

**1/26/23 Thursday**

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'First Come the Tanks, Then Come the Nukes': Trump Calls on Biden to End 'Crazy' Ukraine Conflict

By - Fantine Gardinier

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on Thursday that NATO states sending weapons to Ukraine was “perceived as direct involvement in the conflict” by Moscow, rather than being separate from it.

In a post on his Truth Social platform on Thursday, former US President Donald Trump called on US President Joe Biden to end “this crazy war” in Ukraine before it leads to the use of nuclear weapons.

“First come the tanks, then come the nukes. Get this crazy war ended, now. So easy to do,” Trump said.

The former US leader was referring to Biden’s [decision earlier this week](#) to ship nearly three dozen [M1 Abrams main battle tanks](#) to Ukraine as Poland agreed to send its own Leopard 2 tanks as well. Several NATO allies have also recently announced plans to send other light armored vehicles to Ukraine, too.

Trump has railed against the dangers posed by US support for Ukraine since February 2022, when Russia launched its special operation in Ukraine and NATO rushed to prop up the Ukrainian military. He’s far from being alone in that, as critics from across the political spectrum and from many NATO states have warned of a variety of dangerous consequences from the conflict, ranging from fuel shortages to the outbreak of thermonuclear war.

Biden has shown his awareness of the dangers of nuclear war, warning of the risk of “Armageddon,” but has done so in a way that suggests Russian President Vladimir Putin was threatening to use nuclear weapons.

In fact, Putin said Russian nuclear forces had been placed on high alert [due to “aggressive” statements](#) by NATO about Russia paying a “severe price” for the operation, and he said nuclear war [can have no winners](#) and should never be invoked.

Biden has also ignored several attempts by Moscow to begin negotiations to end the conflict in Ukraine and advised Kiev to abstain from talks as well, pinning their consideration on Russia’s withdrawal from Russian-speaking regions that voted to leave Ukraine and join the Russian Federation.

Path to Peace

Moscow launched the operation in February 2022 with the aim of neutralizing the country as a potential base for NATO weapons. The operation came after months of failed talks in which Washington diplomats said Russia’s security red lines were “non-starters,” and Kiev dramatically ramped up its attacks on rebels in the Russian-speaking Donbass region, where neo-Nazi formations had pushed a war on Russophone Ukrainians since 2014 that had killed nearly 20,000 people by that time.

Moscow now demands Kiev de-Nazify its government and armed forces and declare itself a neutral state, giving up the goal of joining the NATO alliance that is presently written into its constitution.

#### Trump's Record on Escalation

Ironically, when Trump was president, he was often [accused by critics](#) of attempting to start World War 3, variously with Iran, China, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). In August 2017, amid a tense showdown with US ally South Korea, Trump threatened the socialist state with "fire and fury like the world has never seen" if it continued to make threats against the US. Weeks later, Pyongyang tested its first thermonuclear weapon, and Trump soon [proposed creating](#) the W76-2 "micro-nuke," which analysts warned was extremely dangerous because it lowered the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons.

Despite the Russiagate accusations of collusion with Moscow, Trump was no less hostile toward Russia, either. During his tenure, the Pentagon and National Security Council declared a shift in the US' strategic orientation away from the War on Terror and toward what it described as "[great power competition](#)" with Russia and China.

Trump also oversaw the continued basing of US forces along Russia's western flank, weapons sales to Ukraine, and pushed ahead plans for the Aegis Ashore base in [Redzikowo, Poland](#), and the overhaul of a similar base in Deveselu, Romania, which are capable of firing offensive strike missiles deep into Russia. He also signed the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), a law passed by the Democrat-controlled Congress that punishes states for buying advanced military equipment from Russia and China, among other makers. The former president recently [reestablished control](#) over his accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, following their suspension after the January 6, 2021, insurrection by his followers. He created the Truth Social platform in response to their suspension, but has so far not used his Twitter account since it was reactivated last October.

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Ghost Campaign: Biden Hosting Big-Donor Fundraisers Without Announcing 2024 Candidacy Yet

By - Fantine Gardinier

The Democratic National Committee (DNC) is hosting several big-donor fundraisers in the coming weeks to raise money for 2024 campaigns, with US President Joe Biden as their star guest. However, the 80-year-old leader has yet to announce his own bid to stay in office. Reports in US media on Thursday indicated the DNC would hold fundraisers for wealthy donors in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and New York City in the coming weeks to coincide with visits by Biden to those cities. Vice President Kamala Harris is also expected to attend DNC fundraisers in the same cities.

One source was quoted in US media as saying these are "indeed the typical actions of a president preparing to run for reelection."

"We have been told to expect fundraising to ramp up in the March and April time frame," a donor who backed Biden in the 2020 election was quoted as saying.

The DNC aims to raise at least \$500 million for Biden, who became the first candidate in US history to raise \$1 billion during his ultimately-successful presidential campaign in 2020. That number included \$580 million raised for Biden by outside groups. In addition, Democrats are likely to face tough challenges in a number of congressional districts, thanks to a mix of redrawn districts and Biden's low approval rating.

In the 2022 midterms last November, Democrats lost nine key seats in the House, resulting in a narrow Republican majority. However, Democrats marked this as a victory, seeing as a "red wave" of GOP victories had been anticipated by both sides. Democrats also gained a Senate seat - before Arizona Senator Kyrsten Sinema announced her departure from the party and registration as an Independent in December.

For the 2024 race, so far only former US President Donald Trump has formally [announced his candidacy](#), doing so at a time so close to the midterms that Republicans argued it would hurt their party. In many ways, Trump [never stopped campaigning](#) after his 2020 election loss to Biden, incorporating into his rallies his claims that Biden had stolen the election from him. However, Biden has [repeatedly hinted](#) at a 2024 run, which would make him the oldest sitting president to seek reelection. According to some reports, he may do so after the State of the Union Address on February 7.

Other figures widely expected to declare their candidacies include former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis - both Republicans. Conservative US media has indicated its clear [preference for DeSantis](#) over Trump, and opinion polls of US voters reflect a similar attitude.

One poll [held by WPA Intelligence](#) in early January found that if the election were tomorrow, Biden would handily defeat Trump, but if Biden ran against DeSantis, he would lose.

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DOJ Was Reportedly Ready to Use Search Warrant to Get Classified Files From Biden's Delaware Home

By - Fantine Gardinier

If US President Joe Biden didn't agree to cooperate voluntarily with a search of his Delaware home for classified files, the US Department of Justice was prepared to obtain a search warrant in order to do so, according to reports in US media on Thursday.

The six files [found on January 21](#) in Biden's Wilmington, Delaware, family home were not the first found in Biden's custody in recent months. Days earlier, Biden aides found classified documents in filing cabinets in the Biden family home's garage, and several batches of files have been found in Biden's personal files in offices he used while a professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

The [earlier searches](#) had been entrusted to Biden's lawyers, but when it came to the 13-hour search of the Biden home, the DOJ turned to the FBI, its top federal law enforcement agency.

While some of the documents date to the time Biden was vice president, from 2009 until 2017, others came from the span of time Biden was a US senator, from 1973 until 2009. In all, it seems several dozen documents were found, although the White House has been [evasive and dismissive](#) of the details of the situation.

Last August, the FBI was also used to carry out a [search-and-seizure warrant](#) for classified files at Mar-a-Lago, the Florida estate of former US President Donald Trump. The raid recovered hundreds of classified files, also improperly stored, which the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) had been trying to recover for months.

Trump has called the differences between the DOJ's treatment of Biden and himself unfair, and accused the FBI of being used as a political weapon to stop him from returning to office in 2024. Attorney General Merrick Garland has pushed back on those accusations, saying earlier this week that the DOJ has "a set of norms and practices," including "that we do not have different rules for Democrats or Republicans, different rules for the powerful or powerless, different rules for the rich or poor."

"We apply the facts and the law in each case in a neutral and nonpartisan manner," he added. "That is what we always do, and that is what we do in the matters you are referring to."

Notably, the fact that Biden has so far cooperated with the DOJ's investigation, whereas Trump has not, might also explain their different experiences. The DOJ has not announced charges against either man.

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Air Raid Sirens Sound in Southern Israel, IDF Confirms Two Rockets Intercepted Over Ashkelon  
By - Fantine Gardinier

Ten Palestinians, including several children, were reportedly killed by Israeli soldiers during a raid in the West Bank city of Jenin on Thursday. The violence comes amid a deadly month in which 29 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces.

Air raid sirens were reported as sounding in southern Israel north of the Gaza Strip at around midnight on Friday. The sirens were reported in Zikim, Kibbutz Karmia, and the city of Ashkelon, all along the Mediterranean coast.

Video posted online purported to show interceptions of several rockets by the Iron Dome air defense system over Ashkelon.

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) said on Twitter in a brief statement that the siren reports were "under review." They later confirmed the launches of two rockets from the Gaza Strip as well as their intercept.

Hamis Vows 'Response' to Deadly Jenin Raid

Tensions have risen in Israel and the Palestinian territories since the Israeli elections in November in which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu returned to power at the head of a [coalition of far-right parties](#). Anti-Arab extremists have been given prominent places in the new Israeli government, arousing fears of greater violence against Palestinians, including [evictions and annexations](#) in the West Bank.

The latest violence came earlier on Thursday as the IDF and Shin Bet carried out a joint operation in the Jenin refugee camp in the northern West Bank. The Israelis said they were there to try and capture three members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad; however, the raid resulted in the [deaths of ten Palestinians](#), including an elderly woman and two children. They were the latest of at least 29 deaths at the hands of Israeli authorities this month.

In response to the killings, Saleh al-Arouri, the deputy leader of Hamas, vowed that Israel “will pay the price for the Jenin massacre.”

“Our resistance will not break, and our response will come soon,” he said.

IDF chief Herzi Halevi has ordered the army to “increase preparedness and continue counter[terrorism] activities as needed.”

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Blinken Convinced Biden to Give Ukraine Tanks to Conceal NATO Rift Over Military Aid, Reports Say

By - Fantine Gardinier

The US and its European allies have pledged a variety of armored vehicles to Kiev in recent weeks, as the far-right government begins to lose ground to Russian forces once more amid a new offensive in the Donbass.

