

3/10/23 Friday

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Congress Passes Bill Requiring DNI to Declassify COVID-19 Origins Probe Materials
By - Fantine Gardinier

House lawmakers voted unanimously on Friday to require the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) to declassify materials related to the origins of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, which the White House asked the Intelligence Community to probe in 2021. The vote on the COVID-19 Origin Act of 2023 was remarkable in its unity, with 419 in favor and zero opposing. The US Senate passed it last month with a large majority as well, meaning the bill now advances to US President Joe Biden's desk.

"Transparency on the origins of COVID-19 is long overdue. Americans deserve to know the truth about what the government knew and when," House Majority Leader Steve Scalise (R-LA) said in a statement on the bill.

"The American public deserves answers to every aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic," said Rep. Michael Turner (R-OH), the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, adding that it includes "how this virus was created and, specifically, whether it was a natural occurrence or was the result of a lab-related event."

The bill requires the DNI to make the information available within 90 days of it being signed into law.

Biden assigned the Intelligence Community to investigate the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in a May 2021 directive; the results [published several months later](#) showed no evidence the virus was man-made or had entered the human population through unnatural means, such as a leak from a biolab that possessed it for testing.

That document, which was redacted before publication, said the virus "probably emerged and infected humans through an initial small-scale exposure that occurred no later than November 2019 with the first known cluster of COVID-19 cases arising in Wuhan, China, in December 2019."

"We judge the virus was not developed as a biological weapon," the DNI said in the 2021 report. "Most agencies also assess with low confidence that SARS-CoV-2 probably was not genetically engineered; however, two agencies believe there was not sufficient evidence to make an assessment either way. Finally, the IC assesses China's officials did not have foreknowledge of the virus before the initial outbreak of COVID-19 emerged."

After the virus spread from Wuhan to other cities and countries in early 2020, it quickly reached pandemic levels, and hundreds of thousands of deaths quickly followed. By April of that year, claims circulating in anti-China media - as well as by then-US President Donald Trump - attempted to point the finger at China, saying the virus escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The DNI [issued a statement](#) at that time clarifying that all its intelligence said SARS-CoV-2 was "not manmade or genetically modified."

However, after [having seemingly been buried](#) for good, the issue re-emerged a few weeks ago, with several intelligence officials, including FBI director Christopher Wray, [who said that the bureau](#) had “for quite some time now assessed that the origins of the pandemic are most likely a potential lab incident in Wuhan.” The Department of Energy also published a report that reached the same conclusion “with low confidence.”

Beijing [has strongly rejected the claims](#), stressing that the World Health Organization’s probe determined it “extremely unlikely” the Wuhan lab was the source of the outbreak. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning also urged against any form of political manipulation under the pretext of finding the source of COVID-19.

The World Health Organization (WHO) also sent a mission to Wuhan in early 2021 to exchange information on the pandemic’s origins with Chinese scientists, and [their assessment was that](#) Chinese officials were not hiding anything unreasonable to hide, and they found it “extremely unlikely” the virus entering the human population had anything to do with the Wuhan biolab. The 12-nation team assessed the most likely source of the virus was a bat or pangolin that infected a human in the bush.

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US Intel Chief Haines Tells Congress ‘Not Our Assessment’ That China Wants War Over Taiwan
By - Fantine Gardinier

The US has claimed for years that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan was likely, and put significant money and effort into bolstering its support for the Taipei government, including weapons sales and provocative official visits that have infuriated the Chinese government.

A day after Chinese President Xi Jinping asserted the Communist Party of China’s goal of reunifying Taiwan with the mainland, Avril Haines, the US Director of National Intelligence (DNI), told Congress Beijing did not want to go to war over the autonomous island.

“It’s not our assessment that China wants to go to war,” Haines told the House Intelligence Committee during an annual briefing on Friday on worldwide threats faced by the United States. The independently-governed island has [remained outside the control](#) of the People’s Republic of China since the socialist state’s founding in 1949, thanks in large part to US support, which blocked the People’s Liberation Army from being able to cross the Taiwan Strait. Still, the land has long been part of China, and Beijing has conditioned its international relations on a “One China” policy. It regards US support for the government in Taipei as interference in internal Chinese affairs.

Asked about Haines’ comments on Friday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson [Mao Ning told reporters](#) that “Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory. Resolving the Taiwan question is a matter for the Chinese and must be decided by Chinese ourselves.”

“We urge the US to abide by the one-China principle and the three [China-US joint communiqués](#), deliver on US leaders’ commitment of not supporting ‘Taiwan independence’ or ‘two Chinas’ or ‘one China, one Taiwan,’” Mao added. “Stop all forms of official interaction with

Taiwan, stop upgrading its substantive exchanges with the region, and stop obscuring and hollowing out the one-China principle.”

In 2018, the White House and Pentagon identified “great power competition” with Russia and China as its primary strategic focus in the coming period, warning the two nations are hell-bent on undermining what the US calls the “rules-based international order,” atop which it has sat since World War II. Supporting Taiwan, with which the US has only had unofficial relations since 1979, is a key factor in that strategy, and the US has dramatically increased its weapons sales to Taiwan and sent prominent politicians to visit, flouting Beijing’s warnings.

“The People’s Republic of China, which is increasingly challenging the United States economically, technologically, politically and militarily around the world, remains our unparalleled priority,” Haines warned Congress on Friday.

Asked about Beijing’s deepening friendship with Moscow, the DNI said she thought it had “some limitations” but warned it was not a temporary marriage of convenience, either.

“We don’t see them becoming allies, the way we are with allies in NATO,” Haines said, referring to the Brussels-based collective defense alliance.

William Burns, the director of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), also told lawmakers Xi was “sobered” by the course of Russia’s special operation in Ukraine.

“That’s something that President Xi has to weigh as he comes out of Zero Covid, tries to restore Chinese economic growth, tries to engage with the rest of the global economy,” Burns said. The spy chief added that he would “never underestimate the ambitions of the current Chinese leadership in that regard or their determination” to bring Taiwan back under Beijing’s control.

In late 2021, the CIA opened a [special top-level working group](#), dubbed the China Mission Center, to focus on espionage and counter-espionage against the socialist state. Upon its launching, Burns characterized China as an even more formidable rival than the Soviet Union had been during the 20th century, because of its size and the deep entwining of the US and Chinese economies.

Their assessment comes after Chinese President Xi Jinping, [unanimously elected](#) to a third term on Friday by the National People’s Congress, warned earlier this week that “Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-around containment, encirclement and suppression of China, which has brought unprecedented severe challenges to our country’s development.”

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Photos: Kim Jong-un Observes 'Actual War Response Posture' of Rocket Artillery in Massive Drills

By - Fantine Gardinier

The US and South Korea are set to begin massive war games rehearsing strikes on North Korea, which will involve thousands of troops, warships, and bomber aircraft. A state of war technically persists between them, since the war that started in 1950 was only ended by a ceasefire, keeping tensions high for decades.

Kim Jong-un, general secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea and president of the State Affairs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), observed a crack rocket artillery unit in its fire assault drills on Thursday.

Photos published in North Korean media showed six road-capable transporter-erector-launchers (TELs) firing short-range ballistic missiles. They are likely [the same ones detected](#) by South Korean military intelligence on Thursday, flying over the Yellow Sea from a launch site near Nampo.

According to a media report accompanying the photos, Kim "examined the actual war response posture of the 8th fire assault company under the unit charged with striking the enemy's operation airport in the direction of the western front."

"The fire assault company, which has trained its capability to carrying out strike missions in the definite and minute war posture of containing any military moves of the enemy at a time, fired a powerful volley at the targeted waters in the West Sea of Korea set under the simulated conditions of the major elements of the enemy operation airport, thus confidently demonstrating its capability to counter an actual war," the report added, referring to the Yellow Sea that separates the Korean Peninsula from China.

The photos showed Kim was accompanied by a slew of military brass, but also by his daughter, whose name has not been published but is reported in South Korea media to be Kim Ju-ae. She's said to be about 10 or 11 years old. She first began [appearing with him](#) at public functions last autumn, both of a military and civil nature.

The launches come amid a series of war games by the US and South Korea, which rehearse military operations against the DPRK. Last month, tabletop exercises were held at the Pentagon in Virginia, and next week, the massive Freedom Shield and Warrior Shield exercises, involving thousands of US and South Korean troops, will kick off in South Korea. The US has maintained a 28,000-strong garrison there since the 1953 ceasefire with the DPRK.

The absence of a permanent peace treaty and the presence of the massive US garrison are pointed to by Pyongyang as reasons for their ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs, and the socialist government has accused Washington and Seoul of driving up tensions with its constant war games.

That fear was palpable in the North Korean news report on the rocket drills. According to the report, Kim said "the army should be ready to fight any time and be responsible for an actual action rather than words and our clear, practical and unshakable will to take military action."

"He stressed the need to always stay alert for all sorts of more frantic war preparation moves being committed by the enemy recently and maintain and steadily train the powerful capability to overwhelmingly respond to and contain them all the time so as to thoroughly deter the danger of a military clash on the Korean Peninsula," the report added.

Peace and denuclearization talks made promising gains in 2018 and 2019, but collapsed after the US refused to reciprocate North Korea's steps toward ending its nuclear program by lowering some of its sanctions against Pyongyang.

Relations have cooled considerably since then, especially since US President Joe Biden took office in 2021, who campaigned on taking a harder line against Pyongyang than his predecessor, Donald Trump, who preferred a more wheel-and-deal diplomatic style.

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Ex-Pentagon Officer: US 'Still Playing Catchup' With Hypersonics After Underestimating China, Russia

By - Fantine Gardinier

Hypersonic weapons travel more than 5 times the speed of sound and are feared because their speed and maneuverability are unequalled and nigh-impossible to track or shoot down using existing interception techniques.

Iran revealed earlier this week it had developed a [precision strike missile](#) able to hit moving targets at a range of more than 1,000 miles and at a speed of 8 times the speed of sound - making it a hypersonic missile. This follows an [announcement in November](#) that the Islamic Republic had developed a hypersonic weapon, and another last month about an [ultra-long-range cruise missile](#) that might have been the same announced on Tuesday.

The long-range missile has been dubbed a "carrier-killer," and could turn the entire Arabian Sea into a no-go zone for US aircraft carriers in the event of hostilities between the two nations.

Deploying such missiles requires a great deal of technical know-how and capability regarding cruise and ballistic missiles, such that only a handful of nations have the advanced weapons.

While China and Russia have both deployed hypersonic weapons with their armed forces and the latter has even [used them in combat](#), the US and North Korea have [claimed at least one](#) successful test of a hypersonic weapon. South Korea has revealed a prototype weapon, but it has never been fired.

