

3/7/23 Tuesday

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blame Game: US Intel Tells NYT 'Pro-Ukrainian Group' Behind Nord Stream Bombing
By - Fantine Gardinier

The September 26, 2022, bombing of the Nord Stream pipeline deep underneath the Baltic Sea released more methane gas into the atmosphere than any previous industrial disaster - some 400,000 metric tons before it was plugged 17 days later.

A new report [published in the New York Times](#) on Tuesday claims a “pro-Ukrainian group” was behind the Nord Stream pipeline attack, discarding recent evidence pointing the finger firmly at Washington unearthed by veteran journalist Seymour Hersh.

According to the NYT report, which was based on “new intelligence reviewed by US officials,” the attack was carried out without the involvement of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky or his government.

However, the evidence given to the paper by US officials is extremely vague, saying only that “the review of newly collected intelligence suggests they were opponents of President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia.” The paper notes that US intelligence officials were loath to discuss any specifics about the evidence or how it was obtained.

“They have said that there are no firm conclusions about it, leaving open the possibility that the operation might have been conducted off the books by a proxy force with connections to the Ukrainian government or its security services,” the Times wrote, referring to the intel officials.

The Times report makes absolutely no mention of another report by veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh last month that [claimed US Navy divers](#) had planted bombs on the pipeline during drills the previous summer, following months of heated debate about the wisdom of doing so within the US national security community.

The White House dismissed Hersh’s report as “false and complete fiction,” and the article was published on the newsletter site Substack, rather than in any major newspaper.

The US government and corporate media [have long ignored](#) Hersh’s pioneering work, including his 1970 reporting on the My Lai massacre by US soldiers during the Vietnam War, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize. He later played a key role in exposing the CIA’s many secret activities in other countries, leading to congressional investigations and reforms of the agency. He was later hired by the New York Times in 1972 and wrote for them for several years.

When asked about the Times article on Tuesday, the journalist laughed and refused to comment, only telling Sputnik: “well, I’m just looking at it. Gee, the sources aren’t named ... I’ve got nothing to say.”

The anonymous sourcing in Hersh’s article on the Nord Stream bombing have been used by critics to discredit his work.

The natural gas pipeline once ushered huge amounts of fuel into Western Europe from Russia, and a second parallel pipeline, Nord Stream II, was completed before being blocked from operation by the German government under US pressure. Washington has long expressed its

opposition to the project and to Western Europe buying energy from Russia, including pressuring its allies to buy more expensive US gas exports. Following the September 2022 bombing, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken mused that it was "a tremendous opportunity" to divorce Europe from Russian exports.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Dow Jones Down by 575 Points on Fears Fed Could Make Bigger Interest Rate Hike
By - Fantine Gardinier

US stocks fell dramatically on Tuesday after Jerome Powell, chairman of the US Federal Reserve, hinted that the central bank could significantly raise interest rates in spite of recent slowing of inflation.

At closing bell on Tuesday, the Dow Jones had lost 574.98 points from the start of the day, falling 1.72% to finish at 32,856.46. The S&P 500 also declined, falling by 62.05 points to 3,986.37; and the Nasdaq Composite declined by 145.40 points to close at 11,530.33.

The day took a turn in the morning after investors heard Powell's comments about what the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) is likely to decide at its meeting later this month. The FOMC consists of the seven Federal Reserve Board members, plus five heads of regional Federal Reserve banks, and sets the course for monetary policy.

"The latest economic data have come in stronger than expected, which suggests that the ultimate level of interest rates is likely to be higher than previously anticipated," Powell said on Tuesday ahead of his appearance before the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee.

"If the totality of the data were to indicate that faster tightening is warranted, we would be prepared to increase the pace of rate hikes."

At its January-February meeting, the Fed [raised interest rates](#) by a slight 25 base points, to 4.57%, although Powell and other Fed leaders have indicated they intend for it to go higher, perhaps above 5.1%. Powell's comments on Tuesday have many fearing a 50-point increase could come later this month instead of a smaller 25-point hike.

US Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), who opposed the renewal of Powell's appointment in late 2021, criticized his plan to keep raising interest rates, told the Fed chair at the Tuesday hearing that doing so would put 2 million people out of work.

"We're taking the only measures we have to bring inflation down," Powell replied. "Will working people be better off if we just walk away from our jobs, if inflation remains at 5, 6%?"

The most recent Consumer Price Index [report for January 2023](#) found a 6.4% increase in the prices of basic consumer goods from the previous year - the smallest increase seen since late 2021, although still far above the Fed's target inflation rate of 2%.

For nearly a year, the Fed has been aggressively raising interest rates in an effort to stomp out the inflation, which is also described as the depreciating value of the US dollar. The Fed had tolerated rising inflation for years, keeping interest rates low in order to encourage the fastest

possible economic recovery from the crash caused by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, but was compelled to act after inflation hit rates not seen in 40 years. It was still several months before inflation peaked at 9.1% in June 2022, but the rate of increase has declined every month since then.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Beijing's New FM Qin Gang: China's Rise 'Busts Myth That Modernization is Westernization'
By - Fantine Gardinier

At his debut press conference as China's new foreign minister, Qin Gang hailed the country's development path, saying it had proven nations can industrialize and develop without colonial plunder and war, as the West has.

"Achieving modernization for a country of more than 1.4 billion people will be an unprecedented feat in human history, one of profound global significance in itself," [Qin told reporters](#) at the meeting of National People's Congress (NPC), China's national legislature that [meets for several weeks](#) each year to handle essential business.

"Chinese modernization offers solutions to many challenges facing human development. It busts the myth that modernization is westernization; it creates a new form of human advancement; and it provides an important source of inspiration for the world, especially developing countries," Qin added.

He listed five features he had identified of Chinese modernization:

Independence. "The reason why the Chinese path to modernization works is exactly because it is developed in China and rooted in Chinese culture, and fits in well with China's national conditions. China's success in development also proves that every country has the right and ability to choose its own path, and to hold its future firmly in its own hands."

Putting people first. "Chinese modernization is the modernization of common prosperity for all. It is about achieving both material abundance and cultural-ethical enrichment for the people.

Modernization should not serve the interests of only a few countries or individuals. It should not make the rich richer and the poor poorer. Nor should it lead to cultural impoverishment, moral degradation or disorder. People around the world should all enjoy the rights to seek development as equals and pursue happiness."

Peaceful development. "Chinese modernization is not pursued through war, colonization, or plundering. It is dedicated to peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit, and is committed to harmony between humanity and nature. It is a new path different from Western modernization."

Openness and inclusiveness. "Humanity's modernization should not be a one-flower show but a hundred flowers in bloom. It is important to respect the right of every country to pursue a modernization path tailored to its national reality, and encourage exchange and mutual learning, so that all will flourish and prosper together."

Working hard in unity. "China's success proves that acting in disunity like a heap of loose sand will get us nowhere, and that only by striving in unity can we pool strength. We will persevere in

carrying out the set blueprint until it becomes reality. Partisan rift, empty talk and frequent policy flip-flop as seen in certain countries will only make even the best blueprint an illusion and a castle in the air.”

Qin served as Beijing’s ambassador in Washington, DC, until the start of the year, when he was [appointed to head](#) the Chinese foreign ministry. While in his time in Washington, Qin sought to ease US-China tensions by appealing to the better nature of the American people, in his new ministry position Qin has slammed US military encroachments in the western Pacific, including its continued support for the Chinese breakaway province of Taiwan.

At his Tuesday press conference, [Qin told a reporter](#) from a US media outlet that “no amount of guardrails can prevent the derailing” of US-China relations, warning that “there will surely be conflict and confrontation” if the US does not “hit the brakes.”

In 2018, the White House and Pentagon named [“great power competition”](#) with Russia and China as the US’ new strategic focus, claiming the two nations were seeking to upend the “rules-based international order” run by the United States since World War II. A trade war and waves of sanctions have followed, targeting China’s tech and defense industries in particular, and the US has stepped up its aerial and naval patrols off China’s eastern coast. It has also begun to [more aggressively support Taiwan](#), with US President Joe Biden letting the mask slip and openly claiming the US would defend Taiwan from Chinese attack after decades of “strategic ambiguity” on the subject.

At home, Washington has worked to block US companies, universities, and research institutions alike from interacting with their Chinese counterparts, and one claim after another about Chinese efforts to undermine the US, including by creating or [releasing the SARS-CoV-2 virus](#) behind the COVID-19 pandemic, have, been paralleled by a sharp spike in violent, racist attacks on Asians and Asian-Americans in the US.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Two Out of Four Kidnapped Americans Found Dead, One Wounded, Mexican Authorities Say
By - Fantine Gardinier

Mexican authorities said on Tuesday that two of the four US citizens who had been kidnapped by armed men in the border city of Matamoros on Friday had been found dead.

"Two of them are dead, one person is injured and the other is alive," Américo Villarreal Anaya, the governor of Mexico’s Tamaulipas state, told reporters. He did not say which were alive or dead, or give any other details about finding them.

Latavia “Tay” Washington McGee, Shaeed Woodard, Zindell Brown and Eric James Williams crossed the border from Brownsville, Texas, on Friday, and quickly came under weapons fire. The four were a tight-knit group of friends who drove from South Carolina so McGee could receive a medical procedure.

According to the FBI, they were mistaken for Haitian drug smugglers by a Mexican cartel, who [kidnapped them after attacking](#) their minivan. The bureau has put out a \$50,000 reward for information leading to their return and to the arrest of those responsible. Mexican President

Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said on Monday that his "whole government is working" on finding them.

The US State Department has issued a "Level 4: Do Not Travel" advisory for US citizens thinking of going to Tamaulipas, warning of the dangers posed by crime and kidnapping.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Trump Reportedly Eyeing Failed Arizona Gubernatorial Candidate Kari Lake as 2024 VP Pick
By - Fantine Gardinier

It's a long road from the start of the Primaries to getting picked by the Republican National Convention to be the party's presidential candidate, but former US President Donald Trump is reportedly already thinking past all that and weighing who he wants his vice-presidential running mate to be.

According to reports in US media, Trump is considering running alongside Kari Lake, a close follower who [mounted a failed bid](#) for governor of Arizona last November. The reports said he was weighing whether or not she could net him the votes of a demographic he lost handily in the November 2020 election - suburban women - without outshining him on the campaign trail.

Asked about the reports, Trump's spokesperson, Steven Cheung, told US media: "Anyone who thinks they know what President Trump is going to do is seriously misinformed and trying to curry favor with 'potential' V.P. candidates."

"President Trump will choose his running mate on his own time, and those who are playing the media game are doing so at their own peril," Cheung added.

At the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) over the weekend - which was [boycotted by most leading](#) Republicans not aligned with Trump - the former president was the runaway candidate selected in a straw poll, as was Lake in terms of vice presidential picks. Some other likely picks, according to various reports by figures close to Trump, include Arkansas Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders, who served as Trump's press secretary from 2017 until 2019; South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem; and Nikki Haley, a former governor of South Carolina who was Trump's ambassador to the United Nations from 2017 until 2018. However, Sanders was reportedly recently asked by him for an endorsement and demurred without rejecting Trump as a candidate, and Haley has already thrown her hat into the presidential race to challenge Trump directly.