Both US President Joe Biden and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin were skeptical about sending main battle tanks to Ukraine, but both were convinced to assent after Secretary of State Antony Blinken explained it was necessary to heal a rift opening in the NATO alliance, reports in US media said on Thursday.

According to the reports, Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley both believed that giving Ukraine M-1 Abrams tanks, which are expensive and hard to operate and maintain, would not be a net positive for their situation on the battlefield. Public comments by Austin in recent weeks support that narrative, with [him saying recently](#) that the administration wants to focus on what Kiev “needs to be successful right now” when asked if the US would send Abrams tanks.

However, Kiev didn’t just ask the US for tanks, it asked other NATO powers as well, and Germany has been wracked with debate about whether to okay other nations to send Kiev some of their [Leopard 2 main battle tanks](#). Tensions rose even higher when Poland said it was willing to give Ukraine tanks, but Germany, which made them and has the right of refusal on their transfer, dragged its feet.

According to US media reports, Blinken told Austin and Milley that promising to give Ukraine Abrams tanks would force Berlin’s hand and [heal the growing rift](#) in the alliance. They, in turn, advised Biden to do so, and [Biden followed suit](#).

However, Kiev won't be getting the top-of-the-line Abrams model. According to Thursday media reports, while Kiev will get 31 of the M1A2 Abrams tanks, they won't be equipped with the US Army's best armor: a secret mix of materials that includes depleted uranium and is banned by Congress from being exported to other nations.

Similar divisions arose during tense talks prior to the start of the conflict in February 2022, as the US refused to take Russian demands seriously, but NATO allies in Europe preferred negotiations with Moscow. After the conflict started, tensions over a boycott of Russian energy exports have followed a similar pattern, with the US better able to weather their losses than European buyers.

While the Leopard 2 tanks could [arrive by the Spring](#), the Abrams tanks won't be shipped out for nearly a year, according to reports, seriously watering down the importance of Biden's pledge. A similar dynamic played out with the Patriot air defense system promised to Kiev last month, with the US saying it would take several months to train Ukrainian crews to operate them.

Earlier in the conflict, NATO had attempted to avoid such a problem by sending Ukraine some of the same Soviet-made equipment that its Eastern European members used, such as Slovakia and Poland, but their limited numbers have largely run out as the conflict enters its twelfth month.

Russia launched the special operation in Ukraine in February 2022 after months of attempts at negotiations with Kiev and NATO over Moscow's security red lines failed. Moscow has demanded Ukraine declare itself a neutral state, give up its attempts to join NATO, and refuse to host NATO weapons on its soil. It has also called on Kiev to remove the neo-Nazi elements of its government and armed forces, which have long targeted Russophone Ukrainians with violence and discrimination.

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#### Israeli, Palestinian Forces Exchange Barrage of Fire Amid Latest Spike in Tension

Hours earlier, the Israeli Iron Dome missile defense system was triggered after two rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip toward the southern Israeli city of Ashkelon. The latest spike in tension comes after 10 Palestinians were reportedly killed by Israeli troops during a raid in Jenin, a city in the West Bank.

A barrage of air raid sirens sounded off across southern Israel for the second time overnight Friday, mere moments after Israeli forces carried out counterstrikes against Palestinian sites in the Gaza Strip.

Sirens were reported in the towns of Nir Oz, Ein Habesor and Magen after bombing raids by Israeli authorities were conducted at about 3:30 a.m. local time.

Reports of sustained injuries have not yet surfaced.

Video footage documenting strikes from Israeli officials, the subsequent response from Palestinian forces and Iron Dome activity has since surfaced across social media.

Shortly before the latest spate of air raid sirens were triggered, Israeli military officials reported their retaliatory strikes were being conducted against training sites used by "militant" Palestinian groups.

It's been reported Israeli forces opted to use drone technology to carry out two strikes against target sites in Gaza.

However, additional strikes by Israel were said to have been issued by Israeli jets. A translated message issued by the Israel Defense Forces indicated fighter jets had also attacked an underground military rocket production base.

Although the Israel's Iron Dome system intercepted the majority of projectiles launched from Gaza, Israeli military officials did indicate that one missile had landed in an open area. Another was said to have fallen within the parameters of the Gaza Strip.

Israel's retaliatory strikes had been widely anticipated after two rockets were intercepted in the southern Israeli city of Ashkelon at about midnight.

Regional tensions have remained at a high for some time, with matters being more recently elevated after a deadly IDF raid in Jenin, which prompted the death of 10 Palestinians, including an elderly woman and two children. The raid has been considered the deadliest operation in the West Bank in years.

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Hawley Introduces 'PELOSI' Act to Ban Congressional Stock Trading  
By - Ian DeMartino

According to a report by the New York Times, from 2019 to 2021, 183 representatives and senators reported trades by themselves or an immediate family member. More than half included trades that the Times determined may have been a conflict of interest.

Senator Josh Hawley, a Republican from Missouri, recently [introduced legislation](#) that would ban lawmakers and their spouses from holding, purchasing, and selling stocks.

The Preventing Elected Leaders from Owning Securities and Investments Act, or PELOSI act, is a clear dig at the former Speaker of the House and California Democratic Rep. Nancy Pelosi. Pelosi and her husband, Paul, have been criticized for their wealth, which ballooned between 2007 and 2020, partially due to their investments in technology companies.

"For too long, politicians in Washington have taken advantage of the economic system they write the rules for, turning profits for themselves at the expense of the American people," Hawley said in a statement. "As members of Congress, both senators and representatives are tasked with providing oversight of the same companies they invest in, yet they continually buy and sell stocks, outperforming the market time and again."

Currently, lawmakers are allowed to trade stocks and securities as long as they do not use inside information to make the trades and disclose any trades over \$1,000 made by them or immediate family members within 45 days.

But enforcing that rule has proven difficult. It is nearly impossible to prove a lawmaker used insider information before executing a trade and even when caught, the penalty is insignificant, with the standard penalty amounting to a paltry \$200.

The new bill is intended to give lawmakers six months to divest their portfolios or put them into a blind trust while they serve in office.

The issue gained attention after it was revealed several senators, including Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and former Sens. Richard Burr (R-NC), Jim Inhofe (R-OK), and Kelly Loeffler (R-GA) - or

their spouses - unloaded large amounts of stocks and securities after being briefed about the COVID-19 pandemic that had yet to widely spread through the US.

The Department of Justice looked into the trades and investigated Burr further, but ultimately did not pursue charges against any of the lawmakers, with all four denying any wrongdoing.

Last year, a bipartisan bill was introduced to ban stock trading by lawmakers and their spouses. Pelosi initially scoffed at the idea of the ban, saying lawmakers should be allowed to participate in the “free market economy.”

After receiving criticism for those comments, Pelosi eventually relented and signaled she would support the bill, but 2022 came and went and the former House speaker never brought the bill to the floor for a vote. In November, Republicans captured the House of Representatives, electing House Speaker Kevin McCarthy to Pelosi’s old post.

It will be up to McCarthy to decide which, if any, of the stock trading ban bills make it to the House floor. He cannot push the PELOSI Act forward as it is a Senate bill and Democrats still hold the Senate with a slight majority.

The third version of the 2022 bill, the Transparent Representation Upholding Service and Trust in Congress Act was introduced by Reps. Abigail Spanberger (D-VA) and Chip Roy (R-Texas) earlier this year. Another stock ban bill was introduced to the Senate earlier this year by Sens. Jon Ossoff (D-GA) and Mark Kelly (D-AZ).

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MTG Reportedly Looking to Serve as Trump's Running Mate in 2024 Election Bid  
By - Ian DeMartino

The firebrand representative has long been a darling of the far-right but has been making inroads with the establishment wing of the Republican Party recently.

US Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) wants to be former US President Donald Trump’s running mate in 2024, according to people who have talked to her about her plans.

“This is no shrinking violet, she’s ambitious — she’s not shy about that, nor should she be,” said former top Trump aide Steve Bannon on his War Room podcast. “She sees herself on the short list for Trump’s VP.”

Another source who spoke on the condition of anonymity to [NBC News](#) told the outlet that Greene’s “whole vision is to be vice president.”

The source further adds that Greene has been attempting to reposition herself as someone who can work with both the establishment and far-right wings of the Republican party. The source says those moves were made to make her more palpable as a running mate.

Greene surprised many when she supported Kevin McCarthy’s bid to become House speaker, as most expected her to side with the House Freedom Caucus, which had been trying to block McCarthy’s speakership.

After McCarthy was elected, he appointed Greene to two high-profile legislative committee assignments: Homeland Security and Oversight and Accountability. The second will allow her to

participate in investigations of the Biden administration. She was also appointed to the panel that will investigate the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Trump has had a falling out with his previous running mate and Vice President Mike Pence after Pence refused to go along with Trump's attempts to overturn the 2020 presidential election.

Trump, who announced his third presidential bid in November, has not hinted who he is leaning towards as a running mate should he secure the nomination, but Pence has not been thought to be among the potential candidates.

Trump remains the favorite in national GOP polls, but Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has been gaining momentum lately.

Adding to Greene's credentials is that she has proven to be an effective fundraiser. During the 2022 midterm election cycle, Greene raised a little under \$12.5 million, putting her in the top ten of all 2022 candidates in the House.

But Greene has turned off some, even in her party, largely due to statements she made prior to running for office. Greene has shown a penchant for promoting some of the wildest conspiracy theories on the internet, including an antisemitic theory that space lasers, supposedly funded by the Rothschilds, started wildfires in California in 2018.

She has also promoted the so-called "QAnon" conspiracy theory that Democratic politicians are covering up and participating in a global pedophile ring.

Earlier this month, Greene admitted she had been "sucked into" conspiracies by things she read on the internet, and that she did not campaign on those ideas.

Also in 2018, before running for office, Greene said in a Facebook\* post that Rep. Nancy Pelosi was guilty of treason, and noted that treason is "punishable by death." Critics said the post was inciting violence against the former House speaker.

Because of those and other comments, the House voted to remove Greene from her committee assignments in 2021. Eleven Republicans joined every House Democrat in voting for Greene to be censured. McCarthy, who at the time was the House minority leader, fought against holding the vote and voted in support of Greene.

That may have been the start of a political alliance between McCarthy and Greene.

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Weapon Manufacturers Record Skyrocketing Profits From US Arm Sales in 2022

By - Ian DeMartino

War has always been big business in the United States. According to the seminal anti-war essay "War is a Racket," gunpowder manufacturer Du Ponts saw their profits increase by more than 950% during The Great War.