David T. Pyne, an Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP) Task Force scholar and former US Department of Defence officer, told Sputnik the US has fallen behind Russia and China in this field because "after the fall of the Soviet Union and the First Iraq War, the US believed that it was well ahead of Russia and China in terms of military technology and believed that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia no longer posed an existential threat to the US because it seemed to lack aggressive intentions."

While during the 1990s, Russia and the US [dismantled large numbers](#) of nuclear warheads, by 2002, the US had unilaterally pulled out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty with little explanation as to why. The treaty had banned most ballistic missile interceptors, aside from two clusters around the capital city and around a nuclear "missile farm" launch base, because it was feared that if a nation built so many interceptors it believed it could evade an enemy's nuclear attack, it would become more likely to try and launch its own.

Russia responded to this threat by [reviving its 1980s-era research](#) into hypersonic flight to develop a new generation of missiles that could evade any US missile shield.

"In addition, the Global War on Terror which lasted over two decades, changed the focus of the US from 'great power competition' and matching Russia's and China's nuclear missile buildup and modernization programs to fighting no-win counterinsurgency wars in the Middle East against non-state or state backed terrorist actors that posed us little threat," Pyne said.

"Both of these factors caused the US not to prioritize hypersonic weapon development following some early failures at the end of the Cold War. The US has also had a surprising number of

failures in its development of hypersonic weapons, so we are still playing catch up with Russia and China right now.”

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‘Almost Like You Want to Find Nothing’: Experts Slam Norfolk Southern ‘Air Tests’ in East Palestine

By - Wyatt Reed

Public health experts are warning that the ‘air testing’ being carried out in East Palestine by a for-profit company hired by Norfolk Southern is “almost like smoke and mirrors.”

The ‘air testing’ recently conducted in East Palestine residents’ homes was deficient in a number of key ways and was actually carried out by a company contracted by the rail company Norfolk Southern, a new report has revealed.

East Palestine, Ohio was smothered in toxic fumes last month when the authorities intentionally burned off huge quantities of vinyl chloride following a train derailment in the village.

Residents fled the area in the immediate aftermath. However, after an evacuation order was lifted, many have returned, with some reportedly citing ‘air testing’ results which apparently determined that they could return home without danger.

But on Saturday, an explosive new report [seemed to confirm](#) what many have come to suspect: “the air testing results did not prove their homes were truly safe.”

According to a major British outlet, “the air tests were inadequate in two ways: they were not designed to detect the full range of dangerous chemicals the derailment may have unleashed, and they did not sample the air long enough to accurately capture the levels of chemicals they were testing for.”

As University of Kentucky environmental health professor Erin Haynes reportedly put it, “it’s almost like if you want to find nothing, you run in and run out.”

Making matters even worse, “CTEH, the contractor that provided them, was hired by Norfolk Southern, the operator of the freight train that derailed,” the report detailed.

As another outlet previously [explained](#), “the Center for Toxicology and Environmental Health (CTEH) has a name that might sound like a state or federal agency, but in reality it is a private, for-profit corporation that has been present after hundreds of ecological disasters—from 9/11 to Hurricane Katrina to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill to COVID-19.”

While the relevant section has since been deleted, the company previously explained on its website how the data it’s collecting now could be weaponized against the victims of the Norfolk Southern train derailment disaster in East Palestine:

“A carrier of chemicals may be subjected to legal claims as a result of a real or imagined release,” CTEH noted, adding, “should this happen, appropriate meteorological and chemical data, recorded and saved... may be presented as powerful evidence to assist in the litigation or potentially preclude litigation.”

But despite its alarming track record and apparent desire to go after those affected by the crisis, the company remains a major force in the campaign to assuage locals’ health fears.

"It was CTEH, not the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), that designed the testing protocol for the indoor air tests," explains the British report, adding, "and it is CTEH, not the government, that runs the hotline residents are directed to call with concerns about odors, fumes or health problems."

In a recently-published video, the controversial company insists that their 'testing' shows there's no danger to East Palestine residents.

"All of our air monitoring and sampling data collectively do not indicate any short- or long-term risks," a CTEH toxicologist claimed.

But CTEH's failure to register so-called volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in its tests doesn't necessarily mean that people's homes are actually safe, a number of experts noted. As Haynes reportedly explained, "VOCs are not the only chemicals that could have been in the air."

And even a week after the derailment, she said it's likely the compounds would have dissipated already.

"To keep the focus on the air is almost smoke and mirrors," Haynes added. "Like, 'Hey, the air is fine!' Of course it's going to be fine. Now you should be looking for where those chemicals went. They did not disappear. They are still in the environment."

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'Delusional': Israeli Leaders Hit Out at Each Other After Iran, Saudi Arabia Normalize Ties
By - Wyatt Reed

This week Tehran and Riyadh were able to overcome their 7-year rift. But for one country, the news of a restored diplomatic relationship doesn't come as a welcomed prospect.

Top Israeli officials continued to [trade blame](#) following a Chinese-negotiated deal that has led to the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran and a reduction in tensions in the Middle East.

After former Prime Ministers Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett claimed sitting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was responsible for allowing Tehran and Riyadh to normalize their bilateral ties, an anonymous senior Israeli political official struck back on Friday, accusing the pair of laying the groundwork for the deal during their tenures.

"The contacts between [Iran and Saudi Arabia] started a year ago, during the term of the previous government, because there was a feeling of Israeli and American weakness," the official reportedly stated, adding: "Weakness brings rapprochement with Iran, while strength pushes rapprochement away."

Lapid's office rejected that characterization as "delusional," and pointed out that "during the period of our government, an aviation agreement was signed with Saudi Arabia and the tripartite security agreement with Saudi Arabia and Egypt."

Lapid claimed that it's actually Netanyahu who is responsible for an apparent deterioration in relations with the United States.

"All of this came to a halt when the most extreme government in Israel's history was established here, and it became clear to the Saudis that Netanyahu was weak and the Americans stopped listening to him."

Lapid had previously lambasted the Iranian-Saudi detente as "a complete and dangerous failure of the Israeli government's foreign policy." and claimed that the development was linked to a controversial push to overhaul the judicial system that's led to massive street protests.

"This is what happens when you deal all day long with legal madness instead of doing what needs to be done vis-à-vis Iran and instead of strengthening relations with the United States." Virtually every Middle Eastern nation may have welcomed the deal, but former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett seemed to concur with Lapid's assessment.

"The renewal of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a serious and dangerous development for Israel, a political victory for Iran and a fatal blow to the effort to build a regional coalition against Iran," he insisted.

"It is a resounding failure of the Netanyahu government, stemming from a combination of diplomatic neglect with general weakness and internal conflict in the country," Bennett claimed, adding, "the countries of the world and the region watch Israel and see a country in conflict, with a dysfunctional government. And so these countries choose a side."

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Over 1,000 Californians Forced to Evacuate After Levee Fails
By - Wyatt Reed

The brutal spell of weather plaguing the Golden State continued Saturday as floodwaters surged over a levee and sent residents of an agricultural town stumbling.

Over 1,000 Californians were forced to evacuate Saturday morning after a levee failed and the small town of Pajaro was flooded by a torrential storm that drenched the Central Coast's Monterey County.

Dramatic footage posted on social media showed early-morning rescues being carried out for residents who'd become trapped in their parked vehicle by rising floodwaters.

Extractions continued throughout the pre-dawn hours, with the California National Guard writing on Twitter that its members "supported first responders in 56 rescues near the Pajaro river in Monterey County."

Local media reported the levee breach was approximately 100 feet wide as of 9:45 Saturday morning.

Drone footage published on Twitter indicates the flooding showed little signs of stopping, with surging stormwaters continuing to careen over the levee well into Saturday.

As of Saturday evening, over 16,000 Monterey County residents [remained](#) without power, according to PowerOutage.US.

With wells flooded, those living in Pajaro are reportedly being urged not to use tap water until further notice due to the potential for contamination.

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Nicaragua Suspends Relations With Vatican After Pope Compares Ortega to Hitler

By - Wyatt Reed

The break in diplomatic ties comes after months of increasingly hostile rhetoric from the Catholic Church, which openly supported an attempted coup d'etat that left hundreds of Nicaraguans dead in 2018 by collecting money and supplies for rioters.

Nicaraguan authorities confirmed Sunday that there's been a 'suspension of diplomatic relations' with the Holy See after Pope Francis compared Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega to notorious Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler.

The Foreign Ministry of Nicaragua issued a statement affirming the news after reports emerged that the Vatican Embassy in Managua and the Nicaraguan Embassy to the Vatican in Rome had both been closed.

Ties between the Central American country and the Catholic Church have been strained since high-ranking clergy lent their support to violent riots which devastated Nicaragua's economy and left hundreds dead in 2018.

Last week, relations plunged to a new low after the pope insisted in an [interview](#) with Infobae that Nicaragua's elected government is akin to the "1917 Communist dictatorship or that of Hitler in 1935."

Francis seemed particularly incensed by the incarceration of Bishop Rolando Alvarez – a "very serious man," he declared – who was sentenced to 26 years in prison last month for conspiring to undermine national integrity.

The charges relate to Alvarez's role in the chaos which [engulfed Nicaraguan cities](#) in 2018 as US-government linked forces attempted a violent overthrow of the government.

Alvarez continues to insist he maintained a neutral position, but he was recorded taking the side of rioters in a dispute with foreign truckers who'd been stranded as masked, gun-toting militants erected barricades across the country.

As a Costa Rican trucker pleaded with the bishop to intervene and order rioters to allow him and his cohorts to escape from the country, footage [showed](#) Alvarez refusing, jamming his finger toward the man's chest instead, and barking: "Respect the homeland!"

When the Biden administration welcomed 220 other convicted Nicaraguan criminals to the US last month, Alvarez was offered the opportunity to flee as well, but in an apparent political statement, he refused to be transported.

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'Highly Irregular and Political' – Top Ukraine Researcher Blasts Journals For Suppressing His Papers

By - Wyatt Reed

While some elect to "blatantly and uncritically parrot Western narratives" according to the academic, "many scholars are afraid to conduct evidence-based research that runs contrary to established Western narratives on Maidan, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and other issues related to the conflicts in Ukraine Kiev following the 2014 coup."

A leading Ukraine researcher is speaking out after his academic papers were suppressed by multiple journals, a new [report](#) has detailed.

In January, Ukrainian-Canadian political scientist Ivan Katchanovski [revealed](#) his latest academic paper, which documented how the massacre of over 70 protesters which was used to consummate Ukraine's 2014 'Maidan' coup, was initially "accepted after minor revisions by [a] journal editor but then rejected."

