2020 presidential election.

John Eastman, an attorney who outlined a six-step plan for then-Vice President Mike Pence to help US President Donald Trump subvert the 2020 presidential election, is slated to produce some 10,000 pages of emails to the US House Select Committee investigating the insurrection, according to a [Friday filing in a California federal court](#).

Eastman, who previously claimed attorney-client privilege for more than 37,000 pages of emails, has faced pushback from US District Judge David Carter following a March ruling in which he claimed Trump and Eastman “more likely than not” that Trump “attempted to obstruct” the certification of Electoral College votes on January 6, 2021.

Eastman's legal team requests that Carter grant their client a reprieve, noting that the 9-member House panel has signaled that it needs more time to figure out a way to tackle the remaining 27,000 records.

The filing claims the previous ruling did not take into account evidence that they claim demonstrates that many of Trump's aides convinced him that widespread election fraud did take place during the 2020 election. Some have proclaimed Trump genuinely believed the presidential election against President Joe Biden was riddled with voter fraud.

“Such evidence is directly contrary to this Court's March 28 finding that President Trump had been conclusively informed that there was no material fraud or illegality,” attorneys for Eastman argued.

“A fair resolution of this case requires that all such evidence be put before the Court for consideration,” the lawyers said. “Dr. Eastman therefore requests permission to serve a reasonable number of Requests for Admission, Requests for Documents, and Interrogatories on the congressional defendants.”

Eastman is asking for at least two weeks to prepare a legal argument that maintains his attorney-client privilege claims. The move is slated to push the resolution timeline into the summer, possibly June or July.

The filing comes ahead of the [House Select Committee's public hearings](#), with at least eight of them scheduled for June.

It is alleged that, in the days leading up to the January 6 insurrection, Eastman and his lawyers pressured both then-Vice President Pence and his lawyers to back a theory in which Pence could simply not count Biden's Electoral College votes in states where Trump claimed there to be a dispute.

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Taiwan Will Not Return to China's 'Cruel' COVID Lockdowns, Despite Record Outbreak
By - Evan Craighead

It was reported earlier this week that Taiwan is experiencing its worst COVID-19 outbreak since the beginning of the pandemic, accounting for more than 11,353 new cases reported on Thursday alone. Cases of the contagious disease have been on the uptick since the island's government announced that it would cease practicing its "zero-COVID" policy.

Taiwan does not intend to return to China's "cruel" lockdowns to curb the spread of COVID-19 on the island, Premier Su Tseng-chang said during a Sunday visit to Taiwan's Centers for Disease Control.

The premier's remarks come amid a surge in COVID-19 infections and an accompanying demand for tests on the island of 23 million.

Su remarked that their containment efforts, although not comparable to that of Shanghai, have been "praised by the world."

"We will not lock down the country and cities as cruelly as China," Su said.

China's Taiwan Affairs Office argued last week that the government's departure from the 'zero-COVID' policy [will result](#) in many deaths.

However, Chen Shih-chung, health minister of the island, noted in a Thursday briefing that 99.7% of the cases in the current outbreak either had no symptoms or had mild symptoms. At least 858 COVID-19-related deaths have been logged on the island, as of this article's publication.

The current COVID-19 vaccination rate among those older than 75 years of age is 72.5%. Only some 59.1% of that same group have received their COVID-19 vaccine booster jab.

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Tulsi Gabbard: Obama Behind 'Ministry of Truth,' Biden Simply a 'Front Man'
By - Evan Craighead

The US Department of Homeland Security recently announced the formation of the Disinformation Governance Board—a group tasked with countering misinformation regarding homeland security, with a specific focus on Russia and irregular migration.

Tulsi Gabbard (D), a former US representative for Hawaii, argued that former US President Barack Obama—not President Joe Biden—is behind the federal effort to establish a Disinformation Governance Board (DGB).

“Biden is just a front man,” Gabbard said on Twitter Sunday. “Obama, April 21: social media censors 'don't go far enough,' so the government needs to step in to do the job.”

She then compared the planned DGB to George Orwell's ‘Ministry of Truth,’ one of four ministries of the government of Oceania in “Nineteen Eighty-Four.”

“Six days later, Homeland Security rolls out the 'Ministry of Truth' (aka Disinformation Governance Board),” Gabbard tweeted.

Biden and Gabbard were two of several presidential candidates competing for the Democratic nomination in the 2020 US presidential election.

Gabbard's post included a video of Obama's speech at Stanford University late last month, which included a rebuke of the current influx of mis- and disinformation, as well as Big Tech's current fight [to moderate](#) such content.

“Now the good news is that almost all the big tech platforms now acknowledge some responsibility for content on their platforms, and they're investing in a large team of people to monitor it,” the former US president said, noting that the “sheer volume” of content needing moderation “can feel like a game of Whac-A-Mole.”

“But while content moderation can limit the distribution of clearly dangerous content, it doesn't go far enough,” Obama emphasized.

The board, set to be led by Nina Jankowicz, has come under fire for criticisms of its future executive director, who [once described the trove of information on Hunter Biden's laptop as “a Trump campaign product.”](#)

Gabbard previously likened the Biden administration to a dictatorship over the board's formation.

“Every dictatorship has a propaganda arm—a 'Ministry of Truth.' The Biden Administration has now formally joined the ranks of such dictatorships with their creation of the so-called 'Disinformation Governance Board,” the former US representative for Hawaii said.

Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AK) also made an Orwellian reference in response to DGB rollout, calling the move “unconstitutional.”

“The Federal Government has no business creating a Ministry of Truth,” said Sen. Tom Cotton. “The Department of Homeland Security's 'Disinformation Board' is unconstitutional and unamerican, and I'll be introducing a bill to defund it.”

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Mexican FA Minister Accuses Texas Governor Abbott of Extortion Over Border Inspections
By - Evan Craighead

No drugs, weapons, or contraband were recovered last month by Texas state troopers ordered to inspect every commercial truck from Mexico, according to data released by the state's Department of Public Safety. Over the course of eight days, 850 trucks were taken off the road for equipment-related violations.

Mexico Foreign Affairs Minister Marcelo Ebrard is accusing Texas Governor Greg Abbott of extortion related to the backlogs caused by commercial truck inspections that took place last month at several ports of entry between Mexico and the US.

"It is an extortion," Ebrard declared during a visit to the Mexican border province of Nuevo Leon. "I close the border and you have to sign what I say—that is not an agreement," he said, speaking of Abbott's decision to order state inspections of every commercial truck entering the US from Mexico.

"An agreement is that you and I agree on something, and the problem of migration is not from Mexico, it is the decisions that the United States must make," he added.

Abbott claimed his unpopular order was applied to stop the flow of illegal drugs and migrants being smuggled into the US from Mexico's four border states.

Abbott's order was followed by the formation of separate agreements on border security between his government and those of Nuevo Leone, Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Tamaulipas.

"Border governors can achieve results when we work together and put the safety of our constituents first," [Abbott wrote in an April 15 news release](#).

Texas' Department of Public Safety claims Texas state troopers did not find any drugs or migrants in commercial trucks over the 8-day period because cartels "don't like troopers stopping them, certainly north of the border, and they certainly don't like 100% inspections of commercial vehicles on the bridges."

"And once that started we've seen a decreased amount of trafficking across bridges," said DPS Director Steve McCraw.

Adam Isacson, director for defense oversight at the Washington Office on Latin America, told the Texas Tribune that Texas troopers would not likely find illegal drugs via commercial vehicles, as lorries at the state inspection had already passed by federal immigration officials.

"It just seems odd to me that DPS would be that much of a deterrent for smugglers deciding whether to bring something after already passing through the gauntlet of [US Customs and Border Protection]," Isacson told the outlet.

However, the smuggling of illegal drugs via international bridges would continue, he said, noting that smugglers tend to stow drugs in the vehicle's smaller compartments or spare tires.

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Fmr. Pence Aide: Forgiving Student Loan Debt is an 'Asinine Policy' Decision
By - Evan Craighead

It was reported last week that US President Joe Biden was considering canceling \$10,000 in student loan debt for most borrowers via Executive Order. Of the proposals said to be floating

around the White House, one particular option excludes high earners from any possible student-loan relief.

Canceling student loan debt would simply subsidize wealthy individuals, rather than assist those “who never had the opportunity to go to college,” argued Marc Short, a former chief of staff under former Vice President Mike Pence.

“This is an incredibly asinine policy,” Short said during a “Fox News Sunday” roundtable. “The reality is today, 56 percent of all student loan debt is owned by people with graduate degrees.” Short’s assertion appears to reference Federal Reserve data from 2019, which reported that 56% of outstanding education-related debt was held by household with graduate degrees. This was an increase.

However, graduate degrees are not always reflective of a certain salary.

[The Brookings Institution reported](#) that the top 40% of income earners—those bringing home more than \$74,000 a year, accounted for 60% of the outstanding debt, while the lowest 40% of earners accounted for 20% of the outstanding debt.

He went on to brand such a move as “regressive.”

“So what the Biden administration is going to say for the people is—for blue-collar workers across our country, who never had the opportunity to go to college—‘We’re going to take your taxpayer dollars and subsidize lawyers, bankers, and people with graduate degrees, doctors across our country,’” he said of Biden’s reported plan.

Fox News’ Jeanine Pirro also dubbed the practice as “asinine” during a late April broadcast.

“This asinine ‘I wanna pay off student debt’ is an insult to the senior citizens, to the people who pay taxes, to people who decide, you know, ‘Do I wanna buy meat this week or pay for my medicine?’ That’s hogwash,” she said during a recent episode of “The Five.”

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How Canada is ‘Cutting Costs’ by Euthanizing their Poor

By - Mary Manley

Canada, one of the wealthiest nations in the world, is finding a new way to cut costs on disabled people by... euthanizing them?

In 2015 the case of Carter v Canada (Attorney General) prompted the Supreme Court to strike down a previous provision in the Criminal Code, thereby allowing Canadian adults the option of assisted suicide, or Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD).

That ruling then spiraled into a law known as [Bill C-7](#), an all-encompassing euthanasia law passed in 2021 which threw out the requirement that those seeking assisted suicide need to have a terminal illness whose death was reasonably [foreseeable](#).

Although Bill C-7 states that “Parliament affirms the inherent and equal value of every person’s life and the importance of taking a human rights-based approach to disability inclusion”, disability justice organizations and even the UN’s watchdog on disability opposed the new bill based on their belief that it would worsen discriminatory practices within the healthcare system.

