

**3/24/23 Friday**

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Minnesota Nuclear Plant Announces Shutoff Plans After Second Radioactive Water Leak  
By - Fantine Gardinier

A nuclear power plant in the US state of Minnesota will be shut down for repairs after leaking radioactive water for a second time, the owner of the facility has announced. The news comes amid a period of increased scrutiny of the frequency of industrial accidents in the United States. Xcel Energy [said on Thursday](#) that it had detected a second leak of tritium, a radioactive form of hydrogen, from the Monticello Nuclear Generating Plant, which sits on the Mississippi River upstream from the state capital of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The plant will be powered down in order to perform the necessary repair work.

"While the leak continues to pose no risk to the public or the environment, we determined the best course of action is to power down the plant and perform the permanent repairs immediately," Xcel Energy President Chris Clark said in the news release. "We are continuing to work with and inform our state, federal, city and county leaders in the process."

The release said the new leak was "anticipated to be in the hundreds of gallons" and "does not pose any risk to health or the environment." However, a prior leak detected in November 2022 but not disclosed to the public until this month saw some 400,000 gallons of radioactive water leaked from a water pipe running between two buildings at the facility into the Mississippi River. According to the release, only 25% of the tritium has been recovered thus far.

Roughly 30 miles downstream from the Monticello plant are the "Twin Cities" of Minneapolis-St. Paul, which have a combined population of more than 800,000 people.

According to the [Nuclear Regulatory Commission](#), a US federal nuclear regulator, tritium or hydrogen-3 is a weakly radioactive isotope of hydrogen that is naturally occurring, but can also be produced inside a nuclear reactor when a neutron strikes a control rod made out of the element boron, or sometimes by being split from an atom of uranium-235, i.e., the nuclear fuel itself.

This hydrogen-3 atom can bond with other atoms just like regular hydrogen, including forming water molecules with oxygen. Thus, it can be ingested. The NRC warns that a very large exposure to tritium can create health problems, including an increased risk of cancer, but that because of its weak radioactivity, tritium poses no major risk at lower levels of exposure.

The radioactivity of the released tritium has not been made public. However, the NRC notes that "drinking water for a year from a well with 1,600 picocuries per liter of tritium (comparable to levels identified in a drinking water well after a significant tritiated water spill at a nuclear facility) would lead to a radiation dose (using EPA assumptions) of 0.3 millirem (mrem)."

That dose, it notes, is roughly 3,500 times lower than the dose received from a full-body CT scan at a medical facility, or 12 times lower than the dose received from a round-trip cross-country airplane flight.

Xcel, the plant owner, is the country's tenth-largest power provider, with facilities in 10 US states. The Monticello plant has a single BWR-3 reactor built by General Electric in 1971, with a capacity of 671 megawatts. It was originally licensed until 2010, but a 2006 renewal license has allowed it to continue operation until September 2030.

The leak comes amid a flurry of industrial accidents in the United States, including the [catastrophic train crash](#), explosion, and toxic chemical release that occurred in East Palestine, Ohio, on February 4. That incident was caused by a wheel truck on a freight car that overheated and failed, causing it to derail and triggering a pileup of freight cars, which ignited. Later, authorities conducted a "controlled release" of vinyl chloride, a toxic chemical, in a massive explosion that spread the toxins across the area. Locals have alleged a coverup of the release.

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Utah Bans Children From Using Social Media Without Parental Approval

By - Fantine Gardinier

A pair of bills were signed into law by Utah Governor Spencer Cox on Thursday, which together require minors to seek parental approval before logging on to social media apps, especially at certain times of day.

The new laws require social media companies to add a number of features to their apps by March 1, 2024, including age verification for all users in order to open or maintain an account; permission from parents before a minor can open an account; giving parents the ability to access their children's accounts, and including all posts and private messages.

It also requires apps to restrict minors' use of social media between 10:30 pm and 6:30 am, unless a parent changes those settings, and it places restrictions on what kinds of personal information a social media platform can collect from minors.

"This is something that is killing our kids," Cox told reporters. "It's the addictive qualities of social media that are intentionally being placed by these companies to get our kids addicted, and they know it's harming them."

Local media noted the irony of the governor's statement, with [one paper calling him](#) "one of the most prolific users of Twitter in Utah's political sphere."

A [recent publication](#) by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the country's national public health agency, noted a pronounced trend of declining mental health of American youth, especially teenage girls. Other studies have [shown a connection](#) between declining mental health and social media use across all ages, but with a pronounced effect on youth - and there are myriad other stressors also affecting the mental health of young Americans.

However, some critics have said the law poses a major threat to data security, since it would require users to hand over IDs and home addresses.

"SB 152 would require companies to keep a 'record of any submissions provided under the requirements,' which means there would not only be databases of all social media users but also of users under 18, which could be hacked by criminals or foreign governments seeking

information on Utah children and adults," Larry Magid, the CEO of nonprofit online safety group Connect Safely, wrote in a [February newspaper op-ed](#) attacking the bill.

"And, in case you think that's impossible, there was a breach in 2006 of a database of children that was mandated by the State of Utah to protect them from sites that displayed or promoted pornography, alcohol, tobacco and gambling. No one expects a data breach, but they happen on a regular basis," Magid added.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), a nonprofit digital rights group, also demanded Cox veto the bill. In a [statement earlier](#) this month, the group said the limitations would infringe upon teenagers' rights to free speech and privacy, and they warned that the requirements would give social media platforms even more data on their users on top of the considerable amount they already collect.

"Utah's bill is part of a wave of age verification laws that would make users less secure, and make internet access less private overall," the EFF said.

The new laws are the first of their kind in the United States, and come amid a renewed debate about whether or not to ban TikTok, a social media app owned by the Beijing-based company ByteDance.

At a congressional hearing on Wednesday, lawmakers grilled ByteDance officials about their company's security practices, its alleged connections to the Communist Party of China, and the security of the TikTok app. US officials have alleged the app poses a security risk and that it surreptitiously spies on users on behalf of the Chinese government.

The issue was first raised in 2020, although the Trump administration backed off an [attempted forced sale](#) of TikTok's US operations amid questions about the move's legality.

The US has also banned Americans from interacting with numerous other Chinese tech firms, including phonemaker and 5G internet provider Huawei, phonemaker ZTE, and dronemaker DJI Innovations, all on similar accusations of posing a security risk due to Chinese government connections. All [the companies](#), as well as the [Chinese government](#), have denied such a risk exists.

Opponents have criticized the attacks on TikTok as [part of a broader drive](#) against Chinese companies and citizens in general, noting the claims of "security threats" dovetail with the Pentagon's strategy of "great power competition" with China and Russia.

US conservatives have also blamed social media sites, and TikTok especially, for being a [source of information](#) about LGBTQ identities and culture, which they have sought to ban via bills and policies allowing purges of library collections and restrictions on what teachers can tell their students.

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Photos: Egyptologists Uncover Incredible Ancient Relief Paintings Showing Planets, Complete Zodiac

By - Fantine Gardinier

The ancient Egyptians practiced astronomy and mathematics with astonishing accuracy, mapping out their cities and monuments according to the motion of the stars. The link between the Earth and the heavens was key to their religion, but it also laid the foundation for several modern sciences.

An Egyptian-German research team has uncovered and restored a stunning set of relief paintings at the Temple of Khnum in Esna, Upper Egypt, that depict the 12 signs of the ancient Egyptian zodiac cycle.

While many cultures in ancient times [developed a zodiac cycle](#), the concept did not enter Egyptian society until relatively late, when the river valley was conquered by Greeks and later Romans.

The temple in Esna was completed around 250 AD, but the part that remains today and in which the paintings were found was the vestibule to the temple, which would have been completed between 41 and 54 AD, when Claudius was the emperor of Rome.

"Representations of the zodiac are very rare in Egyptian temples," Christian Leitz, a professor at the University of Tübingen, said in [a news release](#). "The zodiac itself is part of Babylonian astronomy and does not appear in Egypt until Ptolemaic times."

"The zodiac was used to decorate private tombs and sarcophagi and was of great importance in astrological texts, such as horoscopes found inscribed on pottery sherds," Dr. Daniel von Recklinghausen, a Tübingen researcher, also said in the release.

"However, it is rare in temple decoration: Apart from Esna, there are only two completely preserved versions left, both from Dendera."

The paintings on the sandstone walls were covered and hidden by grime that had to be carefully removed. However, once cleaned, the incredible colorful frescoes became visible in all their glory.

Many of the zodiac signs are similar to those commonly referenced today by Westerners. However, other paintings also decorate the walls, including of the planets Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, which were known to the ancients, and the "seven arrows" of the lion-headed warrior goddess Sekhmet.