And that same month, another academic publication rejected a paper authored by Katchanovski also for "political reasons," according to comments he gave to the independent American outlet The Grayzone.

As detailed by journalist Kit Klarenberg, "Katchanovski declined to name the journal in question, but described it as "top-tier" in the field of social sciences" and "believes its refusal to publish his study is "extraordinary," but nonetheless emblematic of a "far bigger problem in academic publishing and academia.""

"The editor who accepted my article only learned it would not be published from my tweets on the subject," Katchanovski explained, adding "this reversal was highly irregular and political."

"There is growing political censorship concerning Ukraine in academia, and also self-censorship," Katchanovski reportedly told The Grayzone.

"Many scholars are afraid to conduct evidence-based research that runs contrary to established Western narratives on Maidan, the Russia-Ukraine war, and other issues related to the conflicts in Ukraine Kiev following the 2014 coup," the academic said.

Meanwhile, those who are happy to "blatantly and uncritically parrot Western narratives," are rewarded, according to Katchanovski, who's considered one of the world's leading scholars on post-Maidan Ukraine.

Reached for comment, Klarenberg told Sputnik News that "while it's absolutely outrageous that a mainstream academic journal would suppress a successfully peer-reviewed study – particularly given it concerns the perpetrators of an egregious crime which remains officially unsolved – it's not remotely surprising."

As Klarenberg points out, that's because since Russia began its special military operation on February 24, 2022, "serious discussion of the factors that led us to this point has not been permitted," nor has "accurate reporting of the reality on the ground."

He says the latest act of censorship is in keeping with a slow decline in journalistic freedoms that's plagued corporate media outlets for years.

"Press freedom in the West has been under attack for over a decade," Klarenberg said, noting that "the spectrum of permissible opinions has narrowed, and the mechanisms for maligning dissenting viewpoints and inconvenient truths have multiplied."

"Recently, this tendency has infected academia," Klarenberg explained.

"It seems academic journals, much like news outlets, are aware there are certain truths that cannot be published and must be actively suppressed."

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France's Senate Passes Controversial Pension Reform

By - Mary Manley

The controversial bill will raise the legal retirement age of French workers from 62 years of age to 64 and is a major win for President Emmanuel Macron despite mass protests against the plan nationwide.

On Sunday France's Senate passed [a controversial reform bill](#) that will raise the retirement age for those in France by two years. The Senate passed the bill by 195 votes to 112. It will now go to a joint parliamentary committee (CMP), after which the chambers of Parliament will vote separately on the bill.

The bill plans to gradually raise the retirement age by three months a year starting in September of 2023 until 2030, when the age of those who will be able to retire reaches 64.

"After hundreds of hours of discussions, the Senate adopted the pension reform plan. It is a key step to make a reform happen that will guarantee the future of our pension system," Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne wrote on Twitter.

Socialists criticized the bill, with Senator Monique Lubin telling Labor Minister Olivier Dussopt: "Your name will forever be attached to a reform that will set the clock back almost 40 years."

On Saturday over 368,000 protesters marched through various cities in France to protest the bill, though authorities had expected close to 1 million following Tuesday's protest when [1.28 million took to the street](#) to protest the reform.

Macron and his government have defended the bill, which he has championed, arguing that raising the retirement age and hardening requirements for a full pension will keep the system from falling into a deficit.

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Tracking of Priest Hookup App Data Highlights We're Living in Surveillance Dystopia

By - Ian DeMartino

On Thursday, the Washington Post published a report on a Denver-based Catholic group buying app data from data brokers and using that information to find whether priests in the church are using hookup apps.

Some in the group were behind the outing of prominent priest Jeffery Burrill, after Catholic news outlet The Pillar reported on his use of gay hookup app Grindr and his visits to gay bars and gay bathhouses.

Burrill stepped down from his position as the top administrator of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops days later.

The group, the Catholic Laity and Clergy for Renewal, admitted to the research in a [lengthy op-ed](#) posted on the Catholic magazine First Things' website, which was published after the Post sent questions to the Renewal about the program.

According to [The Post](#), which reviewed two reports prepared by the organization, the Renewal used data from multiple gay-hookup sites, including Grindr, Scruff, Growlr, and Jack'd, as well as OKCupid, which caters to various sexualities. The reports were given to bishops in the church.

Renewal says that the bishops were free to use the information as they liked. However, while The Post said that outside of Burrill there are no known instances of priests resigning over the data, a source told the outlet the priests could be punished by not getting promotions or being forced into early retirement, without being told why.

The op-ed by the Renewal slams The Post and "similar secular outlets" that focus on "a small part of what we do—anything that touches sex." The Renewal also says the program is not about homosexuality exclusively but is instead focused on priests who break their vows of celibacy, whether that is through straight or gay sex.

"It's not about straight or gay priests and seminarians," the op-ed contends. "It's about behavior that harms everyone involved, at some level and in some way, and is a witness against the ministry of the Church."

The op-ed also states that the group obtained the data "in the ordinary way" i.e. buying it from a data broker or someone who had bought it from a data broker. The Post article states that Renewal spent at least \$4 million getting the data.

Legally, apps on our devices are allowed to sell location and other personal data to advertisers. They justify the practice because, they contend, as long as they strip names from the data, it protects the user's privacy.

But multiple studies have shown that it is fairly trivial to connect a phone to a person using location data—even without that person's name—when using other publicly available information. Using location data, a company could easily connect a device to a person simply by watching where it goes every day. Where it goes during work hours and where it returns would tell a prying eye where the person holding that device works and lives. And if you already know where someone works or lives, seeing everywhere they go is as simple as tracking where else the phone goes.

In the case of Renewal, they also had access to the type of device used, the device ID and the internet service provider, in addition to location data. It isn't hard to imagine how easy it would be to link that device to a specific person.

For their part, the dating apps in question have all said they have limited tracking data further in recent years. Grindr said it stopped sharing location data in 2020, Growlr says it no longer shares GPS data, OKCupid said it obfuscates location data within a kilometer, and Scruff and Jack'd, both owned by the same parent company, say they removed third-party ad networks in 2018 and 2020, respectively.

Still, Renewal was able to get the data it needed from someone. And dating apps are hardly the worst offenders when it comes to tracking and selling data.

The laws on data selling are vague and broad. Justin Sherman, a senior fellow at Duke University's public policy school, told The Post that "you can count [the number of data privacy laws] on one or two hands."

Anyone can buy advertising data if they have enough money. Anti-abortion groups have used it to track people who visit abortion clinics. [On Monday](#), the FBI admitted to buying data to avoid getting a warrant. And women's groups have warned that domestic abusers and stalkers may use the data to track their victims.

It is not difficult to think of other nightmare scenarios.

What is stopping an employer from tracking an employee to make sure they are actually staying home when sick, or checking to see if they visited a bar the night before calling out?

Furthermore, what's to stop a Church from expanding its tracking spotlight from priests to parishioners? Or a school from tracking what their students do outside of class hours, something they have become increasingly interested in since the pandemic.

In the early 1990s, Phill Zimmerman released "[Pretty Good Privacy](#)," better known as PGP. It was the first time the public gained access to private digital communications through the use of cryptography, not unlike technology that was previously exclusive to the National Security Administration (NSA).

It allowed individuals to send messages to each other using public and private digital signatures. If the authorities or anyone else intercepted the messages, they would only see noise, but if the message was sent to your public key, you could decode it using your private key.

Zimmerman was investigated for years by the authorities because, they said, his software was downloaded by foreign citizens and that could have been considered exporting a weapon. The Justice Department ultimately decided [against pressing charges](#) against Zimmerman, which was a big win for privacy advocates at the time.

While the principles of Zimmerman's software became the basis for all private online communications we have today, from credit card purchases to private messaging apps like Signal, the public by and large didn't use the privacy tools that Zimmerman created and the majority of online services didn't bother incorporating it.

As apps started sucking up more data about their users, and as cellphones went from a luxury to an essential part of everyday life, online privacy has become more important, and more ignored, than ever.

Speaking to [Wired in 1994](#), legendary cryptographer Niels Ferguson, who at the time was working for a failed pre-Bitcoin digital currency called DigiCash, warned about the dangers of the lack of privacy in the growing digital world. Ferguson was speaking about digital purchases, but considering the ubiquitousness of smartphones today, it can easily be applied to location data.

"Oh, the number of times I've had to argue with people that they need privacy!" Ferguson exclaimed in a response to a question if digital cash should be traceable.

"They'll say, 'I don't care if you know where I spend my money.' I usually tell them, 'What if I hire a private investigator to follow you around all day? Would you get mad?' And the answer always is, 'Yes, of course I would get mad.' And then my argument is, 'If we have no privacy in our transaction systems, I can see every payment - every cup of coffee you drink, every Mars bar you get, every glass of Coke you drink, every door you open, every telephone call - you make. If I can see those, I don't need a private investigator. I can just sit behind my terminal and follow you around all day.' And then people start to realize that, yes, privacy is in fact something

important. Any one part of the information is probably unimportant. But the collection of the information, that is important.”

Which of course, is why advertisers are so interested in our information. Our phones essentially act as little personal private investigators, reporting back to massive conglomerates of a multibillion-dollar industry, ready to sell that information to anyone or any entity willing to pay for it. Churches, the government, spouses, employers, or anyone motivated and wealthy enough can find out where you've been, what you've bought and who you associate with. That is an issue that goes far beyond the inner workings of the Catholic Church.

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Historic Saudi-Iran Deal Proves 'Major Setback' for US But Raises Questions About JCPOA Lifeline

By - Ian DeMartino

The historic Saudi-Iranian agreement to reestablish diplomatic ties will prove to be a serious concern for the US, which has long sought to ensure Iran remains isolated in the Middle East, an expert told Radio Sputnik.

Richard Becker, author of "Palestine, Israel and the US Empire," [told](#) Radio Sputnik's Political Misfits on Friday that the deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran would effectively serve as a "major setback" for the US as the two powerhouse nations work to resume diplomatic ties. Earlier Friday, representatives from Saudi Arabia and Iran met in Beijing, along with a senior Chinese diplomat, and announced that they reached an agreement to restore diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The two sides agreed to host meetings with their foreign ministers, send ambassadors to each country and revive previously signed security cooperation deals and other previously abandoned agreements.

"I would say first and foremost it's a big setback from the US imperial point of view, and the point of view of the empire," Becker told show hosts Michelle Witte and John Kiriakou, noting that the development specifically puts a black mark on the US' continued efforts to keep Iran and any forces against the American agenda in complete isolation.

Becker, who also serves as the West Coast coordinator for the ANSWER Coalition, noted that Saudi Arabia was "created by the United States and Britain back in 1932," and that despite the litany of human rights abuses, Saudi Arabia is still considered a "strong ally" of the US.