More than 300 disability groups in Canada opposed Bill C-7, citing that the removal of the “reasonably foreseeable natural death” requirement would target disabled persons. Instead of being offered medical assistance or support, the Canadian government now has the option of doing away with any ill person that sucks up taxpayer money.

"Rather than funding and making life a possible and viable choice for many people, we're entertaining this option of asking them if they would like to die, and it's very scary," said Spring [Hawes](#), a former Invermere city councilor and the co-founder of Dignity Denied, in 2020.

"There is the danger that it might be considered a favor to offer someone dying when really that person just needs to have access to better care, better supports or the things they need to live well," added Hawes who has a spinal cord injury and uses a wheelchair.

And what some could argue sounds like fear-mongering by a group of people who- in their very right have a legitimate reason to be afraid- is bolstered by horrifying stories told by disabled people which demonstrate abuse and neglect at the hands of their government.

In April of this year a 51 year-old [Ontario](#) woman with multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS) chose MAiD after two years of searching and failing to secure a bid for affordable housing free of cigarette smoke and chemical cleaners. “The government sees me as expendable trash, a complainer, useless and a pain in the a**,” she said in a video filmed on February 14, eight days before her assisted suicide.

One woman requested MAiD because she “simply [couldn't] afford to keep on living”, after food banks became an inaccessible option. Another woman from [Vancouver](#) said she intended to use MAiD after COVID-19 left her with increased expenses and unmanageable pain. And in 2021, Chris Gladders chose to end his life via MAiD after experiencing “deplorable” living conditions at the retirement home called Greycliff Manor in Niagara Falls. When his family arrived to say goodbye to them they were horrified to find Chris in a room covered in urine and fecal matter. “None of the floors were cleaned up or anything, you could see clearly where they changed his catheter bag,” said Shawn Gladders, Chris’s brother in [January of 2021](#).

“There was urine on the floor, there were spots where there was feces on the floor... spots where your feet were just sticking. Like, if you stood at his bedside and when you went to walk away, your foot was literally stuck. It was very, very disturbing, for sure.”

Shawn said that on other occasions when he had visited his brother, Chris was taken outside of the room by a staff member, “I kick myself today, because I wish I would have walked in there before... I never would have left him there.” Shawn adds that Chris’ time at Greycliff Manor most likely contributed to his decision to end his own life.

In 2020, the [Canadian](#) government agreed to give a measly one-time payment of \$600 to disabled persons who qualified, in response to the devastating economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. They estimated that just 1.67 million disabled persons would receive that assistance, compared to the 6 million disabled persons who live in Canada.

One disabled Canadian, who chose to remain anonymous, said that after asking her doctor to fill out a form for the credit he rejected her, saying, “You’re not disabled enough... You have to be sitting in the corner drooling to be able to get this.”

The fact is: the [Canadian](#) government has no interest in spending money on their disabled people. Instead, they see MAiD as a convenient option to cut costs on healthcare for persons with chronic conditions and other disabilities. Canada’s Parliamentary Budget Officer even published an exciting [report](#) on the savings assisted suicide would garner their taxpayers: MAiD

before Bill C-7 generated a total saving of \$86.9 million per year, and Bill C-7, the government was pleased to announced, would save an additional \$62 million a year.

As if things couldn't get any worse, Canada's government appears to be fixed on including those with mental illnesses (such as depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and PTSD) to become eligible for assisted suicide, by as soon as next year. If that decision were to go through, Canada would become one of few nations allowing the use of MAiD in cases of mental [illnesses](#).

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Trevor Noah Roasts Lawmakers During Correspondents' Dinner

By - Mary Manley

Trevor Noah opened the return of the White House Correspondents' Association dinner following two years of cancellations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The South African comedian and host of The Daily Show took aim at lawmakers on both sides of the aisle, journalists and major news media outlets with witty remarks and wild impersonations.

President Joe Biden, who introduced Noah to the stage, appeared to be deeply amused by Noah's quips and impersonations about politicians, media outlets, journalists and yes, even the Biden himself.

"It is my great honor to be speaking tonight at the nation's most distinguished superspreader event," began Noah at the annual gala. "Do you read any of your own newspapers?!" The comedian exclaimed, playfully chastising the room which was filled with various members of the media.

"You guys spent the last two years telling everyone the importance of wearing masks and avoiding large indoor gatherings, then the second someone offers you a free dinner you all turn into Joe Rogan," the comedian said, referencing podcaster Joe [Rogan](#) who has made frequent false claims regarding COVID-19 on his Spotify show.

"Give it up for Kyrsten Sinema," said Noah. "Whoever thought we'd see the day in American politics when a senator could be openly bisexual, but closeted Republican." Senator [Sinema](#) (D-AZ) has been ridiculed by her Democratic constituents as well as volunteers and staffers for leaning right in her voting, particularly in January when she effectively killed a voting rights bill.

"It is risky making jokes these days, we all saw what happened at the Oscars," said Noah, referencing what is now known as "slap-gate". "What if I make like a really mean joke, about like Kellyanne Conway... and then her husband rushes up on the stage and thanks me," he quipped to a room filled with laughter.

The [Conways](#) are known for having different political views. Kellyanne was the former Senior Counselor to the President during the Donald Trump administration. And on the other hand, George created the Lincoln Project, a conservative Super PAC dedicated to "defeating President Trump and Trumpism at the ballot box."

Noah also threw punches at Chris [Cuomo](#), the American journalist who was fired from CNN after violating journalistic ethics in an effort to help his brother, former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo who found himself entrenched in sexual harassment allegations.

Despite Noah poking fun at Biden's struggling poll numbers and the problems he faces like the country's rising inflation, the president seemed particularly amused when the South African comedian poked fun at CNN.

"They just brought on Chris Licht as the new head of [CNN] News. His first order of business? Hire a guy who knows how to turn off the 'breaking news' banner. What happened with that? They just put it on during the O.J. [Simpson] chase and then never figured out how to get rid of it?" Noah joked as the president tried to stifle his laughter. "The news is not always breaking." Despite teasing media outlets including CNN, Fox News host Tucker Carlson, and even "Meet the Press" moderator Chuck Todd, Noah emphasized the important role media plays in exposing truth, mentioning the rising issue of conspiracy theories.

"This is truly the golden era of conspiracy theories, whether it's the right wing believing Trump can still win the 2020 election or the left believing that Joe Biden could still win the 2024 election," he joked.

Every single one of you, whether you like it or not, is a bastion of democracy," he pointed out. "In America you have the right to seek the truth and speak the truth, even if it makes people in power uncomfortable. Even if it makes your viewers or your readers uncomfortable," voiced Noah, emphasizing that the freedom of the press in the United States is a "blessing".

The South African comedian may hold the opinion that American media is "blessed", but others, such as Edward [Snowden](#) who has been exiled to Russia since 2013 after leaking highly classified information from the National Security Agency (NSA) in an effort to expose the fact that the American government was spying on its own citizens, may feel differently.

Biden also continues the U.S. government-led hunt for the WikiLeaks co-founder Julian Assange in an effort to make Assange "pay for his crimes" by charging him under the Espionage Act, which no journalist nor publisher has ever been convicted of. The hunt for a case against Assange could threaten First Amendment [protections](#).

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Amber Heard Fires PR Team Days Before Taking the Stand

By - Mary Manley

One way to avoid bad headlines? Try being a decent person. Amber Heard's bizarre route? Fire the only people sticking up for you.

After weeks of having her dirty laundry aired out to the public including, but not limited to: pooping on Johnny Depp's bed, cutting off his finger, handing Depp a wine bill worth \$160,000 after only 15 months of marriage, and failing to pay a donation pledge of \$3.5 million, Amber Heard has fired her public relations firm, Precision Strategies.

In the case of Depp v Heard, actor Johnny Depp, 58, is clearing his name after being labeled a "wife beater" by the British tabloid The [Sun](#). He is suing his ex-wife, Amber Heard for \$50 million

after being defamed following an op-ed that Heard, 36, outsourced to an American Civil Liberties [Union](#) (ACLU) staffer that painted Heard as a victim of domestic abuse at the hands of her ex-husband Depp.

Depp has brought Heard to court to say that's not the case, rather, he allegedly suffered abuse at the hands of Heard. The case has dug into the personal past and present of both Depp and Heard, and with every second of the trial being broadcast to the public (to Heard's objection), there is no magazine article, no op-ed piece, nor movie role for either celebrity to hide behind. The public is seeing the bare underbelly of two— well, one A-list star— and his B-list ex-wife. While fans have been charmed by Depp's calm demeanor and his ability to laugh at awkward situations during the trial, contempt for Heard has grown after hearing witness after witness (including a psychiatrist who examined Heard, as well as her former assistant) testify to her rage, emotional outbursts, inclination towards cruelty, and superficial concern for image. Apparently frustrated with "bad headlines", on Thursday the "Aquaman" actress fired her public relations firm Precision Strategies in a desperate attempt to turn the tides of public opinion. The decision has left several PR specialists— including those who have worked in political campaigns— baffled.

"It's crazy to change teams in the middle of a trial like this because you don't like the headlines," said Lis Smith, the American political strategist who most recently worked as the senior communications director for Pete Buttigieg's 2020 presidential campaign.

Smith added that the PR team which Heard fired, is "one of the best crisis firms", adding "but they can't rewrite the history of what's happened."

A PR insider expanded on Smith's comment, [saying](#), "After years of narrative building, you can't change the public's opinion in the three weeks when someone is suing you in a case."

Sources allegedly told the Post that Heard replaced her PR team with the corporate communications group Shane [Communications](#), which has previously represented Depp's former business managers during a 2017 lawsuit in which Depp sued them for \$25 million in fraud.

After the trial first began on April 11, Heard who has countersued Depp for \$100 million, may take the stand as soon as Monday, May 2.

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FBI Potentially Searched Millions of Americans' Personal Data in 2021 Without a Warrant
By - Ian DeMartino

Section 702 was amended to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 (FISA) in 2008 and has been reauthorized by Congress twice, once in 2012 and again in 2018; it is set to expire at the end of 2023 unless Congress authorizes it again.

The FBI queried data acquired by the National Security Agency (NSA) under section 702 of the FISA Amendments Act of 2008 an estimated 3.39 million times from December 1, 2020, to November 30, 2021, according to [a report](#) by the Director of National Intelligence.

The NSA uses Section 702 to gather data on foreign terrorism suspects and cyber threats. Ostensibly, the practice is focused on foreign nationals but data on Americans is pulled in whenever they speak to or email a foreign national under surveillance or are mentioned in a conversation by someone under surveillance.