Other fantastic beasts are also present, including snakes with wings, a bird with the head of a crocodile and a snake for a tail, and a snake with the head of a ram.

The cleaning process began in 2018 and has still only cleaned eight of the 18 columns in the temple and two of the architraves, or lintels, supporting the massive ceiling. The work is slow-going, due to the delicateness of the paint dyes underneath.

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Raging French Protests Highlight Macron 'Still Losing' Despite Winning No Confidence Vote - Analyst

Protests have been held in France over the last several months as the French public has voiced their opposition to the rising cost of living in the European nation. More recently, matters were

kicked up a level after legislation increasing the retirement age by two years was forced through the legislature.

Demonstrations held across France will inevitably intensify in the coming week and ultimately prove that even though French President Emmanuel Macron narrowly won a recent no-confidence vote, he's still not in the clear, veteran war correspondent Elijah Magnier told Sputnik.

"Macron is showing his lack of interest in diminishing the gap between the people and himself and he's showing how he is stubborn," Magnier [said](#) on Radio Sputnik's Political Misfits on Friday. "It's getting very bad."

Recent figures [released](#) by French unions indicated that upwards of three million people have participated in demonstrations, and numbers are likely to skyrocket in the following days as a new manifestation have been scheduled for the coming week.

However, while the latest public outrage was emboldened by the pension reform, Magnier told show hosts Michelle Witte and John Kiriakou that the movement is fueled by a larger disappointment with living costs.

"The syndicate and the French population is showing their determination but this is not only related to the pension age," the war correspondent pointed out. "They are complaining about the cost of life, the devaluation of the euro and the increase of prices to crazy levels and they accuse the wrong decision to the war in Ukraine."

"They're saying 'Yes, of course the pension is important but everything is going wrong and Macron doesn't represent us anymore,'" he added.

In regards to a potential compromise, Magnier noted that despite Macron's efforts to calm tensions, the French president is "making things even worse." In fact, Magnier pointed out that if elections were held now, Macron would not prove a victor.

"He's lost in the National Assembly," Magnier told Kiriakou. "Even if [Macron] has won the vote of confidence, he is still losing."

Acknowledging the clashes between demonstrators and law enforcement officials, Magnier stated that the situation is likely to grow even more dire as protest spread across the nation.

"People are angry," he said.

Chaos erupted on the streets of Paris and other major cities after the government adopted legislation that raised the retirement age from 62 to 64.

The measure was forced through the French parliament by invoking Article 49.3 of the constitution, which allows measures to pass the assembly without parliamentary clearance.

Opposition officials attempted to block the law with a [no-confidence vote](#) the following Monday to no avail.

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Seymour Hersh: Biden Blew Up Pipelines Over German Foot-Dragging on Ukraine Aid  
By - Wyatt Reed

The journalist who exposed the US military's My Lai massacre in Vietnam and its Abu Ghraib abuse scandal in Iraq now says the US elite's "long-standing history" of being "disturbed by the

Russian gas and oil sales to Western Europe" means it's unsurprising Biden would intentionally sabotage its NATO ally's energy security in order to weaken Moscow.

Germany's potential hesitation to supply more weapons to the Ukrainian regime was the impetus for US President Joe Biden's decision to order the destruction of the Nord Stream pipelines, Pulitzer-prize winning American journalist Seymour Hersh has claimed.

In an [interview](#) published Friday, Hersh told China Daily reporter Zhao Manfeng that "the only thing" he can "think and suppose" is that Biden "was afraid of Chancellor [Olaf] Scholz not wanting to put more guns and more arms into Ukraine."

"Those who were involved [in the bombing] had the same thought," said Hersh, who noted he's unsure whether Biden took the decision "in anger or in punishment."

But regardless of his motives, with the Western proxy war against Russia not "going well" for the American ruling class, the US president "decided in late September to trigger the mines," the journalist explained.

In February, Hersh exposed the US role in the plot to destroy the Nord Stream pipelines in a widely-read [report](#) on Substack that cited at least one source with "direct knowledge of the operational planning." Prior to the blasts the pipeline, which drew repeated criticism from the US, pumped Russian natural gas into Europe.

Given Biden's public threat to "bring an end" to the pipelines just two weeks before Russian forces began their special military operation in Ukraine, Hersh said, there "wasn't much of a secret what we wanted to do."

But the journalist said that, looking back at the American foreign policy elite's well-established objections to Russian-European energy cooperation, he wasn't "surprised one bit" by the Biden administration's decision to sabotage the pipelines.

"Because Russia has a nearly 'inexhaustible' supply of 'cheap and very clean' natural gas, America has a long-standing history... of being very disturbed by the Russian gas and oil sales to Western Europe," Hersh stated.

The American establishment has "always been bothered by the fact that Russia... was 'weaponizing' gas," Hersh explained, borrowing a word that's come to dominate mainstream Western coverage of Russian energy exports.

"And that's the theme of American foreign policy towards Russia," Hersh said, underscoring the revelation that the Biden administration blew up the pipelines didn't surprise him "one bit" when he first discovered their role in the plot.

Regardless, "the net effect" of the attack on Nord Stream is that Biden "cut off a major power source through Western Europe," the acclaimed journalist told the outlet.

"So Europe is in a crisis now."

And with tensions rising across the continent as elevated energy prices persist, Hersh suggested the American president's decision to bomb the pipelines on which a major US ally relied on could come back to bite him soon.

"Down the road, this summer and fall, it's going to be very difficult for Biden," the journalist predicted, adding: "he's going to get a lot of criticism for what he did, that's for sure."

Russia, which considers the Nord Stream explosions an act of international terrorism, filed in February a draft resolution with the UN Security Council requesting an official independent probe into the blasts. A vote is expected to be held on March 27.

Per Hersh's findings, US Navy divers planted explosives on the pipelines under the cover of the NATO Baltops exercises in 2022.

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Israeli Protesters Promise 'Week of Paralysis' Amid Attempted Judicial Overhaul  
By - Wyatt Reed

There's no end in sight to the political crisis gripping Israel as the leaders of massive protests vowed to keep the pressure on this week.

Demonstrators have vowed to "paralyze" Israel this week in response to the government's declaration that it intends to pass a bill that would give it direct control over important Supreme Court appointments.

Protesters who oppose Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's controversial attempts to bring the judiciary under the control of his coalition [announced](#) on Friday that starting on Sunday, they will be launching major demonstrations in cities including Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Protesters say they will be turning out en masse to express their displeasure with pro-Netanyahu ministers and lawmakers on Sunday and Monday, and promised "days of paralysis" on Wednesday and Thursday, which will reportedly include a "giant protest" at the Israeli legislature in Jerusalem.

"We're going into the most fateful week in the history of Israel," protest leaders said in a statement, according to Israeli media. "This destructive government is tearing the nation apart and dismantling the military and the economy."

Describing the proposed changes to the court system as an "attempt to turn Israel into a dictatorship," protesters vowed that "millions" will turn out to "defend the State of Israel and the Declaration of Independence."

"Every citizen who wants to live in a democracy must come out to the streets and oppose the dictatorship at all costs," the statement insisted.

Netanyahu has defended his proposed overhaul by saying he and his coalition partner do not seek a "controlled court," but a "balanced" one. Netanyahu painted the protests as foreign-backed attempts to sow "anarchy," and his son, Yair, went as far as [accusing](#) the US State Department of sponsoring the unrest.

But with opposition to his judicial reforms now in its third month, demonstrations show little signs of stopping.

Ongoing threats by military reservists — like a recent pledge by 100 backup members of the Air Force to stop following orders if the judicial changes are made — reportedly led the Israeli military's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi, to suggest the protests call Israel's military readiness into question.

Netanyahu demanded a swift end to what he called "the refusal to serve," demanding Sunday that the military's chief of staff and the heads of the security services to "aggressively combat" the phenomenon."

“There’s no place for refusal to serve in the public discourse,” he claimed, insisting that “a state that wishes to exist can’t tolerate such phenomena and we will not tolerate it as well.”