The reason for that, Becker said the United States has been trying to isolate Iran and other "forces of resistance in the region" for some time.

"They have been trying to isolate Iran in particular," Becker said. "They are trying to defeat the forces of resistance in the region, those who are resisting the US agenda and the Israeli agenda in the area. And that means Iran and some forces inside of Iraq, the government of Syria, the . Nasrallah-led Hezbollah movement in Lebanon, the Houthi movement in Yemen."

"This is a big setback to that strategy of Isolation for Iran. It doesn't mean the US is going to stop," he underscored.

However, Becker further contended that China having brokered the deal is what is adding even more salt in the wound for the US in its imperial aims.

"The other side of it was the fact that the agreement was reached in China, in Beijing. Who the US' new leaders are targeting as their main enemy in the world, which also underlines how much of a setback this is for the United States," he said.

The "new leaders" referenced by Becker were national security adviser Jake Sullivan, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Kurt Campbell, who serves as Biden's top Asia hand at the National Security Council.

"They are not happy about the latest news that's come out," Becker said of the trio.

"I think they can of course guarantee the security of Saudi Arabia... but one of the big questions will be whether the US will resume the Iran deal."

The US has remained a non-partner of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action since the days of the Trump White House, which announced in 2018 that the US would withdraw over allegations that Tehran had violated stipulations of the Obama-era agreement. Although US President Joe Biden did promise to return to the deal once in office, he has yet to deliver, with latest talks stuck at a stalemate with negotiators.

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Raw Material & Ukraine Conflict: Biden Holds Talks With EU Commission Head Amid Strained Ties

By - Ian DeMartino

US President Joe Biden and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen met on Friday at the White House, later issuing a joint statement noting the two countries will negotiate a deal to allow European materials to be used in electric vehicles that are eligible for US tax credits.

The Friday meeting between the two leading world figures also geared toward various economic issues, as well as the conflict in Ukraine.

Trade, Climate & Raw Materials

The United States had angered some allies in Europe by including a clause in the Inflation Reduction Act that required EV batteries to be created using materials sourced from the US or a country the US has a free-trade agreement with. It also stated that 50% of the components inside the EV had to be manufactured in the US with that percentage rising to 100% by 2028.

"We have agreed that we will start work now with a clear goal," von der Leyen told reporters after the meeting. "The goal is to have an agreement on critical raw materials that have been sourced, or processed in the European Union so that these strategic supply chains are able to access the American market as if they had been sourced in the United States. So, also access to all the necessary benefits from the United States."

"It is important on both sides of the Atlantic to know what kind of incentives are being given to the clean tech industry, to make sure that we join forces to boost the clean tech industry," von

der Leyen added. "That is crucial and paramount for reaching a circular economy, a net zero economy."

Last year, partially in response to Biden's Inflation Reduction Act, the European Commission passed the Green Deal Industrial Plan. In their joint statement Biden and von der Leyen said that the two deals both have the same goals of "addressing the climate crisis, accelerating the global clean energy economy, and building resilient, secure, and diversified clean energy supply chains."

The joint statement also said the US and EU should remain united in actions they take to counter China, the industry leader in electric vehicles.

"The Clean Energy Incentives Dialogue will become a part of the EU-US Trade and Technology Council where it will also facilitate information-sharing on non-market policies and practices of third parties—such as those employed by the People's Republic of China (PRC)—to serve as the basis for joint or parallel action and coordinated advocacy on these issues."

Biden and von der Leyen also pledged to reach an agreement in the Global Arrangement on Sustainable Steel and Aluminum negotiations by October of this year.

"The arrangement will ensure the long-term viability of our industries, encourage low-carbon intensity steel and aluminum production and trade, and restore market-oriented conditions globally and bilaterally," the joint statement reads.

"Together, we will incentivize emission reductions in these carbon-intensive sectors and level the playing field for our workers. The arrangement will be open to all partners demonstrating commitment to countering non-market excess capacity and reducing carbon-intensity in these sectors."

Ukraine

On Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, Biden and ver don Leyen said they are working to stop "additional third-country actors across the globe" who support Russia in the conflict.

Von der Leyen also stressed Europe's continued support of Ukraine. "We have extensively discussed [the conflict in Ukraine], starting with the financial budget support that the European Union is giving 18 billion [euros] during this year, one and a half billion [euro] per month to Ukraine, but also discussing the way we are caring for four million refugees from Ukraine in the European Union."

She also expressed gratitude to the United States for selling Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) to Europe after western sanctions limited the supply of Russian gas.

"[The US] helped us enormously when we wanted to get rid of the Russian fossil fuel dependency," ver don Leyen said in remarks made before the meeting. "You helped us enormously by delivering more LNG, [you] helped us through the energy crisis."

In October, senior officials from France and Germany accused the United States of overcharging the European Union for natural gas and profiting from the energy crisis in Europe, with French Finance Minister Bruno Le Mair noting that Europe was paying four times the amount domestic US companies were paying for LNG.

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US Reveals Details of New Design for Air Force One

By - Ian DeMartino

"Air Force One" is the term used to refer to any aircraft that the president flies in; however, it is now standard practice to refer to the airplane the commander-in-chief primarily flies in with said name. As for the helicopter that the president uses for shorter distances, it is officially referred to as Marine Force One.

US President Joe Biden has selected the livery design for the next Air Force One, the VC-25B, reports detailed on Friday.

The new paint scheme is not a large departure from the old design, but it will differ in three significant ways:

the lighter blue paint on the underside will be a deeper blue compared to the old design's robin blue color

the engines will use the darker blue already used in the cockpit area

the polished metal sections of the underbelly will be removed because modern commercial planes use a skin alloy that does not allow it

The design will also be updated slightly to account for the new plane's size, which is a modified Boeing 747-8i, slightly bigger than the old plane which was a modified 747.

The Air Force previously showed off a red, white and blue livery design for the VC-25B but a thermal study concluded that the dark blue in the design would have required additional testing because of added heat in certain environments.

"The VC-25B program will deliver a new fleet of aircraft to enable POTUS to execute the duties of Head of State, Chief Executive, and Commander in Chief," the Air Force said in a statement.

"The aircraft will be uniquely modified to provide the POTUS, staff, and guests with safe and reliable air transportation with the equivalent level of communications capability and security available in the White House."

The VC-25B will replace the VC-25A, with the first plane expected to be delivered in 2027 and a second in 2028.

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Biden Says Americans' Bank Deposits Safe, Gov't Won't Let Financial Crisis Recur Over SVB

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) - The US government will ensure the bank deposits of Americans remain safe amid the collapse of two banks and that the country does not experience another financial crisis, President Joe Biden said on Monday as he promised action against reckless risk taking by bankers.

"No losses of a dime ... No losses will be borne by the taxpayers. The money will come from the fees that banks pay into the Federal Deposit Insurance fund [FDIC]. Because of the actions taken by regulators, every American should feel confident, their deposits will be there if and

when they need them," Biden told reporters at the White House. "Second, the management of these banks will be fired. They knowingly took a risk and when the risk didn't pay off." He also said he was going to request Congress to review and strengthen post-financial crisis banking laws that were loosened by the previous administration "to make sure that the crisis we saw in 2008 would not happen again."

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Toddler Kills Sister in Accidental Shooting in Texas - Sheriff

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – A 3-year-old girl killed her 4-year-old sister in an accidental shooting in the US state of Texas, Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez said in a statement.

The incident occurred on Sunday evening.

"@HCSOTexas [Harris County Sheriffs Office] units responded to an apt unit at 9955 Bammel North Houston. Preliminary info: two toddlers were inside the unit with other persons. One toddler (3 yrs) gained access to a firearm and unintentionally shot the other (4 yrs). The toddler was pronounced deceased at the scene," Gonzalez wrote on Twitter.

At a press conference, Gonzalez said there were five adults in the apartment, but at some point, the two girls were left unsupervised inside the bedroom.

"The 3-year-old gained access to a loaded semi-automatic pistol," Gonzalez noted.

The family members heard a single gunshot, ran into the room and found the other girl on the floor unresponsive, the sheriff said.

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Biden Seeks to Strengthen Banking Regulations, Do 'Whatever Needed'

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden sought to assure Americans on Monday that their bank deposits were safe, promising to strengthen banking regulations and do "whatever is needed" to avert further collapse following the failure of two banks.

"During the Obama-Biden administration, we put in place tough requirements on banks like Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank, including the Dodd Frank law to make sure that the crisis we saw in 2008 would not happen again. Unfortunately, the last administration rolled back some of these requirements," Biden said at a press conference. "I'm going to ask Congress and the banking regulators to strengthen the rules for banks to make it less likely this kind of bank failure would happen again."

He added that the bottom line was that "Americans can rest assured that our banking system is safe. Your deposits are safe. Let me also assure you, we will not stop at this. We'll do whatever is needed."

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Americans' Favorable Rating of Russia Down to New Low of 9% - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – Only 9% of Americans view Russia favorably, which is a record low in Gallup's history of measuring the attitude, a poll revealed on Monday.

"Americans' already-negative opinions of Russia have soured further in the past year, dropping from 15% holding a favorable view to 9%. The current reading for Russia is the lowest Gallup has measured since it first asked about the 'Soviet Union' in this format in 1989," the pollster said.

The highest favorable rating of 66% was recorded in February 2002.

Now, Russia is the fourth country, along with Iran, Iraq and North Korea, to have a sub-10% favorable score among Americans.

"Gallup's 2023 World Affairs poll finds 90% of Americans having an unfavorable opinion of Russia, including a 59% majority who have a 'very unfavorable' view. Last year, 42% held a very unfavorable opinion of Russia, and in 2021, 36% did. Before 2020, no more than 32% had viewed Russia very unfavorably," the pollster added.

The survey also revealed that Republicans and Democrats give Russia identical 6% favorable ratings, while 11% of independents rate the country favorably.

At the same time, 68% of Americans have a favorable attitude to Ukraine, including those 23% who have a "very favorable opinion" of the country, the pollster noted.

The poll was conducted from February 1-23 among 1,008 adults in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia.

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Harris Will Visit Africa to Discuss Economy, 'Effects' of Ukraine Crisis – White House

WASHINGTON, March 13 (Sputnik) – US Vice President Kamala Harris will visit Ghana, Tanzania and Zambia from March 23-April 2 to discuss democracy, economy, food security and the "effects" of the Ukraine crisis, the White House said on Monday.

"Vice President Kamala Harris and Second Gentleman Douglas Emhoff will travel to Accra, Ghana; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; and Lusaka, Zambia from March 25 to April 2. The Vice President's visit will build on the recent U.S-Africa Leaders Summit that President Biden hosted in Washington in December 2022," White House said in a statement.