That data is saved by the NSA and can be queried by the FBI as part of their investigations in the US. The report does not allege any wrongdoing by the FBI but intentionally or not, showcases the vast amount of data of American citizens that is warrantlessly swept up by intelligence agencies and how much the FBI utilizes that data.

The number of actual Americans who have had their data investigated by the FBI is lower than the 3.39 million figure. Not only are some individuals' information queried more than once but one query could potentially be counted hundreds of times. When the FBI looks through the data they use search terms, sometimes hundreds at a time. When those queries match an American, even if only one search term matches, it is counted as many terms as it is searched. So one time looking at an American's data could potentially count as hundreds of queries.

It is unclear from the report why the FBI tallies the data in that way, something that is not lost on Oregon Senator Ron Wyden "For anyone outside the U.S. government, the astronomical number of FBI searches of Americans' communications is either highly alarming or entirely meaningless," he [told The Wall Street Journal](#). "Somewhere in all that over-counting are real numbers of FBI searches, for content and for noncontent—numbers that Congress and the American people need before Section 702 is reauthorized."

The law as written only authorizes intelligence agencies to track foreign threats, but Americans' data is gathered, stored and sometimes eventually searched, through what intelligence agencies call "incidental collection."

The Electronic Frontier Foundation, a pro-privacy organization, argues that the collection is anything but accidental. "The fact that Section 702 surveillance regularly results in the collection and search of innocent Americans' communications is an intended and inherent part of the system," a [blog post](#) by the organization says. "That means the government casts a spying net that routinely catches the communications of law-abiding Americans, who are protected by the Fourth Amendment's privacy protections."

In 2018, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC) said they found that the FBI searched the data in a way that violated some Americans' constitutional rights. In response, the FBI instituted policy changes intended to increase compliance.

Despite that, the FBI has been increasingly active in using Section 702 in its investigations. It queried the data only 1.3 million times from December 1, 2019, to November 30, 2020. Last year's totals represent an increase of over 160% from the year before.

The report also mentioned four times that the report identified when the FBI should have asked the FISC court for approval before searching, but did not. Approval from the secretive FISC court is seen as a mere formality; in its history, it has only denied 85 cases out of 41,222 requests, i.e. about 0.2% of the time.

Despite its record of being a rubber stamp, the FBI has not requested approval from the FISC court since it became a requirement in 2018.

Unlike previous reauthorizations, Section 702 is expected to be a hotly contested topic in Congress next year.

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Colorado Judge: Candidate Cannot Use 'Let's Go Brandon' on Ballot
By - Ian DeMartino

"Let's Go Brandon" became a popular slogan after some of the crowd at NASCAR's Talladega Superspeedway race started chanting "F*** Joe Biden" during an interview with winner Brandon Brown. The reporter then exclaimed "you can hear the chants from the crowd, 'Let's Go Brandon!'"

A Colorado judge has confirmed the decision of Secretary of the State Jena Griswold to deny Rep. Dave Williams from using "Let's Go Brandon" on the ballot. Griswold says that the court's decision "confirms that the content of the ballot is not a place for political gamesmanship." The slogan "Let's Go Brandon" has become a not-so-subtle dig at the US president, Joe Biden. Williams is one of three candidates looking to unseat Rep. Doug Lamborn in the GOP primary this June. Williams says he will appeal the decision to the Colorado Supreme Court and is calling for extraordinary consequences if they refuse to hear it.

Williams claims that for him, the phrase is not just a slogan but a nickname he has been using since December. "It's clear that a Democrat-appointed judge put his thumb on the scale for a corrupt Democrat secretary of state," Williams told local news outlet KUSA "If the Colorado Supreme Court doesn't hear this appeal, then they are derelict in their duty and lawmakers should remove their salaries or move to term them out of office without delay."

Colorado does allow candidates to use nicknames if they use the name regularly and do not include a political party. Griswold had determined that Williams could not use the phrase because it is a slogan and not a nickname.

The case is worthy of a look from the Colorado Supreme Court because, Williams says, it will determine the "scope of the secretary of state's authority to disallow nicknames on the ballot."

The primary is largely expected to determine who will represent Colorado's 5th district. The heavily republican district was won by Lamborn with more than 57% of the vote in 2020. The deadline for Griswold to certify the ballot is April 29.

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California AG Announces Investigation Into Oil Industry Over 'Plastics Crisis'
By - Wyatt Reed

The AG office says it's already issued a subpoena looking into how Exxonmobil allegedly duped the public into believing the 'myth' of recyclable plastics as a group of academics argued in Science for action to address the problem now.

California Attorney General Rob Bonta announced Thursday that the state is investigating the role of the powerful fossil fuels industry in what he called the "plastics crisis"—beginning with Exxonmobil.

Calling the oil giant "a major source of global plastics pollution," Bonta announced the state has issued a subpoena into Exxonmobil as part of an investigation into how the fossil fuel and petrochemical industries have "aggressively promoted the development of oil-based plastic products and campaigned to minimize the public's understanding of the harmful consequences of these products."

"For more than half a century, the plastics industry has engaged in an aggressive campaign to deceive the public, perpetuating a myth that recycling can solve the plastics crisis," Bonta explained, referencing recently-revealed [internal 1970s-era documents](#) which warned industry executives that recycling was "infeasible" and that there was "serious doubt" that plastic recycling "can ever be made viable on an economic basis."

The California AG said the "first-of-its-kind investigation" will "examine the fossil fuel industry's role in creating and exacerbating the plastics pollution crisis—and what laws, if any, have been broken in the process."

Per multiple sources including the Environmental Protection Agency, "U.S. plastic recycling rate has never broken 9%," as Bonta's office [explained in a press release](#). "The remaining 91%," the AG's office says, "is landfilled, incinerated, or released into the environment."

Elsewhere on Thursday, a group made up of scientists and experts from across the globe [issued a letter](#) in the journal Science arguing for tackling the plastics crisis head-on now with legislation to cap, regulate, and ultimately phase out new plastics production.

The letter's initiator, Melanie Bergmann of the German Alfred-Wegener-Institute, argued that "even if we recycled better and tried to manage the waste as much as we can, we would still release more than 17 million tons of plastic per year into nature," and warned that "if production just keeps growing and growing, we will be faced with a truly Sisyphean task."

"The exponentially growing production is really the root cause of the problem, and the amounts of plastics we have produced thus far have already exceeded planetary boundaries," another scientist argued. "If we don't tackle that, all other measures will fail to achieve the goal of substantially reducing the release of plastic into the environment."

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By - Wyatt Reed

The US drug enforcement agency claims the island nation's head of state agreed to take cash in exchange for looking the other way on a hypothetical drug smuggling scheme.

The Premiere of the British Virgin Islands, Andrew Lahie, was arrested by the US Drug Enforcement Administration Thursday at Miami International Airport. The DEA says it detained Lahie following what it described as a sting operation targeting the island nation's premier. According to the US DEA, Lahie agreed to assist a US federal informant posing as a member of the Sinaloa cartel. The informant had proposed that they work together to move thousands of kilos of cocaine through a British Virgin Islands port.

"Why am I getting arrested?" Lahie [reportedly](#) asked at the time of the arrest. "I don't have any money or drugs."

Lahie has been on the US government's radar since at least 2003, when it investigated the then-former Minister of Education & culture and his wife, Sheila Fahie over alleged involvement in money laundering.

Meanwhile, British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss called for "calm" on the islands and said she was "appalled" by what she described as "serious allegations". The islands are classified as a British Overseas Territory but retain a nominal level of autonomy over their own affairs.

In 2020, Lahie [lambasted](#) the UK for its unequal distribution of resources to former colonies amid the emergence of Covid: "Here we are seeing again, [in] another catastrophic event, the UK is saying no to grants. The UK says it cannot afford to give us grants because its own finances are strained. The UK's money is for UK citizens, not Virgin Island citizens and not the other Overseas Territories."

British Virgin Islanders have only been recognised by the British government as full British citizens since 2002. Prior to that, they were classified as "British Overseas Territories Citizens" and systematically denied the right to reside in the UK.

The same classification was extended to millions in Hong Kong and all other overseas British territories, except for those with majority-white populations: Gibraltar and the Falklands. The only subjects of British rule not reclassified were those in the British-administered Cypriot communities of Akrotiri and Dhekelia—which the UK now uses as an intelligence base. The UK's Sovereign Base Areas have been described by the government of Cyprus as a "remnant of colonialism".

The DEA, which carried out the operation targeting the British Virgin Islands premiere, has been plagued by scandal since its infancy. Decades after the torture and execution of star DEA Agent Kiki Camarena—allegedly in the presence of the highest authorities of the Mexican government, a young Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, and notorious CIA assassin Felix Rodriguez—the former DEA agent tasked with investigating his death maintains that Camarena was [murdered by the US government](#) after uncovering a CIA plot to secretly fund its illegal Contra War on Nicaragua by funnelling Colombian cocaine to the US via Mexico's Guadalajara cartel. In 2012, a

spokesman for the Mexican state of Chihuahua [told Al Jazeera](#) that the CIA and the DEA “don’t fight drug traffickers,” but rather “try to manage the drug trade”.

“It’s like pest control companies, they only control. If you finish off the pests, you are out of a job. If they finish the drug business, they finish their jobs.”

According to some sources, little has changed. Last December, the lawyer for a former DEA agent now facing corruption charges described a widespread [culture of corruption and impunity](#) at the DEA, saying her client “was schooled in how to be corrupt; he was schooled in how to break the law.”

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US Activists Hope Exposing Odessa Massacre Helps World Grasp True Nature of Ukraine Govt.

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - US activists hope to help the international community understand the real nature of the Ukrainian government by speaking out about what happened in Odessa in May of 2014, US human rights activist and coordinator of the Odessa Solidarity Campaign Phil Wilayto told Sputnik.

On May 2, 2014, Ukrainian nationalists locked pro-federalism protesters in Odessa's Trade Unions House and set the building on fire. Almost 50 people died and some 250 protesters were injured in clashes with the radicals, according to the United Nations.

“On a personal level, the privilege of attending the second annual memorial in Odessa was a deeply moving experience for me and an opportunity to witness the tremendous courage of the people of Odessa who were determined to hold their memorial despite the fact that the fascist organizations were threatening to kill them,” Wilayto said. “And on a political level, continuing to expose what happened on May 2, 2014, is, we hope, a contribution to helping the world understand the true nature of the Ukrainian government and the events and processes that have led to the present crisis.”