US arms sales to other countries skyrocketed in 2022, providing a tidy sum of profits for weapon manufacturers, according to [data](#) released by the State Department on Wednesday.

US weapon sales to other countries, largely driven by NATO's response to Russia's special military operation in Ukraine and increased tensions in Asia, jumped from \$35.8 billion in 2021 to \$51.9 billion in 2022.

Direct weapon sales from US-based weapon manufacturers [also saw](#) a massive increase, jumping from \$103.4 billion in 2021 to \$153.7 billion in 2022.

In Europe, the largest purchasers include Germany, which ordered 35 F-35 Joint Strike Fighter airplanes for \$8.4 billion, and Poland, which spent \$6 billion on 250 M1 Abrams tanks.

The United Kingdom, Spain, and new NATO member Bulgaria also made significant purchases in 2022.

Meanwhile, tensions in Asia over Taiwan and competing claims in the South China Sea have also been a boon for weapon manufacturers. Significant weapon sales in the area include \$13.9 billion from Indonesia for 36 F-15ID fighter jets and a \$1.95 billion purchase from Australia for 40 Black Hawk helicopters and other equipment. South Korea and Japan also made significant military purchases, totaling \$790 million and \$588 million respectively.

The Biden administration also approved a \$1.1 billion weapons package for Taiwan in an effort to deter China from militarily seizing the island.

The Middle East, always a reliable profit center for military contractors has continued to be so. The two countries pushing the brutal war in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have asked for \$3 billion and \$2.2 billion in military weapons and equipment from the United States respectively.

During the 2020 campaign, the Biden administration pledged to stop sending weapons to Saudi Arabia because of its war in Yemen.

Unsurprisingly, this has led to significant [revenue gains](#) by weapon manufacturers.

Revenue for Lockheed Martin, which develops the F-16, F-22, and F-35 fighter jets rose 7.13% to \$19 billion in the fourth quarter of 2022. Northrop Grumman, which also makes F-35 fighter jets, is expected to report 11.8% revenue growth compared to fourth quarter earnings when it issues its financial reports on Thursday.

Meanwhile, Raytheon, the maker of the Patriot Air Defense System the Biden administration recently announced it will supply Ukraine with, saw its Q4 profit rise of nearly 18% compared to last year.

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National Archives Asks Ex-Presidents, VPs to Fork Over Any Classified Docs in Their Personal Records

By - Ian DeMartino

The Department of Justice is investigating how former President Donald Trump and US President Joe Biden handled classified documents after reports recently revealed Biden also failed to follow security protocols on protected records.

The National Archives has sent letters to living former presidents and vice presidents asking them to verify they are not holding onto classified documents that should have been transferred to the department at the end of their respective terms in office.

While it has not been reported who the letters were sent to, they were likely sent to former Presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, as well as former Vice Presidents Dick Cheney, Al Gore and Dan Quayle.

Former President Jimmy Carter was likely not contacted because he left office on January 20, 1981, the same day the Presidential Records Act went into effect.

The letters come after classified documents were found in the home of President Biden and at a think tank associated with the president. The documents come from Biden's time as vice president under the Obama administration. Earlier this week, classified documents were also found at Pence's Indiana home.

Both discoveries came months after the FBI seized more than 100 classified documents from former President Trump's Mar-a-Lago, Florida, estate last summer. The raid on the former president's home was the result of a nearly yearlong investigation. Prior to the raid, Trump turned over nearly 200 other classified documents.

Under the Presidential Records Act, the Archives takes ownership of presidential papers as soon as they leave office. Presidents and vice presidents are allowed to take personal items but the hundreds or thousands of classified documents are supposed to be turned over to the Archives immediately.

A source told the [Washington Post](#) that all classified records from Obama's time in office were turned over when he left the White House. The other former presidents and vice presidents have not commented on the letters.

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Murder in the US: Everything to Know About Tyre Nichols Case Before Release of Body Cam Footage

By - Ian DeMartino

On Thursday, five former Memphis police officers were charged with murder and other crimes related to the beating death of 29-year-old Tyre Nichols. On Friday, body cam footage of the beating and Nichols' arrest will be released to the public.

Tadarrius Bean, Demetrius Haley, Emmitt Martin III, Desmond Mills Jr., and Justin Smith have all been charged with the same crimes, including second-degree murder, aggravated assault, aggravated kidnapping, official misconduct, and official oppression. The five former officers, like Nichols, are Black. All five have also been fired from the Memphis Police Department.

What Led to This?

On January 7, police pulled Nichols over for alleged reckless driving. Police say Nichols fled the scene, causing the officers to chase him which then led to another "confrontation." At that time, police say Nichols complained about shortness of breath and was brought to a hospital in critical condition. He died on January 10.

Nichols' family says he died of a heart attack and kidney failure that they argue was brought on by the confrontation with police officers. Authorities have not issued a cause of death, saying only that Nichols had a "medical emergency."

An independent autopsy, the preliminary results of which were released by the family's lawyers on Thursday, found that Nichols "suffered extensive bleeding caused by a severe beating." Body camera footage of the confrontation has been shown to city officials and Nichols' family and attorneys. The footage will not be released to the public until Friday evening. According to one of the family's attorneys, Nichols was beaten, shocked with a Taser, pepper sprayed, and restrained during his arrest. The attorney noted that Nichols could be heard crying out for his mother in the video.

City officials are not denying that the video is brutal and say it does not represent the city or its police department. Police Chief Cerelyn Davis said in a video statement that the beating by officers was "heinous, reckless and inhumane."

Shelby County District Attorney Steve Mulroy said all five officers played a role in Nichols' death. "The actions of all of them resulted in the death of Tyre Nichols," Mulroy told reporters. "They are all responsible."

An internal investigation found the officers used excessive force and failed to intervene or provide help, breaking department policy. They were fired from the department last week. Two members of the Memphis Fire Department have also been relieved of duty while an internal investigation takes place. A spokesperson for the department said the two individuals were involved in the initial patient care of Nichols but declined to provide further details.

#### Family and Community Response

Nichols' mother, RowVaugh Wells, said she could not watch the video of Nichols' beating. "When I walked in that room and sat there and heard his voice, that just did something to me and I had to get out. I've already seen what they did to him. I don't need to see how they did it," she said.

Nichols' stepfather, Rodney Wells, previously told reporters that the family would not accept anything less than a first-degree murder charge. The family has backed off that since, with one of their lawyers, Ben Crump, saying the charges the officers received were encouraging. "That these five officers are being held criminally accountable for their deadly and brutal actions gives us hope as we continue to push for justice for Tyre," Crump said at a press conference. Another lawyer for the family, Antonio Romanucci, said Nichols was treated like a "human piñata for those police officers." The comment caused Nichols' mother to break into tears during a news conference.

"The brutality of it all, that's the most jarring part," Rodney Wells said at a news conference Monday afternoon after seeing the body camera footage. "It was just so brutal. He didn't deserve that."

Memphis City Council Member Martavius Jones said police training in the city needs to be reevaluated. "This Black man died at the hands of other Black men that were wearing blue," Jones said in an interview with CBS News. "Blue is the only color that matters here."

Protests are expected when the body camera footage is released. Police Chief Davis is asking those who protest to remain peaceful. "I expect our citizens to exercise their First Amendment right to protest, to demand action and results," she said at the same press conference where she condemned the former officers' actions. "But we need to ensure our community is safe in this process. None of this is a calling card for inciting violence or destruction on our community or our citizens."

Nichols' family is also asking the community to remain peaceful after the footage is released.

Meanwhile, NAACP President Derrick Johnson released a [statement](#), demanding Congress address continued police violence.

“If anyone needs to see this video, it’s every single leader in Congress. Sit in your comfy leather chair, watch the video when it is released, and tell us what else you need to vote ‘yes’ on police reform. By failing to write a piece of legislation, you’re writing another obituary. By failing to pass the legislation, you’re passing on your sworn duty to protect the people,” the statement reads. “We know just how much all of you will be thinking and praying upon the release of the video, you don’t need to mention it. Instead, tell us what you’re going to do about it.”

Who Was Tyre Nichols?

Twenty-nine years old and a father to a four-year-old son, Tyre Nichols worked the afternoon to evening shift at FedEx with his stepfather. His family says he and his stepfather would often return to his mother’s home during their lunch break around 7 p.m. An avid photographer and skateboarder, Nichols would often go to nearby Shelby Farms to pursue his passions. His mother says that he suffered from Crohn’s disease and was under 145 pounds. She added that he had her name tattooed on his arm. “That made me proud,” she said. “Most kids don’t put their mom’s name. My son was a beautiful soul.”

According to the family’s lawyers, Nichols can be heard in the video of his confrontation with police crying out for his mother, who lived just 100 yards from where police beat him. They believe those were his last words.

“You should not be killed because of a simple traffic stop,” said Crump.

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Raids, Drone Strikes & Rockets: The IDF’s Jenin Operation and Its Aftermath  
By - Ian DeMartino

Ten Palestinians were killed on Thursday during raids on a refugee camp in the city of Jenin, including a 61-year-old woman. It was the deadliest attack on the West Bank in two decades, according to Palestinian officials. Nine were killed in the morning hours of Thursday and the tenth during a subsequent raid on Thursday night.

In response, two rockets were fired from Gaza on Friday morning. The rockets were intercepted by Israel’s Iron Dome missile defense system and no casualties or injuries were reported.

Responding to that attack, Israel [launched drone strikes](#) at Palestinian sites in the Gaza strip. No reports have yet surfaced of injuries or casualties from either of those attacks.

Israel claims the strikes were targeting militant training areas in Gaza.

The Raid

The Jenin raid that started the recent escalation of hostilities was the deadliest single event in the West Bank in at least 20 years, according to Palestinian officials. Nine of the Palestinians were killed in the morning on Thursday with the tenth being killed on Thursday night.

One of the slain was a 61-year-old woman and another is said to be a civilian. Militant groups claimed the other seven Palestinians who were killed during the initial raid. It is unclear at this

time if the individual killed on Thursday night was a militant or a civilian. Israel said it was attempting to arrest militants it claims were planning “major attacks” against Israel. The raid lasted about five hours, and the Palestinian Authority (PA) claims that Israeli forces raided the government hospital in Jenin and fired tear gas into the pediatric ward. However, Israel denies that it attacked the hospital. In addition to the dead, at least 20 more Palestinians were injured by gunfire or tear gas inhalation, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry.