The other candidate in the 2024 GOP Primary race is [Vivek Ramaswamy](#), a New York-based businessman who's written several books attacking "woke" politics. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, [clearly favored](#) by the conservative media in the US, has yet to announce his candidacy, but has embarked on a speaking tour of the US that is being widely interpreted as laying the groundwork for one.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UN Stands Ready to Mediate in Potential Talks to Demilitarize Area Around ZNPP - Guterres

UNITED NATIONS, March 8 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Wednesday offered the world body's mediation services in potential talks to demilitarize the area around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) during a meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kiev.

"Safety and security around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant is also vital. I believe that a possible mediation to seek the full demilitarization of the area, while ensuring that the plant can return to normal operations, would also be important," Guterres told reporters.

Guterres also emphasized the importance of continuing exporting grain and fertilizer from Ukraine and Russia to ensure food security as well as affordable food prices around the world.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UN Chief Underscores Importance to Extend Grain Agreement in Meeting With Zelenskyy

UNITED NATIONS, March 8 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Wednesday reiterated the need to extend the grain export agreement - formally known as the Black Sea Grain Initiative - during a meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kiev.

"I want to underscore the critical importance of the rollover of the Black Sea Grain Initiative on 18 March and of working to create the conditions to enable the greatest possible use of export infrastructures through the Black Sea in line with the objectives of the initiative," Guterres told reporters.

Guterres noted the importance of continuing to export grain and fertilizer from Ukraine and Russia to ensure food security as well as affordable food prices around the world.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US-Russia Trade Decreased During Month of January - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The trade balance between the United States and Russia decreased during the month of January, with US exports to Russia decreasing to \$44.6 million from \$112.86 million recorded the previous month, the US Commerce Department said on Wednesday.

US imports from Russia decreased to \$508.6 million in January from \$638.4 million in December, the Commerce Department said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US House Speaker Declines Zelenskyy's Invitation to Visit Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy told CNN that he does not plan to visit Ukraine despite Volodymyr Zelenskyy's suggestion that he go see the situation on the ground.

"Let's be very clear about what I said: no blank checks, OK? So, from that perspective, I don't have to go to Ukraine to understand where there's a blank check or not," McCarthy said in an interview on Tuesday. "I will continue to get my briefings and others, but I don't have to go to Ukraine or Kyiv to see it. And my point has always been, I won't provide a blank check for anything."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden's Approval Rating at 42%, Highest Since June – Poll

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden's approval rating has increased to 42%, its highest since June, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll released Wednesday.

It has increased gradually since falling steadily since Biden's first days as president to reach a low of 36% in the May to July period last year. Last month, Biden's approval rating was 41%.

Biden is expected to launch his reelection campaign in the coming weeks.

The nationwide poll covered 1,023 adults.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Four Dead After 2 Small Planes Collide Over Florida Lake - Sheriff

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) – Four people died after two small planes crashed into each other over Lake Hartridge in Florida, the Polk County Sheriff's Office said.

The in-air collision occurred on March 7.

"Polk County Sheriff's Office investigators are confirming that four people have been located who were in the two planes that crashed. All four are deceased," the office said in a statement on Tuesday.

All four located persons are the only occupants of the planes.

The deceased were identified as Faith Irene Baker, 24, of Winter Haven, a pilot/flight instructor with Sunrise Aviation, and Zachary Jean Mace, 19, of Winter Haven, a student at Polk State College, in the Cherokee Piper 161 plane. Randall Elbert Crawford, 67, from Carlisle,

Pennsylvania was in the Piper J-3 Cub. The sheriff's office is working to confirm the identity of the other passenger in the latter plane.

Sheriff Grady Judd said the National Transportation Safety Board and the Federal Aviation Administration would investigate the cause and circumstances of the collision.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

RPT - Africa Must Meet Local Demand Before Contributing to Europe's Energy Needs - Oil Firm CEO

HOUSTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Africa must fulfill its local demand before it is able to become a key partner contributing to Europe's energy security, Uganda National Oil Company Limited CEO Proscovia Nabbanja told Sputnik.

"Today, we have so much demand locally that we need to fulfill - we need to fulfill the local demand of petroleum products for refining, but at the same time also export a reasonable amount to the international market," Nabbanja said on the margins of CERAWEEK annual energy conference.

Nabbanja and several other African energy leaders underscored during a panel discussion that the region needs investors to bolster its energy infrastructure and production.

The Ukraine conflict has reportedly made Africa an attractive investment opportunity for energy security after the region had some exploration successes in 2022.

In February, Russian ambassador-at-large and the head of the Russia-Africa partnership forum Oleg Ozerov told Sputnik that Russia has much potential in the oil and gas spheres to develop relations with African states.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

RPT - State Secretary in German Federal Chancellery Says Getting Off Russian Gas 'Huge Stress'

HOUSTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Germany had a very challenging time reducing its reliance on Russian gas, State Secretary of the German Federal Chancellery Jorg Kukies told Sputnik on the margins of CERAWEEK in Houston.

"No, it was huge stress," Kukies said on Tuesday when asked if Germany easily reduced its dependency on Russian gas. "It was more than half of the volumes coming to Germany so obviously replacing that was very challenging."

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said recently that it was not hard for Germany to get rid of Russian gas.

CERAWEEK is an annual energy conference that brings together top industry executives and senior government officials from all over the world.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

House Speaker McCarthy Confirms Plans to Meet With Taiwanese Leader During Her Trip to US

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy confirmed plans to meet with Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen during her trip to the United States.

"The President [Tsai] happens to be in America and I'm going to meet with her," McCarthy told reporters, as quoted by CNN journalist Manu Raju on Tuesday. "But that has nothing to do with my travel and if I would go to Taiwan or not."

The confirmation comes after reports surfaced this week that McCarthy will meet with Tsai in California instead of making a trip to Taipei in order to avoid further tensions with Beijing.

The Financial Times reported that Tsai convinced the California senator to meet in the United States instead to avoid sparking military demonstrations from China, which former speaker Nancy Pelosi spurred on when she visited Taiwan in August, said the report.

Last week, Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin in a letter to all Defense Department personnel vowed that the US would provide Taiwan with self-defense capabilities as the threat from China evolves.

The US defense budget authorizes \$2 billion in annual military assistance to Taiwan. However, Taiwan has expressed frustration over the delay in arms deliveries and an alleged backlog of almost \$20 billion, much of which may not arrive for years, according to The Washington Post. Taiwan has been governed independently from mainland China since 1949. Beijing views the island as its province and opposes any official contacts by foreign states with Taipei as well as considers Chinese sovereignty over the island indisputable.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Kazakhstan CPC Oil Route to Reach Full Capacity By End of 2024 - Energy Chief

HOUSTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Kazakhstan expects oil transportation through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) route to reach full capacity by 2024, Kazakh Energy Minister Bolat Akchulakov told Sputnik on the sidelines of CERAWeek in Houston.

"Oil transportation via the CPC route has basically increased to 72 [million tons of oil per year]. We'll see. It's end of 2024. About this time," Akchulakov said on Tuesday when asked when CPC is expected to reach full capacity.

The CPC sustained damage late last fall that disrupted the pipeline's operations.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Kazakh Energy Chief Says No One Can Forecast Oil Prices With Certainty

HOUSTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The forecast for global oil prices is the most ungrateful thing because no one can predict it with certainty, Kazakh Energy Minister Bolat Akchulakov told Sputnik on the sidelines of CERAWEEK in Houston.

"This is the most ungrateful thing. No one will tell you," Akchulakov said on Tuesday when asked about his outlook for global oil prices this year.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Kazakh Energy Chief Says Oil Price Fluctuations Will Depend on How Ukraine Crisis Evolves

HOUSTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The fluctuation in global oil prices will depend on how the situation in Ukraine evolves, but Kazakhstan believes more than \$65 a barrel is a reasonable price, Kazakh Energy Minister Bolat Akchulakov told Sputnik on the sidelines of CERAWEEK in Houston.

"It all depends on how the situation develops," Akchulakov said on Tuesday when asked if he expects oil price hikes while the Ukraine conflict continues. ""The only fair price depends on each country. In the case of Kazakhstan, it should be more than \$65 per barrel."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Kazakhstan Plans to Boost Oil Production to 2Mln bpd by End of 2024 - Energy Chief

HOUSTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Kazakhstan plans to increase its oil production to two million barrels a day by the end of 2024, Kazakh Energy Minister Bolat Akchulakov told Sputnik on the sidelines of CERAWEEK in Houston.

"The end of 2024," Akchulakov said on Tuesday when asked when the country plans to increase oil production to two million barrels per day.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

State Secretary in German Federal Chancellery Says Getting Off Russian Gas 'Huge Stress'

HOUSTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Germany had a very challenging time reducing its reliance on Russian gas, State Secretary of the German Federal Chancellery Jorg Kukies told Sputnik on the margins of CERAWeek in Houston.

"No, it was huge stress," Kukies said on Tuesday when asked if Germany easily reduced its dependency on Russian gas. "It was more than half of the volumes coming to Germany so obviously replacing that was very challenging."

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said recently that it was not hard for Germany to get rid of Russian gas.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Lockheed Martin 'Ready to Go' in Making Operational Hypersonic Missiles - Vice President

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin is developing a robust escalating program in developing hypersonic glide strike technology in cooperation with the US Air Force and its industry partners, the company's Vice President for Air Dominance and Strike Operations, Jay Pitman, announced.

"We have strong partnerships and we are getting ready for production," Pitman told a podcast press conference on Tuesday. "We're ready to go."

Lockheed Martin and the US Air Force carried out the first operational test flight of the AGM-183A air-launched rapid response weapon on December 9, Pitman said.

The test had been successful and at least two more tests were planned for the coming months, Pitman added.

The test was carried out at the Edwards Air Force Base in California as the first test flight of an operational prototype of a US air-launched hypersonic missile. Air Force officials said it met all its objectives, according to published reports.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

State Secretary in German Federal Chancellery Says Getting Off Russian Gas 'Huge Stress'
HOUSTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Germany had a very challenging time reducing its reliance on Russian gas, State Secretary of the German Federal Chancellery Jorg Kukies told Sputnik on the margins of CERAWeek in Houston.

"No, it was huge stress," Kukies said on Tuesday when asked if Germany easily reduced its dependency on Russian gas. "It was more than half of the volumes coming to Germany so obviously replacing that was very challenging."

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said recently that it was not hard for Germany to get rid of Russian gas.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken Says Price to Step Down as US State Dept. Spokesperson in March

(Update: adds details in paras 1-3)

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement that State Department Spokesperson Ned Price will step down from the position later in the month after more than 200 press briefings held since 2021.