The 2014 Odessa Massacre, Wilayto added, has been called the worst civil disturbance in Europe since World War II.

“After the February coup, local organizers in Odessa began circulating a petition calling for the popular election of provincial governors, instead of having them continue to be appointed by what had now become a right-wing government,” he said.

The murderous attack led by openly fascist organizations was not only a great local tragedy, Wilayto added, but proof the new government in Kiev was willing to continue to work with the neo-Nazi paramilitary organizations that had helped bring it to power.

“Among the most notorious of these is the Azov Battalion, which has been integrated directly into the Ukrainian military,” Wilayto said.

Wilayto went on to underscore that today in Ukraine it is impossible to openly speak out against the government.

“Since the beginning of hostilities on Feb. 24, President [Volodymyr] Zelenskyy has outlawed 11 opposition political parties, accusing them of being 'pro-Russian,' even though many of them had opposed the Russian invasion,” he explained. “That same weekend, the president

nationalized television news, combining all national TV channels into one government-run platform to create a 'unified information policy.'"

Meanwhile, Wilayto continued to say, many individuals have come under attack.

"From Yuri Tkachev, editor-in-chief of Timer, a non-political online publication in Odessa, who happens to be an ethnic Russian, to Mikhail and Aleksandr Kononovich, brothers and youth leaders of the Communist Party of Ukraine, who were jailed in March," he said. "But none of this is being reported here in the West."

Wilayto stressed that a lot of the truth about the Odessa Massacre is already known including through the many online videos and images of the House of Trade Unions in flames, showing people jumping from the third and fourth floors to save themselves from burning to death. It also shows people being beaten as they hit the ground and the faces of the murderers in addition to the inaction of the police.

Despite all of this public knowledge, the activist stressed, it is still not known who was ultimately responsible for the massacre.

"We know it served the interests of the central government, which was worried about a separatist movement developing in Odessa, but we don't know if the massacre was orchestrated from above or if its perpetrators were merely protected after the massacre," he said. "But the fact that Kiev has never allowed an independent international investigation of the massacre speaks volumes."

Meanwhile, Washington has not demanded that the murderers be brought to justice, Wilayto added, because the massacre also served US interests by helping to consolidate the power of the new pro-US and pro-NATO government.

"Besides, the United States has yet to fully investigate its own massacres of indigenous peoples, African-Americans and other people of color here at home," he said.

The clashes in Odessa became one of the deadliest events during the Maidan and anti-Maidan demonstrations in Ukraine that started in late 2013. Moscow has repeatedly criticized Kiev's steps in the investigation of the deadly tragedy and urged the international community and human rights groups to probe the causes of the massacre.

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Activist Groups to Commemorate 2014 Odessa Massacre in US, Canada, Europe - Coordinator

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - A number of US activist groups will commemorate the 2014 massacre in the city of Odessa by organizing public events in the United States, Canada and Europe, Odessa Solidarity Campaign coordinator Phil Wilayto told Sputnik.

"This year we have been working with two other organizations - the Union of Political Emigrants and Political Prisoners of Ukraine, which is made up of people who have been forced to leave Ukraine due to political repression there or who have been imprisoned by the Ukrainian government; and the Coop Anti-War Cafe, a gathering place for local and international peace activists in Berlin, Germany," Wilayto said. "Together we issued an appeal for international

solidarity with the people of Odessa, encouraging local actions on May 2 with the slogans 'NO to Fascism! NO to NATO! YES to a Multipolar World based on Cooperation, not Confrontation!'" Wilayto noted that the organizers are still compiling a list of cities that will hold events, adding, "We know they will take place in Europe, Canada and the United States, at least."

The organizers are also creating a webinar with representatives from the three organizations and that will be ready to post content online on May 2, Wilayto said.

"The webinar goes over the processes and events that have led up to the present crisis in Ukraine: the steady, eastward expansion of NATO and the US support for the right-wing coup of 2014 that led to the Odessa Massacre, as well as to the developments in Crimea and the Donbas," he said.

Wilayto pointed out that each year, the Odessa Solidarity Campaign - a project of the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice and Equality - encourages local action around the world to commemorate the tragic events of May 2, 2014, when at least 42 people were murdered by a fascist-led mob at the House of Trade Unions in Odessa, Ukraine.

Wilayto said the activists have been doing this since they traveled to Odessa on May 2, 2016, in the role of international observers to attend the second annual memorial of the massacre.

"In years past, there have been as many as 20 local events across Europe and North America to honor the victims and to support the ongoing demand of the people of Odessa for an international investigation into the mass murders, something the Ukrainian government has never allowed," he said.

On May 2, 2014, Ukrainian national-chauvinists locked protesters in Odessa's Trade Unions House and set the building on fire. Almost 50 people died and some 250 other protesters were injured in clashes with the extremists, according to the United Nations.

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Russian Orthodox Priests From Ukraine Seek Work in Canadian Parishes - Archbishop

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - Several Orthodox priests from Ukraine contacted the Canadian diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) in order to get a job in its parishes, Archbishop Gabriel of Canada and Montreal told Sputnik.

"Several priests from Ukraine have reached out to me and have expressed their interest in moving to Canada as a result of the military operation," Archbishop Gabriel said. "I told them that unfortunately we do not have any vacancies in our Canadian diocese."

The Canadian diocese of the ROCOR is relatively small and has not more than 30 parishes, and all clergy positions are currently filled, the archbishop explained.

"Thank God, we have priests in every parish, and we just have no place for these priests to be accepted," Gabriel added.

The Archbishop noted that he had not heard about refugees from Ukraine coming to the Canadian diocese, but expressed readiness to help them as far as possible.

Ottawa is partnering with the country's flag carrier and charities with the goal of relocating at least 10,000 Ukrainians to Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada said last week.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation aims to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine and it solely targets the country's military infrastructure. In response, the United States and its allies have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia and supplied Ukraine with offensive and defensive weapons worth tens of billions of dollars.

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Majority of ROCOR Hierarchs Ready to Attend Bishops' Council in Moscow - Archbishop

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - A majority of hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) are ready to participate in the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Moscow, which was delayed to late 2022, Archbishop Gabriel of Canada and Montreal told Sputnik.

Earlier in April, Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) of Volokolamsk said that the Russian Orthodox Church decided to postpone the Bishops' Council, which was scheduled for May 26-29, as most hierarchs from Ukraine and from the ROCOR will not be able to arrive in Moscow due to the international situation.

Archbishop Gabriel noted that the Moscow Patriarchate has said the Council may be postponed until fall or winter.

"As far as I know, most of our bishops are ready to participate in the Council. I would say, most of them, including myself, were expecting to go in May, and I think if it takes place at the end of the year, majority will probably go," he said.

When asked about the possible agenda of the upcoming gathering, the Archbishop noted that it may discuss the relics of the Imperial Romanov family.

"I have heard until recently that of course the topic of the relics of the Royal Family, whether to recognize them as genuine relics or not, was going to be one of the major topics of the Council. However, I have also heard that it was decided to postpone this discussion as well," Gabriel said.

The issue has been on the agenda for some time, and now the Patriarch apparently wants the bishops to make a decision, the archbishop said. He, however, did not rule out the discussion will be postponed.

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ROCOR Bishops Continue Maintaining Normal Contacts With Moscow Patriarchate - Archbishop

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) continue to maintain normal working relations with the Moscow Patriarchate despite the Western sanctions imposed against Russia, Archbishop Gabriel of Canada and Montreal told Sputnik.

"Everything is still normal, we have no problems with contacting anyone," Archbishop Gabriel said.

The ROCOR, which became an independent part of the Russian Orthodox Church after the signing of the Act of Canonical Communion in 2007, remains in regular cooperation with Metropolitan Antony (Sevryuk), who is responsible for the Moscow Patriarchate parishes outside of Russia.

"If we have questions regarding any issues that we may have, our Bishop Irenei in London is in regular contact with Metropolitan Antony. So, in that regard, I don't think anything has really changed," Archbishop Gabriel added.

Relations between Russia and the Western countries has significantly deteriorated after Moscow launched a special military operation in Ukraine. The operation was undertaken after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. Russia said that the aim of the special operation is to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine and that it is solely targeting the country's military infrastructure.

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RPT - Biden \$33Bn Aid Package Will Benefit US Shareholders More Than Ukraine - Experts

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's attempt to secure more than \$30 billion in additional defense and economic aid for Ukraine will further enrich the stockholders of major US defense contractors while having a negligible effect on the battlefield, analysts told Sputnik.

On Thursday, President Joe Biden asked US Congress for \$33 billion in emergency supplemental funding to support Ukraine, including \$20 billion for military assistance. So far, the package appears to have won broad bipartisan support among US lawmakers.

The request comes on top of about \$4 billion in military aid the Biden administration has already committed to Ukraine, \$3.4 billion of which came after Russia launched its military operation in late February.

"The most immediate impact will be to further enrich shareholders in US defense industries and the politicians who represent their interests in Washington, DC," retired US Army colonel, historian, and tactician Douglas Macgregor told Sputnik.

With very few exceptions, the former Trump administration Pentagon adviser added, the vast majority of the equipment and weapons on their way to Ukraine will have "at most" a modest effect on the fighting in Eastern Ukraine.

"The Russians know where the materiel will be stored and how it will be shipped eastward," Macgregor said. "As a result, much of it will be destroyed or end up sitting in isolated warehouses hundreds of miles from the scene of the action."

Historian and political commentator Dan Lazare sees the \$33 billion allocation as a sign that the war is morphing from a regional to an international conflict involving both NATO and the United States.

"The more fuel Biden throws on the fire, the greater the likelihood of the war spreading beyond its original boundaries," Lazare told Sputnik. "If Moldova is somehow dragged in due to those mysterious explosions in Transnistria, then all bets are off as to what will follow."

Lazare said there is also a chance the rest of the NATO alliance will plunge into the conflict. "If so, it's 1914 all over again - only this time with nukes. This is madness, needless to say," Lazare said.

Lazare thinks 95 percent of the blame lies with US Democrats who have been on an anti-Russia crusade for a decade.

"Words have consequences," he said. "Years of Kremlin-bashing have finally led to a real-life European war that is raging out of control."

Meanwhile, Lazare added, the more Biden tries to outrun his problems at home, the more acute they grow. And now, the expert said, Biden appears to be pinning his hopes on some sort of "epic victory in the Ukraine."