The vice president will meet with the presidents of the three countries to "discuss regional and global priorities, including our shared commitment to democracy, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, food security, and the effects of Russia's unprovoked war in Ukraine, among other issues," the statement added.

During the trip, Harris will advance efforts to expand access to the digital economy, support climate adaptation and resilience, as well as boost business ties and investment, the White House said. She will also discuss such issues as innovation, entrepreneurship, and the economic empowerment of women.

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US, EU Taking Steps Against Third Parties Supporting Russia's Ukraine Operation-Statement

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden and the European Commission President Ursula Van Der Leyen said on Friday that they are taking new steps to target third-country actors in the world in order to disrupt support for Russia's operation in Ukraine. "We are taking new steps together to target additional third-country actors across the globe to disrupt support for Russia's war from any corner of the world where it is identified. We are working in lockstep to limit Russian revenue even further while ensuring continued energy supplies to emerging market and developing countries via the G7+ price cap for seaborne Russian-origin crude oil and petroleum products," the statement read. They also promised to continue to work together to strengthen economic restrictions to ensure that the costs to Russia continue to grow.

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US, EU Seek Progress on Sustainable Steel, Aluminum Agreement by Oct 2023 - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States and the European Union have pledged to seek a result in the Global Arrangement on Sustainable Steel and Aluminum talks by October of this year, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and US President Joe Biden said in a joint statement after the bilateral meeting in Washington on Friday. "We are committed to achieving an ambitious outcome in the Global Arrangement on Sustainable Steel and Aluminum negotiations by October 2023," the statement said. "The arrangement will ensure the long-term viability of our industries, encourage low-carbon intensity steel and aluminum production and trade, and restore market-oriented conditions globally and bilaterally." The statement went on to say that they will incentivize emission reductions in these sectors. "The arrangement will be open to all partners demonstrating commitment to countering non-market excess capacity and reducing carbon-intensity in these sectors," it said.

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Von der Leyen Says Agreed With Biden to Start Work on Raw Materials Deal

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) – European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that she agreed with US President Joe Biden to start working on an agreement on critical raw materials that have been either sourced or processed in the European Union.

"We have agreed that we will start work now with a clear goal. The goal is to have an agreement on critical raw materials that have been sourced, or processed in the European Union so that these strategic supply chains are able to access the American market as if they had been sourced in the United States. So, also access to all the necessary benefits from the United States," von der Leyen told reporters on Friday, after her meeting with Biden.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 11 (Sputnik) -

IRAN-SAUDI ARABIA AGREEMENT

* Iran and Saudi Arabia have agreed to resume cooperation on security, trade and investment, the two countries said in a joint statement on Friday.

* Tehran and Riyadh agreed to respect each other's sovereignty and not interfere in the other's internal affairs, the joint statement said.

* White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said he would stridently push back on the idea that the United States is stepping back on its role in the Middle East after China helped restore ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

* Saudi Arabia kept the United States informed about its talks with Iran to restore diplomatic ties, but US officials were not involved in this matter, Kirby said.

GENERAL ELECTIONS IN TURKEY

* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday signed a decree on holding general elections on May 14, according to media broadcasts.

* Turkey's High Electoral Commission approved the date of the presidential elections proposed by the president, May 14, and this decision was published in the country's official publication Resmi Gazete.

US BIOLOGICAL PROGRAMS

* Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov, the head of the radiation, chemical and biological defense troops of the Russian armed forces, unveiled on Friday new names of participants in the United States' military biological programs, including representatives of Ukrainian state institutions and private companies.

* The health ministry of one Central African country is studying a possibility of the artificial spread of the Ebola virus in September 2022 by US military biologists, Kirillov said.

* The United States has failed to deactivate its biolaboratories on the territory of Ukraine, despite the relevant statements by US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby, Kirillov said.

UKRAINE CONFLICT

* Russia has requested the UN Security Council to organize a meeting on March 14 on the issue of how prevalent Russophobia hinders the potential long-term solutions to the Ukraine crisis, Russian deputy envoy to the United Nations Dmitry Polianskiy said on Friday.

* The countries of the collective West are very close to seriously discuss the prospect of sending allied troops to Ukraine, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said.

* Washington will not be able to ignore the persecution against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said, commenting on Kiev's demand for the monks of the UOC to leave the Kiev Pechersk Lavra.

* French President Emmanuel Macron announced after a meeting with UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak their countries' intention to help Ukraine launch a counteroffensive in the near future.

* Ukraine has lost more than 240 soldiers in the Donetsk and Krasnyi Lyman directions in the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The Canadian government has adopted new Special Economic Measures that prohibits imports of Russian iron, steel and aluminum products, Global Affairs Canada said in a statement on Friday.

* President Joe Biden and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during a meeting at the White House that they will discuss enhancing economic pressure on Russia, including cracking down on third countries that may be helping Moscow circumvent Western-imposed sanctions, a senior Biden administration official said.

NORD STREAM SABOTAGE

* If an investigation into the Nord Stream sabotage is blocked, Russia will rethink how to respond to the West for the direct encroachment on its property, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Friday.

* It is obvious for Russia that the responsibility for the Nord Stream blasts lies with the United States and the leaks it places in in media are an attempt to set the investigation on a wrong track, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said in an interview with RT Arabic.

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Von der Leyen Says Discussed Ukraine 'Extensively' With Biden at White House

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) – European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said she had an extensive discussion on Ukraine at a meeting with US President Joe Biden at the White House on Friday.

"We have extensively discussed that [conflict in Ukraine], starting with the financial budget support that the European Union is giving 18 billion [euros] during this year, one and a half billion [euro] per month to Ukraine, but also discussing the way we are caring for four million refugees from Ukraine in the European Union," von der Leyen told reporters following the meeting with Biden.

A "strong focus" of her talks with Biden was on sanctions against Russia, she added.

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Canada Bans Imports of Russian Steel, Aluminum - Global Affairs

(Adds details in para 3-4, 7-8)

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has banned imports of Russian steel and aluminum products, Global Affairs Canada said in a statement on Friday. The newly introduced amendments to the Special Economic Measures (Russia) Regulations include the prohibition of steel and aluminum imports by Canadians inside or outside Canada, purchased from Russia or a Russian national, the statement said.

The ban targets a wide range of products such as aluminum imports which include unwrought aluminum, aluminum sheets and all sorts of finished aluminum household items and even containers.

As for Russian steel products, the list includes iron and non-alloyed steel, semi-finished items such as tubes and pipes as well as railway or tram-track construction materials, among others. According to Global Affairs Canada, the measures were introduced because Ottawa believes Russia's actions "constitute a grave breach of international peace and security that has resulted in a serious international crisis."

However, the Canadian government has made an exception for products acquired under contracts that entered in effect before the new amendments were made, the statement said. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland separately said the new measures would ensure Russia cannot fund its special military operation in Ukraine with revenues from steel and aluminum.

According to available data, Canada imported \$32.5 million worth of aluminum and \$154 million worth of steel products from Russia in 2021.

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Von der Leyen Thanks Biden for Helping 'Tremendously' With Delivering More LNG to Europe

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen expressed thanks during a meeting with US President Joe Biden for "tremendously" helping the European Union by delivering more liquefied natural gas (LNG) to decrease the bloc's dependency on Russian gas, according to a White House press pool on Friday.

"Thank you very much, Mr. President," the White House pool cited Von der Leyen as saying. "Indeed, you helped us enormously when we wanted to get rid of the Russian fossil fuel dependency, you helped us tremendously by delivering more LNG, you helped us through the energy crisis."

Von der Leyen is visiting Washington to review mutual cooperation between the United States and the European Union in support of Ukraine and to discuss addressing the climate crisis through investments in "clean" technology based on secure supply chains.

After Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine, the countries of the collective West have been actively searching for ways to limit Moscow's energy-related income, notably from oil and gas.

On Thursday, European Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson called for EU member states to completely stop importing Russian liquefied natural gas and refrain from signing new gas contracts with Moscow all the while being mindful of the bloc's energy security.

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Yellen 'Closely Tracking' Developments With Silicon Valley Bank - White House

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen is closely monitoring the situation concerning the Silicon Valley Bank after it failed earlier on Friday, Council of Economic Advisers Chair Cecilia Rouse told reporters on Friday.

"Our Treasury Secretary Yellen is closely tracking the developments with Silicon Valley Bank," Rouse said during a press briefing. "We have every faith in our regulators."

Earlier on Friday, the Treasury Department announced that Yellen convened the leaders of the Federal Reserve, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation and the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency to discuss developments concerning the SVB.

Yellen expressed full confidence in banking regulators to take appropriate actions in response to the situation, the Treasury Department said.

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Communist Party of Canada Asks Ottawa to Withdraw from NATO, Reduce Military Spending

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) – The leader of the Communist Party of Canada Elizabeth Rawley called on the Federal Government to reduce its military spending by 75%, withdraw from NATO, and achieve a peaceful settlement to the conflict in Ukraine.

"We call on the government and on parliament to act now ... cut the military budget by 75%, withdraw from NATO and call for a peaceful political settlement to the war in Ukraine," Rawley said during a press conference from Parliament Hill.

The Communist Party of Canada held a presser in response to a meeting on Thursday of a parliamentary subcommittee with CEOs from three major Canadian grocery chains, questioned over the “skyrocketing” prices of food.

Rawley also criticized major companies for making major financial gains in times of crisis, and the government for not protecting consumers.

Other calls included asking for a freeze of food, fuel and rent prices as well as interest rates.

She also asked for Ottawa to rise wages and pensions, and enact a guaranteed livable income.

Created in 1921, the Communist Party of Canada is the second oldest active and recognized political organisation in the country. It does not currently hold any parliamentary representation.

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Equinor Not Considering Resuming Oil Production in Venezuela at This Time - Spokesperson HOUSTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Norwegian oil firm Equinor is not considering resuming oil production operations in Venezuela regardless of the US easing sanctions, company spokesperson Ola Morten Aanestad told Sputnik on Friday.

"No, Venezuela is not being considered by Equinor at this time," the spokesperson said.

Equinor had a joint venture in Venezuela but left after US sanctions hampered Venezuela's energy sector in 2019.

Chevron and its joint ventures with PDVSA currently produce up to 100,000 barrels per day, but with additional investment and time it could reach a capacity of 300,000 barrels per day, a person with knowledge of the industry told Sputnik earlier this week. Chevron, European energy companies ENI and Repsol, and other joint ventures produced 500,000 barrels a day before US sanctions were placed on Venezuela in 2019, which has discouraged investment in the country's oil sector.