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Saudi State TV Show Mocks Biden as Senile and Foolish, as Actor Imitates His Real Life Blunders  
By - Wyatt Reed

The comedic segment may be a joke, but for the D.C. establishment, Saudi Arabia’s increasingly independent foreign policy is no laughing matter. Saudi state television mocked US President Joe Biden at length this week in a scathing portrayal that paints the head of state as senile and foolish. In the video, which was widely shared online, a horrified 'Kamala Harris' attempts to escort an actor playing Joe Biden off stage as he tries to greet imaginary people. On social media, a number of alarmed viewers said the satire as painful, but reflective of reality. “It’s accurate. It’s funny. It’s not going to end well,” [wrote](#) one Twitter user. Others pointed out that there was almost no need to produce a new video showing a doddering Biden attempting to shake hands with people who don’t exist, given that he’s repeatedly been documented doing just that. The sketch marks the second time the satirical Saudi show, Studio 22, has lampooned the American commander-in-chief in the past year. Last April, the show aired another segment depicting Kamala Harris repeatedly being forced to intervene as Biden dozes off mid-speech. The sketch comes as an increasingly assertive Riyadh pursues a more independent foreign policy path which has seen it deepen its relations with China and Russia despite pressure from the United States. On March 10, Saudi Arabia announced it’s normalizing diplomatic relations with Iran, in the latest move which suggests the country has little interest in serving as Washington’s pawn.

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‘I Am Going to Kill You’: Death Note, White Powder Mailed to Manhattan DA Probing Trump  
By - Fantine Gardinier

The recent discovery comes as the former American president warned of potential "death and destruction" in the event New York officials present an indictment over the hush-money payments made to adult film star Stormy Daniels. The prosecutor leading the case against former US President Donald Trump has received a death threat in an envelope laced with white powder, US media reports indicated on Friday.

The letter, addressed to Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, reportedly said “ALVIN: I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” The envelope also contained a small amount of white powder. According to a Friday statement by the DA’s office, the letter “was immediately contained and that the NYPD Emergency Service Unit and the NYC Department of Environmental Protection determined there was no dangerous substance.”

The white powder was likely an imitation of a series of incidents in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, in which letters laced with anthrax spores were mailed to several public figures, including journalists and federal lawmakers. Five people were killed and 17 others injured in the attacks, which have spawned [a series of copycats](#).

The incident comes after Trump called on his supporters to “protest” his alleged pending indictment by Bragg, who has been building a case against Trump for hush-money payments made during his 2016 presidential election campaign.

The news that Trump had, via his “fixer” lawyer, Michael Cohen, paid adult film star [Stormy Daniels](#) \$130,000 to keep silent about an alleged sexual encounter between the pair years earlier. Until now, Cohen has [taken the blame](#) for the payment, claiming he spent his own money and acted on Trump’s behalf without his knowledge.

While Trump’s lay supporters have not manifested into a movement to pressure Bragg, several senior Republican lawmakers have, sending a letter to Bragg earlier this week demanding information about his investigation. Bragg fired back, denouncing their requests as “an unlawful incursion into New York’s sovereignty,” as such communications are “confidential under state law.”

It’s not known if Bragg will file charges against Trump or what those charges might be. However, if handed down, officials are already preparing for the possibility of violence, having seen what Trump’s supporters were capable of doing in the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol.

In that event, thousands of followers acting at Trump’s apparent behest fought past police and stormed and sacked the national legislature, temporarily dispersing Congress in an attempt to block certification of the 2020 presidential election results that Trump claimed were fraudulent. Their attempts failed, and Capitol Police and US National Guard troops cleared them from the building.

As a result, the New York Police Department have already begun [making security preparations](#) and are reportedly coordinating their response with the New York State Court Officers, the US Secret Service, the FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force and the DA’s office.

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Report: Biden Has Become Increasingly Annoyed by Kamala Harris for Not ‘Rising to the Occasion’

By - Mary Manley

In late 2021, reports surfaced detailing that tensions between the West Wing and the Harris team had reached an all-time high as insiders described at the time an environment in which White House aides were "worn out" by the American vice president.

US President Joe Biden is reportedly growing increasingly annoyed that his second-in-command refuses to take on more responsibility over a fear of potentially "messing up."

"A point of tension in their relationship is that I don't think that the president sees her as somebody who takes anything off of his plate" due to a "fear of messing up," a former White House [official](#) said of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris' relationship. The vice president's poll ratings are failing despite Biden being sure to choose Harris as his running mate for the 2024 presidential election, should he run again. The American president is 80-years-old and would become the first octogenarian to take on the role; however, if he were to become ill or cannot complete his duties, Harris would take on that responsibility, as has temporarily happened when Biden underwent a medical examination.

According to a recent poll, Harris has a disapproval rating of nearly 50%, while only 38% approve of the [vice president](#).

The former official adds that while Biden and Harris may have a good working relationship overall, the president is confident that neither Harris nor any other Democratic hopeful could beat former President Donald Trump if he becomes the GOP nominee. Trump's resolve to run for a second non-consecutive term, even in the midst of several ongoing criminal investigations, has reportedly influenced Biden's decision to run for a second term.

"If he did not think she was capable, he would not have picked her. But it is a question of consistently rising to the occasion," the official added. "I think his running for reelection is less about her and more about him, but I do think that she and the Democratic bench are a factor." Chris Whipple, author of "The Fight of His Life," has also confirmed Biden's private frustrations regarding Harris. In 2021, the president reportedly spoke to a close friend and complained about a comment made by the VP's husband, Douglas Emhoff, who had protested tasks assigned to Harris that included immigration and federal voting rights.

"Biden was annoyed," wrote [Whipple](#) in his book. "He hadn't asked Harris to do anything he hadn't done as vice president — and she'd begged him for the voting rights assignment.

Other Democrats, including those who have worked in the West Wing under the Biden-Harris administration, have also expressed disappointment at Harris' lack of taking on critical issues. In 2021, Biden placed Harris in charge of US-Mexico border issues; however, [Harris](#) neglected to visit the border and only did so after falling victim to criticism from interest groups.

In January, the National Border Patrol Council also called on Harris to fulfill her responsibility for border protection.

"She, I think, is smart. She does not see this as a political win for her. Because it's not. It's a really hard issue," said a current White House official.

US Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) has also lost interest in supporting the VP. "I really want to defer to what makes Biden comfortable on his team," Warren said when asked by a Boston Public Radio interview if Harris should remain by Biden's side for the [2024 election](#).

"I've known Kamala for a long time. I like Kamala. I knew her back when she was an attorney general and I was still teaching, and we worked on the housing crisis together, so we go way

back. But they need — they have to be a team, and my sense is they are — I don't mean that by suggesting I think there are any problems. I think they are."

Warren later walked back her remarks, although the damage seemed to have been done already. Insider reports suggest the US senator reportedly tried to call Harris in order to apologize, but her call went unanswered twice.

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Dodging Cameras: Melania Trump 'Lying Very Low' Amid Trump Arrest Drama, Insiders Say  
By - Mary Manley

The former president, who is running for his second non-consecutive term, was able to raise \$1.5 million for his 2024 presidential campaign in just three days after telling his supporters he would be arrested.

Former first lady Melania Trump is none too pleased about her husband's possible indictment, and has [reportedly](#) been "lying low" and avoiding events being held at Mar-a-Lago.

"Melania is lying very low. She hasn't been coming out for the dinners and events at Mar-a-Lago. He is acting like everything is normal, but she hasn't been social," said an insider about the couple.

"She wants to be away from it. She wants to protect [their son] Barron."

The New York probe is investigating Trump's involvement in a hush-money scandal in which \$130,000 was paid to adult film actress Stormy Daniels on Trump's behalf so she would not speak to the media about a sexual encounter they had in 2006; the same year Melania gave birth to their son, Barron, 17.

Daughter Ivanka Trump and her husband Jared Kushner, who are both former senior White House advisers, are also reportedly trying to avoid the former president's legal drama.

"Ivanka lost a lot of friends and her social scenes during his presidency... They want to put it in the rearview. They want it behind them," the source said, adding they are happy "building their life in Miami" where Ivanka and Kushner live in a \$24 million waterfront mansion currently being [renovated](#).

"They want nothing to do with this. They are staying away and don't want to be hounded by reporters. I don't think you will see them defending him, it will be no comment."

Both Kushner and Ivanka were reportedly subpoenaed by the counsel investigating the former president's role in the January 6, 2021 Capitol riot. Ivanka was also named in a [fraud](#) suit against her father's company, which she denied having involvement in.

Despite his family cringing at his legal troubles, the former president is seemingly pleased by the attention he has received concerning his looming indictment. A source said Trump is "in high spirits," and that him and his campaign team would like an indictment and an arrest to be "public" should it occur.

On Thursday, Trump's former Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney said he believes it is inevitable that Trump will be indicted, adding that the event is something that, in a rare case, is wanted by both the conservative and liberal parties.

“The left want to see him frog marched in his orange jumpsuit and the right wants to see him arrested because they think it will show that this has been a political witch hunt the whole time, and they think it will make Trump more sympathetic,” said [Mulvaney](#) in an interview.