"But that's obviously not going to happen since Russia will either take all of the southern and eastern part of the country or the war will turn into a long and bloody stalemate," Lazare said. "If so, the effect will be to heighten the contradictions to the breaking point."

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Falcon 9 Booster Successfully Carries 53 Starlink Mini-Satellites Into Orbit - SpaceX
WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - A Falcon 9 booster successfully carried 53 more Starlink mini-communications satellites into low earth orbit, SpaceX announced.

The launch was podcast live and the rocket blasted off on schedule at 5:27 pm Eastern Daylight Time (EDT) from Space Launch Complex 40 at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida, SpaceX said on Friday.

The first stage booster on the mission was previously used only three weeks earlier to launch the manned Axiom-1 private astronauts' mission to the International Space Station. It was the fastest turnaround use yet of any recycled booster in the Falcon 9 program, SpaceX said.

The first stage booster again successfully landed as the 117th recovery of a birth stage booster and the second stage of the rocket separated and fired on schedule, sending the satellite payload into a good orbit, SpaceX added.

The first stage booster supporting this mission previously launched GPS III Space Vehicle 04, GPS III Space Vehicle 05, Inspiration4, one Starlink mission and most recently the Axiom-1

mission on April 8. Following stage separation, Falcon 9's first stage will return to Earth and land on a dronship stationed in the Atlantic Ocean.

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US Big Tech Stocks Down 13% in April, Worst Month for Wall Street Since 2008

(Updates with more details, comments and context in paras 3-14)

NEW YORK, April 30 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's Big Tech sector lost 13% in April, leading US stocks markets to their worst month since the financial crisis of 2008, amid fears that a Federal Reserve bent on defeating inflation could push the economy into recession with aggressive rate hikes beginning next week.

Wall Street's three major stock indexes - the S&P 500 for the top 500 stocks, the broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average and the tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite - closed Friday's trade down by an average of 3.5%. For all of April, the S&P 500 slumped almost 9%, becoming the second biggest loser after Nasdaq's 13% dive, while the Dow lost 5%.

"US stocks did not stand a chance after mega-cap tech earnings disappointed," Ed Moya, analyst at the online trading portal OANDA, said. "Rate hike bets continue to pile up ahead of next week's FOMC decision. Surging wage pressures could be what is needed to make the Fed even more aggressive with tightening at the June and July Fed meetings."

After slashing US interest rates to nearly zero at the height of the coronavirus outbreak, the FOMC, which stands for the policy-making Federal Open Market Committee of the US central bank, raised rates by 25 basis points, or a quarter point, last month. That hike brought key lending rates to between 0.25% and 0.5%.

Many FOMC members have since concluded that the March interest rate hike was too tame to rein in inflation galloping at 40-year highs. They are pushing for "one to two" 50-basis point hikes in the near term to get a better grip on fighting inflation. Expectations are that the FOMC meeting on May 3-4 will agree on the first of such 50-bps hikes.

As of Friday, some money market traders were even pricing in a 75-basis point, or three-quarter point, hike at the June FOMC meeting.

All in, the FOMC members are considering as many as seven rate hikes this year. They expect monetary tightening to continue into 2023 if inflation does not drop from current levels of around 6-8% per annum to the central bank's desired level of 2%.

But economists caution that the economy could go into recession if interest rates go up too much, too fast.

The last time the US economy slipped into recession, which is technically defined as two straight quarters of negative growth, was in the aftermath of the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak. While the economy rebounded 5.7% in 2021 - US US growing at its fastest pace since 1984 - it fell by 1.4% in the first quarter of this year. If it contracts in the second quarter as well, the United States would automatically be in recession.

The University of Michigan said in its closely-followed consumer poll released on Friday that many Americans think the Fed will have a hard time succeeding with its goal of providing a soft landing for the economy from aggressive rate hikes planned by the central bank.

"The goal of a soft landing will be more difficult to achieve given the uncertainties that now prevail, raising prospects for a halt, or even a temporary reversal, in the Fed's interest rate policies," Richard Curtain, chief economist of the so-called UMich Consumer Surveys, said in a summary of the university's April poll.

In Friday's session, the S&P 500 finished down 156 points, or 3.6%, at 4,131. Aside from its 9% decline for the month, the index lost 3% for the week and was off 13% for the year.

The Dow settled down 939 points, or 2.8%, at 32,977. Its 6% decline for April aside, the index lost 2.5% on the week and was off 9% on the year.

The Nasdaq closed down 537 points, or 4.2%, at 12,334. Aside from its 13% tumble for the month, the index lost almost 4% on the week and was down 21% for the year.

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Oil Prices Coast to 5th Straight Monthly Gain in April

NEW YORK, April 30 (Sputnik) - Crude prices coasted to a fifth straight month of gains as concerns over Russian oil disruption offset downside brought by China's newest COVID-19-related crisis.

Analysts said prices could climb further ahead of next week's OPEC+ meeting, where producer indifference to increasing output could prompt a barrel to test highs of \$115 and above.

Brent crude, the London-traded global benchmark for oil, settled Friday's trade up \$1.75, or 1.6%, at \$109.34 per barrel.

For the week, Brent rose 2.5% and for the month, it rose 1.3%. While the monthly gain was Brent's smallest since December, it ensured an unbroken winning streak over the past five months for the global crude benchmark which netted 55% in that stretch.

In New York, the West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, benchmark for US crude settled down 67 cents, or 0.6%, at \$104.69 per barrel.

For the week, WTI rose almost 2% and for the month, it was up 4.4%. Similar to Brent, WTI has gained every month since the end of November, accumulating a windfall of 58% over the past five months.

Oil began this week on a dark note, as a two-day selloff from last week extended into Monday on worries about China's COVID-19 situation and about the dollar at 2020 highs that made crude and other commodities more expensive for non-holders of the US currency.

But in three sessions from Tuesday, crude prices reversed from their weakness on concerns over tight supply. Reports on Thursday that Germany will likely lead the European Union in banning Russian oil heightened the rally, as traders vexed over more supply disruptions in already-stressed global energy markets.

Some 35% of Germany's oil imports came from Russia before the start of the Ukraine conflict and the ensuing Western sanctions against Moscow. Some EU nations, meanwhile, sourced almost every drop of their oil from Russia once.

"If Europe is suddenly required to look for huge amounts of gas or oil supplies in international markets, that will offset China's slowdown fears and send prices higher," Jeffrey Halley, a senior market analyst at online trading site OANDA, said.

With OPEC+ due to hold its monthly conference on May 4, oil's upward momentum could hold for another week at least, analysts said.

OPEC+, led by the 13-member Saudi-controlled Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and ten other oil producers steered by Russia, has pushed prices up each time it met over the past year by offering 400,000 barrels per day hike in monthly output - and then struggling to fulfill the raise in production.

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Senior US, French, German Officials to Discuss Ukraine in Paris on May 7 - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman will visit Paris next week to discuss with her counterparts from France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom coordination of efforts in response to Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the State Department said.

"[O]n May 7, the Deputy Secretary will meet in Paris, France, with French MFA Secretary General Francois Delattre, German MFA State Secretary Andreas Michaelis, Italian MFA Secretary General Ettore Sequi, and UK Minister of State for Europe and North America James Cleverly to discuss our ongoing, close coordination to respond to Putin's brutal, unprovoked war against Ukraine," the State Department said in a press release on Friday.

Sherman's travel to Paris will be the last stop of her nearly a week-long trip to South Africa, Angola and Gabon that will commence on May 2, the release added.

In all three African countries, Sherman is scheduled to meet with government officials and business leaders to discuss a range of bilateral and international issues, according to the release.

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

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 30 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Talks between Russia and Ukraine have stalled due to the inconsistent position of Kiev and the parties could have achieved significant results if it was an honest negotiator, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Friday.

* Russia does not use mercenaries in Ukraine, Lavrov said.

* The United States is aware of reports that a US citizen was killed while fighting in Ukraine, State Department deputy spokesperson Jalina Porter said.

* The United States does not know of any American defense contractors working in Ukraine, US Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby told reporters.

* Volodymyr Saldo, the new head of the administration of the Kherson region that is now controlled by Russian forces, said he was unaware of plans for holding a referendum and creating republics in the region.

ENERGY MARKETS

* The Russian government did not allow Gazprom to continue the circulation of depositary receipts abroad, in connection with which the company notified The Bank of New York Mellon of the termination of the deposit agreement and sent applications to the London and Singapore stock exchanges for delisting no later than 20 working days later, the company said.

* Several European exporters of Russian gas have agreed to new terms of payments in rubles, but are hushing this up and spread false information about Hungary's stance on the issue, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said

* The Czech Republic has no plans to pay for Russian gas deliveries in rubles, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala said.

* Moldova will receive gas from Russia's Gazprom next month as ensured in the contract, Moldovagaz CEO Vadim Ceban said on Friday.

* Most of the key partners have agreed to switch to the Russian-proposed scheme to pay for gas in rubles, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

G20 SUMMIT

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy have been invited to the G20 summit, AFP reported on Friday, citing Indonesian President Joko Widodo.

* Russia will prepare for the G20 summit that will take place in the Indonesian province of Bali in November, but it is too early to talk about the modalities of its participation, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* Indonesia, as this year's chair of the G20, wants to unite its participants and opposes any split within the group, Widodo, commenting on the composition of the upcoming summit participants.

* The United States hopes that more constructive diplomatic talks will occur with Russia prior to their participation at the G20 summit in Indonesia in November, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

WESTERN MILITARY SUPPORT TO UKRIANE

* The first batch of the Phoenix drones for Ukraine will get in the region today, Senior Defense Official told reporters on Friday.

* The United States is helping transport Ukrainian troops to training locations, but not going inside the country, a senior defense official said.

* More than 12 flights will depart the United States in the next 24 hours with military aid for Ukraine, including howitzers, ghost drones, and radars, a senior US defense official said.

STATE OF RUSSIAN ECONOMY

* Russia's GDP is expected to fall by up to 10% in 2022, the Russian Central Bank forecast showed on Friday.

* The annual inflation in Russia will reach 18-23% in 2022, the forecast showed.

* The Russian Central Bank decreased the key rate from 17% to 14%.

RUSSIA-KAZAKHSTAN TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Kazakh counterpart, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, have discussed cooperation within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) during a phone conversation, the Kremlin said on Friday.

* r Putin and Tokayev, did not discuss Kazakhstan's possible withdrawal from the Eurasian Economic Union's (EAEU) Customs Union, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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IMF Says Executive Board Approves 2-Year \$9.8Bln Flexible Credit Line for Colombia

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has approved a new two-year flexible credit line for Colombia in the amount of \$9.8 billion, designed for crisis prevention, the IMF announced on Friday.