"This month, Ned Price will step down as the State Department's Spokesperson," the statement said on Tuesday. "Throughout the more than 200 briefings he has since [January 20, 2021] held, he's treated journalists – as well as colleagues and everyone else he interacts with – with respect."

"On a personal level, I have constantly benefited from his counsel, as have so many members of the Department," Blinken said in the statement. "Fortunately, I'll be able to continue to do that."

Earlier in the day, NBC News reported that Price will leave his post on March 17 to take up his new position under Blinken.

Price reportedly called the new position a return to policy work, where his career began. Price previously served as CIA and National Security Council spokesperson under former US President Barack Obama.

Price's "firm grasp" of State Department policies made him an effective spokesperson, Blinken said.

Current State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel will take over for Price after he leaves the role. However, a permanent successor has yet to be announced, the report said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Senator to Introduce Bill for US Military Force Against Drug Cartels in Mexico - Report

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) – US Senator Lindsey Graham unveiled his plans to introduce a bill, which would allow the United States to use military power against drug cartels in Mexico, Fox News reported on Tuesday.

"I'm going to introduce legislation... to make certain Mexican drug cartels foreign terrorist organizations under US law and set the stage to use military force if necessary to protect America from being poisoned by things coming out of Mexico," Graham said.

The news came up amid reports that four Americans were kidnapped in Matamoros, Mexico, last week. On Tuesday, the governor of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, Americo Villarreal Anaya, confirmed that two of them were killed and another was wounded.

Republican Graham accused the Democratic Biden administration of doing "nothing about it." He said he would put "Mexico on notice" and call the country an enemy of the US since it gives safe haven to fentanyl drug dealers.

The four US citizens from South Carolina reportedly entered Mexico for medical purposes, but may have been abducted by a cartel who mistook them for Haitian drug dealers.

White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said the administration is working with Mexican officials to learn more and to have all Americans returned to the United States.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Discusses Ukraine Support, China Challenges With France's Macron - White House

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden discussed issues including continued support for Ukraine and challenges posed by China in the Indo-Pacific region during a call with French President Emmanuel Macron, the White House said in a statement.

"The two leaders discussed their support for Ukraine as Russia's brutal invasion enters its second year, including their commitment to continue providing Ukraine with security assistance and imposing costs on Russia for its aggression," the statement said on Tuesday.

Biden and Macron discussed cooperation between the United States and France in the Indo-Pacific region as well, including efforts to address challenges posed by China to the rules-based international order, the statement said. The two leaders also reaffirmed their commitment to coordinate on accelerating the transition to clean energy economies, the statement added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Artemis Launch Pad Needs Repairs From Damage in Recent Blast-Off - NASA Officials

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - NASA technicians and engineers are working to repair and strengthen launch pad 39B used for the Space Launch System giant rocket that propelled the Artemis 1 mission into space before using it again in November 2024 for the planned manned Artemis 2 mission around the Moon, US space agency officials told a press conference.

"We did sustain more damage than anticipated to the launch pad," NASA Exploration Ground Systems Program Manager Shawn Quinn said on Tuesday. "Replacement [crews are] at work getting the one elevator [that was also] damaged" in the Space Launch System blast-off. "We are considering future hardening requirements for the launch pad. Some pneumatic water cooling lines were also lost in the shock of take off."

Quinn said the damage caused by the take off of the largest and most powerful rocket NASA had ever operated was no neither serious nor unexpected.

NASA Orion Program Manager Howard Hu told the press conference that more material had fallen off the Orion space capsule on reentry to the Earth's atmosphere than had been anticipated and that an analysis was being conducted to study the causes.

At 5,000 degrees Fahrenheit temperature on reentry, charring of the underside of the heat shield was to be anticipated, Hu said.

However, an analysis was being undertaken from the remains of the heat shield as to whether any changes or upgrades would need to be made before Artemis 2 was launched, the NASA officials said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken Says Price to Step Down as US State Dept. Spokesperson in March

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement that State Department Spokesperson Ned Price will step down from the position later in the month after more than 200 press briefings held since 2021.

“This month, Ned Price will step down as the State Department’s Spokesperson,” the statement said on Tuesday. “Throughout the more than 200 briefings he has since [January 20, 2021] held, he’s treated journalists – as well as colleagues and everyone else he interacts with – with respect.”

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Democrat Senate Head Calls Fox TV Host Liar For Airing Capitol Hill Riot Record

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - Democratic Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has accused Fox News and its owner Rupert Murdoch of airing "one of the most shameful hours we have ever seen on cable TV" and also made an unprecedented attack on Fox Network host Tucker Carlson, calling him a liar and paid propagandist who posed a major threat to US democracy in a press conference on Tuesday.

"With contempt for the facts, disregard of the risks, and knowing full well he was lying to his audience, Fox News host Tucker Carlson ran a lengthy segment arguing the January 6 Capitol attack was not a violent insurrection," said in his Capitol Hill press conference with other Democratic senators. He was repeating comments he had just made on the floor of the Senate. Schumer called on Murdoch to censor or silence Carlson, whom the Senate Majority Leader described as "a certified liar," from continuing to appear on the air, saying his continuing comments posed a threat to US democracy.

"This man is one of the loudest voices perpetuating the big lie with that contempt for facts. They are liars and propagandists They are destroying America for monetary advantage. ...Last night

was a low point for Fox News and devastating for our democracy. ...Rupert Murdoch has a special obligation from letting Carlson go on because our democracy depends on it," he said. Tucker Carlson's TV show "Tucker Carlson Tonight" gained exclusive access to over 40,000 hours of surveillance footage of the January 6, 2021 Capitol Hill riot which, Fox News said, contradicted several narratives about the incident that had been presented by the Democrats and by the mainstream US media.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Wants to See Channels of Communication With China Continue to Expand - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The United States is interested in seeing the channels of communication with China expand as there are still areas without the desirable level of cadence in the bilateral relationship between the two countries, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"There are areas where there isn't the level or the cadence of communication that we would like to see, and our colleagues at the Department [of State] events have spoken to that. That is not our doing. That is because of decisions that have been made in Beijing, not decisions that have been made in Washington. So, we would like to see these channels of communication continue to expand," Price said during a press briefing on Tuesday.

The United States does not seek conflict with China but seeks a relationship that has measures in place to prevent competition from veering into conflict, Price said.

The State Department spokesperson added that the US approach to China is not about containing or suppressing the country.

Earlier on Tuesday, Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang said the United States continues to follow a wrong path in its China policy and it will lead to a confrontation.

In response, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said that the United States' posture on its bilateral relationship with China has not changed and it is seeking a strategic competition with Beijing.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Oil Price Drops Most in 2 Months as Fed Ratchets Up US Interest Rate Hike Fears

NEW YORK, March 8 (Sputnik) - Fears that US economic growth might be choked by larger-than-imagined Federal Reserve interest rate hikes triggered oil's worst selloff in two months on Tuesday.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude closed the session at \$77.58 per barrel, down \$2.88, or 3.6%, on the day. The last time the US crude benchmark fell more in a session

was on January 3, when it lost 4.2%. The latest slump came a day after WTI closed above \$80 in the previous session, the first time in three weeks.

London-traded Brent crude settled at \$83.29, down \$2.89, or 3.4%. Like WTI, the last time Brent fell more was on January 3, when it lost 4.4%. Tuesday's plunge came after the global crude benchmark settled above \$86 on Monday, the first time in three weeks.

The US Energy Information Administration forecast an average Brent price of \$83 for all of 2023 in its short-term energy outlook.

"Oil has had a nice start to the month, but lingering demand concerns and further oil inventory increases should cap this rebound," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said, referring to last week's jump of more than 4% in both WTI and Brent that was briefly extended by Monday's rally.

"Oil looks like it might need to trade in a range a little longer until we have a clearer outlook for the US economy," Moya said. "The debate over what type of recession will hit the US economy will not be answered in a couple of months' time, so we might see conservative calls for demand to remain healthy over the short-term."

Crude plunged as the dollar spiked, weighing on most commodities priced in the currency, after Fed Chair Jerome Powell warned that US rate hikes could end up being a lot higher than imagined as the fight against inflation had a long way to go.

"The ultimate level of interest rates is likely to be higher than previously anticipated," Powell said in the Fed's semi-annual testimony to Congress. "If the totality of the data were to indicate that faster tightening is warranted, we would be prepared to increase the pace of rate hikes."

Soon after the release of Powell's speech before its delivery in Congress, the Fed-funds-futures, which serve as a barometer for upcoming rate decisions, priced in a 50-basis point rate hike for March 22, when the central bank is to decide on the interest rate again. The Fed had been expected to adopt a rate hike of 25 basis points.

"It's interesting that he's leaving the 25 vs 50 bps debate open," economist Adam Button said, referring to Powell's comments, in a post on the ForexLive forum. "This is a greenlight for [greater] hiking."

The Consumer Price Index, a broad gauge of inflation, hit a 40-year high of 9.1% in the United States during the year to June. It has moderated since, to an annualized growth of 6.4% in January, but remains well above the Fed's target of just 2% per year.

To clamp down on runaway price growth, the Fed added 450 basis points to interest rates since March last year via eight hikes. Prior to that, rates stood at nearly zero after the global outbreak of the coronavirus in 2020.

The Fed's first post-COVID hike was a 25-basis point increase in March last year. It then moved up with a 50-basis point increase in May. After that, it executed four back-to-back jumbo-sized hikes of 75 basis points from June through November. Since then, it has returned to a more modest 50-basis point increase in December and a 25-basis point hike in February.

"Although inflation has been moderating in recent months, the process of getting inflation back down to 2 percent has a long way to go and is likely to be bumpy," Powell said. "Recent economic data, particularly inflationary pressures, have been stronger than expected."

One of the Fed's biggest challenges has been stellar jobs data as the nation's labor market continues to stun economists with outsized growth month after month.

Non-farm payrolls growth for January was the strongest since July 2022, when the Labor Department reported jobs creation at 528,000. Economists polled by US media had only forecast a jobs growth of 188,000 for January. The outperformance pushed down the unemployment to 3.4% from December's 3.5%.

While policy-makers the world over typically celebrate on seeing good jobs numbers, the Fed is in a different predicament. The central bank wishes to see an easing of conditions that are a little "too good" now for the economy's own good - in this case, unemployment at more than 50-year lows and average monthly wages that have grown without stop since March 2021. Such job security and earnings have cushioned many Americans from the worst price pressures since the 1980s and encouraged them to continue spending, further feeding inflation.

The US Labor Department will release the February non-farm payrolls report on Friday. Expectations are that the economy added 200,000 jobs last month, moderating from January's blistering jobs growth of 517,000, while the unemployment rate is expected to hold steady at a more than five-decade low of 3.4%.

Economists say monthly jobs numbers need to grow meaningfully below expectations to create some ding at least in employment and wage security which the Fed suggests are its biggest two headaches now in fighting inflation.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US State Department Spokesperson Price to Leave Post, Start Working for Blinken - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price will soon leave the position for a new role directly under Secretary of State Antony Blinken, NBC News reported, citing a statement from Blinken.