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Los Angeles Public School District Reaches 'Historic' Deal With Union Employees After 3-Day Strike

By - Mary Manley

The deal will raise pay for bus drivers, custodians and other support staff after union workers went on strike for three days, resulting in the closure of the United States' second-largest school system.

The Los Angeles Unified School District and union leaders announced on [Friday](#) that they reached a historic agreement to meet the demands of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) members following a three-day strike led by the employees.

“Los Angeles Unified today announced that it has reached an agreement with SEIU Local 99 on a new contract that significantly increases salaries for its more than 30,000 members,” said LAUSD in a statement.

“This agreement addresses historic pay inequities, creates a massive expansion of health care benefits for part-time employees, invests considerable resources into professional development for the workforce, all while maintaining financial stability for the District.”

The provisional deal should include:

30% wage increase as well as a \$2 per hour increase for all employees beginning in January of 2024

6% ongoing wage increase retroactive to July 1, 2021

7% ongoing wage increase retroactive to July 1, 2022

7% ongoing wage increase effective July 1, 2023

Free health care will also be provided for any employee who works at least four hours a day, said district Superintendent Alberto Carvalho.

The deal will also provide workers with a one-time \$1,000 raise, will set the district's minimum wage at \$22.52 and create a \$3 million educational and professional development fund for union members.

If the deal is agreed to, it will also increase hours and compensation for paraprofessionals serving students with special needs, and will invest \$3 million in an Education and Professional Development Fund.

“When we started negotiating with SEIU, we promised to deliver on three goals. We wanted to honor and elevate the dignity of our workforce and correct well-known, decades-long inequities impacting the lowest-wage earners. We wanted to continue supporting critical services for our students. We wanted to protect the financial viability of the district for the long haul. Promises made, promises delivered,” said the superintendent said in a statement.

"I have no doubt that this contract will be seen as a precedent-setting, historic contract that elevates the dignity, the humanity of our workforce, respects the needs of our students, but also guarantees the fiscal viability of our district for years to come," Carvalho said, who credited Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass for helping reach the agreement.

The union described what is an unlivable wage in [California](#): the school district's employees on average are making \$25,000 a year, with many of those living in poverty due to the area's high cost of living.

"Our workers at school, often they're making less than kids in high school working at fast food jobs," said Chris Acosta, a teacher.

"I'm married with a spouse who helps, but we go check by check," added Erica Cabrera, a special education assistant.

The full union, which includes 30,000 workers, will have to vote on the deal before changes to the school system are made. About 400,000 students will now return to their classrooms as schools will reopen following the deal. But despite having their children out of school, some LAUSD parents supported the strike:

"It's obvious all over the schools that we're really not putting the support where it's needed and our children are suffering because of that," said an LAUSD parent.

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George Santos Agrees to Confess, Pay \$1,300 in Restitution Over Brazil Fraud Case  
By - Mary Manley

Officials have indicated that the Brazil case had been archived for multiple years after authorities were unable to serve papers in the case; however, it was ultimately reopened in January after the New York lawmaker began to make headlines for embellishing his resume. Embattled US Rep. [George Santos](#) (R-NY) has reached a deal with Brazilian prosecutors that will allow him to avoid a trial if he agrees to formally admit to swindling a man out of \$1,300, and pay restitution.

Santos has been accused of defrauding a Rio de Janeiro area clerk after using a stolen checkbook to purchase \$1,300 worth of clothes and shoes in 2008. The freshman representative had nabbed the checkbook from an elderly man his mother cared for; something which he admitted to police in 2010.

The non-prosecution agreement was reached after his defense filed a petition in January arguing that he is now "gainfully employed" and "re-socialized." An exception was also requested for Santos to participate in legal proceedings via phone, email and video conference. Agreements such as the one Santos was able to secure can be reached if it is a non-violent case and the sentencing minimum is under four years. Santos has been avoiding prosecution by Brazilian authorities for about a decade since leaving Brazil for the United States. Santos, who first shocked and enraged his constituents when he admitted to embellishing his resume while campaigning, previously claimed that he had never been charged with any crime in the US or Brazil when asked by the New York Post in December 2022.

"I am not a criminal here - not here or in Brazil or any jurisdiction in the world. Absolutely not. That didn't happen," he said at the time

The lawmaker, who refuses to step down from his position, is also facing several other [investigations](#) by the House Ethics Committee, the Nassau County district attorney, the New York state attorney general, the Queens district attorney and the US Attorney's Office in the Eastern District of New York.

Most recently, his former roommate Gustavo Ribeiro Trelha alleged that he orchestrated a credit card skimming operation in order to steal information from ATMs and credit cards. "Never did anything of criminal activity, and I have no mastermind event," said Santos, denying the allegation.

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UPDATE - Global Economy's GDP 'Speed Limit' to Decline to 30-Year Low of 2.2% by 2030 – World Bank

(Updates with details in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) – The so-called "speed limit" of the global economy, or the maximum speed at which economies can grow without sparking inflation, will decline to a 30-year low of just 2.2% by 2030, the World Bank said in a new report on Monday.

"The report documents a worrisome trend: nearly all the economic forces that powered progress and prosperity over the last three decades are fading. As a result, between 2022 and 2030 average global potential GDP growth is expected to decline by roughly a third from the rate that prevailed in the first decade of this century — to 2.2% a year," the World Bank said in a press release summarizing the report.

Developing economies meanwhile will face a decline in their GDP speed limit from 6% between 200 and 2010 to just 4% for the remainder of this decade, the release said.

The World Bank added that these declines would be much steeper in the event of a global recession or financial crisis.

The report marks the first comprehensive reassessment of long-term potential GDP growth in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine, the release noted.

"A lost decade could be in the making for the global economy," the World Bank's Chief Economist and Senior Vice President for Development Economics Indermit Gill said. "The ongoing decline in potential growth has serious implications for the world's ability to tackle the expanding array of challenges unique to our times — stubborn poverty, diverging incomes, and climate change. But this decline is reversible."

The World Bank's analysis states that the global GDP speed limit could be raised by as much as 0.7 percentage points to an average of 2.9% if governments adopt growth-oriented policies to incentivize work, boost productivity and speed up investment.

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Number of Americans Saying Patriotism, Religion, Having Children Are Important Declines—Poll

WASHINGTON, March 27 (Sputnik) – The number of Americans who highly value patriotism, religion, having children, and other longstanding national priorities has sharply declined over the last five and 25 years, according to a poll conducted by The Wall Street Journal and the University of Chicago's NORC research organization.

The survey of 1,019 adults, conducted from March 1 to 23, found that 38% of respondents said patriotism was "very important," down from 61% in 2019 and 70% in 1998. A similar number, 39%, viewed religion as "very important", down from 48% in 2019 and 62% in 1998. Less than a third, 30%, said having children was "very important," falling from 43% in 2019 and 59% in 1998.

There were large differences between adults aged 65 or older and those under age 30. Of the younger group, only 23% and 31% saw patriotism and religion, respectively, as "very important," compared to 59% and 55% of the elder group.

Money was the only value that increased in importance over the last 25 years, rising from 31% of respondents in 1998, to 41% in 2019 and 43% this year.

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RPT: PREVIEW - US VP Harris Travels to Africa in Bid to Counter Advances Made by Russia, China

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris is slated to leave Washington on Saturday for a week-long tour of Africa that will include stops in Zambia, Ghana, and Tanzania with an agenda focused on bolstering US trade and security ties and countering Russian and Chinese influence in the region.

Harris will be the highest-ranking US official to visit the continent as the White House strives to strengthen its connections with the continent and counter China and Russia's investments.

It also marks the fifth major trip from a senior administration official since December's US-Africa Leaders Summit, and comes on the heels of visits to the continent by US top diplomat Antony Blinken and Treasury chief Janet Yellen.

Harris' visit will begin in Ghana, where from March 26-29 she will meet with President Nana Akufo-Addo before touring the Cape Coast Slave Castle, making public remarks about the African diaspora and brutality of slavery, according to administration officials.

Harris will then move on to Tanzania, where she will meet with President Samia Suluhu Hassan from March 29-31 before her final stop in Zambia on March 31 and April 1.

Senior administration officials asserted that Harris is going to put forward affirmative agendas, incorporating concerns about dependency on China and Russia, who have both increased their investments in the region.

Harris is also expected to discuss operational security, strengthening business ties, long-term economic growth, debt relief, and the impact of the conflict in Ukraine, according to senior officials.

She is also scheduled to meet with young leaders and businesses and will discuss topics such as climate change and food insecurity.

#### THE FIGHT FOR AFRICA'S SOUL

Harris' trip also comes amid concerns voiced recently by several administration officials, including senior defense leaders, that changes in Africa's political landscape have shifted to the benefit of China and Russia.