"The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund approved today a successor two-year arrangement for Colombia under the Flexible Credit Line (FCL) in an amount equivalent to SDR 7.1557 billion (about US\$9.8 billion) and noted the cancellation by Colombia of the previous arrangement. The Colombian authorities stated their intention to treat the new arrangement as precautionary," the IMF said in a press release.

The IMF noted in the release that the approval is Colombia's ninth FCL arrangement since 2009.

Colombia qualified for the FCL because it has demonstrated very strong economic fundamentals and institutional policy frameworks and has been implementing very strong policies, the release also said.

The FCL mechanism allows its recipients do use the credit line funds at any time and to use them to address both actual and potential balance of payments in order to boost market confidence, the release added.

Drawings under the FCL are not tied to any negative conditionality as in other IMF programs, according to the release.

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US Cyber Chief Discussed Security, Cyber Issues With Partners During Talks in India - NSC

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - US Deputy National Security Advisor for Cyber and Emerging Technologies Anne Neuberger discussed a range of security and cyber issues with a number of countries and multilateral organization during a recent trip to India for the Raisina Dialogue, National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said on Friday.

"From April 26-28, Deputy National Security Advisory for Cyber and Emerging Technologies Anne Neuberger traveled to India to participate in the Raisina Dialogue where she met with representatives from multiple countries and multilateral organizations to discuss cooperation on a range of global security and geopolitical issues," Watson said in a statement.

Neuberger met with Indian government officials to deepen bilateral efforts on a vibrant digital economy and build cybersecurity capacity to address shared threats, the statement said.

Neuberger also met with private sector representatives to discuss the role of industry in advancing shared objectives on cybersecurity and technology, including 5G, artificial intelligence and semiconductors, the statement added.

Neuberger across all her engagements emphasized the importance of bolstering US-India collaboration in securing the technologies of the future while improving security against current cyber threats, according to the statement.

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US Big Tech Stocks Down 13% in April, Worst Wall St. Month Since 2008

NEW YORK, April 29 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's Big Tech sector lost 13% in April, leading US stocks markets to their worst month since the financial crisis of 2008 amid fears the Federal Reserve bent on defeating inflation with aggressive interest rate hikes could push the economy into a recession.

Wall Street's three major stock indexes - the S&P 500 for the top 500 stocks, the broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average and the tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite - closed Friday's trade down by an average of 3.5%. For all of April, the S&P 500 slumped almost 9%, becoming the second biggest loser after Nasdaq, while Dow lost 5%.

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US, EU Discuss Diversification of Natural Gas Supplies to Europe – Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - US and EU representatives met in Washington, DC to discuss prospects of diversifying natural gas supplies to Europe and reducing the continent's

overall demand for the fossil fuel, according to a joint statement published by the White House on Friday.

"On April 28, the U.S.-EU Task Force on Energy Security met in person in Washington to discuss implementation of the March 25 Joint Statement by Presidents Biden and von der Leyen. The meeting, chaired by Amos Hochstein, U.S. Senior Advisor for Energy Security, and Björn Seibert, Head of Cabinet of the European Commission President, reviewed progress on diversifying natural gas supplies to Europe and reducing Europe's demand for natural gas," the statement said.

The officials also discussed plans to establish a framework to increase LNG supplies as part of the EU's Energy Purchase Platform and options to reduce Europe's reliance on natural gas, including renewable energy and the deployment of heat pumps, the statement added.

The European Commission announced on Thursday the creation of a regional taskforce in Sofia that will shop around for energy supplies ahead of winter after Russia stopped pumping gas to Bulgaria and Poland.

Russian energy giant Gazprom cut natural gas supplies to the two EU members on Wednesday after they refused to pay for gas in rubles in accordance with President Vladimir Putin's decree from March 23.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian forces. In response to Russia's operation, Western countries have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow and vowed to reduce dependence on Russian energy.

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US Defense Companies Likely to Expand Aerospace Investment After Ukraine - Lockheed CEO WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The lessons of the Ukraine war will likely lead to increased military spending on aerospace advanced systems, Lockheed Martin CEO James Taiclet told an Atlantic Council audience on Friday.

"The Ukraine war has heightened the importance of aerospace domains so I expect increased investment in those areas," Taiclet said

The Lockheed Martin chief executive also predicted an increased demand for F-35 Joint Strike Fighters and F-16 Fighting Falcon combat aircraft among America's NATO allies.

Lockheed Martin received \$75 billion in contracts from the US Department of Defense in 2020, according to a Brown University/Center for International Policy analysis, a sum more than 50 percent greater than the State Department's entire operating budget. The top five contractors secured a staggering \$286 billion in US defense spending in 2019 and 2020, the report revealed.

After Russia launched its operation in Ukraine on February 24, the Pentagon's top five suppliers saw their stock prices rise - with three jumping by double digits in the first week - as investors on Wall Street anticipated a surge in weapons orders.

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Top US Diplomat for Asia Heads to Cambodia, Laos Ahead of US-ASEAN Summit - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, APRIL 29 (Sputnik) – Daniel J. Kritenbrink, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, will embark on a visit to Cambodia and Laos on May 1 to meet with officials from both countries ahead of a US-ASEAN summit, the State Department said in a press release Friday.

"Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel J. Kritenbrink will travel to Cambodia and Laos May 1-7," the release said. "The visits will highlight U.S. commitment to two of the youngest and most dynamic societies in the region, reinforcing ASEAN centrality, underscoring the United States' commitment to the Mekong-U.S. Partnership to address transboundary challenges, and promoting a secure, open and prosperous Mekong sub-region." While in Cambodia, Kritenbrink will meet with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn, other senior officials, and youth and civil society leaders to discuss the current bilateral relationship and US support for Cambodia's year as ASEAN chair.

In Laos, Kritenbrink will lead the US-Laos Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue to deliberate about how to expand US-Laos cooperation and build deeper connections with Laos when the country will co-chair the 2022 Mekong-US Partnership. He will also spend time with alumni of Department of State exchange programs.

In both countries, Kritenbrink will discuss the US-ASEAN summit that President Joe Biden will host on May 12-13.

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US Delays SpaceX Starship Environmental Review - Federal Aviation Authority

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The US government has once again delayed its environmental review for SpaceX's Super heavy Starship, the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) announced in an update on Friday.

"The FAA is working toward issuing the final Programmatic Environmental Assessment (PEA) for the SpaceX Starship/Super Heavy on May 31, 2022," the agency announced. "SpaceX made multiple changes to its application that require additional FAA analysis."

Even the extended review will not guarantee that the FAA will reach a favorable conclusion to allow Space X to further proceed with the project, the update cautioned.

"The completion of the PEA will not guarantee that the FAA will issue a launch license.

SpaceX's application must also meet FAA safety, risk and financial responsibility requirements," the agency said.

The FAA announced on March 25 it was postponing its environmental assessment of SpaceX's new Starship complex until the end of April.

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Lockheed Martin to Expand Javelin Production Due to Urgency of Situation in Ukraine - CEO

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin is going to expand its production of Javelin anti-tank missile systems even before the Pentagon orders more given the urgency of the situation in Ukraine, Chairman and CEO James Taiclet said on Friday.

President Joe Biden will be visiting a Lockheed Martin weapons manufacturing facility next week in the US state of Alabama where they make Javelins. The Biden administration has championed the weapon as a symbol of US efforts to help counter Russia in Ukraine.

"Something this urgent, we are going to move forward ahead of need," Taiclet told an audience at the Atlantic Council. "We are going to invest in that... Javelins are saving lives. It is a game changing capacity for the Ukrainians."

Lockheed Martin was also considering funneling financial support to many of its suppliers of components for the Javelins to ensure they could all expand their production rapidly as well and avoid bottlenecks in the supply chain, Taiclet continued.

The Biden administration has provided Ukraine with \$3.4 billion in security assistance - including more than 5,500 Javelins - since Russia launched its military operation in Ukraine in late February, the Pentagon said in a release on April 22.

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Lockheed Martin Expanding Production of Counterbattery Rockets, Radars - CEO

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin, the largest single US defense contractor, is expanding its production capacity to make counterbattery rockets and the radars needed to track incoming bombardments and locate their firing sites, company President, Chairman and CEO James Taiclet said on Friday.

"We are going to need to expand production capacity," Taiclet told a meeting at the Atlantic Council. "We are investing in expanding production capacity also [of] counter battery radar. We expect to increase the production rates of rockets with counter battery fire."

The United States continues to equip Ukraine with both heavy artillery and the radars to direct them, a senior US defense official said on Friday.

"In the next 24 hours, more than a dozen flights are expected from the continental United States and that will include howitzers, more 155 [mm artillery] rounds, some of those Phoenix ghost UAVs and even some of the radars that we talked about," the official told a press briefing.

Over the past six months, the value of Lockheed Martin's shares have grown by about 35%. Taiclet has said that the competition between major powers would bring more business to the company.

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Sherman, Tikhanovskaya Discuss Belarus Support for Russia's Operation in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman met with former Belarusian presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya to discuss Minsk's support for Russia's military operation in Ukraine, the State Department said on Friday.

"They discussed the Lukashenka regime's continued support of Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine and U.S. efforts to hold the regime accountable for its complicity, as well as for its sustained crackdown on human rights and democratic freedoms," spokesman Ned Price stated.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken joined the two for part of the meeting, Price noted.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian forces. Western countries have responded with comprehensive sanctions on Moscow and lethal aid for Kiev

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US Hopes for More Constructive Diplomacy From Russia Ahead of G20 Summit - White House

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes that more constructive diplomatic talks will occur with Russia prior to their participation at the G20 summit in Indonesia in November, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"There's a lot that could happen between now and then, but we certainly haven't seen an indication to date of Russia's plan to participate in diplomatic talks constructively. Our hope certainly is that will change, " Psaki said during a press briefing when asked about whether Russia's presence at the summit could be positive.

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US Aware of Reports That North Korea Ready to Conduct Nuclear Test - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is aware of reports that North Korea is ready to conduct a nuclear test and deems it a violation of international law, State Department deputy spokeswoman Jalina Porter said on Friday.

On Tuesday, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said his country will continue to boost its nuclear potential.

"We are aware of reports that the DPRK [the Democratic People's Republic of Korea] is ready to conduct a nuclear test, it is a violation of the international law. We urge the DPRK to refrain from destabilizing activities," she said.