#### Reactions

The PA called the attack “a massacre” and said it would add it to the list of complaints it has filed with the UN International Criminal Court. PA President Mahmoud Abbas declared a three-day mourning period.

The PA has said it will suspend its security cooperation with Israel, an already controversial practice that included the PA giving intel on suspected militants to the Israeli government. Meanwhile, the governments of Saudi Arabia and Iran strongly condemned the raid, while the US, EU, and UN called for de-escalation and dialog between the two sides.

Benjamin Netanyahu, who recently regained power as the head of a new far-right administration in Israel, said that Israel is not looking to escalate the situation but is prepared nonetheless. “Netanyahu made it clear that Israel is not looking to escalate,” the Israeli government said in a statement published in The Times of Israel. “But [Netanyahu] instructed the security forces to prepare for any scenario in the various arenas to ensure the safety of Israeli citizens.”

Israeli parliament member Almog Cohen praised the raid in a highly-criticized tweet. “Nice and professional work by the fighters in Jenin, keep killing them,” the tweet read, finishing with a flexing emoji.

Meanwhile, Palestinians on the streets called the action a crime.

“What happened to [the Palestinians killed in the Jenin raid] is a crime against humanity,” Osama Mansour, 55, a local activist in Jenin, told [Middle East Eye](#). “It’s a multi-faced crime that not only includes killing our children but attacking civilians and destroying Palestinian property.”

#### Background

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been going on at least since before Israel was formed in 1948, which led to the first Arab-Israeli war. While Israel won that war with significant backing from the West, the conflict has been actively brewing under the surface ever since, frequently boiling over into violence for nearly three-quarters of a century.

Jenin has been the site of significant events in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before. In 2002, during the second intifada, or Palestinian uprising, Israel launched a full-scale incursion into the area, which became known as the Battle of Jenin. At least 52 Palestinian militants and civilians were killed, along with 23 Israeli soldiers.

The conflict more recently saw a severe uptick in violence and destruction in May 2021, when for just over two weeks both sides carried out rocket strikes until a ceasefire had been implemented.

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Trumpian Pulpit - Cartoon  
By - Ted Rall

Former President Donald Trump, apparently the new voice of reason in American politics, has called for an end to the conflict in Ukraine. The former reality TV star claimed that "first come the tanks, then come the nukes," warning against the continued escalation between the world's two largest nuclear powers.

Earlier this week, both [Germany](#) and the [United States](#) announced they would be sending tanks to Ukraine, a change from previous policy.

The bully pulpit references an unofficial power held by the president. By speaking directly to the American people, the president wields the power to sway public opinion on a variety of issues and can use that to advance their agenda. While Biden has yet to prove he can employ the bully pulpit effectively, his predecessor utilized it frequently while in office and arguably still does today.

Of course, [Trump](#) was never taken seriously by the Democratic establishment, a miscalculation that has harmed them politically in the past.

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US Faces Rising Anti-Semitism But Youth Have Little Information About Holocaust - Veteran

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - The United States is facing rising anti-Semitism when the younger generations do not have enough information about the tragedy of the Holocaust, US World War II veteran Frank Cohn told Sputnik.

January 27 marks the Holocaust Remembrance Day. On this day in 1945, the Soviet Red Army liberated the Auschwitz concentration camp in Nazi-occupied Poland. Auschwitz was the largest of the Nazi concentration camps where 1.4 million people died - 1.1 million of them Jews - and became one of the main symbols of the Holocaust.

"The rise of anti-Semitism is extremely troubling. I had not expected this to climb so sharply," Cohn said.

Cohn, who is Jewish, was born in 1925 in Germany. After the Nazis came to power in the 1930s, Cohn said he faced outright discrimination together with the other Jews in the country. In 1938, Cohn said he emigrated to the United States but returned to his homeland during the war as a US Army soldier.

For many years, anti-Semitism was "very much hidden" in the United States but now it has become a serious issue, Cohn said.

"You have it even in our Congress. This is certainly not healthy and needs to be watched because if it really gets out-of-hand it is frightening where it all will end up," he said.

Cohn noted that younger Americans do not know enough about the Holocaust, adding that this is a big failure of the US education system.

"There are exceptions, of course, where some teachers took the initiative, and there are some states that have prescribed lessons about it. I am always ready to respond when asked to lecture about it and have had many on-site, as well as Zoom opportunities to do so," he said. Cohn pointed out that he could have written a book about the Holocaust given that 11 members of his extended family died during the war.

"I only knew two of them well enough to mourn them, one aunt and one uncle. The uncle had given me his gold pocket watch just before we were leaving and he told me that he was only lending it to me and that when he would come to the United States, I would have to return it to him. Did he guess his fate back in 1938? He obviously wanted me to have it and he did not survive. This conversation still disturbs me to this day," Cohn said.

The veteran noted that the Holocaust became a tragedy not only for the Jews, but for the entire world, including Germany itself, in addition to being a tragedy for him personally.

"You know, for such a long time I failed to look at a personal impact, only that we managed to escape and that was it. In recent years, I started to think of all the close shaves that I had and that, in so many ways, I could have been killed," he said.

Cohn said that the Nazi German secret police, the Gestapo, was looking for his father, who had to sell the family store to emigrate to the United States in 1938. Only by purchasing a first-class ticket on a ship were Cohn and his mother able to avoid problems with US authorities upon and after arriving in the United States.

"We did not know this, but 1st Class passengers, upon arrival in New York, were invited to exit straight onto the dock instead of an Ellis Island processing center (which my mother worried about during the whole trip), where it might have been discovered that my father was already in-country and we were refugees, not visitors," he said.

Cohn said, however unlikely it may sound, he did not hear during the war about the horrific atrocities in the Auschwitz concentration camp.

"I had no information about the systematic plan to gas methodically and thus kill all the Jews of Germany and in the occupied territories. I learned of the real horror only after I returned to the States, after the war in 1946," he added.

The Holocaust, or the Shoah, is the genocide of European Jews by Nazi Germany and its satellite states from the late 1930s until 1945 that resulted in the death of around six million Jews.

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Elon Musk Says Met With House Leaders McCarthy, Jeffries to Discuss Fairness on Twitter

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - Twitter CEO Elon Musk said he met with US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy and House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries to discuss ensuring Twitter is fair to both major political parties in the United States.

"Just met with [McCarthy and Jeffries] to discuss ensuring that this platform is fair to both parties," Musk said via Twitter on Thursday.

Musk acquired Twitter in a multibillion-dollar acquisition deal last year, vowing to bolster the platform's free speech policy and make it a more reliable source of information. Some Democrats have criticized Musk's ownership of Twitter, pointing toward ties to foreign investors from countries such as Saudi Arabia. Democrats have also called on Musk to address a purported rise in so-called hate speech on the platform - a claim that Musk has denied. However, recently released "Twitter Files" based on internal company information have revealed extensive interaction between Twitter and US government officials to censor certain news stories and boost military psychological operations accounts.

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US Army Orders \$656M In Worth of Black Hawk Combat Helicopters - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - Sikorsky has won a more than \$650 million US Army contract to build an unspecified additional number of UH-60M Black Hawk ground support helicopters, the Defense Department announced.

"Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin Company, Stratford, Connecticut, was awarded a \$656,774,666 modification ... contract for UH-60M aircraft," the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.

Work on the contract will be performed in Stratford, Connecticut, over the next four-and-a-half years with an estimated completion date of June 30, 2027, the release added.

The UH-60M version operated by the US military for conducting special operations is MH-60M, according to the release.

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Biden Calls for 'Peaceful Protest' After Memphis Ex-Officers Charged in Beating of Nichols

WASHINGTON, January 27, (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden called for peaceful protest and condemned acts of violence, particularly in the pursuit of justice, following the indictment of five officers involved in the death of Tyre Nichols, a 29-year-old Black man.

On Thursday, the five Memphis officers, who are all Black men, were indicted by a grand jury on charges ranging from second-degree murder to aggravated kidnapping.

"As Americans grieve, the Department of Justice conducts its investigation, and state authorities continue their work, I join Tyre's family in calling for peaceful protest. Outrage is understandable, but violence is never acceptable," Biden said in a statement on Thursday.

Biden also highlighted the growing need to build trust between law enforcement and the communities they are sworn to protect and serve, noting that real change happens when accountability systems exist for officers who violate their oaths.

"We also cannot ignore the fact that fatal encounters with law enforcement have disparately impacted Black and Brown people," Biden added.

Biden said he signed an order to ensure accountability after Congress failed to pass the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act.

Authorities said the bodycam footage surrounding the death of Nichols is expected to be publicly released on Friday. Major cities are preparing for the possibility of protests once the video, which has been described in brutal term by attorneys involved, is circulated to the public. Nichols died on January 10, three days after being beaten by the five officers during a traffic stop in Memphis, Tennessee.

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Biden Vows to 'Veto Everything' That Republicans Propose on US Tax Hikes

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said he would fight his Republican rivals' plans to tax all goods and services in the United States instead of income, saying such moves would destroy the US economy and the best jobs market in 50 years.

"Why in God's name would Americans give up the progress we made for the chaos they're suggesting? I don't get it," Biden said on Thursday. "I will not let that happen, not on my watch. I will veto everything they send."

A group of US House Republicans are pushing to eliminate most federal taxes, including those on income, and replace them with a federal sales tax in a plan that would also abolish the Internal Revenue Service.

Some tax experts say the so-called Fair Tax Act would not be so fair to working families, as it would further reward the wealthiest Americans.

While eliminating individual and corporate income taxes, capital gains, payroll taxes and estate taxes, the proposed 23% sales tax on goods and services would end up making the poorest Americans pay closer to 30% more on everyday purchases.

"This nation has gone through too much, we've come too far to let that happen," Biden said, pointing out the economic gains made by United States under the two years of his Democratic party leadership.

Biden made the remarks on the day when the US Commerce Department reported an annualized GDP growth of 2.9% in the fourth quarter of 2022 - higher than the 2.6% forecast by Wall Street economists despite being lower than the third quarter growth of 3.2%.