Earlier in the week, the Pentagon's assistant secretary for international affairs, Celeste Wallander, told Congress recent political transitions in Africa challenge US military assistance as well as access and influence to help counter "advances" made by Russia and China.

A senior administration official previewing Harris' trip underscored the significance of the great power rivalry over Africa, and even cited the Soviet Union's role in backing African countries in their fight against imperialism during the Cold War.

Harris will stress that the United States shares the same principles with African countries during her talks with leaders while combating the narrative around Russia's deep roots on the continent.

"We understand that many African countries have a historical relationship with the USSR, which supported their liberation movements. And countries have current relationships with Russia," a US official told reporters on Thursday. "But we believe that it's important to have a conversation to identify shared points of agreement [with African countries]... and this is something that will almost certainly be raised in different bilateral meetings."

The official said Harris during her visit will push back against Moscow's vows to deliver on its commitment to export food to the poorest areas in Africa by pointing out economic hardships from the conflict in Ukraine.

Regarding China's ties with countries on the continent, a US administration official noted that at the US-Africa Leaders Summit the White House made clear that Washington's relationship with Africa "cannot and should not and will not be defined by competition with China."

However, the official said Harris will raise US "concerns" with China's engagement with African countries, especially in the technological, economic, military, and global governance domains.

The US will also push the message that Beijing has a responsibility to restructure Chinese debt that is burdening many African countries. According to the official, China, for example holds one-third of Zambia's overall external debt of \$17 billion.

Moscow has repeatedly objected to efforts including through sanctions and other penalties by the West to pressure African states to cut ties with Russia.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during a trip to Africa in January said the United States and European countries - by requiring African states to stop cooperation with Russia - are seeking to restore the continent's colonial dependence

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US Charges Russian Cherkasov For Allegedly Acting as Foreign Agent, Fraud - Justice Dept.  
(Updates with details in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The United States charged Russian national Sergey Cherkasov for allegedly acting as a foreign agent and engaging in visa and wire fraud, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"Sergey Vladimirovich Cherkasov ('Cherkasov'), 37, a national of the Russian Federation who operated as an 'Illegal' agent for a Russian Intelligence Service under the Brazilian alias of Victor Muller Ferreira, was charged today for acting as an agent of a foreign power, visa fraud, bank fraud, wire fraud, and other charges stemming from his illegal activities in the United States," the Justice Department said in the release on Friday.

Federal prosecutors accuse Cherkasov of acting as an illegal foreign agent in the United States between 2012 and April 2022 by using his Brazilian alias identity, which he used to obtain a US visa in 2017, the release said.

Cherkasov allegedly gathered information about US persons of interest and passed it to his Russian intelligence handlers, according to the Justice Department.

Cherkasov left the United States around May 2020 but allegedly used connections he established at a university he attended to obtain information about US foreign policy that he passed on to his Russian intelligence handlers in 2021 and 2022, the release added.

The Russian national unsuccessfully sought employment at the International Criminal Court in The Hague in April 2022. He then returned to Brazil where he was arrested by authorities on fraud charges over his alleged use of a fake identify, the release said.

The release did not disclose any information about Cherkasov's initial hearing or how many years in prison he may face if convicted.

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Canada to Increase Asylum Seekers Admissions to Compensate for Crossing Closures - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Canada would be increasing the number of admitted asylum seekers to compensate for the closure of irregular border crossings such as Roxham Road.

"We will increase the number of asylum seekers who we accept from the Western Hemisphere in order to compensate for closing these irregular crossings," Trudeau said during a joint press conference with US President Joe Biden.

The prime minister said both governments were aware for some time already about the necessity to address the issue of migrants crossing through irregular paths, notably Roxham Road, adding that closing it wasn't a solution.

"We couldn't simply shut down Roxham road and hope that everything would resolve itself," Trudeau said, adding the problem would've only been moved to another part of the long border both country's share.

Trudeau said the decision to modernize the Safe Third Country agreement was made so that those who arrive at regular crossing points be given the same treatment as in their first country of arrival.

Moreover, the prime minister said Canada remains open to receive regular migrants, noting Ottawa would live up to its obligations with respect to asylum seekers.

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## Rwanda Releases Activist Rusesabagina From Prison - Senior US Administration Official

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - Human rights activist Paul Rusesabagina, whose aid to refugees during the Rwandan Genocide inspired the film "Hotel Rwanda," has been released from prison after months of work by the Biden administration, a senior administration official told reporters.

"The main message tonight is that we are gratified that Paul Rusesabagina has been released from prison in Rwanda," the senior administration official said on Friday. "We anticipate in coming days seeing him leave the country, initially for Qatar and then for the United States."

Rusesabagina's release was the culmination of months of work by US officials with Rwandan counterparts, including diplomatic engagements by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, the senior administration official said.

The United States made clear to Rwanda that Rusesabagina's detention would remain a bilateral irritant until resolved, the official added.

The official also said the US did not make any particular concessions as part of the deal.

Rusesabagina worked as manager of the Hotel des Mille Collines, which sheltered hundreds of refugees during the Rwandan genocide, inspiring the Oscar-nominated film "Hotel Rwanda."

Rusesabagina was arrested by Rwandan authorities in 2020 for alleged ties to rebel groups in the region and sentenced to 25 years in prison in 2021. The US had maintained Rusesabagina's innocence and classified him as wrongfully detained.

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## UPDATE - Biden Says Did Not Block Alaska Willow Project Because Oil Firm Would Win Court Fight

(Adds more background in para 8)

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he was counseled to not disapprove of the ConocoPhillips Oil project in Willow, Alaska as he could be defeated in court.

"The difficult decision was on what we do with Willow project in Alaska and my strong inclination was to disapprove of it across the board, but the advice I got from counsel was that if that were the case, we may very well lose that case in court to the oil company," Biden said during a joint press conference in Canada with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Friday.

That would have impeded his administration's efforts to conserve significant amounts of Alaskan lands forever, Biden continued.

The President added that although he approved ConocoPhillips project in Alaska, he could also see how that would save "millions" of acres, both in the sea and on land, that wouldn't be up for use in the future.

Biden noted that with the approval of three drilling platforms, extraction would amount to 1% of the world's entire output of oil.

Earlier this month, the US Interior Department approved three out of five drill sites proposed by ConocoPhillips as part of its Willow Master Development Plan in the National Petroleum

Reserve-Alaska.

Shortly after, the non-profit public interest organization Earthjustice, announced it was undertaking legal action against the Biden Administration, for not taking into consideration the ecological consequences on ecosystems and endangered species, amongst other reasons.

ConocoPhillips in a statement said it applauded the move to green-light a project projected to deliver between \$8 billion to \$17 billion in new revenue for state and local governments that will create 2,500 construction jobs as well as 300 long-term jobs.

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Trudeau Says Canada to Invest C\$100Mln on Haitian Police Force

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said during a press briefing that Ottawa will spend C\$100 million (\$72.45 million) on the Haitian police and impose sanctions against members of the Haitian elites.

"Today, I'm announcing that Canada will invest an additional \$100 million to provide better police support and to the national police force in Haiti. We will also impose additional sanctions on other members of the Haitian elite who are benefiting from insecurity and violence," Trudeau said on Friday.

Canada will also increase its international support for Haiti, including through additional humanitarian assistance, Trudeau added.

Haiti has long been mired in a socio-political crisis that escalated after the assassination of then-President Jovenel Moise on July 7, 2021. The inaction of the authorities over the past years has led to an unprecedented increase in the activities of criminal groups. The gangs are practicing extortion and kidnapping people for ransom, while also controlling the whole region of the country, including fuel terminals.

The Haitian government has asked the international community to deploy troops in the country with a view to deterring crime and violence. The US and Canada have so far supplied the nation with armored military aircraft, vehicles, and small ships to help the Haitian authorities in their fight against armed gangs.

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Biden on Banking Crisis: It Might Take While to Calm Down, But Understands Unease

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said during a press conference that he expects the US banking crisis to calm down after a while but understands there currently exists an unease about the situation.

"I think it's gonna take a little while for things to just calm down, but I don't see anything on the horizon is about to explode, but I do understand there's an unease about this," Biden said during remarks in Ottawa on Friday. "These mid-sized banks have to be able to survive and I think they'll be able to do that."

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

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China Not Yet Provided Russia With Lethal Aid, But That Does Not Mean They Won't - Biden

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - China has not yet provided any lethal aid to Russia to support its special military operation in Ukraine, but it does not mean that Beijing will not do so in the future, US President Joe Biden said during a press briefing.