Over 10 years in power, the North Korean leader has conducted more than 100 missile launches, including intercontinental launches, and four nuclear tests. During his 10-year tenure, his father Kim Jong Il carried out 16 missile launches and two nuclear tests.

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'Oath Keepers' Member Pleads Guilty to Charges Linked to January 6 Events - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - A member of the Oath Keepers group pleaded guilty to charges linked to breach of the US Capitol by individuals protesting the certification of election results on January 6, 2021, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"Brian Ulrich, 44, of Guyton, Georgia pleaded guilty to seditious conspiracy in connection with the Capitol breach," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Ulrich also pleaded guilty to the charge of obstruction of an official proceeding and agreed to cooperate with the government's ongoing investigation as part of a plea agreement, the press release added.

Ulrich admitted in his guilty plea that he conspired with other Oath Keepers members to use force to prevent the certification of the 2020 presidential election results in favor of Joe Biden, according to the press release.

Joshua James, a 34-year-old from Alabama, became the first Oath Keepers member to plead guilty to seditious conspiracy and obstruction charges in March 2022. Ulrich is the second member of the group to plead guilty to those charges.

Ulrich faces up to 20 years in prison and financial penalties upon sentencing, for which a date has not been set, the press release said.

Nearly 800 individuals have been arrested across the United States for crimes connected to the Capitol breach on January 6, 2021, according to the press release. Over 250 individuals have been charged with assaulting or impeding law enforcement, and investigation remains ongoing, the press release added.

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US Aware of Reports That American Citizen Was Killed Fighting in Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is aware of reports that an American citizen was killed while fighting in Ukraine, State Department Deputy spokeswoman Jalina Porter said on Friday.

On Thursday, media reported that Willy Joseph Cancel, 22, an employee of a US private military company, was killed in Ukraine.

"We are aware of reports, we have nothing to announce, we call on US citizens to [avoid] Ukraine and depart immediately," she said.

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EPA Fuel Waiver for E15 Gas Will Address Fuel Supply Crisis, Lower Prices - White House

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) emergency fuel waiver to allow for the sale of 15% ethanol blend (E15) gasoline during the summer driving season will address the ongoing fuel supply crisis and lower costs at the pump, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"Today, the Environmental Protection Agency announced that it is issuing an emergency fuel waiver to allow E15 sales during the summer driving season. The waiver is a critical step to address the fuel supply crisis... At current prices, E15 can save a family 10 cents per gallon of gas on average and many stores sell E15 at an even greater discount and today's waiver will allow families to pay that lower price for months to come," Psaki said in a statement.

On Thursday, the EPA issued the emergency fuel waiver for E15 as part of the Biden administration's broader plan to use domestic biofuel to reduce US reliance on foreign energy products and accelerate the transition to clean energy.

President Joe Biden announced earlier in April that he would request a waiver for E15 gas as part of his plan to address rising fuel costs. The EPA said the emergency waiver will go into effect on May 1.

E15 gasoline is blended with 10.5% to 15% ethanol and was approved for use in light-duty conventional vehicles made in 2001 or later, according to the US Energy Department.

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US Has No Plans to Train Forces Inside Ukraine But Has Virtual Training Option - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is not planning at present to train Ukrainian forces inside Ukraine, however, it does have the option to conduct virtual training, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Friday.

"Right now... we don't have any plans to return to training inside Ukraine," Kirby said during a press briefing. "We are exploring on some of the systems the possibility doing virtual training so where the trainers would be obviously outside Ukraine, but they will communicate with Ukrainian

troops inside Ukraine virtually. That's an option available to us. It hasn't started. We are not doing that right now. But we foresee the possibility on some of these systems."

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Pentagon Says Unaware of Any US Contractors in Ukraine After American Reportedly Killed

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States does not know of any American defense contractors working in Ukraine, Pentagon Spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Friday. On Thursday, media reported that Wily Joseph Cancel, 22, an employee of a US private military company, was killed in Ukraine.

"Not that I am aware of," Kirby said when asked whether Pentagon has any contractors working in Ukraine.

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Japan Defense Minister Kisho to Visit US May 3-6, Meet Austin May 4 - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kisho will visit the United States on May 3-6 and will meet with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on May 4, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"Japanese Defense Minister Kishi will travel to the United States from May third to the sixth and he'll have a chance to meet with Secretary Austin on the fourth of May," Kirby said during a press briefing. "Items on the agenda, of course, include Ukraine. We were grateful that Japan was represented in that 40 plus consultative meeting in Ramstein earlier this week."

The two leaders will also talk about China, North Korea and defense cooperation initiatives to strengthen the deterrent and response capabilities of the Japan-US Alliance, Kirby said.

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US Starts Training With Ukraine Forces on Key Systems in Germany - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States has commenced training with Ukraine armed forces today on key systems at military installations in Germany, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"Today, I can announce that the United States has commenced training with Ukrainian armed forces on key systems at US military installations in Germany," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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British IS 'Beatle' Member Kotey Jailed for Life for Helping Murder Hostages - US Court

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Former UK national Alexandra Kotey, who was part of the Islamic State terror group (outlawed in Russia) cell known as the Beatles, has been jailed for life after being found guilty in a US court to charges of engaging in torture and murder of hostages in Syria, court reporter for a judge on the case Rebecca Stonestreet told Sputnik on Friday. The verdict was delivered by senior judge Thomas Selby Ellis III in the US Eastern District Court of Virginia earlier in the day.

Alexandra Kotey was suspected of being a member of the notorious extremist cell the "Beatles," which was involved in torture and killing of Western hostages in Syria. The group is believed to have beheaded US citizens James Foley, Steven Sotloff and Peter Kassig for the Islamic State propaganda videos. Kotey is alleged to have acted as a guard for the cell and tortured hostages, including through waterboarding and electric shocks.

Kotey's co-defendant, El Shafee Elsheikh, was sentenced by the jury earlier in the month. Elsheikh, 33, was found guilty on all charges, including hostage-taking, kidnapping, and supporting a terrorist group, for his role in the capture and murder of two journalists and two aid workers from the United States by the terror cell.

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UN Chief Discusses With Ukraine Prime Minister Stepping Up UN Humanitarian Aid - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has discussed with Ukraine's Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal boosting humanitarian assistance to the country, United Nations deputy spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Friday.

"The Secretary General met with Ukrainian Prime Minister Denis Shmygal and they discussed the stepping up of UN humanitarian support to Ukraine," Haq said during a press briefing. Haq also noted that Guterres left Kiev earlier on Friday.

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US Advises Ukraine on How to Preserve Items of Cultural Heritage - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is providing recommendations to the Ukraine government and to specialists there on possible ways to protect items of cultural heritage amid Russia's special operation in the country, US State Department Cultural Heritage Center Director Eric Catalfamo said on Friday.

"We are working with partners in the US government and affiliated agencies, including the Smithsonian Institution, on how we can give advice to Ukrainian cultural heritage professionals to be able to safeguard items here and now," Catalfamo said during a press briefing.

Catalfamo noted that the State Department shares information through a special body, which specifically works on cultural heritage protection in difficult situations when such items can be damaged.

"We are in coordination stage now, but some of our member agencies have been taking concrete actions," Catalfamo said without providing further details.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the special operation aims to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine and solely targets the country's military infrastructure. In response, the United States and its allies have imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia and supplied Ukrainian military with offensive and defensive weapons worth tens of billions of dollars.

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Biden, Mexican Counterpart to Discuss Illegal Immigration, Smuggling - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will hold a virtual meeting with his Mexican counterpart Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador later on Friday to discuss illegal immigration and smuggling, a senior Biden administration official said on Friday.

The two presidents will discuss the Ninth Summit of the Americas, scheduled to be held in California in June, as well as the issues concerning illegal immigration, economic development and regional security.

"Biden and Lopez Obrador to discuss the situation with migrants, migrant issues. We've been working in close partnership with Mexico to reduce illegal migration," the official said. Relations between the United States and Mexico have been "incredibly constructive," the official said.

"We have strong cooperation with continues... in combating human smuggling," the official said. Earlier in April, the US authorities said they apprehended more than 221,000 migrants on the country's border with Mexico the previous month. A majority of the migrants apprehended were single adults from Mexico and other countries, including Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

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Pelosi Dismisses US GDP Contraction as 'Aberration,' Does Not Worry About Recession

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - New official US government figures showing a 1.4% fall in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the first three months of this year are an "aberration" and there should be no worry about any economic recession, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Friday.

"I think this is an aberration: Many other factors show growth in our near future," Pelosi told a Capitol Hill press conference. "I am not concerned about a recession."

Inflationary pressure continued in the first quarter of 2022, where GDP fell by 1.4%, new figures issued by the Department of Commerce said. If GDP continues to contract in the second quarter as well, the United States would automatically be in recession.

Pelosi acknowledged the dangers of continuing inflation. "We cannot ignore inflation. We carefully watch those numbers," she added.

Pelosi said US exports were still out of balance and she said new legislation to encourage revived domestic industrial production to replace imports would create a more favorable balance of trade and restore growth.

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Washington Hopes Mexico Will Join US-Led Opposition to Russia on Ukraine - Official

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes that Mexico will join the opposition to Russia on the issue of Ukraine - a matter that will be discussed between the leaders of the two countries later on Friday, a senior Biden administration official said.

US President Joe Biden is scheduled to hold a virtual meeting with his Mexican counterpart Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador later in the day. The two presidents will discuss the Ninth Summit of the Americas, which will be held in California in June as well as migration, economic development and regional security.

"We respect the Mexican leadership at the United Nations and [want] to see [Mexico] join us in imposing cost on the Kremlin in what it is doing in its brutal war on Ukraine," the official said. Last week, the Organization of American States (OAS) voted 25 to zero to suspend Russia's status as a permanent observer at the organization. A total of eight countries, including Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, abstained from the vote.

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UNSC Urges Secretary-General to Promptly Appoint Special Envoy for Libya

UNITED NATIONS, April 29 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council on Friday extended the mandate of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) until July 31, 2022 and urged the secretary general to quickly appoint a special envoy for Libya.

The mandate of the mission was to expire on April 30. The resolution was passed unanimously.

"Takes note of the Independent Strategic Review of UNSMIL (S/2021/716), requests the Mission to implement its recommendations, decides that UNSMIL should be led by a Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), in Tripoli, supported by two Deputy Special Representatives of the Secretary-General, and calls upon the Secretary-General to appoint a SRSG promptly," the resolution said.