In November, the US Treasury Department provided a new license that allows Chevron to extract oil in Venezuela for six months through its joint venture partners PDVSA. However, this license did not expand operations or allow new US investment in Venezuela's oil sector.

The United States granted the new license after the Venezuelan government and the opposition resumed talks in Mexico City and came to an agreement on addressing the humanitarian crisis in the country, including an agreement on the continuation of talks focused on elections to be held in 2024.

According to US officials, Venezuela-related sanctions and restrictions imposed by the United States still remain in place and this decision should not be interpreted as a permissive environment on sanctions.

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Michigan Man Arrested on Firearms Charges After Threatening FBI Agents - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - A US man in the state of Michigan was arrested and charged with illegal possession of a firearm after making threats to kill FBI agents and other government officials, the Justice Department said on Friday.

"A Michigan man was arrested and charged in a criminal complaint with illegally possessing firearms after having been committed to a mental institution and while being an unlawful user of a controlled substance," the Justice Department said in a statement.

Randall Robert Berka II was illegally in possession of four firearms while being a daily user of marijuana and after being committed to a mental institution, the statement said.

Berka came to the attention of the FBI after he made numerous threats over YouTube to kill FBI agents, members of the LGBTQ community, President Joe Biden and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, the statement said.

The firearms were purchased for Berka by a relative who later feared for his mental health and became afraid of Berka, the statement said.

Berka posted threats to government officials, including "I buy guns... and plot to kill people," the statement quotes him as saying.

The FBI arrested Berka on Thursday at his residence and he is scheduled to make his first court appearance on Friday, the statement said.

Berka faces up to 15 years in prison if convicted on the charges against him, the statement added.

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State Dept. Warns Against 'Undermining' Dayton Accords as Dodik Threatens Secession

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) – The United States will hold responsible those undermining Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutions and the Dayton Peace Agreement, the State Department said on Friday in response to Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik's secession warning.

On Thursday, Dodik said Republika Srpska may secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina if its integrity is at stake, according to media reports. The warning came after the Bosnia and Herzegovina Constitutional Court repealed an immovable property law in Republika Srpska.

"The United States rejects Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik's March 9 comments, in which he sought to undermine the Bosnia and Herzegovina Constitutional Court and made repeated threats about the Republika Srpska's secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)," spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement. "Article III (3) of the Dayton Constitution clearly states that the Republika Srpska must fully comply with the decisions of the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the final and binding rulings of the BiH Constitutional Court." He accused Dodik of "separatist" rhetoric and "threats to the Dayton Peace Agreement," calling it irresponsible and dangerous.

The United States will continue to uphold BiH's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and multiethnic character, the statement added. Washington will "hold responsible those who seek to undermine BiH's institutions and the Dayton Peace Agreement," it said.

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US Capable of Displacing Russian Gas in Europe in Foreseeable Future - Senate Energy Chair

HOUSTON, March 10 (Sputnik) – The United States will be able to fully displace Russian gas in the European market in the foreseeable future and Washington wants to make sure Europe does not go back to being reliant on Russian oil and gas, Chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Joe Manchin said on Friday.

"I think yes, we'll be able to," Manchin said in response to a Sputnik question on the margins of CERAWEEK. "We can make sure that they're not having to rely on or go back to that type of a scenario. If we can do that and take Russian oil off the market to be used as a weapon, that would be a blessing for democracy and the freedoms of people."

The US lawmaker believes that the United States will be able to increase its LNG deliveries to Europe from 13-14 billion cubic feet a day to about 20-22 billion cubic feet in the future.

Manchin has advocated for the complete withdrawal of Russian gas and oil from world markets, adding that the United States "as a superpower of the world" should help with that.

After Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine, the West has been actively searching for ways to limit Moscow's energy-related income, notably from oil and gas.

European Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson on Thursday urged EU countries to completely stop importing Russian liquefied natural gas and refrain from signing new gas contracts with the country, while still keeping in mind the bloc's energy security.

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US Senator Hawley Tells China's Xi to 'Come Clean' About Role in COVID-19 Origins - Letter

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - US Senator Josh Hawley on Friday urged Chinese President Xi Jinping to come clean about China's alleged role in the genesis of the novel coronavirus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic, following Congress' passage of legislation to declassify US intel on the matter.

Chinese Communist Party officials earlier wrote a letter to Hawley, the lead lawmaker on the legislation, condemning the bill and expressing concerns about claims that the novel coronavirus may have originated from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, US media reported earlier this week.

There is "not a chance" Hawley withdraws the bill, the lawmaker said in a statement on Thursday. The legislation has passed both the House and Senate, now awaiting final approval by US President Joe Biden.

"Today the US House of Representatives followed the Senate in unanimously adopting my bill to declassify US government intelligence on the origins of the COVID virus. I know you are keenly

interested in this bill," Hawley said in his letter to Xi. "But the bill will soon be law – unless you can convince President [Joe] Biden to veto it. Time is up. Come clean about your role in spreading COVID to the world."

Those responsible for lying about what the US government knew about the COVID-19 pandemic's origins will be held accountable as a result of the bill, Hawley also said in a statement on Friday.

Last week, FBI Director Christopher Wray said that the agency believes that the novel coronavirus most likely came from a laboratory in Wuhan, although other US intelligence agencies have pointed to a market in the city instead.

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Canadian Government to Release 2023 Federal Budget on March 28 - Finance Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The Canadian federal government will present its 2023 budget at the House of Commons on March 28, the Department of Finance said in a statement on Friday.

"The Honorable Chrystia Freeland, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, announced today that the government will table its 2023 budget on March 28, 2023, in the House of Commons, at approximately 4:00 p.m. ET," the statement said.

Freeland will table the government's plan and the measures set to be taken to strengthen the Canadian economy and make it more resilient "for everyone," the statement also said.

However, fiscal restraint may make its way into the budget as Freeland has repeatedly said the government does not want to interfere with the Bank of Canada's efforts to reduce high inflation, the statement added.

Freeland is also expected to present the details of Canada's answer to the recently enacted US Inflation Reduction Act and of its efforts to transition to so-called green energy.

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Blinken to Testify Before US House Panel on China Threat March 23 - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will provide a congressional testimony on the alleged threat posed by China to the United States later in March, Fox News reported on Friday.

Blinken is expected to testify before the US House Foreign Affairs Committee on March 23 on 10:00 a.m. (15:00 GMT) on the alleged China threat as part of a hearing about the State Department budget request, which was published on Thursday, the report said.

Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul noted that he looks forward to getting Blinken before the panel and on the record about the Biden administration's strategy to confront the "generational threat" posed by China, the report said.

McCaul recommends that Blinken prepare for extensive questions on the Biden administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 as well, the report added.

US President Joe Biden's budget request for the State Department and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) for 2024 is \$63.1 billion, including \$400 million in discretionary funding to counter "specific problematic behaviors" by China globally through the Countering PRC Influence Fund and more than \$13 billion on a range of programs to out-compete Beijing.

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Xi Must Call Zelenskyy if China Wants Peace for Russia, Ukraine - Joly

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - If China wants to bring peace between Russia and Ukraine, the country's president Xi Jinping must call his Ukraine counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy to hear his vision of a sustainable peace, Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly said on Friday.

"President Xi hasn't spoken to President Zelenskyy since February 24 and China always talks about bringing peace to the region, so we think it should be clear that President Xi speaks with President Zelensky. It's the only way they'll be able to hear his version of Ukraine being invaded by their neighbor," Joly said.

The foreign affairs ministers made the comment during a joint press conference with her Norwegian counterpart Anniken Huitfeldt in Ottawa.

Joly added that Canada believes China can and should be playing a clearer role in solving the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the request for meeting Zelenskyy was also expressed to the Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang last week on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Delhi.

Since China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, it has a "duty" to defend the UN Charter, Joly said.

Moreover, Beijing also has a "specific role" to play in bringing more stability to Europe, Joly said. Western states need to engage with countries worldwide to highlight and denounce Russia's special military operation in Ukraine as it goes against the UN Charter's principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

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UN Hopes Saudi Arabia, Iran Agreement Will Have Positive Impact in Yemen-Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United Nations wishes that the newly-brokered agreement by China between Saudi Arabia and Iran will have a positive impact on the crisis in Yemen, the UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"In Yemen, we have a situation that is fragile ... We hope this agreement will have a positive impact on this situation and others," Dujarric told a briefing.

It is not a secret that a lot of tensions and challenges have been seen between the two countries that have impacted the region as a whole, he added.

Earlier today, Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to resume cooperation on security, trade and investment, they said in a joint statement with their mediator, China.

Diplomatic relations between Tehran and Riyadh were severed in 2016 after an attack on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran by protesters against the kingdom's execution of prominent Shiite theologian Nimr al-Nimr, but in recent months the two sides have expressed a desire to resolve differences. In an interview with The Atlantic, released in September, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said that relations with Iran should be built as with a neighboring country.

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Russia Requests UNSC Meeting on How Russophobia Hinders Ukraine Crisis Resolution - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 10 (Sputnik) – Russia has requested the UN Security Council to organize a meeting on March 14 on the issue of how prevalent Russophobia hinders the potential long-term solutions to the Ukraine crisis, Russian deputy envoy to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Friday.

"Today we requested an open meeting in the UN Security Council on Tuesday March 14, on Russophobia as a factor, hindering long-term and sustainable solutions to the Ukrainian crisis," Polyanskiy wrote on his Telegram profile.

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CORRECTION - Democratic Congressman Says US Wants Russia to Lose in Ukraine, But Not 'Too Badly'

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States wants Russia to lose in Ukraine, but is not seeking its "abject defeat" or even "collapse" since it would be detrimental to global stability, Democratic Congressman Seth Moulton, a strong supporter of military aid to Ukraine, stated on Friday.

"I don't know if it's good for the stability of the world if the Russian regime collapses. For example, I am talking about nuclear proliferation. So saying that we want abject defeat of the

Russians and the whole regime collapse is probably not what we actually want," Moulton said in a podcast conversation at the Hudson Institute.

The lawmaker noted "it is a strange way in which we absolutely want Ukraine to win, we want Russia to lose, but we don't actually want Russia to lose too badly."

In an apparent slip of the tongue, Moulton conflated Russia with the Soviet Union, which was dissolved at the end of 1991. But he said the United States did not want to destroy Russia.

"We have no intent of taking out the Soviet Union or Russia," he said.

Moulton also called for the Biden administration to supply more heavy artillery ammunition, tanks and other offensive weapons to Ukraine to boost Kiev's capability to go on the offensive against Russian forces.