Data also showed US durable goods orders for December growing twice more than expected, with a 5.6% gain. Sales of new homes in the United States, a cornerstone of the economy, also rose in December after the Federal Reserve slowed its interest rate hikes for the first time last month after aggressive monetary tightening since June.

The US jobless rate fell to 3.5% in December, well below the 4% rate that the Fed identifies as "full employment."

"We created nearly 11 million jobs, including 750,000 manufacturing jobs... the unemployment rate is near record lowest for Black and Hispanic workers and the lowest ever recorded for people with disabilities," Biden said.

The Fair Tax Act was a Republican counteroffer to Democrats' calls for the two parties work together in raising the US debt limit to avoid the United States defaulting on its debt obligations while keeping the government running. The Democrats kept control of the Senate in the November midterm elections but conceded control of the House of Representatives to the Republicans, allowing their rivals to make laws in the lower chamber of Congress.

The debt limit issue has become a yearly political fight in Congress between the two parties. A drawn-out struggle to raise the nation's debt ceiling in 2011 triggered a financial crisis that culminated in the credit rating agency Standard & Poors stripping the United States of its top triple-A credit status.

The Treasury Department announced last Thursday that it has taken extraordinary measures to avoid a debt default by temporarily suspending payments not immediately needed by federal retirement, disability and health benefit funds and channeling the money instead to other urgent services needed to keep the government running until June at least.

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Asteroid Flies 2,200 Miles Over Tip of South America But Spares Planet Earth - NASA

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - An asteroid the size of a truck is about to pass 2,200 miles above the surface of the Earth over the southern tip of South America without posing a threat to the planet, NASA and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) announced.

"On Thursday, a small near-Earth asteroid will have a very close encounter with our planet," the release stated. "Designated 2023 BU, the asteroid will zoom over the southern tip of South America at about 7:27 pm. EST only 2,200 miles [3,600 kilometers] above the planet's surface and well within the orbit of geosynchronous satellites," NASA and JPL said in a press release on Thursday.

Geosynchronous satellites orbit in fixed points 22,000 miles [36,000 kilometers] above the surface of the earth, the release said.

Asteroid 2023 BU is about the size of a box truck and is predicted to make one of the closest approaches by a near-Earth object ever recorded, the release said.

"There is no risk of the asteroid impacting Earth. But even if it did, this small asteroid – estimated to be 11.5 to 28 feet (3.5 to 8.5 meters) across - would turn into a fireball and largely disintegrate harmlessly in the atmosphere, with some of the bigger debris potentially falling as small meteorites," the release added.

The asteroid was discovered by amateur astronomer Gennadiy Borisov from his MARGO observatory in Nauchnyi, Crimea, on January 21, according to the release.

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US Kills Key IS Operative in Somalia Raid - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - The United States killed a key Islamic State (IS, ISIS, a terrorist group banned in Russia) operative during a nighttime assault in northern Somalia, a senior administration official said.

"Last night, on orders from the president [Joe Biden], the US military conducted an assault operation in northern Somalia that resulted in the death of Bilal al-Sudani, a key operative and facilitator for ISIS' global network, as well as a number of other ISIS operatives," the senior administration official said on Thursday.

The operation resulted in neither US nor civilian casualties, the official said. In addition to al-Sudani, the operation killed 10 other IS associates as well, the official said.

US forces were prepared to capture al-Sudani as part of the operation, but the assault ultimately resulted in his death, the official added.

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US Jury Convicts Extremist Who Killed 8 People in 2017 New York Truck Attack - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) - A US jury found Sayfullo Saipov guilty of 28 federal crimes for driving a truck into a crowd of people, killing eight, in New York City in 2017, the US Attorney's Office in the Southern District of New York said.

"A verdict has been reached in US v. Sayfullo Saipov. Saipov has been found guilty on all counts," the US Attorney's Office said in a statement on Thursday.

According to media reports, the US jury will review more evidence in the coming days to determine whether Saipov should face the death penalty or serve life in prison.

On October 31, 2017, Saipov drove a rented pickup truck into cyclists and runners on the Hudson River Park's bike path in South East Manhattan district, killing eight people and injuring 12 others before crashing into a school bus. The suspect was shot by a police officer, arrested and taken to hospital.

Saipov pleaded not guilty before the Federal Court of New York. All together he was charged with eight counts of murder, 12 counts of attempted homicide, assistance to the Islamic State (banned in Russia) and attempts to assist the terror group, as well as one count of violence and destruction of a motor vehicle resulting in death.

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## SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 27 (Sputnik) -

### US SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- \* The United States has imposed visa restrictions on 531 members of the Russian military in connection with the ongoing special operation in Ukraine, the US Department of the Treasury said on Thursday.
- \* The latest round of United States sanctions against Russia has targeted Tatarstan President Rustam Minnikhanov, the Treasury Department said.
- \* The United States designated Russian Industry and Trade Minister Denis Manturov as part of a new round of sanctions on Russian companies and officials, the Treasury Department said.
- \* The United States has imposed sanctions on six individuals and 12 entities in connection with Russia's military operation in Ukraine, the Treasury Department said.
- \* The United States has designated Russia's private military company Wagner Group as a significant transnational criminal organization, the Treasury Department said.
- \* The United States has targeted Vladimir Potanin and his companies in its latest round of sanctions, the State Department said.

### US AID TO UKRAINE

- \* US Abrams tanks will not be delivered to Ukraine in time for the spring offensive, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.
- \* US government auditors arrived in Kiev this week to conduct oversight of the military aid being provided to Ukraine as the Biden administration remains focused on preventing any weapons diversion, Nuland said.
- \* The US Defense Department does not have excess Abrams M1A2 main battle tanks to provide to Ukraine, which is why it will take months for the tanks to make it to the battlefield, Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said.

### CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

- \*The possible use of Russia's frozen EU assets is accompanied by complex legal issues, so the discussion of this issue continues in various EU institutions, a senior EU official said on Thursday.
- \* US President Joe Biden is considering a trip to Europe to coincide with the first anniversary of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, NBC reported.
- \* The United Kingdom plans to supply Challenger 2 tanks to Ukraine at the end of March, but the training of Ukrainian troops for the tanks' maintenance will begin next week on Monday, UK Deputy Defense Minister Alex Chalk said.
- \* Changing the status of Russia's military operation in Ukraine due to the West's decision to supply tanks to Kiev is not on the agenda, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- \* Training of the Ukrainian military involving Marder infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) will begin in Munster in the coming days, before the end of January, German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius said.

### US-RUSSIA ENGAGEMENTS

\* The United States would be ready to lift sanctions it has imposed on Russia if Moscow decides to negotiate seriously and pulls out its forces from Ukraine, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

\* Konstantin Gavrilov, the head of the Russian delegation at the military security and arms control talks in Vienna, said, commenting on the words of Nuland about the readiness to ease sanctions against Russia for the sake of serious negotiations and the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine, said that he did not see the readiness of the US diplomats in Vienna for negotiations.

\* The United States and NATO have approached a dangerous line on the way to a full-scale military conflict in Europe, Russia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the OSCE Maxim Buyakevich said.

\* It is strange for the United States to demand from the Russian Federation the resumption of inspections under the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) after Kiev tried to strike Russian long-range aviation facilities, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

#### EU RESTRICTIONS ON RUSSIAN OIL

\* The plans of the European Union to ban imports of refined oil products from Russia starting on February 5 are on track, a European Commission spokesperson said on Thursday.

\* The European Commission has sent a proposal on the price cap for Russian oil products to the EU countries, the discussion is scheduled for January 27, Reuters reported citing an unnamed EU official.

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Austin to Depart on January 29 for Trip to South Korea, Philippines - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin will head to South Korea and the Philippines on January 29 for meetings with government and military officials, the Pentagon announced on Thursday.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III will depart Jan. 29 for a trip to the Republic of Korea and the Philippines," the release said. "During his visits, he will meet with senior government and military leaders in both countries to advance regional stability and further strengthen the defense partnerships with the United States."

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Boeing Says Made 'Deep Changes' Following 737 Crashes, Committed to Justice Dept. Deal

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Aerospace company Boeing made deep corporate changes following two crashes of its 737 MAX planes and is committed to complying with a Justice Department agreement on the incidents, a Boeing spokesman told Sputnik on Thursday. In 2018, a 737 MAX plane crashed in Indonesia, killing all 189 passengers and crew members. In 2019, another 737 MAX crashed in Ethiopia, also killing all 157 people aboard the plane. Earlier on Thursday, Boeing pleaded not guilty to a criminal fraud charge for allegedly deceiving federal airline regulators on matters related to the crashes. Families of the victims are attempting to hold the company criminally responsible for the incidents despite Boeing's 2021 agreement with the Justice Department giving them immunity from prosecution in exchange for admitting fault.

"We are deeply sorry to all who lost loved ones on Lion Air Flight 610 and Ethiopian Flight 302, and greatly respect those who expressed their views at the hearing today," the Boeing spokesman said in a statement. "We have made broad and deep changes across our company, and made changes to the design of the 737 MAX to ensure that accidents like these never happen again."

Boeing claims that crashes occurred following malfunctions in the planes' maneuverability enhancement systems.

Boeing is committed to continuing to "comply scrupulously" with all obligations under the Justice Department agreement, the statement said.

Boeing Chief Safety Officer Mike Delaney, who entered the company's not-guilty plea on Thursday, told the court that Boeing stands by its admission of fault while still contesting the felony charge, according to US media reports.

Boeing has also been the defendant in shareholder lawsuits related to the crashes, with its board facing litigation for allegedly misleading investors about the incidents.

The criminal case being pursued by victims' families claims that the 346 deaths resulting from the two crashes could have been avoided if not for an alleged conspiracy by Boeing to defraud the Federal Aviation Administration. The families allege Boeing committed the "deadliest corporate crime in US history," a court document filed on Wednesday said.

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Pentagon Confirms US Sending M1A2 Model of Abrams Tanks

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will send the newer M1A2 model of Abrams tanks to Ukraine, Pentagon Deputy Spokesperson Sabrina Singh said on Thursday, confirming earlier US media reports.

"We're giving the M1A2 variant of the tank," Singh said during a press briefing.

The US intends to procure new tanks in a long-term commitment to Ukraine, Singh said.

The advanced M1A2 model Abrams tanks will not be equipped with a secret armor that uses depleted uranium, the US media reports said. M1A2s have improved optics compared to older Abrams configurations, as well as digitized control stations for commanders, the reports said.