In December, UN chief Antonio Guterres appointed Stephanie Williams of the United States as his special adviser on Libya. It came after Special Envoy Jan Kubis of Slovakia resigned.

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First Batch of Phoenix Drones for Ukraine to Arrive in Region Friday - Defense Official
WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The first batch of the Phoenix drones for Ukraine will get in the region today, Senior Defense Official told reporters on Friday.

"There hasn't been training on the Phoenix ghost [drones] yet. Again, we believe that a first tranche of those drones should be arriving in the region today. Not all 121, but the first tranche of them will be arriving in the region today," the official said. "Again, we're still working out how the specific training is going to be done on this."

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US Helps Transport Ukrainian Soldiers to Training Sites, Not Going Into Country - Official

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is helping transport Ukrainian troops to training locations, but not going inside the country, a senior defense official said on Friday.

"We have in many cases helped with the transportation of Ukrainian soldiers to training sites, not helping them get out of Ukraine. So I do not want to leave you with the impression that we're going into Ukraine and we're flying or transporting Ukrainian soldiers out of the country. That is not happening," the official told a briefing.

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Federal Reserve to Have Hard Time Providing Soft Landing for US Economy - UMich Poll

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - Many Americans think the Federal Reserve will have a hard time providing a soft landing for the US economy from aggressive interest rate hikes planned by the central bank to contain runaway inflation, the University of Michigan (UMich) said in its latest consumer survey.

"The goal of a soft landing will be more difficult to achieve given the uncertainties that now prevail, raising prospects for a halt, or even a temporary reversal, in the Fed's interest rate policies," Richard Curtin, chief economist of the so-called UMich Consumer Surveys, said in the university's final consumer poll for April published on Friday.

The Federal Reserve is moving to raise interest rates rapidly to try to cool off inflation, but economists say it will take time to suppress the runaway growth in prices.

After slashing US interest rates to nearly zero at the height of the coronavirus outbreak, the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, or FOMC, approved the first pandemic-era rate hike on March 16, raising rates by 25 basis points, or a quarter point. That brought key lending rates to between 0.25% and 0.5%.

Many FOMC members have concluded since that the March hike was too tame to rein in inflation galloping at 40-year highs. They are pushing for "one to two" 50-basis point hikes in the near term to get a better grip on fighting inflation. Expectations are that the FOMC meeting on May 3-4 will agree on the first of such 50 basis poin hikes.

All in, the FOMC members are considering as many as seven rate hikes this year and expect monetary tightening to continue into 2023 if inflation does not drop to desired levels.

But economists like Curtin also caution that the economy could go into recession if rates rise too much, too fast.

After a 3.5% contraction in 2020 gross domestic product (GDP) forced by the coronavirus crisis, the US economy grew by 5.7% in 2021 - the biggest calendar-year growth since 1984.

But inflation grew even faster. The Federal Reserve's preferred price indicator - the Personal Consumption Expenditure (PCE) Index - rose 5.8% for all of last year, in its largest annual increase since July 1982.

Inflationary pressure has continued in the first quarter of this year, with the PCE Index growing 6.6% in the year to March, while GDP fell 1.4% over the first three months. If the GDP contracts in the second quarter as well, the United States would automatically be in recession.

The last time the economy slipped into recession, which is technically defined as two straight quarters of negative growth, was in the aftermath of the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak.

"The probability of consumers reaching a tipping point will increasingly depend on prospects for a strong labor market and continued wage gains," Curtin said. "The cost of that renewed strength is an accelerating wage-price spiral."

The labor market has been the brightest spot of the US economy in recent times, with employment having hit record highs after rebounding all-time lows just two years ago.

Joblessness among Americans reached a record high of 14.8% in April 2020, with the loss of some 20 million jobs in the aftermath of the coronavirus breakout. Employment has, however, been stellar over the past year, with the jobless rate moving down to 3.6% in March. A jobless rate of 4.0% or below is regarded by the Federal Reserve as "maximum employment".

The United States is experiencing one of the greatest transformations of its employment market as COVID-19 measures upended labor supply and work trends, raising wages and putting employees' demands above those of employers.

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Over 12 Flights to Depart US in Next 24 Hours With Howitzers, UAVs for Ukraine – Official

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – More than 12 flights will depart the United States in the next 24 hours with military aid for Ukraine, including howitzers, ghost drones, and radars, a senior US defense official said on Friday.

"In the next 24 hours, more than a dozen flights are expected from the continental United States and that will include howitzers, more 155 [mm artillery] rounds, some of those Phoenix ghost UAVs and even some of the radars that we talked about," the official told a press briefing.

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Moderna Says Launching Partnership With Canada, Building Vaccine Factory in Quebec

TORONTO, April 29 (Sputnik) - Moderna will build an mRNA vaccine manufacturing facility in Quebec as part of a partnership agreement with the Canadian government, the US biotechnology company said on Friday.

"[Moderna] today announced its plan to build a state-of-the-art mRNA vaccine manufacturing facility in Quebec that will support a long-term strategic partnership with the Government of Canada to enhance pandemic preparedness," the press release said.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Friday also attended an event alongside other government and Moderna officials to announce the launch of the partnership and vaccine plant plan.

Moderna's investment in research and development of mRNA technology in Canada will have a significant impact on public health for both COVID-19 and other diseases with the potential to be treated with the new technology, Trudeau said.

The Canadian Moderna facility will produce mRNA vaccines for respiratory diseases including COVID-19, influenza, respiratory syncytial virus, and others contingent on government approval, according to the press release.

The partnership agreement between Moderna and the Canadian government also supports research and development in the country, with the project expected to create hundreds of jobs during construction and operation, the press release added.

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ExxonMobil Estimates Exit From Russia's Sakhalin-1 at \$3.4Bln in Q1 2022

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) – The exit from Russia's Sakhalin-1 oil and gas project cost ExxonMobil \$3.4 billion in the first quarter of 2022, the American company said on Friday, while still posting higher profits for Q1 2022.

"First-quarter results included an unfavorable identified item of \$3.4 billion associated with our planned exit from Russia Sakhalin-1, or \$0.79 per share assuming dilution," the statement read. Overall, the company's estimated earnings in the first quarter totaled \$5.5 billion, a two-fold increase from the same period in 2021.

On Thursday, ExxonMobil confirmed to Sputnik that it has declared force majeure for its Sakhalin-1 operations in Russia due to sanctions. As a result of the force majeure, Exxon Neftegas Ltd. has curtailed crude oil production.

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US Should Stop Arms Sales to Taiwan, China Reserves Right to Respond to Meddling - Embassy

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The United States should stop selling weapons to Taiwan, as China reserves the right to respond to any foreign meddling, the Chinese Embassy in Washington told Sputnik on Friday.

"Currently there is a new wave of tension across the Taiwan Strait. The root cause is that the authorities in Taiwan keep pushing for the independence agenda by soliciting US support and that some in the US attempt to use Taiwan to contain China," spokesperson Liu Pengyu said. "China must and will be reunified. We will strive for the prospect of peaceful reunification with utmost sincerity and efforts. That being said, we reserve the option of taking all necessary measures in response to the interference of foreign forces and the secessionist activities of a handful of 'Taiwan independence' separatists."

The diplomat noted that Washington should abide by the one-China policy and principles outlined in China-US joint communiques.

"The US should ... cut off official interactions and military ties with Taiwan, stop arms sales to Taiwan and take concrete actions to fulfill its commitment of not supporting 'Taiwan independence,'" he stressed.

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Taiwan Different From Ukraine, US Misleading Public by Drawing Parallel - Chinese Embassy

WASHINGTON, April 28 (Sputnik) - The Taiwan issue is absolutely different from Ukraine, and American officials are misleading people by drawing parallels between the two, the Chinese Embassy in Washington told Sputnik on Friday.

"Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory and the Taiwan question is entirely China's internal affair. The Taiwan question and the Ukraine issue are different in nature and are not comparable at all," spokesperson Liu Pengyu said. The US and Taiwan have colluded with each other, and certain individual deliberately draws parallel between Taiwan and Ukraine despite

they are two fundamentally different issues. Their aim is to mislead the public and profit from that."

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US Inflation Up 6.6% in Year to March in Key Gauge Watched by Fed - Commerce Dept.
(Adds details and context in paras 3-13)

WASHINGTON, April 29 (Sputnik) - The Personal Consumption Expenditure (PCE) Index, a US inflation indicator closely followed by the Federal Reserve, grew 6.6% in the year to March, keeping to its fastest expansion in four decades, data from the Commerce Department showed on Friday.

The so-called core PCE Index, stripped of food and energy prices, however, rose by a slower 5.2% in the 12 months to March after a 5.4% growth in the year to February, the data showed. That was the fastest growth since 1983.

"Energy prices increased 33.9 percent while food prices increased 9.2 percent," the department said in a news release that explained the higher headline inflation number.

The Federal Reserve sees the PCE index as the most accurate measure of price pressures in the United States. Economists familiar with the index say it provides granularity that even takes into account consumer substitution of cheaper goods for more expensive ones, say ground beef for filet mignon or frozen spinach for fresh ones.

The central bank is moving to raise interest rates rapidly to try to cool off inflation, but economists say it will take time to suppress the runaway growth in prices.

Economists also caution that the economy could go into recession if rates rise too much, too fast.

After a 3.5% contraction in 2020 gross domestic product forced by the coronavirus crisis, the US economy grew by 5.7% in 2021 — the biggest calendar-year growth since 1984.

But inflation grew even faster, with the PCE Index rising 5.8% for all of last year, the largest annual increase since July 1982.

Inflationary pressure continued in the first quarter of 2022, where GDP fell by 1.4%. If it contracts in the second quarter as well, the United States would automatically be in recession. The last time the economy slipped into recession — which is technically defined as two straight quarters of negative growth — was in the aftermath of the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak.

After slashing US interest rates to nearly zero at the height of the coronavirus outbreak, the Federal Reserve's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) approved the first pandemic-era rate hike on March 16, raising rates by 25 basis points. That brought key lending rates to between 0.25% and 0.5%.

Many FOMC members have concluded since that the March hike was too tame to rein in inflation galloping at 40-year highs. They are pushing for "one to two" 50-basis point hikes in the near term to get a better grip on fighting inflation. Expectations are that the FOMC meeting on May 3-4 will agree on the first of such 50 bps hikes.

All in, the FOMC members are considering as many as seven rate hikes this year and expect monetary tightening to continue into 2023 if the inflation does not drop to desired levels.