"I have been hearing now for the past three months about China's going to provide significant

weapons to Russia," Biden said on Friday. "They [the Chinese] haven't yet. It doesn't mean they won't. But they haven't yet."

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Biden Says Does Not Take China, Russia Lightly But Their Alliance Vastly Exaggerated

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said during a press conference that he does not take China or Russia lightly, but he believes the concerns over the development of closer ties between the two countries is vastly exaggerated.

"I don't take China lightly. I don't take Russia lightly, but I think we vastly exaggerated," Biden said on Friday during remarks in Ottawa alongside Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. "I've been hearing now for the past three months about China's going to provide significant weapons to Russia and they're going to go up and talk about that. They haven't yet."

Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Russia from March 20-22, during which he had a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The leaders signed a joint statement on a plan to develop key areas of Russian-Chinese economic cooperation by 2030.

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Biden After Syria Strikes Says US Seeks No Conflict With Iran But Will Defend Americans

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) - The United States does not seek conflict with Iran following US retaliatory strikes against Iranian proxies in Syria, but it is prepared to forcefully defend American personnel in the country, US President Joe Biden said during a joint press conference with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

"The United States does not seek conflict with Iran, but be prepared for us to act forcefully to protect our people," Biden said on Friday.

The United States launched retaliatory strikes on Thursday night against Iranian-aligned forces for a drone strike they conducted that killed a US contractor and injured five US service members.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 25 (Sputnik) -

US STRIKES IN SYRIA

\* No Iranians were killed in the US strikes in Syria that hit a grain center and a rural development center in the Deir ez-Zor province, rather than any Iranian military positions, Press TV reported on Friday, citing sources in Syria.

\* The United States does not seek war with Iran though it carried out airstrikes on Iranian-linked groups in Syria, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said.

\* No US soldiers have been killed or injured in a new attack on a US military base in eastern Syria, Kirby said.

#### CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

\* The Russian Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation (FSMTC) called the statement of the Slovak Defense Ministry on the transfer of the first batch of four MiG-29 fighters to Ukraine an unfriendly act against Russia and another gross violation of Bratislava's obligations on re-export of military equipment manufactured by Russia.

\* Ukraine has lost more than 380 servicemen in the Donetsk area over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

#### NORD STREAM PIPELINES ACCIDENTS

\* The United States considered the possibility of exploding the Nord Stream 1 and 2 gas pipelines at the end of 2021 and US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan already contacted the perpetrators of the attacks at that time, US investigative journalist Seymour Hersh said in an interview with the Daily China newspaper.

\* The invitation of the operator of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, Nord Stream 2 AG, to join the process of recovering an object found near the gas pipeline is positive news, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

\* Nord Stream 2 AG agreed to take part in the extraction of an object found near the gas pipeline, but there is no information about the timing the operation, Danish Energy Agency (DEA) spokesman Ture Falbe-Hansen told RIA Novosti.

#### US SANCTIONS ON BELARUS

\* The United States has imposed new sanctions on three Belarusian companies and nine individuals, including on the country's largest manufacturers - Belarusian Automobile Plant (BelAZ) and Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ), the US Treasury Department said on Friday.

\* The United States has blocked the Boeing 737 aircraft owned and used by the Belarus government as part of the new sanctions package against Minsk, the Treasury Department said.

\* The State Department has imposed visa restrictions on 14 Belarusian nationals, including government officials, as part of a joint action with the Treasury Department against Minsk, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

#### LEROY MERLIN DEPARTS RUSSIA

\* The French home improvement and gardening retailer company Leroy Merlin announced plans to sell all its stores in Russia after 18 years of activity in the country, ADEO, a part of Leroy Merlin, said on Friday.

\* Leroy Merlin made a reasonable decision to transfer its assets in Russia to local

management, the company will retain all staff and plans to open new stores, Russian Deputy Trade Minister Viktor Yevtukhov said.

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Harris will be the highest-ranking US official to visit the continent as the White House strives to strengthen its connections with the continent and counter China and Russia's investments.

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Moscow has repeatedly objected to efforts including through sanctions and other penalties by the West to pressure African states to cut ties with Russia.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov during a trip to Africa in January said the United States and European countries - by requiring African states to stop cooperation with Russia - are seeking to restore the continent's colonial dependence.

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Second US Base Hit in Northeastern Syria - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - Ten rockets have targeted coalition forces at the Mission Support Site Green Village compound in northeast Syria on March 24, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) said on Friday.

No US personnel or coalition members were injured in the attack and the facilities and equipment remain unscathed, CENTCOM said in a statement.

One of the rockets, which missed the compound by nearly five kilometers, struck and damaged a civilian home, resulting in injuries to two women and two children, the statement said.

The attack comes after the United States launched retaliatory strikes on Thursday night against Iranian-aligned forces for a drone strike they conducted that killed a US contractor and injured five US service members.

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Major Hacker Charged, Forum Operation Disrupted - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - New York resident Conor Brian Fitzpatrick, the creator and operator of a hacking forum and a marketplace that profited from stolen personal information, has been charged with conspiracy to commit access device fraud, the US Department of Justice said on Friday.

"The founder of BreachForums made his initial appearance today in the Eastern District of Virginia on a criminal charge related to his alleged creation and administration of a major hacking forum and marketplace for cybercriminals that claimed to have more than 340,000 members as of last week," the Justice Department said in a press release.

In parallel with Fitzpatrick's arrest, the FBI conducted a disruption operation that caused BreachForums to go offline, the release said.

Since March 2022, Fitzpatrick operated BreachForums as a marketplace for cybercriminals to buy, sell and trade hacked or stolen data and other contraband, including bank account information, social security numbers and other personal identifying information, the release said.

Fitzpatrick's alleged victims have included millions of US citizens and hundreds of US and foreign companies, organizations and government agencies, the release said.

"Some of the stolen datasets contained the sensitive information of customers at telecommunication, social media, investment, health care services, and internet service providers," the release added.

If convicted, Fitzpatrick faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison, according to the release.

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White Powder Delivered to Manhattan District Attorney's Office Amid Trump Probe - Reports  
NEW YORK, March 21 (Sputnik) - Suspicious white powder has been delivered to the building housing the Manhattan District Attorney's office amid its investigation of former President Donald Trump and consideration of whether to indict him, Fox News reported on Friday.

The New York Police Department said an envelope containing white powder was delivered to 80 Center Street, the building where the jury in the Trump case is supposed to meet, the report said.

The police also said they could not specify as to the kind of white powder, but added that no one was injured in the incident and there is no suspect at present, the report added.

The Manhattan District Attorney's Office has been probing whether Trump broke the law for allegedly providing \$130,000 to pornography star Stormy Daniels to remain silent during the 2016 presidential election about their alleged affair.

Over the weekend, Trump shared on his social media platform Truth Social that he was to be arrested on March 21 and called on Americans to protest and take back their nation.

Trump has dismissed his connection to Daniels as well as any other alleged criminal offense. He has repeatedly said the probe against him is a political witch hunt conducted by Democrats ahead of the 2024 presidential election and refused to testify before the jury.

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Biden, Trudeau Committed to Ensuring Ability to Compete Effectively With China - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States and Canada are committed to working together to ensure their ability to compete effectively with China, US President Joe Biden and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a joint statement on Friday.

"While we will cooperate with China in areas of mutual interest, such as on climate change, we remain committed to ensuring our ability to compete effectively with China on a level playing field," the statement said. "Canada and the United States will also continue to cooperate on countering foreign interference in our societies in a manner that reflects our shared democratic values."

China poses a serious long-term challenge to the current international order, including in the areas of trade, the statement said.

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US Working With Canada to Address Fentanyl Crisis, Establish Global Coalition - Biden

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States and Canada are cooperating to stop the illicit flow of fentanyl into both countries and establish a global coalition to address the issue more broadly, US President Joe Biden said on Friday.

"We're tackling the scourge of synthetic drugs that are devastating Canada and American communities... Fentanyl is a killer," Biden said during remarks to the Canadian Parliament. "So today, we are announcing a commitment to build a new global coalition of like-minded countries, led by Canada and the United States, to tackle this crisis."

The United States and Canada are working closely with Mexico to address the problem at every stage, from precursor chemicals shipped from overseas to trafficking across borders, Biden said.

Addressing synthetic drugs is a matter of public health, economic opportunity and national security, Biden added.

In December, US Under Secretary of Homeland Security Ken Wainstein said that the threat of synthetic drugs such as fentanyl is expected to grow in coming years.

Synthetic drugs resulted in approximately 108,000 deaths in the United States in 2021, Wainstein said.