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Five Ex-Memphis Officers Charged With 2nd Degree Murder in Beating of Nichols - Attorney

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - All five of the Memphis police officers who beat Tyre Nichols to death after a traffic stop have been indicted for second-degree murder, among other charges, the family's attorney Benjamin Crump said on Thursday.

On January 10, Nichols, a 29-year-old Black man, died three days after being beaten by the five officers after he fled a traffic stop in Memphis.

"The 5 former Memphis Police Department officers have been indicted by a grand jury on charges ranging from second-degree murder, aggravated assault, aggravated kidnapping, official misconduct and official oppression for the death of Tyre Nichols," Crump said via Twitter. The five officers, all of whom are Black, were jailed on Thursday, several media outlets reported, citing Shelby County Jail booking information.

Meanwhile, law enforcement agencies nationwide are bracing for protests that are expected to erupt once the police bodycam footage of the beating is publicly released, sources told CNN. Memphis Police Chief CJ Davis in a clip released on youtube on Wednesday urged residents not to react violently when the body cam footage is released in coming days.

The Major Cities Chiefs Association, one of the leading professional law enforcement organizations, has convened several calls with member agencies, according to the group's executive director, Laura Cooper.

Although the video has not yet been released to the public, the Nichols family, their attorney Ben Crump and members of his team were shown the video on Monday. The attorneys said the officers used Nicholas as a "human pinata" as he was pinned to the ground.

Nichols' death at the hands of police officers is one of a string of police-involved killings of Black people in the United States over the years and has placed renewed scrutiny on the issue.

National and global protests following the police murder of George Floyd and several "national conversations" were attempts to hold law enforcement responsible in such cases.

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IMF Considering \$16Bln Multiyear Aid Package for Ukraine – Reports

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is considering a multiyear aid package for Ukraine worth as much as \$16 billion, Bloomberg reported on Thursday, citing people familiar with the matter.

The program is conditional, and the first disbursement can be made as soon as April, according to the report.

If approved, the program will last 3 to 4 years, the report added. The IMF reportedly plans to provide Ukraine \$14-\$16 billion, with a \$5 billion to \$7 billion disbursement in the first year.

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Pentagon Says Does Not Have Excess Abrams M1A2 Tanks Available in US Stocks for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department does not have excess Abrams M1A2 main battle tanks to provide to Ukraine, which is why it will take months for the tanks to make it to the battlefield, Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

"We are using the USAI [Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative] because that's exactly it, we just don't have these tanks available in excess in our US stocks, which is why it is going to take months to transfer these M1A2 Abrams to Ukraine," Singh said during a press briefing.

The United States has committed to sending 31 Abrams tanks to Ukraine through the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which represents the beginning of a contracting process to provide additional military capabilities to Ukraine amid Russia's special military operation there.

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Republicans Back DeSantis by Landslide Numbers Over Trump for 2024 Nomination - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Republicans prefer Florida Governor Ron DeSantis over former President Donald Trump as their 2024 presidential candidate to run against incumbent President Joe Biden by a whopping 28% margin, a new Marquette University Law School national survey revealed on Thursday.

Some 64% of Republicans want DeSantis, who won a landslide reelection victory by more than 20% over his predecessor Charlie Crist last November, over former President Trump, who was defeated in his bid for reelection by Biden in 2020, a press release on the poll said.

Republican voters also expressed confidence by a more than two-to-one margin of 66% to 32% that US House Republicans can successfully unite behind their new Speaker Kevin McCarthy to govern effectively, the release added.

McCarthy is not yet well known to many Americans, with 39% saying they do not know enough to have an opinion of him and so far he is only viewed favorably by 19% and unfavorably by 42% of them, according to the release.

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Canada to Provide 4 Leopard 2 Tanks to Ukraine, Train Troops on System - Anand  
(Changes dateline and headline, adds details in paras 5-7, edits throughout)

TORONTO, January 26 (Sputnik) - Canada will send four Leopard 2 main battle tanks to Ukraine in the coming weeks and train Ukrainian troops on how to use the new armored capability, Canadian Defense Minister Anita Anand announced on Thursday.

"Today, I am announcing that Canada will supply Ukraine with four Leopard 2 main battle tanks in the coming weeks. This donation, combined with the contributions of allies and partners, will significantly help the armed forces of Ukraine as they fight heroically to defend their nation's freedom and sovereignty," Anand said during a press conference.

The defense minister said the German-made tanks are battle-ready and will be deployed in the coming weeks, unlike the M1 Abrams main battle tanks pledged by the United States, which are expected to take months to reach the battlefield.

Anand said the heavily armored, highly protected tanks will give Ukraine the mobility and firepower to capture territory under Russian control and defend existing land.

Canada will also deploy an undisclosed number of its own troops to train Ukrainian soldiers on use of the Leopard 2 system, Anand said. Canada could also send more tanks in the future based on consultations with allies, Anand added.

Canada may use C-17 military transport aircraft to deliver tanks across the Atlantic Ocean to Ukraine, Canadian Chief of Defense Staff Wayne Eyre said during the press conference.

Anand said that following the press conference, she planned on speaking with a number of European partners to discuss coordination on the tank donations and support for Ukraine.

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New US Home Sales Up Over 2% in December as Loan Rates Fall

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Sales of newly-built homes in the United States rose more than 2% in December, according to US Commerce Department data, which suggested buyers were returning due to easing lending rates although realtors reported dismal overall sales.

Single-family homes, the benchmark for the industry, saw a 2.3% increase in new sales to 616,000 units last month, the Commerce Department said in a news release. For November, the Commerce Department originally reported an increase of 640,000 units but revised that down to 602,000 in Thursday's release - even lower than October's final figure of 605,000.

The "revision is not a good one but the overall pace is what was anticipated", economist Adam Button said in a post on the Forex Live forum, referring to the forecast sale of 612,000 units for December. "Home builders have been reporting earnings and have been more upbeat about sales recently, in part due to lower rates and buydowns."

US home mortgage rates have fallen the most since December amid a continuous tumble in inflation from aggressive interest rate hikes imposed by the Federal Reserve, Freddie Mac, the agency overseeing lending for home buyers, said two weeks ago.

The average for a 30-year, fixed loan for a home - the benchmark for mortgages in the United States, had slid to 6.33% from 6.48% a week ago, Freddie Mac had said.

Inflation, as indicated by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 6.5% in the 12 months to December, the Labor Department said. It was the slowest annual advance for the CPI since October 2021.

The CPI hit a 40-year high in June when it grew at an annual rate of 9.1%, versus the Fed's inflation target of just 2% per year. In a bid to control surging prices, the central bank added 425 basis points to interest rates since March via seven rate hikes. Prior to that, interest rates peaked at just 25 basis points, as the central bank slashed them to nearly zero after the global COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. The Fed, which executed four back-to-back interest rate hikes of 75 basis points from June through November, imposed a more modest 50-basis point increase in December.

For its next rate decision on February 1, economists expect the central bank to announce an even smaller hike of 25 basis points. The last time the Fed announced a 25 basis-point increase was in March 2022, at the start of its current rate hike cycle.

Notwithstanding the improvement in new home sales, demand for existing houses in the United States remained sluggish for the 11th consecutive month in December, the National Association of Realtors said in a statement on January 20. It was the slowest monthly sales in 12 years as the economy transitions from runaway inflation and aggressive Fed interest rate hikes, the realtors group said.

Housing and real estate play important roles in the US economy, with roughly 65% of occupied housing units being owner-occupied. That makes homes a substantial source of household wealth and home construction a key provider of employment.

In the 2008/09 financial crisis, a crash of the housing market precipitated what later came to be known as the era of the Great Recession. Since then, and up until last year, the property market had been buoyant on the back of steady economic growth and demand from buyers.

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Boeing Pleads Not Guilty in US Court to Criminal Liability for 737 MAX Crashes - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Aerospace company Boeing pleaded not guilty in a US federal court to criminal responsibility for two 737 MAX crashes that killed hundreds of people in Indonesia and Ethiopia, Bloomberg reported on Thursday.

Boeing entered a not guilty plea during an arraignment hearing in Texas, denying deceiving federal regulators ahead of the crashes, which occurred in October 2018 and March 2019, the report said.

The 2018 crash in Indonesia killed all 189 passengers and crew members. The crash in Ethiopia several months later also killed all 157 people aboard the plane. Use of Boeing 737 MAX planes was suspended worldwide following the crashes.

Boeing claims that malfunctions in the planes' maneuverability enhancement systems occurred before both crashes.

In November 2021, Boeing admitted liability for compensatory damages from deaths related to the crash in Ethiopia. Boeing that same month also agreed to settle a shareholder lawsuit claiming that the company failed to monitor safety issues related to the two incidents.

However, a US Appeals Court revived an investor lawsuit against Boeing in January 2022, allowing its board to face litigation over allegations that they misled investors about the 737 MAX planes prior to the crashes.

Families of the victims are also now seeking a criminal conviction for the crashes, claiming that they were not consulted before a January 2021 deal between Boeing and the US government to avoid prosecution for fraud.

"In sum, but for Boeing's criminal conspiracy to defraud the Federal Aviation Administration, 346 people would not have lost their lives in the crashes," the victims families said in a court document filed Wednesday. "This defendant in this case thus committed the deadliest corporate crime in US history."

The victims are seeking to impose conditions of release on Boeing, like would be imposed on an individual criminal defendant: guarantees that they will commit no new crimes, cooperate with an independent corporate compliance monitor and act with transparency about their compliance efforts, the court filing said.

Boeing's not-guilty plea risks violating their immunity agreement with the US Justice Department, which requires the company admit to its role in hiding 737 MAX issues from federal regulators, the report said.

Boeing Chief Safety Officer Mike Delaney entered the plea and told the court that Boeing stands by its admission of fault while still contesting the felony charge, the report added.

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UN Says Peace in Ukraine Not on Immediate Horizon - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United Nations wants to see peace in Ukraine but what we are seeing now is not moving us in that direction, the UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a briefing on Tuesday.

"What we want to see is a just peace in line with the UN Charter and in line with international law. But what we're seeing is not moving us in that direction," Dujarric said.

The comments followed a question about the recent announcement of more tanks being sent to Ukraine, and whether or not the UN thinks that the delivery of tanks could intensify the fighting in the coming month.