"On a personal level, I have constantly benefited from his counsel, as have so many members of the Department," Blinken is quoted as saying on Tuesday. "Fortunately, I'll be able to continue to do that."

Price will leave the spokesperson role later this month to take up his new position under Blinken, the report said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US State Department Spokesperson Price to Leave Post, Start Working for Blinken - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price will soon leave the position for a new role directly under Secretary of State Antony Blinken, NBC News reported, citing a statement from Blinken.

"On a personal level, I have constantly benefited from his counsel, as have so many members of the Department," Blinken is quoted as saying on Tuesday. "Fortunately, I'll be able to continue to do that."

Price will leave the spokesperson role later this month to take up his new position under Blinken, the report said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

OPEC Chief Says Concerned About Economic Slowdown in US, Europe Due to Inflation

HOUSTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is mostly concerned about an economic slowdown in Europe and the United States due to high inflation, OPEC Secretary-General Haitham Al Ghais said in a panel discussion during the CERAWEEK annual energy conference.

"What concerns us more is actually the slow down we see in Europe and the US in terms of the financial situation, inflation," Ghais said on Tuesday.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Redirection of Russian Oil to Asia Not of Concern to OPEC - OPEC Chief

HOUSTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The redirection of Russian oil to China and India does not concern the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) because demand is big enough to accommodate everyone, OPEC Secretary General Haitham Al Ghais said in a panel discussion during CERAWEEK.

"It's not something that really concerns us," Ghais said on Tuesday. "I think the market is actually big enough with demand improving."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Shortfall in Oil Investments May Lead to Energy Security, Affordability Issues -OPEC Chief

HOUSTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - A substantial shortfall in oil investments could create problems in the future in terms of energy security and affordability, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) Secretary-General Haitham Al Ghais said in a panel discussion during the CERAWEEK annual energy conference.

"We've seen a significant shortfall in investments in the oil sector, our latest world oil outlook we have produced recently shows there's \$12.1 trillion required investments in the oil sector," Ghais

said on Tuesday. "We're talking about over \$500 billion every year. We're not seeing those levels yet. Unless this happens, I'm afraid we could be facing issues in the future in energy security and affordability."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

OPEC Expects Oil Demand From China to Increase by 600,000 BPD in 2023 - Secretary General

HOUSTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) expects China's oil demand to increase by 600,000 barrels a day this year, OPEC Secretary-General Haitham Al Ghais said in a panel discussion during the CERAWEEK annual energy conference.

"We're quite optimistic, cautiously optimistic on China," Ghais said on Tuesday. "We figured China alone will account for about... 600,000 barrels a day on demand improvement."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

OPEC Expects Oil Demand to Increase by 2.3Mln Barrels Per Day in 2023 - Secretary General

HOUSTON, March 8 (Sputnik) - The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) expects oil demand to increase by 2.3 million barrels per day this year and mostly driven by an increase in demand from Asia, OPEC Secretary General Haitham Al Ghais said in a panel discussion during the CERAWEEK annual energy conference.

"Our latest forecasts show that demand will increase by 2.3 million barrels a day, year-on-year," Ghais said on Tuesday. "Most of that 2.3 million actually is in non-OECD [Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development] Asia, India, China. So there's phenomenal demand growth in Asia."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

CORRECTION - SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) -

US ECONOMY

* US interest rate hikes could end up being a lot higher than once imagined and the fight against inflation has a long way to go, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said on Tuesday.

* Raising the debt ceiling is the only way for Congress to avoid a US debt default and long-standing harm to the country's credit profile, Powell said.

* US oil production is expected to grow by 500,000 barrels per day in 2023, with most of it coming from the Permian Basin in West Texas, Oxy Energy Services President Frederick Forthuber told Sputnik.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Russian Defense Ministry said on Tuesday that 90 Russian servicemen had returned from Ukrainian captivity.

* Canada will allocate \$2.2 million for demining Ukraine and will extend engineering training through the fall, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said.

* Poland will transfer another ten Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine this week, Polish Defense Minister Mariusz Blaszczak said.

* There are no concrete plans for further supplies of Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine, Ukrainian tank brigades for the previously agreed number of tanks are currently being trained in Germany, Arne Collatz, a German Defense Ministry representative said.

* NATO's increasing arms supplies to Kiev do not lead to the success of Ukrainian troops on the battlefield, losses among the military personnel of Ukraine are growing, Russian Defense Minister Sergej Shoigu said.

NEW YORK TIMES REPORT ON NORD STREAM ATTACK

* New intelligence reviewed by US officials indicates that the saboteurs behind the attack on the Nord Stream pipelines were highly likely Ukrainian or Russian opponents of President Vladimir Putin, or some combination of the two, The New York Times reported on Tuesday, citing US officials.

* The German government told RIA Novosti it had taken note of the New York Times report about the likely involvement of a pro-Ukrainian group in the attacks on Nord Stream.

* The United States will let the European investigations into the attack on the Nord Stream pipeline to continue and will not get ahead of its results, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said.

* The UN Security Council will vote this month on Russia's resolution requesting that a commission be set up to investigate the Nord Stream blasts, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

* Investigators have identified the vessel from which the Nord Stream sabotage had been committed, traces lead to a company owned by Ukrainians, German newspaper Zeit reported.

GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS

* The G7 countries have set a price cap for Russian oil that does not really exist- if you look at the level of market prices, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday.

* The Kuwait Petroleum Corporation has not lost any oil market share in Asia to Russia, the company's CEO Nawaf Al-Sabah said.

* Kazakhstan's introduction of its own oil brand, KEBCO (Kazakhstan Export Blend Crude Oil), amid changes caused by rising geopolitical tensions in the world has allowed the country's

exporters to minimize sanctions risks, head of Kazakh state-run oil company KazMunayGas (KMG) Magzum Mirzagaliev has said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US OK's Potential \$1.381Bln Sale of Early Warning and Control Aircraft to Japan - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – The United States decided to approve a possible \$1.381 billion sale to Japan of E-2D Advanced Hawkeye Airborne Early Warning and Control Aircraft, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Tuesday.

“The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Japan of E-2D Advanced Hawkeye (AHE) Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) Aircraft and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$1.381 billion. The Defense Security Cooperation Agency delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale today,” the statement read.

Japan has requested to buy up to five E-2D Advanced Hawkeye Airborne Early Warning and Control Aircraft, twelve T56-A-427A Engines, six Multifunction Information Distribution System Joint Tactical Radio System Terminals, and five (5) APY-9 Radars, it added.

Tokyo also asked for five AN/AYK-27 Integrated Navigation Control and Display Systems, twelve LN-251 Embedded Global Positioning Systems/Inertial Navigation Systems with Embedded Airborne Selective Availability Anti-Spoofing Module or M-Code Receiver, and six ALQ-217 Electronic Support Measures Systems, according to the statement.

“Also included are aircraft ancillary equipment; modifications; spare and repair parts; support equipment; publications and technical documentation; software; personal protective equipment; personnel training and training equipment; ferry services; U.S. Government and contractor logistics, engineering, and technical support services; and other related elements of logistics and program support,” the statement said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

SPUTNIK TOP STORIES IF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Sputnik) -

US ECONOMY

* US interest rate hikes could end up being a lot higher than once imagined and the fight against inflation has a long way to go, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said on Tuesday.

* Raising the debt ceiling is the only way for Congress to avoid a US debt default and long-standing harm to the country's credit profile, Powell said.

* US oil production is expected to grow by 500,000 barrels per day in 2023, with most of it coming from the Permian Basin in West Texas, Oxy Energy Services President Frederick Forthuber told Sputnik.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Russian Defense Ministry said on Tuesday that 90 Russian servicemen had returned from Ukrainian captivity.

* Canada will allocate \$2.2 million for demining Ukraine and will extend engineering training through the fall, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said.

* Poland will transfer another ten Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine this week, Polish Defense Minister Mariusz Blaszczak said.

* There are no concrete plans for further supplies of Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine, Ukrainian tank brigades for the previously agreed number of tanks are currently being trained in Germany, Arne Collatz, a German Defense Ministry representative said.

* NATO's increasing arms supplies to Kiev do not lead to the success of Ukrainian troops on the battlefield, losses among the military personnel of Ukraine are growing, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

NEW YORK TIMES REPORT ON NORD STREAM ATTACK

* New intelligence reviewed by US officials indicates that the saboteurs behind the attack on the Nord Stream pipelines were highly likely Ukrainian or Russian opponents of President Vladimir Putin, or some combination of the two, The New York Times reported on Tuesday, citing US officials.

* The German government told RIA Novosti it had taken note of the New York Times report about the likely involvement of a pro-Ukrainian group in the attacks on Nord Stream.

* The United States will let the European investigations into the attack on the Nord Stream pipeline to continue and will not get ahead of its results, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said.

* The UN Security Council will vote this month on Russia's resolution requesting that a commission be set up to investigate the Nord Stream blasts, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

* Investigators have identified the vessel from which the Nord Stream sabotage had been committed, traces lead to a company owned by Ukrainians, German newspaper Zeit reported.

GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS

* The G7 countries have set a price cap for Russian oil that does not really exist- if you look at the level of market prices, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday.

* The Kuwait Petroleum Corporation has not lost any oil market share in Asia to Russia, the company's CEO Nawaf Al-Sabah said.

* Kazakhstan's introduction of its own oil brand, KEBCO (Kazakhstan Export Blend Crude Oil), amid changes caused by rising geopolitical tensions in the world has allowed the country's exporters to minimize sanctions risks, head of Kazakh state-run oil company KazMunayGas (KMG) Magzum Mirzagaliev has said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

White House Supports Bill in US Congress to Address Foreign Tech Threat - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The White House supports an effort in the US Congress to pass legislation granting new authorities to address threats posed by foreign technology, such as TikTok, to the United States, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Tuesday. "We applaud the bipartisan group of Senators, led by Senators [Mark] Warner and [John] Thune, who today introduced the Restricting the Emergence of Security Threats that Risk Information and Communications Technology (RESTRICT) Act," Sullivan said in a statement. "This bill presents a systematic framework for addressing technology-based threats to the security and safety of Americans."

The legislation would empower the US government to prevent certain foreign governments from exploiting technology services operating in the US in a way that poses risks to Americans' sensitive data and US national security, the statement said. The legislation comes amid concerns about ties between TikTok and the Chinese government.

The Biden administration looks forward to working with both parties in Congress to pass the legislation, the statement added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Senator McConnell Says Biden Tax Plan on Medicare Will Not See 'Light of Day'

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said on Tuesday that his colleagues in Congress will not adopt President Joe Biden's tax plan on Medicare.

"Massive tax increases, more spending... will not see the light of day," McConnell told reporters. The senator explained that Biden's budget is "replete" with what the Democrats would do if they could.

"Thank goodness, the House [of Representatives] is Republican," McConnell added.