Earlier this month, US Senator Lindsey Graham unveiled a plan to allow the United States to use military power against drug cartels in Mexico by designating them as foreign terrorist organizations.

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US, Canada to Continue Supporting Ukraine, Imposing Costs on Russia - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday that they will continue supporting Ukraine and imposing economic consequences on Russia for its special military operation, following a meeting between the two leaders in Canada.

"We condemn Russia for its illegal, unjustifiable, and unprovoked war against Ukraine, and will continue imposing economic costs on Russia, while maintaining our unwavering support for Ukraine for as long as it takes," Biden and Trudeau said in a joint statement.

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Over Three Quarters of Americans Say They Fear for Their Children's Future - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - More than three quarters of Americans say they doubt their children will live better than they do now, a new Wall Street Journal/NORC poll revealed on Friday.

About 78% of poll respondents said they do not feel confident their children will live in better conditions than them - the highest number since polling on that question began in 1990 - a release on the poll said.

The current state of college education is one of the major reasons for the pronounced concerns, the release said.

About 56% of the respondents said college education is not worth the price because students often do not gain specific skills and get heavily burdened with debt they have to repay for prolonged periods of time.

However, 42% said they are satisfied with education in the United States because it gives a better chance to find a good job, the release said.

In addition, 12% of respondents said they are "very happy" with developments in their life - the lowest number since 1972.

By contrast, a third of respondents said they are "not too happy" - the highest number during the same period.

The poll was conducted among 1,019 adult Americans from March 1-13.

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US Investigates Why Air Defense Was Not Fully Operational During Strike in Syria - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is investigating the reason why its air defense system was not fully operational during a strike on a US base in Syria, the New York Times said on Friday.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said earlier in the day that the US military had carried out airstrikes on facilities belonging to groups affiliated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) after an Iranian drone attacked a coalition base in northeast Syria, killing one US contractor.

The US military does not know at present why the system did not work as it should and the circumstances are under investigation, the report said, citing two officials.

One of the officials explained that the Avenger missile defense system on the base, named RLZ, may have been experiencing some unexpected maintenance issue, despite the fact that the troops were on high alert given that Iranian-backed groups had conducted 78 attacks in the past two years, the report said.

Two service members injured during the attack were treated on site, while three others were evacuated to the medical facility in Iraq along with a wounded contractor, the report added.

The Defense Department did not reveal the identity of the killed person, pending notification of family, one official said, according to the report.

US officials said on Friday that Iran-backed militias fired about a dozen of rockets while attacking a second US base in the area, but that strike did not result in casualties.

The US military controls parts of the provinces of Al-Hasakah, Raqqa, Aleppo and Deir Ez-Zor, where the largest Syrian oil and gas fields are located. The Syrian government has repeatedly called the US military presence in the provinces an occupation aimed at stealing Syria's oil.

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US Missile Defense Situation Changed 'Drastically' in Last 18 Months - Northrop Grumman

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States' missile defense situation has changed drastically in the last 18 months due to the actions of China and Russia, Northrop Grumman Vice President for Next Generation Interceptor Lisa Brown said on Friday.

"If you looked at what we as a country are doing to respond to these threats, things have changed so drastically in the last 18 months when it comes to the Chinese ramping up test and development, [and] Russia's invasion of Ukraine and seeing what they were capable of bringing directly into theater now," Brown said during an event at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

The US and its industry partners are in a "competitive phase" ahead of potential crisis and conflict stages, Brown said.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is an emerging capability for the US missile defense network with the potential to reduce escalation, Palantir Technologies Senior Vice President for Emerging Technologies Miriam Marwick said during the event.

AI can make human decisionmakers more effective if designed and used by the right people,

Marwick said.

The future success of the US missile defense enterprise depends on the determination to make investments in such areas, Marwick added.

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Senate Banking Panel Members Request Info From US Federal Reserve on SVB Collapse - Letter

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - Republican members of the US Senate Banking Committee sent a letter to Federal Reserve Board of Governors Chair Jerome Powell and San Francisco Federal Reserve Bank CEO Mary Daly requesting info on their supervision of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) ahead of its collapse earlier this month.

"We write to request more information from the Federal Reserve System... regarding the recent failure of SVB and the failure of the Federal Reserve to properly respond to apparent bank mismanagement, lack of risk controls, and other warning signs at SVB prior to its collapse," the letter, released on Friday, said.

On March 10, US regulators seized SVB, marking the largest bank collapse since the 2008 financial crisis and the second largest implosion in the country's history.

The lawmakers in the letter also said based on publicly available information SVB suffered from "rampant mismanagement," resulting in its collapse. The Federal Reserve's apparent failure to regulate SVB is even more concerning, the letter said.

Several areas of concern, the letter added, should have been readily apparent to the Federal Reserve in the months and years leading up to SVB's failure.

"Rather than effectively directing SVB management to take definitive, corrective action, it is apparent that the Federal Reserve supervisors and examiners neglected to intervene in a meaningful, appropriate way to rectify the bank's deficiencies, ensure safe and sound operations, and prevent its ultimate failure," the letter said.

Lawmakers requested the Federal Reserve officials provide all reports, supervisory determinations and risk identification records on SVB going back to January 2019, according to the letter. The committee is also seeking records on communications between Federal Reserve employees and US media outlets in recent weeks.

The committee requested the officials provide the information no later than April 6.

The letter was signed by Ranking Member Tim Scott and other Republican members of the committee, including Senators Mike Crapo, John Kennedy and Steve Daines.

Republican members of the committee also released a statement on Friday vowing to deliver transparency and accountability on the recent bank collapses. The effort will continue on Tuesday, March 28, when the panel will hold a hearing on the federal regulatory response to the situation.

Federal Reserve System Board of Governors Vice Chairman for Supervision Michael Barr is scheduled to testify to the committee alongside Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation

Chairman Martin Gruenberg and Treasury Undersecretary for Domestic Finance Nellie Liang.

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US Preparing to Deliver Aegis System to Poland, May Be Ready for Inservice in April - MDA

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is preparing to deliver an Aegis Ashore ballistic missile system to Poland, which may be ready to be in service in April, US Missile Defense Agency (MDA) Director Vice Admiral Jon Hill said on Friday.

"We're getting ready to deliver the Poland Aegis Ashore site," Hill said during an event hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Going through full testing of it now, so that'll be ready for inservice within the next month or so."

Hill said earlier this month that the Aegis Ashore system is not designed to intercept Russian missiles but is focused instead on threats from outside Europe such as Iran.

In 2018, Poland and the United States signed an agreement valued at nearly \$5 billion for the development of air-and-missile defense systems with a focus on threats from Iran.

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US to Launch 2 Satellites This Year Capable of Tracking Hypersonic Missiles - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States will launch two satellites later this year designed to be capable of detecting hypersonic ballistic missiles, US Missile Defense Agency Director Jon Hill said on Friday.

"We're going to launch our first two hypersonic ballistic tracking space sensors later this year," Hill said during an event hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

The satellites will initially be set to oversee the Indo-Pacific region, Hill said.

The Defense Department will start to monitor US missile test flights in order to learn to characterize missile launches from space with the new satellites, Hill said.

This will be a critical step before handing them over to the US Space Force for proliferation, Hill added.

Earlier on Friday, US Congressman Doug Lamborn said that no country has defense capabilities against hypersonic weapons, which is another reason to fund research and development in this kind of weapon systems. Lamborn said China remains the "pacing threat" to the United States regarding hypersonic weapons.

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## Top Fed Hawk Bullard Suggests Only One More US Rate Hike in Current Cycle

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The current US rate hike cycle may be ending just over a year after it began, with a senior Federal Reserve official reported saying on Friday that there might be just one more increase after this.

James Bullard, president of the St. Louis chapter of the Fed, was quoted as telling reporters at a banking event that the central bank's rate hike projections suggest that its policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, or FOMC, will resort to another increase at its next meeting or the one after that. The FOMC's next two rate decisions are scheduled on May 3 and June 14.

At its March 22 meeting, the FOMC raised rates by 25 basis points as expected, bringing rates to a peak of 5%.

The Fed slashed rates to 0.25% after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic three years ago.

It has added a total of 475 basis points since March 2022 to bring under control inflation that hit four-decade highs of more than 9% per year in the aftermath of the pandemic. The central bank's aim is to get inflation back to its long-standing target of 2%.

Bullard's opinion on rates is highly valued as he has been one of the FOMC's biggest rate increase hawks, advocating a super-tight monetary policy to subdue super-strong price pressures.

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## Yellen to Hold Meeting of Financial Regulators Amid Deutsche Bank Troubles - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has called a meeting of the top US financial regulators as newly discovered Deutsche Bank troubles suggested the banking crisis that spread from the United States to Europe has been widening, Bloomberg reported on Friday.