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Ukraine War Important for US to Prevent Americans From Dying in Europe - Congressman

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States and NATO support for Ukraine and their continued massive flow of arms and ammunition to Kiev is critically important for the United States because it prevents Americans from having to fight and die in Europe instead of the Ukrainians, US Congressman Seth Moulton said on Friday.

"This fight is so important because it prevents Americans dying in Europe," Moulton said in a podcast conversation at the Hudson Institute. "We want Ukraine to win to make it clear [to Russia] you tried this war of aggression and you lost."

Continued support for Ukraine was essential to the United States maintaining the credibility of its underlying nuclear deterrent to protect its allies, Moulton said.

"If you are counting on the United States for a nuclear deterrent we are going to show up. That is a really important message," Moulton said.

Since Ukrainians were doing the fighting, they and not the United States should determine the terms of the eventual settlement with Russia at the end of the conflict, Moulton added.

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Ottawa Prohibits Imports of Russian Steel, Aluminum - Global Affairs Canada

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has adopted new Special Economic Measures that prohibits imports of Russian iron, steel and aluminum products, Global Affairs Canada said in a statement on Friday.

The newly introduced amendments include the prohibition of steel and aluminum imports by Canadians inside or outside Canada, purchased from Russia or a Russian national, the statement said.

According to Global Affairs Canada, the measures were introduced because Ottawa believes Russia's actions "constitute a grave breach of international peace and security that has resulted in a serious international crisis."

However, the Canadian government has made an exception for products acquired under contracts that entered in effect before the new amendments were made, the statement said.

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Republican Congressman Says US Wants Russia to Lose in Ukraine, But Not 'Too Badly'

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US Congressman Says Introduced Bill to Protect US Agriculture From Foreign Pests, Diseases

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Dan Kildee said on Friday that he introduced bipartisan legislation to protect the United States' agricultural sector from foreign pests and diseases by permanently authorizing the National Detector Dog Training Center. The center mainly trains beagles and their US Customs and Border Protection handlers to sniff out prohibited items that could introduce foreign plant pests or animal diseases into the United States, giving the legislation its title - the Beagle Brigade Act.

"I'm proud to partner with Republicans and Democrats to introduce the Beagle Brigade Act so we can strengthen the inspection of food imports," Kildee said in a statement. "This legislation

will help defend American agriculture from harmful diseases like African Swine Flu that could decimate our livestock and increase food prices."

Providing permanent authorization for the Department of Agriculture's National Detector Dog Training Center ensures the United States has a crucial tool to prevent pests and diseases that could devastate all areas of the agricultural economy, the statement said.

The center trains dogs to detect fruits, vegetables and meats in international passenger baggage, mail and vehicles entering the United States. Dogs are selected from animal shelters, rescue groups and private owners, with those who do not complete training being offered up for adoption.

US Senators Raphael Warnock and Joni Ernst introduced a companion bill in the upper chamber of Congress.

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Ottawa and Oslo Reaffirm 'Excellent' Relations During Norwegian Foreign Minister Visit

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) – Canada and Norway reaffirmed in a joint statement on Friday their "excellent" bilateral relations as the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Melanie Joly hosted her Norwegian counterpart Anniken Huitfeldt in Ottawa.

"Today, Canada and Norway reaffirm our excellent relations, which are anchored by our common values and commitment to the rule of law and the rules-based international order. We are like-minded partners dedicated to effective multilateralism that promotes gender equality, protects human rights, including the rights of Indigenous Peoples and minorities, and safeguards democratic principles," the joint statement shared by Global Affairs Canada reads. Canada and Norway remain committed to enhancing collective security, international peace and stability, the statement said, adding both countries will increase bilateral cooperation in those domains.

Joly expressed her gratitude to Anniken for Norway's sponsorship of NATO's Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence taking place in Montreal, the statement continued, while the two countries also reaffirmed their support for Finland's and Sweden's accession to the US-led military bloc, the statement reads.

Furthermore, both ministers pledged to fight the growing "threat" of disinformation by supporting collective efforts and civil society, while also supporting democracy throughout multilateral forums and inclusive democratic processes, the statement continued.

"We will continue to support the valuable work of the Community of Democracies, Media Freedom Coalition, International IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) and the Freedom Online Coalition," the statement said.

Additionally, Canada and Norway will also continue their work as members of the Arctic Council, promote cooperation in the area, economic and social development, and ensure the region remains "peaceful and stable."

Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs Anniken Huitfeldt is visiting Canada from March 9-10.

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Blinken to Travel to Ethiopia, Niger March 14-17 - US State Dept.

(Updates with more details in paras 4, 5)

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit Ethiopia and Niger next week for talks on a range of issues, including the cessation of hostilities between the Ethiopian government and the restive Tigray region in the north of the country, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel to Ethiopia and Niger March 14-17, 2023. On March 15, the Secretary will visit Addis Ababa, Ethiopia where he will discuss implementation of the cessation of hostilities agreement to advance peace and promote transitional justice in northern Ethiopia," Price said in a statement.

During his visit to Addis Ababa, Blinken will also hold talks with African Union Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat on shared priorities, including food security, climate, energy and health, the statement said.

Blinken will also meet with humanitarian organizations and civil society actors for talks on humanitarian aid, food security and human rights, the statement said.

Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee said during a press briefing that Blinken will meet with Ethiopian and Tigrayan government officials, but he will not make a stop at Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region.

Phee said that in order to put the relationship between the United States and Ethiopia in a forward trajectory, Addis Ababa needs to make steps to "break the cycle of ethnic political violence" that has allegedly set the country many decades back.

Blinken will then make the first-ever visit by a US secretary of state to Niger on March 16 for talks with President Mohamed Bazoum and Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massaoudou in Niamey, Price said in the statement.

"He will discuss ways to advance the US-Niger partnership on diplomacy, democracy, development, and defense," he said.

Blinken's visit to the country will also include encounters with young people from Niger's conflict zones who have completed the United Nations-sponsored Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Reconciliation (DDRR) program, which seeks to facilitate transitions into civilian life, the statement said.

The top US diplomat will also seek to advance agreements on collaboration achieved during the US-Africa Leaders Summit on issues that include regional peace, security, climate and governance, the statement added.

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Members of US House Freedom Caucus Considering Vote to Increase Debt Ceiling

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Republican US Congressmen who belong to the House Freedom Caucus announced on Friday that they will consider voting on the issue of increasing the debt ceiling.

"The members of the House Freedom Caucus will consider voting to raise the debt ceiling," the congressmen said in a statement.

The lawmakers said they would conduct a vote contingent on enacting legislation to cut spending by ending the \$400 billion student loan bailout proposed by President Joe Biden and rescinding all unspent COVID-19-related funds.

The lawmakers pledged in the statement to find "every dollar" spent by Democrats that can be reclaimed for US taxpayers.

Setting topline discretionary spending at fiscal year 2022 levels for ten years would allow for \$131 billion to be cut from the 2024 budget and save \$3 trillion over the long term by cutting the federal bureaucracy, the statement said.

Freedom Caucus Chair Scott Perry urged saving funds by shrinking Washington and growing America.

"Doing this, we will lower, dollar for dollar, the amount needed for any increase in the debt ceiling. It is actually what families across America, who find themselves overextended, must do," Perry said.

The Freedom Caucus of Republican members of the House of Representatives is generally considered to be the most conservative bloc within the House Republican Conference.

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US, Europe to Go After Chinese Firms if Beijing Does Not Comply With Minimum Tax - Yellen

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States and Europe will ensure that Chinese companies in their jurisdictions pay the global minimum on taxes even if Beijing does not comply with the international treaty it has signed on to, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a congressional testimony on Friday.

"China will not benefit at all" by ignoring the minimum 15% tax on corporations, Yellen told the US House Ways and Means Committee. "If for any reason China fails to put this tax in place, there is an enforcement mechanism built into this agreement, [where] the United States or other countries in which Chinese firms do business ... would impose a top up tax on Chinese corporations."

Yellen's remarks come in the wake of an opinion piece by former Assistant Treasury Secretary for Tax Policy Aharon Friedman, who wrote that the global minimum tax would be "a boon for Beijing."

Friedman said China's prioritizing of state enterprises already bypasses the global tax code, which focuses on private companies. In addition, the collective West has little reason to take China's word it would pay taxes or to trust the books of Chinese companies operating under Beijing's thumb, he also said.

The Chinese government is not likely to share sensitive information on Chinese companies, especially those in the defense and technology sectors, nor allow other countries to tax their Chinese operations, Friedman added.

Yellen responded by saying that the United States and Europe would be extra vigilant in ensuring that Chinese firms do not fall through the crack of compliance on the global tax code. "We will do it and will keep the tax revenue... one way or another," Yellen said. "We will level the playing field, so Chinese firms are on the same footing as our multinationals." China's seriousness in complying with the global tax code has come under skepticism since Beijing urged state-owned firms in February to phase out the use of the four biggest international accounting firms that set some of the highest auditing standards.

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Iowa Republicans Remain Committed to Trump But Support Decreases Ahead of Caucuses - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Almost half of Republicans in the US state of Iowa look very favorably at former President Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential race, but their support has begun to decrease months ahead of the presidential caucuses, a new Des Moines Register/Mediacom Iowa Poll revealed on Friday.

Forty-four percent of Iowa voters who self-identify as Republicans said they view Trump very favorably and 36% said they view him as mostly favorably while 18% of respondents expressed the opposite view, a release on the poll said.

However, Iowa voters' favorable view of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who still has not announced whether he intends to run, place him right behind Trump. Forty-two percent of Republicans in Iowa said they have a "very favorable" view of DeSantis and 33% said they hold a "mostly favorable" view of him.

At the same time, two thirds of respondents said they hold a very or mostly favorable view of former Vice President Mike Pence and about half share the same opinion of former US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, the release said.

"Someone who has already held the office and who won the state twice would be presumed to be the front-runner, and I don't know that we can say that at this point. There's nothing locked in about Iowa for Donald Trump," pollster J. Ann Selzer, who conducted the Iowa poll, said.

Almost three-fourths of the respondents, or 74%, said they would likely vote for Trump in the 2024 presidential election, including 47% who said they would definitely vote for Trump and 27% who said they would probably vote for him, the release said.

Iowa is the first US state to vote in the Republican primary elections and is often viewed as a bellwether state indicating the political direction of the country.

The survey was conducted on March 5-8 via telephone interviews with 805 adult residents of Iowa, according to the release.

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Sullivan, Georgian President Met Friday to Discuss Recent Developments - White House

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili earlier on Friday to discuss recent developments in the country after unrest broke out over a proposed foreign agents bill that drew controversy among non-governmental organizations and activists, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said.