On Sunday, the White House said Biden will unveil his budget proposal for fiscal year 2024 on March 9 during a visit to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

As expected, Biden will propose a plan that he claimed would increase taxes solely for the wealthiest Americans to support Medicare.

According to media reports, the draft budget proposal to the US Congress is unlikely to be enacted, as Republicans control the US House of Representatives and are opposed to it.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Has Full Faith, Confidence in Partners' Probe Into Nord Stream Sabotage - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is fully confident in the investigation being carried out by its close partners into the attack on the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"These are close partners of ours who are investigating the blast. We have full faith and confidence in the investigation that they're running," Price said.

Earlier in the day, the New York Times reported, citing US officials, that new intelligence suggested a "pro-Ukrainian group" had carried out the attacks on the Nord Stream pipelines. A few hours later, the German newspaper Zeit reported that the investigators had identified the vessel used to carry out the attack on the pipelines.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Europe's Energy Crisis Not Over, May Get Worse - Energy Investment Banker

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Europe's energy crisis is not over and may get worse, Guggenheim Securities Senior Managing Director Michael LaMotte said on Tuesday.

"Europe may have got through this winter surprisingly well but I don't think we're out of the woods yet. It's actually going to get worse before they get better," LaMotte said in a panel discussion during CERAWeek in Houston.

LaMotte mentioned that currently there is no functionality in the gas market because of infrastructure constraints, which may take years to solve.

However, LaMotte said there is talk about doubling or even tripling Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) export capacity in the United States.

Russia is off limits to western resources of capital for now in light of the Ukraine conflict, LaMotte noted.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Allocates Additional \$26Mln in Humanitarian Aid for Rohingya Refugees - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - The United States has announced an additional \$26 million in humanitarian assistance for Rohingya in Myanmar and in host communities in Bangladesh, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"Earlier today, at the launch of the 2023 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh, the United States announced nearly \$26 million in additional humanitarian assistance for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and the region, for those people in Burma

affected by the ongoing violence and for the communities hosting refugees from Burma," Price said.

Earlier on Tuesday, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said financial aid in the amount of \$125 million is needed to support the 1.4 million Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh.

Myanmar's Rohingya refugees currently living in Bangladesh are getting assistance from that country's government and the international community, but their needs are "immense" and can be fully satisfied only with constant support, the statement added.

The Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic group that mainly resides in Myanmar's Rakhine state, do not have Myanmar citizenship in the predominantly Buddhist country because they are considered to be illegal migrants from Bangladesh.

The mass illegal migration of Rohingya to Bangladesh began in 2017 after a massive operation by the Myanmar armed forces in Rakhine against Rohingya rebels who attacked several police posts and army bases. More than 700,000 Rohingya have since fled to Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

State Dept. on Georgia Protests Says US Has Tools to Take Action Over Human Rights Abuses (Adds details, background in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday commenting on the current protests over the bill on foreign agents in Georgia that the United States has tools that would allow it to hold responsible anyone in any nation for violating human rights.

Georgian police earlier on Tuesday reportedly used tear gas on demonstrators protesting against a bill on foreign agents that is under consideration by parliament.

"We have a number of tools within our purview that would allow us to hold accountable anyone in any country around the world who is responsible for the suppression of what would otherwise be a universal human right," Price said at a press briefing.

Price said Washington has been closely following the developments in Georgia and has seen the reports coming from Tbilisi that protesters have been met with tear gas and other efforts to suppress the protest against this draft "so-called foreign agents legislation."

Price said the US is deeply concerned over the legislation which could silence independent voices.

The bill on Transparency of Foreign Influence was submitted to the Georgian parliament in late February. It envisages making a list of non-governmental organizations, media and subjects getting financial support from a foreign state.

The representatives of the ruling Georgian Dream party, which has a parliament majority, said that they would support the new bill and try to overcome the presidential veto, in the event it takes place. Opposition thinks the bill alienates the country from the European Union.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Sullivan Meets With South Korean Counterpart, Discusses Yoon Visit - White House

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with Republic of Korea (ROK) counterpart Kim Sung-han to discuss preparations for ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol's upcoming state visit to the United States, the White House said on Tuesday. "[Sullivan and Kim] discussed preparations for the upcoming State Visit by ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol and First Lady Kim Keon Hee on April 26, 2023 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the US-ROK alliance and deepen US-ROK political, economic, security, and people-to-people ties," the White House said in a statement.

Sullivan also welcomed news of the historic breakthrough between the ROK and Japan to resolve historical issues and increase cooperation, the statement said.

Sullivan and Kim also discussed how to maintain close cooperation to further enhance security ties and respond to changes to the threat environment in the Indo-Pacific region, the statement said.

The two officials talked about efforts to advance peace and stability globally, including support for Ukraine, the statement said.

Sullivan and Kim emphasized continued US-ROK cooperation to advance their technology leadership, respond to economic coercion and address supply chain vulnerabilities, the statement added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

State Dept. on Georgia Protests Says US Has Tools to Take Action Over Human Rights Abuses

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday commenting on the current protests over the bill on foreign agents in Georgia that the United States has tools that would allow it to hold responsible anyone in any nation for violating human rights.

Georgian police earlier on Tuesday reportedly used tear gas on demonstrators protesting against a bill on foreign agents that is under consideration by parliament.

"We have a number of tools within our purview that would allow us to hold accountable anyone in any country around the world who is responsible for the suppression of what would otherwise be a universal human right," Price said at a press briefing.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Treasury Official Confirms G7 Will Reevaluate Price Cap on Russian Oil in March

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury's Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes Elizabeth Rosenberg confirmed to Sputnik on Tuesday that the Group of Seven will reevaluate the price cap on Russian oil in March to determine if any recalibration is needed, but did not disclose if they believe it is working to sway Russia's policy.

"All I can say right now is that G7 is planning to reevaluate it in March," Rosenberg said on the margins at CERAWeek.

Rosenberg said she did not have any comment when asked about whether they believe the price cap will influence Russia's policy.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ukraine Asked West to Be Mindful About Price Cap on Russian Diesel - US Treasury

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Ukraine asked the Group of Seven (G-7) countries to be mindful about placing a price cap on Russian diesel because it is critical for domestic energy needs and for vehicles on the battlefield, Assistant Treasury Secretary for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes Elizabeth Rosenberg said on Tuesday.

"Diesel in particular, this is closer to the end user... the Ukrainians themselves who are not shy about saying as our electricity grid is attacked, it's diesel that runs the generators that turns it back on, and that goes into the tanks on the front[line], so you know, please be mindful if you want to help us," Rosenberg said during a panel discussion at the CERAWeek annual energy conference.

Rosenberg added that Ukraine's requests helped the coalition immediately figure out the right limit for the price cap.

After Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine, the countries of the so-called collective West actively searched for ways to limit Moscow's energy-related income, notably from oil and gas. The effort culminated in a \$60 price cap imposed by the G7 member states and Australia on December 5.

In response to the price cap, Moscow banned the supply of Russian oil and petroleum products if contracts directly or indirectly provide for a price cap, in a decree signed by President Vladimir Putin in late December.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

White House Says Biden Updated on Attack on Americans in Mexico, Engaged on Issue

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has been updated on an attack on four US citizens in Mexico that left two killed and one other wounded after the group was

reportedly abducted by a cartel, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday.

"We're still working with Mexican officials to learn more and to have all Americans returned to the United States," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing. "President Biden has been kept updated on this incident. Senior members of the White House have also been engaged."

Earlier on Tuesday, the governor of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, Americo Villarreal Anaya, confirmed that two of the four Americans were killed and one other wounded.

The four US citizens from South Carolina reportedly entered Mexico for medical purposes, but may have been abducted by a cartel who mistook them as Haitian drug dealers.

Jean-Pierre also said attacks on US citizens are unacceptable no matter where or under what circumstances they happen.

The Biden administration, she added, will continue to work closely with the Mexican government to pursue justice in the case.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Discusses Middle East Issues in Call With Oman's Sultan Haitham - White House

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tariq al Said discussed a range of issues related to the Middle East during a call on Tuesday, the White House said.

"The two leaders reaffirmed the longstanding historical ties between our countries and peoples, and discussed mutual efforts to forge a more prosperous, peaceful, and integrated Middle East region," the White House said in a statement.

Biden thanked Sultan Haitham for his leadership and support for the UN-mediated truce in Yemen, the statement said.

Biden also welcomed Oman's recent decision to open its airspace to all civilian aircraft, including those flying to and from Israel, the statement said.

Both leaders committed to strengthening the US-Oman strategic partnership, trade opportunities and cooperation on clean and secure energy, the statement said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Yellen Says Climate Change to Be Source of Shocks to Financial System in Coming Years

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – Climate change may turn into a source of shocks to the financial system in the years to come, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Tuesday.

"Climate change will likely become a source of shocks to the financial system in the coming years," Yellen said at the first meeting of the climate-related Financial Risk Advisory Committee.

She noted that natural disasters and warming temperatures can lead to declines in asset values that could cascade through the financial system. Delayed and disorderly transition to a net-zero economy could lead to shocks to the financial system as well, she added.

Yellen warned that the risks are not hypothetical and are already having a negative impact on the US economy.

"In the United States, there's been at least a five-fold increase in the annual number of billion-dollar disasters over the past five years compared to the 1980s, even after adjusting for inflation. States like California, Florida, and Louisiana recently have seen especially severe storms and wildfires," she noted.

The secretary emphasized that the disasters are taking a "terrible toll" on the economy. Some insurers are raising rates or even leaving high-risk areas.

Yellen warned that such developments could spill over to other parts of the interconnected financial system. Yellen stressed the need to take climate change into account. She expressed the hope that the government will be able to increase the resilience of the US financial system to climate change effects.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UNSC to Vote in March on Russian Resolution Seeking Probe Into Nord Stream Blast - Mission

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will vote this month on Russia's resolution requesting that a commission be set up to investigate the Nord Stream blasts, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Tuesday.

"There have been 3 rounds of expert consultations on the draft, the vote will definitely take place by the end of March," Polyanskiy wrote on social media.

The recent New York Times report claiming that a pro-Ukraine sabotage group was behind the blasts proves that Russia is right to push for the probe, the diplomat added.

Earlier in the day, The New York Times reported that the saboteurs were most likely Ukrainian or Russian nationals, the report also said, adding that no US or UK nationals were involved.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Canada Investing \$2.2Mln on Demining Ukraine - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Canada will allocate C\$3 million (\$2.2 million) for demining Ukraine and will extend engineering training through the fall, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced on Tuesday.

"Today, I can announce that we are extending our engineering training as part of the Operation Unifier until at least the fall," Trudeau said during a joint press conference with European

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. "We are also investing C\$3 Million for de-mining in Ukraine and working with the EU to deliver energy equipment to Ukraine for the power grid."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

EU Gives Canada Partner Status in Export Controls, Sanctions Against Russia - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The European Union has given Canada the status of a partner nation in its regime of export controls and sanctions against Russia, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced on Tuesday.