There was no time cited for the meeting of the so-called Financial Stability Oversight Council (FSOC), an entity overseen by the Treasury Department, and the discussions will be closed to the public, the report said.

Shares of Deutsche Bank tumbled heavily on Friday, suggesting possible contagion from the United States to Europe amid what has been described as a spike in the cost of insuring the German lender's debt against default.

FSOC members include the heads of the Federal Reserve, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) and several other regulatory agencies. FSOC has little legal authority but serves as a coordinating panel for financial reforms.

The banking crisis erupted two weeks ago with the takeover of two mid-sized lenders - Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank - by the FDIC as depositors withheld billions of dollars from them for fear of the banks' solvency. Silicon Valley later filed for bankruptcy protection despite the FDIC rescue. Since then, other US banks, First Republic and PacWest Bancorp, have faced deposit runs as well.

The crisis took on an international dimension after the Zurich-based Credit Suisse, one of the

world's preeminent names in investment banking, faced solvency issues and had to be bought by rival UBS of Switzerland.

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McCarthy Says Biden Jeopardizing US Economy by Stalling Debt Ceiling Negotiations

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is jeopardizing the US financial markets by delaying negotiations with Congress on raising the debt ceiling, House of Representatives Speaker Kevin McCarthy said on Friday.

"I have been waiting to get to the table the entire time. Unfortunately, the president doesn't think it's important," McCarthy said during a press conference. "He's really jeopardizing the financial markets of America by his activity."

The US economy is too important to play games with, McCarthy added.

Last month, Biden and McCarthy met to discuss raising the debt ceiling, during which McCarthy expressed concerns about doing so and continuing spending at such high levels. Biden emphasized the importance of increasing the nation's borrowing limit before it defaults on its financial obligations.

Earlier in March, Biden released his budget proposal for fiscal year 2024. The proposal projects \$6.883 trillion in spending and \$5.036 trillion in revenue, leading to a deficit of more than \$1.8 trillion.

McCarthy called Biden's proposed budget "completely unserious" and reiterated concerns about government spending.

Although Republicans have not released an alternative budget proposal, US media reported earlier that the party's proposal could include measures such as reducing foreign aid by 45% and halving the FBI's counterintelligence funding in an effort to cut spending.

Earlier this week, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said it is "utterly essential" to raise or suspend the country's debt limit ahead of a catastrophic default later this year.

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US Announces New Belarus-Related Sanctions on 9 Individuals, 3 Companies - Treasury (Updates with more details in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed new sanctions on three Belarusian companies and nine individuals, including on the country's largest manufacturers - Belarusian Automobile Plant (BelAZ) and Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ), the US Department of the Treasury said in a press release on Friday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is designating three entities and nine individuals, and identifying one presidential aircraft as blocked property," the release said.

The main reason for the imposition of new sanctions is the Biden administration's desire to punish Minsk for allegedly suppressing the peaceful opposition in Belarus as well as for its role in supporting Russia in the special military operation in Ukraine, the release said.

Open Joint Stock Company Belarusian Automobile Plant (BelAZ) and its director Sergei Nikiforovich have been designated for being related to the government of Belarus, which was sanctioned in August 2021, the release said.

For the same reason, the United States imposed sanctions on Open Joint Stock Company Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ) and its director Valery Ivankovich, the release said.

The US Treasury Department also imposed sanctions on new members of Belarus' Central Election Commission, including Igor Karpenko, Alena Baldovskaya, Denis Duk, Alena Kuntsevich, Aleksandr Tkachev, Katerina Fedosenko and Aleksandr Yuzhik, the release added.

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US Designates 2 Persons, 6 Entities Linked to Myanmar Military - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has designated two persons and six entities linked to the Myanmar military, the US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Friday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated two individuals and six entities that are connected to Burma's [Myanmar's] military and that have enabled the military regime's continuing atrocities, including through the importation, storage, and distribution of jet fuel to Burma's military," the statement said.

The actions come as Myanmar prepares to mark the 78th Armed Forces Day, the statement said.

Three Myanmar-based companies have been sanctioned for their operations in the defense sector and for being involved in the importation, storing and distribution of jet fuel to Myanmar's military, the statement said.

The United States also imposed sanctions against Myanmar national Tun Min Latt, who is described as a close associate of military leader Min Aung Hlaing. Sanctions were also imposed against Hlaing's wife and three companies owned or controlled by him, the statement said.

"The United States remains steadfast in its commitment to the people of Burma, and will continue to deny the military the materiel it uses to commit these atrocities," the statement added.

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Congressman Warns of Threat Chinese Hypersonic Weapons Pose to US

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - Hypersonic missiles, especially those built by China, are

an emerging threat to the United States and Washington must set funds to research and develop such weapon systems, US Congressman Doug Lamborn said on Friday.

"There are things on the horizon though that we need to be really giving attention to, funding research and development and making progress on... the hypersonic threat, especially China," Lamborn said at an event hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Lamborn said Russia talks a lot about hypersonic weapons and perhaps has some "primitive capabilities," but China remains the "pacing threat" with respect to hypersonics.

The congressman warned that China is aiming to build hundreds or thousands hypersonic weapons.

Lamborn noted that President Joe Biden announced on March 3 that he would initiate an industrial system that allowed for the efficient production of hypersonic weapons, but the United States has not progressed to the level of China or even Russia.

"We do not have a viable offensive capability with hypersonics," Lamborn said.

No country has defense capabilities against hypersonic weapons, which is another reason to fund research and development in this kind of weapon systems, he added.

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US Imposes Visa Restrictions on 14 Belarusians, Including Government Officials - Blinken WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The Department of State has imposed visa restrictions on 14 Belarusian nationals, including government officials, as part of a joint action with the Department of the Treasury against Minsk, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"The Department of State is announcing actions to impose visa restrictions on an additional 14 individuals under Presidential Proclamation 8015 for their involvement in undermining democracy in Belarus," Blinken said in a statement. "Specifically, these individuals include regime officials involved in policies to threaten and intimidate brave Belarusians exercising their human rights and fundamental freedoms at great personal cost."

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US Targets Lukashenko's Government Aircraft in New Belarus-Related Sanctions - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - The United States has blocked the Boeing 737 aircraft owned and used by the Belarus government as part of the new sanctions package against Minsk, the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said in a press release on Friday.

"EW-001PA is a Boeing 737 belonging to the GoB [the government of Belarus] and used as the presidential aircraft for the US-sanctioned leader of Belarus, Alyaksandr Hryhoryavich Lukashenka. Lukashenka has exclusive access to EW-001PA and other luxury aircraft and uses them for personal trips," the release said. "OFAC is identifying EW-001PA as property in which

Lukashenka, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14038, has an interest."

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US Lawmakers to Meet With January 6 Defendants at Washington Jail - Greene

WASHINGTON, March 24 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan group of lawmakers from the US House Oversight Committee will visit a jail in Washington to meet with defendants charged in connection with the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 amid concerns about their harsh treatment in detention, Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said on Friday.

"Flashback to 2021 when we were trying to go in the DC Jail to check on Pretrial J6 Defendants due process rights and make sure they weren't being treated like political prisoners," Greene said via Twitter, sharing a video of the 2021 visit. "Today, we are going back in the DC Jail and two years later the only thing that's changed is we don't wear these stupid [COVID-19] masks anymore."

Greene told US media that Republican members of the delegation, including Congressmen Andy Biggs, Scott Perry and Lauren Boebert will be joined by two Democratic members - Summer Lee and Jasmine Crockett.

Crockett, a former civil rights lawyer, said earlier on Friday that she is joining the delegation to ensure the truth is told and not a "revisionist alternative reality." It is important not to conflate the treatment of the January 6 defendants, whom the lawmaker referred to as "insurrectionists," with the jail conditions endured by "mostly black and brown folk" for decades, Crockett said.

Earlier this month, Greene and House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer sent a letter to Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser requesting information about the district's jail, as well as a visit with defendants and jail personnel.

The lawmakers expressed concerns about reports of inhumane treatment of defendants in the jail, including abuse, neglect and beatings.

"The Committee is concerned by reports that January 6 detainees are facing a unique form of mistreatment due to their politics and beliefs, representing potential several human rights abuses," the letter said.

The visit comes after new video footage was aired on Fox News earlier in March from the events on January 6 that showed law enforcement officials guiding and standing alongside demonstrators inside the Capitol.

However, US Capitol Police said the news program failed to provide accurate context for the footage, claiming the officers were outnumbered and attempted to use de-escalation tactics to clear the building.

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