On Wednesday, President Joe Biden announced that he would be sending 31 Abrams tanks to Ukraine.

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## US to Send Most Advanced Version of Abrams M1 Tank to Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will send Ukraine its most advanced version of the Abrams M1 main battle tank, Politico reported on Thursday, citing three people familiar with the matter.

On Wednesday, President Joe Biden announced that the United States will send 31 Abrams tanks to Ukraine. However, US officials have said that training and delivery of the tanks to Ukraine's battlefields will take many months, certainly not in time for Ukraine's alleged counteroffensive in spring.

The advanced Abrams tanks, known as the M1A2 model, to be sent to Ukraine will not be equipped with a secret armor that uses depleted uranium due to federal restrictions, the report said.

The M1A2 Abrams tank, compared to the older M1A1 configuration, has improved optics for targeting and a separate thermal optics system that allows the tank's commander to scan for targets in all weather and battlefield conditions, the report added.

The newer model of the tank also has a digitized control station that features technology allowing the commander to quickly identify friendly vehicles and enemy positions, according to the report.

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## Palestine's Suspension of Security Coordination With Israel 'Not Right Step' - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The Palestinian Authority's (PA) decision to suspend security coordination with Israel earlier in the day following a deadly Israeli raid in the occupied West Bank city of Jenin is "not the right step" at present, US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, nine Palestinians were killed and 20 others injured as a result of an Israeli raid in the city of Jenin in the West Bank. Palestinian presidential spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeineh called the raid a "massacre," while President Mahmoud Abbas declared three days of mourning. The Israeli army said it had neutralized three Palestinian militants in Jenin, suspected of preparing major terrorist attacks.

"We've seen that, we're in very close touch with senior PA officials," Leaf said when asked during a conference call about the PA's announcement. "Obviously we don't think this is the right step to take at this moment."

The United States, Leaf said, believes it is important for Israel and the Palestinian Authority to retain and deepen security coordination.

US officials will continue to talk to the Palestinian Authority and to Israeli officials throughout the coming days, Leaf said.

Blinken will travel to the Middle East for high-level meetings with Israeli and PA officials on Monday and Tuesday, according to the State Department.

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Canada to Provide 4 Leopard 2 Tanks to Ukraine, Train Troops to Use Them - Anand

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Canada will send four Leopard 2 main battle tanks to Ukraine in the coming weeks and will train Ukrainian troops to acquire the competencies necessary to use them, Defense Minister Anita Anand announced on Thursday.

"Today, I am announcing that Canada will supply Ukraine with four Leopard 2 main battle tanks in the coming weeks. This donation, combined with the contributions of allies and partners will significantly help the armed forces of Ukraine, as they fight heroically to defend their nation's freedom and sovereignty," Anand said during a press conference.

The defense minister said the German-made tanks will be deployed shortly unlike the M1 Abrams main battle tanks pledged by the United States.

Anand said the tanks are combat ready, heavily armored and highly protected and expressed the view that their mobility and firepower will help Ukraine liberate more territories captured by Russia.

Canada will also deploy an undisclosed number of its own troops to train Ukrainian soldiers on the use of the Leopard 2 tanks.

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US Looking for Appropriate Candidate to Serve as Special Envoy for Belarus - Nuland

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States is looking for an appropriate candidate to serve as Special Envoy for Belarus, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

"We are looking for an appropriate candidate, accurate candidate for this job, it's a complex job," Nuland said, when asked about the plans to appoint a Special Envoy for Belarus.

Nuland added that she hopes that they will have somebody in a "not too distant future."

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Senator Warns of Inability for Parliamentary Exchanges if US Sanctions Russian Lawmakers

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US lawmakers will not have any legislative exchanges with Russian colleagues if Washington continues to sanction them for their beliefs, Senator Rand Paul said during a congressional question-and-answer session with Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland on Thursday.

"If we're going to sanction people for their belief and, you know, their sort of nationalist version of the world, then we won't have any, we won't have any discussion between people or any legislative exchange," Paul said.

Paul made the comment after Nuland stated that the United States sanctions Russian lawmakers over their support for the special military operation in Ukraine and for Crimea rejoining Russia.

"That would be about 90 percent of the people," Paul said. "I would venture to say that every member of the Duma probably supports Crimea... This is their perspective."

After the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the US-led collective West imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia and provided more than 100 billion dollars in military and other aid to Kiev. However, the moves led to an increase in inflation, including the prices of electricity, fuel and food in Europe and in the United States.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said earlier the policy to contain and weaken Russia is a long-term strategy for the collective West and the imposed sanctions have dealt a severe blow to the global economy. Putin said the main goal of the collective West is to make the lives of millions of people worse. However, Putin and other Russian officials have repeatedly said that Russia will solve the problems created by the policies of the collective West.

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US Reports 'Successful Counterterrorism Operation' in Somalia, Promises Details Later

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – US forces have conducted a successful counterterrorism operation in Somalia, US Africa Command (AFRICOM) said on Thursday, promising to provide details later.

"The U.S. military conducted a successful counterterrorism operation in Somalia. Additional details will be provided in the coming days," the statement said.

The assessment is that no civilians were injured or killed, it added.

On Tuesday, AFRICOM said it eliminated two members of the al-Shabaab terrorist group (affiliated with al-Qaeda, banned in Russia) in a strike in Somalia on January 23.

Somalian media reported on Monday that 39 al-Shabaab terrorists were killed in an operation conducted by the Somali armed forces with the support of their international security partners. It came a day after al-Shabaab militants attacked a government building in Mogadishu, killing at least six civilians.

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US Ready to Lift Sanctions if Russia Negotiates Seriously, Withdraws Troops - Nuland

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States would be ready to lift sanctions it has imposed on Russia if Moscow decides to negotiate seriously and pulls out its forces from Ukraine, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday. "In the context of a Russian decision to negotiate seriously and withdraw its forces from Ukraine and return territory, I would certainly favor and I believe Secretary Blinken would also favor sanctions relief," Nuland said.

After the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the US-led collective West imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia and provided tens of billions in military and other aid to Kiev. However, the moves led to an increase in inflation, including the prices of electricity, fuel and food in Europe and in the United States.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said earlier the policy to contain and weaken Russia is a long-term strategy for the collective West and the imposed sanctions have dealt a severe blow to the global economy. Putin said the main goal of the collective West is to make the lives of millions of people worse. However, Putin and other Russian officials have repeatedly said that Russia will solve the problems created by the policies of the collective West.

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US Dismantles Hive Ransomware Group That Targeted Victims Worldwide - Attorney General

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States dismantled the Hive cybercriminal group that targeted more than a thousand victims all over the world, US Attorney General Merrick Garland said on Thursday.

"Last night, the Justice Department dismantled an international ransomware network responsible for extorting and attempting to extort hundreds of millions of dollars from victims in the United States and around the world known as the Hive ransomware group," Garland said during a press conference.

Garland pointed out that more than 1,500 individuals from some 80 countries were targeted by Hive hackers since June 2021.

Garland also said that Hive hackers used malicious software to hold digital systems hostage and demand a ransom. He further explained that Hive hackers breached victims' systems and stole sensitive data and then deployed malicious software, neutralizing the encryption systems, and demanded ransom in exchange for a system decryption key and a promise not to publish any stolen data.

Garland said he could not disclose if the United States sought to arrest anyone in connection to the Hive ransomware attacks because the investigation is ongoing.

However, the United States took down the cybercriminal group's servers and other cyber infrastructure and prevented victims from paying \$130 million demanded by the hackers, he added.

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Biden Defers Deportation of Hong Kong Residents Living in US by 2 Years – Memorandum

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden announced his decision to defer deportation of Hong Kong residents who are present in the United States by 24 months. "Pursuant to my constitutional authority to conduct the foreign relations of the United States, I have determined that it is in the foreign policy interest of the United States to defer for 24 months the removal of any Hong Kong resident who is present in the United States on the date of this memorandum," Biden said in a memorandum.

The list of exceptions includes those who are subject to extradition, who have voluntarily returned to Hong Kong or China after the date of this memorandum, or have not continuously resided in the US. The memorandum does not apply to people who have been convicted or whose presence in the US is threatening to its national security.

Biden attributed the decision to alleged human rights violations by China in Hong Kong.

"The United States supports the human rights and fundamental freedoms of the residents of Hong Kong. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has continued to erode those rights and freedoms, and as such I am directing an extension and expansion of the deferral of removal of certain Hong Kong residents who are present in the United States," he said.

Biden also directed the secretary of homeland security to take appropriate measures to authorize employment for noncitizens whose removal has been deferred, as provided by the memorandum.

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US Abrams Tanks Will Not Be in Ukraine in Time for Spring Counteroffensive - Nuland

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US Abrams tanks will not be delivered to Ukraine in time for the spring offensive, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

"Abrams, as you know, are very sophisticated tanks and they require significant training," Nuland told a Senate hearing. "So even as we approved them yesterday it's gonna take some time to get them to the battlefield, so this is not something that's going to appear in time for the spring offensive."

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US to Announce Sanctions Against Russia Over Opposition Activist Kara-Murza - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will shortly impose additional sanctions against Russia over the detention of Russian journalist and opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

"We are not only going to get you an answer, we are going to get you Magnitsky sanctions in very short order," Nuland said.

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US Government Auditors in Ukraine to Conduct Oversight of Aid This Week - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – US government auditors arrived in Kiev this week to conduct oversight of the military aid being provided to Ukraine as the Biden administration remains focused on preventing any weapons diversion, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland said on Thursday.

"The [Biden] administration remains laser-focused on ensuring that no aid or weapons are diverted. We have plumped up our embassy staff in Kiev for technical oversight. We are also working with the World Bank, with Deloitte, and with a team of US government auditors who are in Kiev this week, in fact," Nuland said during a Senate committee hearing.

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US Sanctions Former Paraguay President, Current Vice President for Corruption - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has sanctioned former Paraguay President Horacio Manuel Cartes Jara and current Vice President Hugo Adalberto Velazquez Moreno for corruption, the US Department of the Treasury said in a press release on Thursday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned Horacio Manuel Cartes Jara (Cartes), the former president of Paraguay, and Hugo Adalberto Velazquez Moreno (Velazquez), the current vice president, for their involvement in the rampant corruption that undermines democratic institutions in Paraguay," the release said. The Treasury Department said it has also sanctioned for entities owned and controlled by Cartes, including Tabacos USA Inc., Bebidas USA Inc., Dominicana Acquisition S.A. and Frigorifico Chajha S.A.E.