"The European Union has given Canada the status of partner country in its regime on export controls and sanctions against Russia," Trudeau said during the joint press conference with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. "This will reinforce our cooperation on enforcing sanctions. As I told President von der Leyen, Canada will remain in solidarity with Ukraine as long as needed."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Kuwait Has Not Lost Oil Sales to Russia in Asia Market - CEO

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The Kuwait Petroleum Corporation has not lost any oil market share in Asia to Russia, the company's CEO Nawaf Al-Sabah said on Tuesday.

"We have not lost a single barrel of market share in Asia, all of our crude is essentially sold in Asia right now, we have not lost a single barrel of market share," Sabah said at a press conference during the CERAWEEK annual energy gathering.

Sabah emphasized that Kuwait Petroleum Corporation's customers are loyal and relations with them have been established over decades.

In addition, Sabah said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation has been able to capture market share in Europe as the region seeks to strengthen its energy security.

After Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine, the countries of the so-called collective West have actively searched for ways to limit Russia's energy-related income, notably from oil and gas, after Moscow started a special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The effort culminated with the West imposing a \$60 price-cap on Russian oil on December 5.

In response, Moscow banned the supply of Russian oil and petroleum products if contracts directly or indirectly provide for a price cap.

US Deputy Energy Secretary David Turk said last month that the price cap imposed on Russian oil has benefited countries around the world because it has kept purchasing costs low, including for countries in Africa and Latin America.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Sues to Block JetBlue From Acquiring Spirit Airlines for \$3.8 Billion - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department announced on Tuesday that it has filed a lawsuit to block the acquisition of Spirit Airlines, one of the major low-cost air carriers in the United States, by JetBlue Airways for \$3.8 billion.

"The Justice Department, together with Attorneys General of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the State of New York and the District of Columbia, filed a civil antitrust lawsuit today to block JetBlue Airways Corporation's (JetBlue) proposed \$3.8 billion acquisition of its largest and fastest-growing ultra-low-cost rival, Spirit Airlines, Inc. (Spirit)," the statement read. The two air carriers serve millions of travelers and the proposed merger would significantly increase airfares, the statement said.

"As our complaint alleges, the merger of JetBlue and Spirit would result in higher fares and fewer choices for tens of millions of travelers, with the greatest impact felt by those who rely on what are known as ultra-low-cost carriers in order to fly," US Attorney General Merrick Garland said in the statement.

Garland called on private business in all industries to be aware that the Justice Department will not hesitate to enforce antitrust laws in order to protect consumers, the statement said.

The airline industry is already highly consolidated and another step forward in this direction would increase fares and overall costs as well as reduce the choice of available routes across the United States, the statement added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UN Chief Spoke to Vershinin Prior to Leaving on Ukraine Trip - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres spoke to Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin prior to his travels to Ukraine and he is willing to go wherever he is needed to meet with officials, UN Spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Tuesday.

"I would like to point out that prior to leaving New York, the Secretary-General did have a conversation with Sergey Vershinin, the deputy foreign minister of the Russian Federation," Haq told the reporters.

The Secretary-General, he added, is open to meet other officials as opportunities arise and willing to go wherever he is needed.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ex-US Senator on Nord Stream Attack Report: US Only Nation That Could Have Carried it Out

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Former Virginia State Senator Richard Black told Sputnik, commenting on the latest report by the New York Times on the Nord Stream pipelines attack, that the United States is the only country that could have done it.

Earlier on Tuesday, the New York Times reported that US officials said intelligence indicated a pro-Ukrainian group was behind the attacks on the Nord Stream pipelines last year. The saboteurs were most likely Ukrainian or Russian nationals, the report also said, adding that no US or UK nationals were involved.

"The day after the blasts, I commented publicly that the U.S. was the only nation that could have carried this out," Black said when asked to comment on the report. "Even a child could see it wasn't Russia and no NATO country would dare act without U.S. approval, since the U.S. leads and dominates NATO."

The New York Times' report comes on the heels of a report by Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh detailing the US's alleged involvement in the destruction of the Nord Stream pipelines, which provided a substantial amount of gas to Germany.

"There's no question Seymour's article is accurate," Black said. "Seymour Hersh is the most respected investigative journalist on international affairs. I don't agree with him on everything, but his investigative reports are thorough and objective."

The Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines, built to deliver gas under the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany, have been inoperable since they were hit by explosions last September. Nord Stream's operator, Nord Stream AG, said that the damage was unprecedented and it was impossible to estimate the time repairs might take.

Russia considers the explosions of the two pipelines an act of international terrorism. There are no official results of the investigation yet, but US journalist and Pulitzer Prize winner Seymour Hersh alleged that the explosions were organized by the United States with the support of Norway. Following Hersh's report, Moscow has reiterated its calls for an impartial and thorough investigation. The US denies its involvement in the incident.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UPDATE - Two of 4 US Citizens Abducted in Mexico Were Killed, 2 Others Found Alive - Governor

(Updates with more details in paras 7-9)

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Two of the four US citizens recently abducted in Mexico were killed and the other two were found alive, the governor of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, Americo Villarreal Anaya, said on Tuesday.

Public Safety Secretary Rosa Icela Rodriguez informed President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador during a press briefing earlier that she had been informed by Villarreal that the four US citizens who were abducted on Friday had been found.

"This was fully confirmed by the prosecutor's office - out of four, two perished, and one is wounded. Right now, ambulances and security services have been sent to provide the required support, transport, and assistance," Villareal said.

Obrador thanked Villarreal for his report, adding that Rodriguez would give a more detailed account of the situation later on Tuesday.

The Mexican president also said in response to the White House saying the situation was unacceptable that the US government had the right to condemn the incident.

"We're working everyday to guarantee peace and tranquility. We will continue to work on it, and we deeply lament what happened in our country," Obrador said as he expressed sympathies to the families and friends of the victims as well as to the US government.

However, Obrador also criticized the US government and partisan interests for using such events, while helped by wide media coverage, for political gain.

"When they kill Mexicans in the United States, they become silent, like mummies," Obrador said referring to a case his government dealt with last month involving the murder of two Mexican laborers by farmers near San Francisco, California.

Obrador said he would not allow any state to intervene in the internal affairs of Mexico, noting that the country does not investigate criminal organizations working in the United States but cooperates with Washington on suppressing crime while respecting US sovereignty.

On Friday, four US citizens from South Carolina, who had reportedly crossed the border into Mexico for medical procedures and to buy medicines, were abducted by a cartel who may have mistaken them for Haitian drug dealers.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Global Oil Market Expected to Remain in Balance First Half of 2023 - Kuwait Oil CEO

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The global oil market is expected to remain in balance for the first half of this year, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation's CEO Nawaf Al-Sabah said on Tuesday.

"So far it looks like the market will remain in balance at least for the first half of this year," Sabah said in a press conference during CERAWEEK.

However, Al-Sabah pointed out that the oil industry is mindful about a potential recession and what effect that might have on the market, and whether interest rate increases will continue, which can curb demand growth.

Earlier on Tuesday, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said during a congressional hearing that US interest rate hikes could end up being a lot higher than once imagined and the fight against inflation has a long way to go.

Soon after the release of Powell's speech before its delivery in Congress, the Fed-funds-futures - which serves as a barometer for upcoming rate decisions — priced in a 50-basis point hike for March 22, when the central bank is to decide on rates again. Prior to that, the Fed had been expected to adopt a hike of just 25 basis points.

As of Tuesday afternoon, the West Texas Intermediate crude lists a barrel at \$78.03, down \$2.43, while Brent crude lists a barrel at \$83.93, down \$2.25.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Kuwait Petroleum CEO Al-Sabah Says Chinese Oil Demand Uptick 'Sustainable'

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The spike in Chinese demand for oil is sustainable despite concerns it will tighten global supply, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation's CEO Nawaf Al-Sabah said on Tuesday.

"When people said whether the Chinese demand uptick that's happening right now is sustainable or not...it is a sustainable demand," Sabah said during a press conference at CERAWEEK.

Moreover, Sabah said the Kuwaiti oil firm will be able to make additional supply available as demand increases.

Kuwait Petroleum Corporation sells over 600,000 barrels of crude oil to China, he added. Chinese demand is expected to grow after the Chinese government targeted a 5% growth rate this year as Beijing has rolled back pandemic-related measures.

As of Tuesday afternoon, the West Texas Intermediate crude lists a barrel at \$78.03, down \$2.43, while Brent crude lists a barrel at \$83.93, down \$2.25.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Stance on Bilateral Ties With China Same, Seeks Strategic Competition With Beijing -NSC

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Washington's posture on its bilateral relationship with China has not changed and it is seeking a strategic competition with Beijing, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Tuesday while commenting on the recent statements made by China's top diplomat.

"We seek a strategic competition with China, we do not seek conflict, and there is nothing about our approach to this most consequential of bilateral relationships that should lead anybody to think that we want conflict... There's been no change to our one China policy, no. We do not support independence for Taiwan," Kirby said. "With all due respect to the Chinese Foreign Minister, there is no change to the United States posture when it comes to this bilateral relationship."

Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang said at an annual press conference on Tuesday that if the United States continues to follow a wrong path in its China policy, it will lead to confrontation,.

He said the US constantly talks about the need to comply with rules, but is itself engaged in unfair competition.

Qin said the recent incident with a Chinese balloon in the sky over the United States showed that Washington views China as its main rival.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Congressman Himes Says 'Not Quite Ready' to Support Complete Ban of TikTok

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Jim Himes, who is a member of the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee, said on Tuesday that he is not yet ready to support telling Americans to stop using TikTok amid allegations that the Chinese application is used for spying.

"I'm not quite ready to say that I'm supportive of telling every American that they can't use TikTok, but I do think that it's a no-brainer that anybody in a sensitive position should not have it [TikTok] anywhere near their devices," Himes said.

Banning TikTok for more than 300 million US citizens could set a precedent, Himes said without specifying whether the US federal government may seek to ban other media platforms under the pretext of defending democracy.

On Monday, US media reported that Democrats would table in the US Senate a bipartisan bill to give President Joe Biden the authority to act against TikTok.

The highly-anticipated bill, which is expected to be unveiled on Tuesday afternoon by Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Mark Warner, will allow Biden to respond to threats posed by TikTok and companies like it, the report said.

The latest action comes nearly two years after Biden canceled in June 2021 former President Donald Trump's ban of TikTok and another Chinese platform WeChat and signed his own executive order to protect US information technology and communications supply chains from alleged threats that include those from China.

The ban on TikTok and WeChat was part of a long-running diplomatic and trade war waged by the Trump administration against China prior to Biden's term, which began in January 2021.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

White House Will Not Comment on New Nord Stream Attack Reports - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - The United States will let the European investigations into the attack on the Nord Stream pipeline to continue and will not get ahead of its results, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday commenting on the latest New York Times report.