"Mr. Sullivan met this morning with the President of Georgia," Kirby said during a conference call. "They did have a chance to discuss recent developments there, including these protests against controversial legislation, and they also discussed our shared strong concerns that this legislation would have a chilling effect and impede the important efforts of hundreds of Georgians, Georgian NGOs that are working to improve the community."

The Biden administration is glad to see that the legislation has been withdrawn in Georgia's parliament, Kirby added.

The United States continues to support Georgia's transatlantic aspirations, but there are still reforms needed to be able to advance them, with which Washington will help, according to Kirby.

Georgia's parliament on Tuesday adopted a controversial draft law on transparency of foreign influence by a majority vote in the first reading. Under the law, a list of individuals and entities receiving financing from abroad would be created. The move triggered mass protests and concerns among the opposition, which fears it would allow the government to suppress the work of NGOs and activists in the country.

On Thursday, the ruling Georgian Dream party announced the withdrawal of the bill from the parliament, and earlier on Friday, the parliament voted against the controversial bill in the second reading.

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Biden to Ask Congress to Provide \$300Mln in Additional Energy Aid to Moldova - White House (Update: adds background in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is working with Congress to provide \$300 million in additional energy assistance to Moldova, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"Our administration is working with Congress to provide Moldova an additional \$300 million in energy assistance to address the urgent needs created by the war in Ukraine and to strengthen Moldova's resilience and energy security," Kirby said during a conference call.

The push for assistance comes amid indications that Russia could attempt to destabilize Moldova and insert a pro-Moscow government in Chisinau, Kirby said, citing US intelligence.

However, the United States does not see any immediate military threat to Moldova, Kirby said. Earlier this week, security officials in the Russian-speaking, breakaway Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (Transnistria, PMR) prevented a terrorist attack by suspects linked to a Ukrainian intelligence service.

The Russian Defense Ministry warned in February that Ukraine may be planning a military provocation in Transnistria.

Kirby, as well as Ukrainian officials, have denied Russia's allegations regarding attempts to destabilize Transnistria.

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US Plans to Develop Conventionally Armed Regionally Based Hypersonic Weapons - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States plans to develop conventionally armed and regionally stationed hypersonic weapons, US Defense Department Emerging Capabilities Policy Office Director Michael Horowitz said in a congressional hearing on Friday.

"The [Defense] Department's currently planning to develop conventionally armed regionally based hypersonic weapons," Horowitz told the US House Armed Services Committee.

Horowitz's comment came in response to a question by lawmakers whether there is a need to develop hypersonic weapons that could fire from the United States and have the range to hit Russia or China.

On February 27, Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said the US military would deploy its first long-range hypersonic weapon battery in the fall. The US military continues training on that weapon system at Joint Base Lewis-McCloud (JBLM) in Washington State, Wormuth added.

On January 16, Russian media reported, citing sources close to the military and the defense industry, that Russia manufactured the first batch of the Poseidon torpedoes for the Project 09852 special purpose nuclear-powered submarine Belgorod.

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US Not Stepping Back From Mideast as China Brokers Deal Between Iran, Saudis - White House

(Update: adds attribution in headline, details in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday that he would stridently push back on the idea that the United States is stepping back on its role in the Middle East after China helped restore ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

"I would stridently push back on this idea that we're stepping back in the Middle East, far from it," Kirby said during a conference call.

The US supports any effort to de-escalate tensions in the Middle East and would like to see the war in Yemen end, Kirby said. However, the US was not directly involved in the recent negotiations, Kirby said.

Iran may have been brought to the negotiation table due to internal pressures, Kirby added. The US continues to be watchful of China's attempts to gain influence around the world, Kirby also said.

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White House Says Xi's Third Term as China's President Coming as No Surprise

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday that Chinese President Xi Jinping's election to a third term as China's president comes as no surprise.

"On China, with Mr Xi's third term, it's certainly coming as no surprise to anyone here. That was all highly expected," Kirby said during a conference call.

Earlier in the day, the Chinese National People's Congress — the country's supreme state authority — unanimously reelected Xi as the president of China for a third five-year term, according to the voting results.

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US Not Directly Involved in Saudi-Iranian Negotiations to Restore Ties - White House

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Saudi Arabia kept the United States informed about its talks with Iran to restore diplomatic ties, but US officials were not involved in this matter, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"The Saudis did keep us informed about these talks that they were having, just as we keep them informed on our diplomatic engagements, but we weren't directly involved," Kirby said during a conference call.

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US House Passes Bill Requiring Declassification of Intelligence on COVID-19 Origins

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Friday passed legislation requiring the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) to declassify materials related to the origin of the novel coronavirus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic.

House lawmakers passed the COVID-19 Origin Act of 2023 in a unanimous vote of 419-0. The bill requires DNI to declassify information on potential links between the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China and the genesis of COVID-19 no later than 90 days after enactment of the legislation.

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US Says Not Stepping Back in Mideast as Saudis, Iran Reach Detente in China

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US Has No Intention of Developing Hypersonic Nuclear Weapons - Officials

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - Senior US military officials present at a House of Representatives Armed Services Committee hearing on Friday confirmed that Washington has no plans to develop hypersonic nuclear weapons.

A panel of six officials representing various branches of the US military said "no" when Congressman Seth Moulton asked them whether the United States intends to develop hypersonic nuclear weapons.

Some members of the committee, including Moulton, voiced concern that the United States will not be able to reach parity with China and Russia on a number of nuclear hypersonic missiles because it has not and is not investing in their development.

The United States is far behind China and Russia, which have been able to make significant progress in the development of hypersonic missiles in recent years, with Russia deploying and using such missiles in the Ukraine conflict, according to committee members.

Participants in the hearing included Office of the Director of Defense Research and Engineering Principal Director for Hypersonics Michael White; Defense Department Emerging Capabilities Policy Office Director Michael Horowitz; Strategic Systems Programs Director Vice Adm. Johnny Wolfe; US Army Director of Hypersonics, Directed Energy and Space Lt. Gen. Robert Rasch; Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Deputy Lt. Gen. Donna Shipton; and Defense Intelligence Agency Chief Scientist for Science and Technology Paul Freisthler.

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(Update: adds Scalise statement, background in paras 4-6)

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The bill requires DNI to declassify information on potential links between the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China and the genesis of COVID-19 no later than 90 days after enactment of the legislation.

"Transparency on the origins of COVID-19 is long overdue. Americans deserve to know the truth about what the government knew and when," House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the bill.

The Senate passed the bill earlier this month, with the House's passage sending the bill to President Joe Biden's desk for final approval.

Last week, FBI Director Christopher Wray said that the agency believes that COVID-19 most likely originated from a lab in Wuhan, although other US intelligence agencies instead point to a Wuhan market at the virus' origin.

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Biden to Ask Congress to Provide \$300Mln in Additional Energy Aid to Moldova - White House

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is working with Congress to provide \$300 million in additional energy assistance to Moldova, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"Our administration is working with Congress to provide Moldova an additional \$300 million in energy assistance to address the urgent needs created by the war in Ukraine and to strengthen Moldova's resilience and energy security," Kirby said during a conference call.

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US Adds 311,000 Jobs In Feb, Beating Forecasts but Posing Less Challenge to Fed

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States added 311,000 jobs in February, the Labor Department said Friday, reporting a number that again beat forecasts but not as much as in January, in what could be a relief to the Federal Reserve's task of lowering inflation amid persistently strong labor and wage growth.

Last month's growth in so-called nonfarm payrolls comes after the outsized addition of 517,000 jobs in January. Economists had forecast a growth of 225,000 in February and 188,000 in January. In a further relief to the Fed, the unemployment rate expanded to 3.6% last month from 3.4% in January.

Until Friday's latest payrolls report, the Fed had been expected to settle on a 50-basis point hike at its upcoming March 22 rate decision. The relatively softer growth in February payrolls versus January prompted some analysts to think the central bank might opt for a more modest hike, although there was not enough consensus on that.

For what it's worth, Investing.com's Fed Rate Monitor Tool — an indicator of money market expectations for upcoming rate decisions — had a 72% chance of a 25 basis point hike at the Fed's March 22 meeting.

"The unemployment rate was higher and wages were lower than expectations," economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on the ForexLive forum, referring to the February payrolls data. "Will the change in the calculus influence the Fed as well? Will they hold off on a 50 bp hike?"

The Fed has said that a labor market slowdown will be necessary to cool inflation that proved more stubborn than thought.

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.

While policy-makers the world over typically celebrate on seeing good jobs numbers, the Fed faces a different predicament. The central bank wishes to see an easing of labor 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.

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

"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," Fed Chair Jerome Powell said in testimony before the US Congress this week. "Recent economic data, particularly inflationary pressures, have been stronger than expected."

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.

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US Developing Comprehensive Defense Against Adversary Hypersonic Systems - Pentagon WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - The United States is working on a comprehensive defense capability to counter adversary hypersonic systems, Michael White, principal director for hypersonics at the Pentagon's Office of the Director of Defense Research and Engineering (Modernization), said on Friday.

"In addition to developing offensive hypersonic weapons, we are developing a comprehensive layered defeat capability to defend against adversary hypersonic systems and we are evaluating the military utility and technology requirements for reusable hypersonic aircraft," White told a Congressional hearing.

The US armed forces have no defense against Russia's new nuclear-armed Poseidon torpedo or hypersonic missiles, Sen. Roger Wicker told the Senate on Thursday.

Wicker noted that Russia's strategic weapons arsenal was both larger and more modern than that of the United States.

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Blinken to Travel to Ethiopia, Niger From March 14-17 - State Department

WASHINGTON, March 10 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit Ethiopia and Niger next week for talks on a range of issues including the cessation of hostilities between the Ethiopian government and the restive Tigray region in the north, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel to Ethiopia and Niger March 14-17, 2023. On March 15, the Secretary will visit Addis Ababa, Ethiopia where he will discuss implementation of the cessation of hostilities agreement to advance peace and promote transitional justice in northern Ethiopia," Price said in a statement.

During his visit to Addis Ababa, Blinken will also hold talks with African Union Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat on shared priorities including food security, climate, energy and health, Price said. The top US diplomat will also meet with humanitarian organizations and civil society actors for talks on humanitarian aid, food security and human rights.

Blinken will then make the first-ever visit by a US secretary of state to Niger on March 16 for talks with President Mohamed Bazoum and Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massaoudou in Niamey, Price said.

"He will discuss ways to advance the US-Niger partnership on diplomacy, democracy, development, and defense," Price said.

Blinken's visit to the country will also include encounters with young people from Niger's conflict zones who have completed the UN-sponsored Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, and Reconciliation (DDRR) program, which seeks to facilitate transitions into civilian life.

He will also seek to advance agreements on collaboration achieved during the US-Africa Leaders Summit on issues including regional peace, security, climate and governance, Price said.