The Treasury Department also said Cartes and Velazquez both have ties to members of Hezbollah, which the US government had designated as a terrorist organization.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Vladimir Potanin and His Companies - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has targeted Vladimir Potanin and his companies in its latest round of sanctions, the US state Department announced on Thursday. "Vladimir Olegovich Potanin, one of Russia's wealthiest oligarchs, was designated alongside members of his network on December 15, 2022. Today, we are designating four additional entities in Potanin's network," the Fact Sheet said. "MK INTERROS INVEST is being designated pursuant to Section 1(a)(vii) for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Potanin, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to Section 1(a)(iii)(C). MK Interros Invest is a holding company used by Potanin to control his minority stake in Norilsk Nickel."

The other three sanctioned companies of Potanin are WHITELEAVE HOLDINGS LIMITED (WHITELEAVE), SALTCLIFF TRADING LIMITED (SALTCLIFF) and INTERNATIONAL LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY INTERROS CAPITAL (INTERROS CAPITAL), according to the State Department.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Tatarstan President Minnikhanov, His Wife - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The latest round of United States sanctions against Russia has targeted Tatarstan President Rustam Minnikhanov, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) said in a release on Thursday. Minnikhanov is chairman of the board of US-designated Tupolev Public Joint Stock Company, which produces strategic bombers for Russia's armed forces, the release said. In addition, the United States has also sanctioned Minnikhanov's wife, Gulsina Minnikhanova, the release added.

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US Imposes Visa Restrictions on 531 Members of Russian Military - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – The United States has imposed visa restrictions on 531 members of the Russian military in connection with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the US Department of the Treasury said on Thursday.

"The Department of State is further taking steps to impose visa restrictions on 531 members of the Russian Federation military for actions that threaten or violate the sovereignty, territorial integrity, or political independence of Ukraine pursuant to Section 212(a)(3)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act," the department said in a press release.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Russian Industry, Trade Minister Manturov - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States on Thursday designated Russian Industry and Trade Minister Denis Manturov as part of a new round of sanctions on Russian companies and officials, the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) said in a release.

In November, the United Kingdom added Manturov to its list of sanctioned individuals for being responsible for overseeing the Russian weapons industry and equipping mobilized troops amid the special military operation in Ukraine.

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US Sanctions 6 Individuals, 12 Entities Over Russia's Operation in Ukraine - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on six individuals and 12 entities in connection with Russia's military operation in Ukraine, the Treasury announced on Thursday.

"Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is taking additional actions to degrade the Russian Federation's capacity to wage war against Ukraine by sanctioning six individuals and 12 entities," the press release said.

The list includes Russian cargo airline Aviacon Zitotrans, UAV developer Ural Civil Aviation Factory, Joint Stock Company National Aviation Service Company, LLC Research & Production Enterprise Prima, Federal State Unitary Enterprise Scientific and Production Enterprise Gamma, as well as state-owned enterprise Almaz-Antey and its CEO Yan Novikov, among others.

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US Designates Wagner Group as Significant Transnational Criminal Organization - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has designated Russia's private military company Wagner Group as a significant transnational criminal organization, the Treasury announced on Thursday.

"Today, the Wagner Group is being redesignated pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13581, as amended by E.O. 13863, for being a foreign person that constitutes a significant transnational criminal organization," the release said.

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Whelans Express Hope New US Ambassador's Arrival in Moscow Will Help Paul Whelan's Release

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The family of convicted spy Paul Whelan on Thursday expressed the hope that the arrival of new US Ambassador Lynn Tracy in Moscow will help his release from prison.

"Our family is hopeful that Ambassador Lynne Tracy's arrival today in Moscow to helm the US embassy will help propel efforts forward to free Paul," the Whelans said in a statement. "The US embassy staff have been unstinting in their support but it can only help to have an Ambassador, after 4 months without one, to advocate for Paul's safety and freedom."

Whelan is able to call his parents daily and the US embassy has recently received many letters with the request to deliver them to him in prison, the statement said.

"We are looking forward to hearing his reaction when embassy staff are able to deliver the mail to him in Mordovia. Perhaps the ambassador will be able to be part of that visit. It may take months of translation by prison staff for him to hold them, but it will mean a lot to Paul to know that, after four years as a hostage, he hasn't been forgotten," the statement said.

The Russian authorities arrested Paul Whelan in December 2018 and a Moscow court sentenced him to 16 years in prison on charges of espionage. Whelan, who is also a citizen of Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom, has maintained that he is innocent and insisted that he arrived in Russia for a friend's wedding.

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Blinken, Mexico's Ebrard Discuss Cooperation in Fighting Drug Trafficking - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and his Mexican counterpart Marcelo Ebrard spoke by telephone to follow up on their discussions at the North American Leader's Summit about increasing cooperation to combat drug production and trafficking, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Thursday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke yesterday with Mexican Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard to follow up on the North American Leaders' Summit," the readout said.

Blinken and Ebrard discussed the ongoing cooperation on combating drug production and trafficking, notably fentanyl, an illicit narcotic considered to be the leading cause of death for people aged 18-49 in the United States, the readout said.

Blinken reaffirmed its commitment for a stronger bilateral partnership to prevent trans-border crime and fight organized crime under the Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health and Safe Communities, the release added.

The two officials met at the North American Leaders Summit in Mexico City January 9-10, where the United States, Mexico and Canada pledged to cooperate in the fight against transnational criminal organizations.

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Biden Plans Trip to Europe on 1st Anniversary of Russia's Operation in Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden is considering a trip to Europe to coincide with the first anniversary of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, NBC reported on Thursday, citing people in the know.

February 24 will mark one year since Moscow launched an operation in Ukraine in response to calls for help from the Russian-speaking republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

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G7, Ukrainian Officials Discuss Coordination of Economic Aid for Kiev - White House

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - Officials from the G7 group of nations and the Ukrainian government met on Thursday for an inaugural meeting of the steering committee in charge of coordinating the West's aid for Kiev, the White House said.

"Today, Deputy National Security Advisor for International Economics Mike Pyle co-chaired the inaugural meeting of the Ukraine Multi-agency Donor Coordination Platform's Steering Committee, delivering on G7 Leaders' December 2022 commitment and exemplifying the Biden-Harris Administration's unwavering support for Ukraine," the White House said in a readout. "Representatives from G7 countries, the Government of Ukraine, and the international financial institutions discussed how to better coordinate economic support for Ukraine's immediate financing needs and future economic recovery and reconstruction efforts."

The participants of the meetings vowed to work closely with Kiev to define and sequence strategic economic needs, advance the country's reform ambitions and stabilize its economy, the readout noted.

"Pyle commended the Government of Ukraine's adept management of its economy, despite incredibly difficult circumstances, and its vision for a broad-based economic reform agenda," the

readout added. "Collaboration will continue in the coming weeks, and the Steering Committee will hold its next meeting in March."

The United Nations said in a fresh report on Wednesday that Ukraine's economy contracted by more than 30% in 2022 due to the destruction caused by the conflict. The UN added that post-conflict reconstruction would require "immense" financial resources.

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UPDATE - US GDP Beats Estimates With 2.9% Growth in Q4 Despite Strong Fed Rate Hikes (Modifies headline and lede, adds comments, details and context in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - The US economy posted an estimate-beating annualized growth of 2.9% in the fourth quarter of 2022, the Commerce Department said on Thursday in a preliminary estimate that is likely to assure the Federal Reserve that its rate hikes have not weighed too much on growth.

While the fourth quarter real gross domestic product, or GDP, was still a contraction from the year-on-year expansion of 3.2% in the third quarter of last year, it came in above the 2.6% forecast by Wall Street economists polled by the media. For the entire year 2022, GDP expanded by 2.1%, the Commerce Department said.

"The Fed will probably be heaving with a sigh of relief that its heavy rate hikes through 2022 had not inflicted too much damage on the economy," said John Kilduff, partner at New York hedge fund Again Capital.

After a 5.9% growth in 2021, GDP had only been projected to grow 2% for all of 2022 due to runaway inflation in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic and Fed efforts to fight that with its most aggressive rate hikes in four decades.

In a bid to control surging prices, the Fed added 425 basis points to interest rates since March via seven rate hikes. Prior to that, interest rates peaked at just 25 basis points, as the central bank slashed them to nearly zero after the global COVID-19 outbreak in 2020.

While the Fed executed four back-to-back jumbo rate hikes of 75 basis points from June through November, since December it has imposed a more modest 50-basis point increase. For its next rate decision on February 1, economists expect the central bank to announce an even smaller hike of 25 basis points. The last time the Fed announced a 25 basis-point increase was in March 2022, at the start of its current rate hike cycle.

Inflation itself, as indicated by the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, grew by 6.5% in the 12 months to December. It was the slowest annual advance since October 2021 for the CPI, which hit a 40-year high in June when it grew at an annual rate of 9.1%.

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Blinken Will Travel to Egypt, Israel, West Bank From January 29-31 - State Dept.  
(Adds details in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, January 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit Egypt, Israel and the West Bank next week to discuss a number of global and regional issues including the Ukraine conflict, the State Department announced on Thursday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel to Egypt, Israel, and the West Bank from January 29-31 to consult with partners on a range of global and regional priorities, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Iran, Israeli-Palestinian relations and preserving the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the protection of human rights and democratic values, among other topics," spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

Blinken will begin his visit in Cairo, where he will meet with President Abdel Fattah Sisi, Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, as well as other senior officials, Price noted.

"The Secretary then will travel to Jerusalem and Ramallah from January 30-31," the spokesperson said. "In Israel, he will meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Foreign Minister Eli Cohen, and other senior leaders to discuss the enduring U.S. support for Israel's security, particularly against threats from Iran. The Secretary will also discuss Israel's deepening integration into the region, Israeli-Palestinian relations and the importance of a two-state solution, and a range of other global and regional issues."

In the West Bank, Blinken will meet with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and senior officials.

With both Israeli and Palestinian leaders, the secretary will underscore the urgent need for the parties to take steps to deescalate tensions, Price said. Blinken will also discuss the importance of upholding the historic status quo at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in Jerusalem.