The New York Times reported that US officials said intelligence indicated a pro-Ukrainian group was behind attacks on the Nord Stream pipelines last year. The saboteurs were most likely Ukrainian or Russian nationals, the report also said, adding that no US or UK nationals were involved.

"Several of our European partners, in fact three of them - Germany, Sweden, Denmark - have already opened investigations into what happened with the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and those investigations are not closed," Kirby said. "I'm just not going to get ahead of that investigative work and I'd have to refer you to each of those European countries to comment on their investigations."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Congressman Admits to Existence of Labs in US That Work With 'Terribly Dangerous' Viruses

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - There are laboratories in the United States that work with "terribly dangerous" viruses and China should be forthcoming in getting to the truth about whether a laboratory leak started the coronavirus pandemic, US Congressman Jim Himes said on Tuesday.

"If it turns out to have been a lab leak, we need to really understand how that happened, and the Chinese certainly do because it cannot happen again, and, by the way, we have labs that handle terribly, terribly dangerous viruses too. So, there's a lot of learning that could occur if we got to the truth. To get to the truth, we're going to need the Chinese to be forthcoming," Himes said.

In February, the US Energy Department, which runs a network of national bioresearch laboratories, joined the FBI in claiming that the COVID-19 pandemic emerged from a test tube in a laboratory in Wuhan, China. FBI Director Christopher Wray also said in an interview that the novel coronavirus most likely originated from a potential mishap at a lab in Wuhan.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Two of 4 US Citizens Abducted in Mexico Killed, 2 Others Found Alive - Governor
(Updates with more details, background in paras 2, 4-7)

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Two of the four US citizens abducted in Mexico were killed and the other two have been found alive, the governor of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, Americo Villarreal Anaya, said on Tuesday.

Public Safety Secretary Rosa Icela Rodriguez informed President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador during a daily morning press briefing that she had been informed by Villarreal that the four US citizens who were abducted on Friday had been found.

"This was fully confirmed by the prosecutor's office - out of the four, two perished and one is wounded. Right now, ambulances and security services have been sent to provide the required support, transport and assistance," Villarreal said.

Obrador thanked Villarreal for his report, adding that Rodriguez would give a more detailed account of the situation later on Tuesday.

The Mexican president also said in response to the White House saying the situation was unacceptable that the US government had the right to condemn the incident.

"We're working everyday to guarantee peace and tranquility. We will continue to work on it, and we deeply lament what happened in our country," Obrador said as he expressed sympathies to the families and friends of the victims as well as to the US government.

However, Obrador also criticized the hypocrisy of the US government for not condemning the recent killing of four Mexican citizens in San Francisco, California.

On Friday, four US citizens from South Carolina, who had reportedly crossed the border into Mexico for medical procedures and to buy medicines, were abducted by a cartel who may have mistaken them for Haitian drug dealers.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Hersh Laughs, Declines to Comment on Report That Pro-Ukraine Group Sabotaged Nord Stream

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh declined to comment to Sputnik on a New York Times report released Tuesday that claimed an independent pro-Ukrainian group sabotaged the Nord Stream pipelines.

"Well, I'm just looking at it. Gee, the sources aren't named," Hersh told Sputnik on Tuesday, laughing. "I've got nothing to say."

The New York Times report, which cited anonymous US officials, claimed that intelligence indicated that a pro-Ukrainian group was behind attacks on the Nord Stream pipelines last year. The saboteurs were most likely Ukrainian or Russian nationals, the report also said, adding that no US or UK nationals were involved.

Earlier this year, Hersh published a report assigning responsibility for the attacks to the United States and its allies. However, the Biden administration has denied involvement in the attacks.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Hersh Laughs, Declines to Comment on Report That Pro-Ukraine Group Sabotaged Nord Stream

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh declined to comment to Sputnik on a New York Times report released Tuesday that claimed an independent pro-Ukrainian group sabotaged the Nord Stream pipelines.

"Well, I'm just looking at it. Gee, the sources aren't named," Hersh told Sputnik on Tuesday, laughing. "I've got nothing to say."

The New York Times report, which cited anonymous US officials, claimed that intelligence indicated that a pro-Ukrainian group was behind attacks on the Nord Stream pipelines last year.

The saboteurs were most likely Ukrainian or Russian nationals, the report also said, adding that no US or UK nationals were involved.

Earlier this year, Hersh published a report assigning responsibility for the attacks to the United States and its allies. However, the Biden administration has denied involvement in the attacks.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Raising Debt Ceiling 'Only Way' for US to Avoid Default, Long-Standing Harm - Powell

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Raising the debt ceiling is the “only way” for Congress to avoid a US debt default and long-standing harm to the country’s credit profile, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said Tuesday.

In a question-and-answer session during his biannual testimony to Congress, Powell made clear as custodian of US monetary policy, it was not his job to advise lawmakers on balance of payments, a function that comes under the Treasury. Yet, he said a debt default would have an enormous negative impact on the United States and its people.

“We do not seek to play a role in these policy issues, but at the end of the day, there's only one solution to this problem and that is ... Congress really needs to raise the debt ceiling,” Powell said. “That's the only way out, in a timely way that allows us to pay all of our bills when asked to. And if we fail to do so, I think the consequences are hard to estimate. But they could be extraordinarily adverse and could do long-standing harm.”

The debt limit drama has become a yearly political fight in Congress between the Democrats, who say spending is crucial for social programs and to grow the economy, versus Republicans, who accuse their rivals of reckless wastage.

A drawn-out struggle to raise the nation’s debt ceiling in 2011 triggered a financial crisis that culminated in major credit rating agency Standard & Poor's stripping the United States of its top triple-A credit status.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen informed Congress in January that the department had found a workaround to the debt default by delaying payment on non-critical obligations. The actions will buy the country time until Congress can pass legislation that will either raise the nation’s \$31.4 trillion borrowing authority or suspend the limit for a period of time.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Intel Suggests Nord Stream Saboteurs Were Most Likely Ukrainians or Russians - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - New intelligence reviewed by US officials indicates that the saboteurs behind the attack on the Nord Stream pipelines were highly likely Ukrainian or Russian opponents of President Vladimir Putin, or some combination of the two, The New York Times reported on Tuesday, citing US officials.

Neither US nor UK nationals were involved in the attack, the American officials said. In addition, US officials told the newspaper that they have not found any evidence of involvement by the Russian government in the attack.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Africa Open to Investment Opportunities From Russian Firms - Uganda Oil Firm CEO

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Africa is open to investment opportunities from Russian companies, Uganda National Oil Company Limited CEO Proscovia Nabbanja told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"I think Africa is open to investment opportunities although we haven't had any Russian companies participate in the oil and gas sector," Nabbanja said on the sidelines at CERAWeek. Nabbanja added that some key companies investing in Africa's energy sector include TotalEnergies, China National Offshore Oil Corporation, Oriental Energy, among others. Nabbanja and several other African energy leaders underscored during a panel discussion that the region needs investors to bolster its energy infrastructure and production. In February, Russian ambassador-at-large and the head of the Russia-Africa partnership forum Oleg Ozerov told Sputnik that Russia has much potential in the oil and gas sectors to develop relations with African states.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Africa Must Meet Local Demand Before Contributing to Europe's Energy Needs - Oil Firm CEO

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Africa must fulfill its local demand before it is able to become a key partner contributing to Europe's energy security, Uganda National Oil Company Limited CEO Proscovia Nabbanja told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"Today, we have so much demand locally that we need to fulfill - we need to fulfill the local demand of petroleum products for refining, but at the same time also export a reasonable amount to the international market," Nabbanja said on the margins of CERAWeek annual energy conference.

Nabbanja and several other African energy leaders underscored during a panel discussion that the region needs investors to bolster its energy infrastructure and production.

The Ukraine conflict has reportedly made Africa an attractive investment opportunity for energy security after the region had some exploration successes in 2022.

In February, Russian ambassador-at-large and the head of the Russia-Africa partnership forum Oleg Ozerov told Sputnik that Russia has much potential in the oil and gas spheres to develop relations with African states.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Norfolk Southern Says Employee 'Fatally Injured' as Train Crashes Into Truck in Ohio

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Norfolk Southern said in a statement on Tuesday that one of its train conductors has died as a result of a train collision with a dump truck at the Cleveland-Cliffs Cleveland Works property in the US state of Ohio earlier in the day.

"Norfolk Southern Corporation stated that Louis Shuster, a Norfolk Southern conductor, was fatally injured early Tuesday morning at the Cleveland-Cliffs Cleveland Works property in Cleveland, Ohio. At this time, officials are reporting that the conductor was struck by a dump truck as a Norfolk Southern train was moving through a crossing at the facility," the statement said.

The statement added that the company is working with the Cleveland Police Department and Cleveland Cliffs representatives to confirm the details and learn about the incident.

The incident is the latest one in a series of train derailments and accidents over the past months. On February 3, a train hauling 20 cars with hazardous materials from Norfolk Southern derailed in East Palestine, Ohio. A big fire erupted due to the derailment, leading to officials to burn the vinyl chloride inside of five of the tanker cars in order to avoid a catastrophic explosion. The accident released toxic chemicals, including hydrogen chloride, phosgene, butyl acrylate and ethylene, into the environment.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

New Intelligence Suggests Pro-Ukrainian Group Sabotaged Nord Stream Pipelines - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - New data assessed by the US intelligence community claims that the attack on the Nord Stream pipelines was conducted by a pro-Ukrainian group, the New York Times reported, citing US officials.

The report noted that the US officials did not have any evidence on whether President Volodymyr Zelenskyy or his top lieutenants were involved in the operation or if the perpetrators acted at the direction of any Ukrainian government officials.

According to the report, this is the first significant lead that has emerged from the investigation and could result in implications for the coalition supporting Ukraine, especially in Germany, as the German public has been enduring high energy prices 'in the name of solidarity.'

The newspaper also said in its report that US officials said there was much they did not know about the perpetrators of the attacks. However, a review of new data suggests they were opponents of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Africa Must Meet Local Demand Before Contributing to Europe's Energy Needs - Oil Firm CEO

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Africa must fulfill its local demand before it is able to become a key partner contributing to Europe's energy security, Uganda National Oil Company Limited CEO Proscovia Nabbanja told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"Today, we have so much demand locally that we need to fulfill - we need to fulfill the local demand of petroleum products for refining, but at the same time also export a reasonable amount to the international market," Nabbanja said on the margins of CERAWEEK annual energy conference.

Nabbanja and several other African energy leaders underscored during a panel discussion that the region needs investors to bolster its energy infrastructure and production.

The Ukraine conflict has reportedly made Africa an attractive investment opportunity for energy security after the region had some exploration successes in 2022.

In February, Russian ambassador-at-large and the head of the Russia-Africa partnership forum Oleg Ozerov told Sputnik that Russia has much potential in the oil and gas spheres to develop relations with African states.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

New Intelligence Suggests Pro-Ukrainian Group Sabotaged Nord Stream Pipelines - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - New data assessed by the US intelligence community claims that the attack on the Nord Stream pipelines was conducted by a pro-Ukrainian group, the New York Times reported, citing US officials.

The report noted that the US officials did not have any evidence on whether President Volodymyr Zelenskyy or his top lieutenants were involved in the operation or if the perpetrators acted at the direction of any Ukrainian government officials.

According to the report, this is the first significant lead that has emerged from the investigation and could result in implications for the coalition supporting Ukraine, especially in Germany, as the German public has been enduring high energy prices 'in the name of solidarity.'

The newspaper also said in its report that US officials said there was much they did not know about the perpetrators of the attacks. However, a review of new data suggests they were opponents of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Rate Hikes Likely Higher Than Previously Thought, Long Way in Inflation Fight - Powell
(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-13)

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US interest rate hikes could end up being a lot higher than once imagined and the fight against inflation has a long way to go, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said on Tuesday.

"The ultimate level of interest rates is likely to be higher than previously anticipated," Powell said in the Fed's semi-annual testimony to Congress. "If the totality of the data were to indicate that faster tightening is warranted, we would be prepared to increase the pace of rate hikes."

Soon after the release of Powell's speech before its delivery in Congress, the Fed-funds-futures — which serves as a barometer for upcoming rate decisions — priced in a 50-basis point hike for March 22, when the central bank is to decide on rates again. Prior to that, the Fed had been expected to adopt a hike of just 25 basis points.

"It's interesting that he's leaving the 25 vs 50 bps debate open," economist Adam Button said, referring to Powell's comments, in a post on the ForexLive forum. "This is a greenlight for [greater] hiking."

The Consumer Price Index, a broad gauge of inflation, hit a 40-year high of 9.1% in the United States during the year to June. It has moderated since, to an annualized growth of 6.4% in January, but remains well above the Fed's target of just 2% per year.

To clamp down on runaway price growth, the Fed added 450 basis points to interest rates since March last year via eight hikes. Prior to that, rates stood at nearly zero after the global outbreak of the coronavirus in 2020.

The Fed's first post-COVID rate hike was a 25-basis point increase in March last year. It then moved up with a 50-basis point increase in May. After that, it executed four back-to-back hikes of 75 basis points from June through November. Since, it has returned to a more modest 50-basis point increase in December and a 25-basis point hike in February.

"Although inflation has been moderating in recent months, the process of getting inflation back down to 2 percent has a long way to go and is likely to be bumpy," Powell said. "Recent economic data, particularly inflationary pressures, have been stronger than expected."

One of the Fed's biggest challenges has been stellar jobs data as the nation's labor market continues to stun economists with stupendous month after month.

Non-farm payrolls growth for last month was the strongest since July 2022, when the Labor Department reported jobs creation at 528,000. Economists polled by US media had only forecast a jobs growth of 188,000 for January. The outperformance pushed down the unemployment to 3.4% from December's 3.5%.

While policy-makers the world over typically celebrate on seeing good jobs numbers, the Fed is in a different predicament. The central bank wishes to see an easing of conditions that are a little "too good" now for the economy's own good - in this case, unemployment at more than 50-year lows and average monthly wages that have grown without stop since March 2021. Such job security and earnings have cushioned many Americans from the worst price pressures since the 1980s and encouraged them to continue spending, further feeding inflation.

Economists say monthly jobs numbers need to grow meaningfully below expectations to create some ding at least in employment and wage security which the Fed suggests are its biggest two headaches now in fighting inflation.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Two of 4 US Citizens Abducted in Mexico Were Killed, Two Others Found Alive - Governor

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – Two of the four US citizens recently abducted in Mexico were killed, and the other two were found alive, Governor of the State of Tamaulipas Americo Villarreal Anaya said on Tuesday.

"This was fully confirmed by the prosecutor's office – out of four, the two perished, and one is wounded. Right now, ambulances and security services have been sent to provide the required support, transport and assistance," the governor said by phone during a press conference of President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

On Friday, four US citizens from South Carolina, who had reportedly crossed the border to Mexico for medical procedures and to buy medicines, were abducted by a cartel which may have mistaken them for Haitian drug dealers.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Africa Open to Investment Opportunities From Russian Firms - Uganda Oil Firm CEO

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - Africa is open to investment opportunities from Russian companies, Uganda National Oil Company Limited CEO Proscovia Nabbanja told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"I think Africa is open to investment opportunities although we haven't had any Russian companies participate in the oil and gas sector," Nabbanja said on the sidelines at CERAWEEK. Nabbanja added that some key companies investing in Africa's energy sector include TotalEnergies, China National Offshore Oil Corporation, Oriental Energy, among others.

Nabbanja and several other African energy leaders underscored during a panel discussion that the region needs investors to bolster its energy infrastructure and production.

In February, Russian ambassador-at-large and the head of the Russia-Africa partnership forum Oleg Ozerov told Sputnik that Russia has much potential in the oil and gas sectors to develop relations with African states.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Congressman Says Introducing Bills to Ban Lawmakers From Profiting Off 'Misdeeds'

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Anthony D'Esposito said on Tuesday that he is introducing legislation to prevent members of Congress from profiting off their misdeeds,

following freshman lawmaker George Santos' dishonesty and alleged crimes during his campaign.

"I'm introducing two pieces of legislation that aim to uphold the integrity of this House by punishing members who seek to monetize their misdeeds," D'Esposito said during a press conference.

The legislation would ensure that members of Congress who have been indicted or convicted of crimes such as fraud or campaign finance violations are not able to profit from their story, D'Esposito said.

The first piece of legislation, the "No Fame for Fraud" resolution, would change US House rules on the matter, while the second bill, the "No Fortune for Fraud" Act would ensure that current or former members are permanently unable to profit from their story.

D'Esposito aimed the legislation at Santos, a fellow New York Republican who has admitted to lying about aspects of his biography on the campaign trail, and who is also alleged to have committed campaign finance violations.

D'Esposito said that he looks forward to having Democrats join in support of the legislation as well. The bills are part of a "good government agenda" and not partisan in nature, D'Esposito said.

D'Esposito said he has had conversations with congressional leadership and is confident the legislation will make it to the floor.

Last week, the US House Ethics Committee announced the establishment of an investigative subcommittee to examine the allegations surrounding Santos.

Earlier this year, more than three-quarters of voters in Santos' congressional district said he should resign, a Newsday/Siena College poll found. Similarly, three-quarters of respondents expressed doubts about Santos' ability to effectively represent the district, the poll said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Canada Requires \$580Mln to Process Immigration Applications - Parliamentary Budget Officer

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – Canada's Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO) Yves Giroux reported on Tuesday that Ottawa needs to spend C\$792 Million (\$580 million) to provide for the direct fiscal cost of processing applications from economic migrants.

The PBO published a report on Tuesday analysing the fiscal costs of processing economic immigration applications through the Express Entry (EE) system, Federal Skilled Workers (FSW), Canadian Experience Class (CEC) and Federal Skilled Trades (FST).

The report does not include the province of Quebec which has established its own separate immigration system.

"The PBO projects that over 5 years, the gross cost would be \$792 million for the ROC. This will be offset by \$743 million in fee revenue, for a net cost of \$48 million," the report reads.

In his report, Giroux noted that to meet Ottawa's time goals, 80% of applications should be processed within 6 months, and while most expenses are covered by the government, some are

taken from the revenues generated by applicants and permanent residents' mandatory fees, estimated at C\$91.

Currently, Canada does not only cover application and processing costs, the report added, but also pre-arrival and post-arrival settlement services to immigrants, noting that the current Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has approximately 65% more staffing than required to meet the deadlines.

The PBO said the report aimed at raising the "quality" of parliamentary debate, while also allowing for greater budget transparency and accountability.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Powell Says Long Way in Inflation Fight, Interest Rates Likely to Be Higher Than Expected

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US interest rate hikes could end up being a lot higher than once imagined, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said on Tuesday, warning that the fight against inflation had a long way to go.

"The ultimate level of interest rates is likely to be higher than previously anticipated," Powell said in the Fed's semi-annual testimony to Congress. "If the totality of the data were to indicate that faster tightening is warranted, we would be prepared to increase the pace of rate hikes.

Although inflation has been moderating in recent months, the process of getting inflation back down to 2 percent has a long way to go and is likely to be bumpy."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Record-Low 15% of Americans View China Favorably – Poll

WASHINGTON, March 7 (Sputnik) – Only 15% of Americans have a favorable view of China, which is the lowest number in Gallup's more than 40-year history of measuring the attitude, a new Gallup poll revealed on Tuesday.

"A record-low 15% of Americans view China favorably, marking a five-percentage-point, one-year decline in this rating, which Gallup has measured since 1979," the poll said.

The current number is down a total of 38 points since 2018.

"More than eight in 10 U.S. adults have a negative opinion of China, including 45% who view it very unfavorably and 39% mostly unfavorably," the survey added.

Only 6% of Republicans view China favorably, and this number is just a little bit higher among Democrats and independent voters – 17% and 18%, respectively.

At the same time, the vast majority of Americans believe China represents a critical threat to US interests, the poll said.

"Currently, 66% of U.S. adults consider it to be a critical threat to the vital interests of the U.S., while 27% think it is an important but not critical threat and 6% say it is not an important threat.

The share of Americans who think China's military is a critical threat remains high; before last year, it had never exceeded 51%," the poll read.

Eighty-one percent of Republicans and almost 63% of independents said that China's economic power also represents a threat to the US. Only 49% of Democrats share this view.

The poll was conducted from February 1-23 as tensions soared over the US downing of an alleged Chinese surveillance balloon. The results are based on telephone interviews of 1,008 adults in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UN Chief is Not Going to Moscow After His Meeting With Zelenskyy in Kiev - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 7 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will not travel to Russia after his travels to Ukraine, the UN Spokesperson Farhan Haq told Sputnik.

"We are not announcing any other travel," Haq said.

Earlier today, the UN announced that the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is en route to Kiev, where he will meet with Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday to discuss extending the Black Sea grain deal.

A Russian delegation is expected to meet with UN officials next week in Geneva amid efforts to extend the Black Sea grain deal.

On Monday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused the West of "shamelessly burying" the grain deal, saying that the exports of Russian agricultural products around the world is being blatantly hindered. The Russian Mission to the United Nations previously stated the country's fertilizers have not been shipped and cannot enter places like Syria even in the form of humanitarian aid.

The United Nations-brokered grain export agreement, originally set to expire on November 19, 2022, was renewed for another 120 days until March 18, unless it is extended once again.

Russia has repeatedly criticized the agreement for failing to ensure unimpeded exports of Russian grain and fertilizer amid Western sanctions.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Oil Output to Grow by 500,000Bpd This Year - Oxy Energy President

HOUSTON, March 7 (Sputnik) - US oil production is expected to grow by 500,000 barrels a day this year with most of it coming from the Permian Basin in West Texas, Oxy Energy Services President Frederick Forthuber told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"We think it will be about 500,000 barrels a day this year and 80 to 90 percent from Permian [Basin]," Forthuber said on the margins of CERAWEEK.

