

3/30/23 Thursday

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No Evidence of Weapon Misuse in Ukraine, US Officials Claim During Hearing on Aid

On Wednesday, the House Foreign Affairs Committee on aid to Ukraine lawmakers spent hours listening to witness testimony from officials observing the agencies responsible for distributing the billions in aid given to Ukraine by America.

The watchdogs claim that so far, no evidence of misuse of American funds or weapons has been seen in Ukraine.

Some Republican lawmakers have criticized the Biden administration for giving Ukraine what House Speaker Kevin McCarthy described as a “blank check” in the lead-up to the midterm elections that took place in November.

During the hearing, however, Republican lawmakers seemed to back away from that assertion, clarifying that the hearing did not indicate that they are unwilling to send more aid to Ukraine.

“To be clear, I do not conduct this oversight to undermine or question the importance of support for Ukraine,” said committee Chairman Michael McCaul (R-TX), “but rather -- to the contrary -- oversight should incentivize the administration and Ukraine to use funds from Congress with the highest degree of efficiency and effectiveness.”

That did not satisfy Democratic lawmakers in the committee, including New York Representative Gregory Meeks who said that the “MAGA Republicans” are helping Russia simply by holding the hearing. Representative Ted Lieu, a Democrat from California, took it a step further, saying the committee should instead be talking about how to get more weapons into the hands of Ukrainians.

“I think we should talk about more important issues, like how do we make sure other countries don't give additional assistance to Russia? How do we make sure Ukraine has the long-range weapons they need to win this war?” Lieu asked the committee.

The watchdogs admitted that they do not have a full accounting of every dollar spent in Ukraine. “We're doing oversight at the speed of war,” said Department of Defense Inspector General Robert Storch.

The watchdogs also admitted that the situation may change as the conflict progresses.

One Republican suggested that a new office be created specifically to monitor aid to Ukraine, something the United States did in 2008 with Afghanistan.

In contrast to the assurances from US watchdogs, multiple international agencies, including Interpol and Europol, have expressed concerns that the weapons in Ukraine may end up in other European countries or elsewhere in the world. In October, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the monthly amount of weapons smuggling in Ukraine [exceeds \\$1 billion](#).

“The monthly amount of smuggling on this black market exceeds \$1 billion. NATO's military supplies addressed to the Kiev regime end up in the hands of terrorists, extremists and criminal groups in the Middle East, Central Africa and Southeast Asia,” she said.

Last June, a screenshot of US-made Javelin rocket launchers being sold on the dark web was posted by ASB Military News on Telegram. The United States dismissed the post as “Russian propaganda.”

The issue of F-16 fighter jets and MQ-9 drones, which Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has repeatedly asked for, also came up during the hearings.

“That won’t help them in this current fight,” Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin said, while not ruling out the possibility that they could be given F-16s or “some other fourth-generation aircraft” in the future, likely after the conflict.

Austin also said that the F-16s would be counteracted by Russia’s robust air defense capabilities.

“That air domain is a very hostile airspace because of the capability that the Russians have for air defense,” he added.

Russia has warned the United States and NATO about providing further weapons to Ukraine, saying that doing so will increase the risk of a direct confrontation between Russia and NATO.

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Joint Base Andrews on Lockdown After Active Shooter Reports

Joint Base Andrews is located in Prince George's County in Maryland, not far from Washington D.C. it is often used by high-profile officials to fly in and out of the city, including the vice president and president.

UPDATE: Officials have confirmed that as of 5:15 p.m. the lockdown has been partially lifted and will be completely lifted at 6:00 p.m. They say no suspect has been arrested and everyone will be searched when leaving the base.

What was originally reported as an active shooter situation at Joint Base Andrews (fka Andrews Airforce Base) in Maryland, outside of Washington DC has put the base into lockdown and service members have been told to shelter in place.

At around 2:37 p.m. on Thursday, the base sent out an emergency alert to service members, advising that there was an armed individual, but it has since been clarified by the base that no shots have been fired.

The suspect is carrying an AR-15-style rifle and is described as a white male wearing a purple sweatshirt and black shorts.

The alert asked service members to call 911 and ask to be connected to base security if they see anyone moving around.

"Security Forces, foot and mobile patrols are out looking for the suspect," the alert said in an update. The Base said the suspect was spotted near base housing, which is used to house enlisted military personnel and their family members.

Last year, the base shut down after two individuals, one armed, breached the security perimeter. That incident took place shortly after Vice President Kamala Harris' plane had taken off.

Live streamed footage by local media appeared to show base law enforcement take someone into custody near a pond at a park on the base.

The video shows the individual lying next to the pond before officers arrive. It appears that the officers order the individual to stand up and walk towards them. No gun is visible in the grainy video, though officers appear to head toward the area the individual was lying before going out of frame.

Sputnik has reached out to Joint Base Andrews about the individual. Officials confirmed to other media outlets that no suspect was arrested in connection with the case, Joint Base Andrews has not responded to Sputnik's inquiries at press time.

At around 4:20, the Twitter account to Joint Base Andrews clarified that no shots had been fired and there were no injuries or deaths reported, but they stressed that the situation was "on going." As noted above, the lockdown has now been partially lifted and will be lifted completely at 6 p.m. the situation is no longer consider active.

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Trump Indicted By NY Grand Jury - CNN

CNN is reporting that Trump will appear in court on Tuesday, April 4, to be arraigned on his charges.

Former President Donald Trump has been indicted by a Manhattan grand jury, according to CNN who cites "multiple sources familiar with the matter."

This is the first time a current or former President of the United States has faced criminal charges. The indictment is under seal and will be announced in the coming days. The charges against Trump are not known at this time.

The case centers around a \$130,000 payment made by Attorney Michael Cohen to adult film star Stormy Daniels shortly before the 2016 election. Cohen, who was not Trump's lawyer at the time, was then allegedly paid by the Trump campaign. Those payments were labelled as legal expenses and were not included in the campaign's finance reports.

Cohen pled guilty in 2018 for charges related to tax fraud and campaign finance violations. He claimed that Trump ordered him to make the payments to Daniels and then reimbursed him in monthly installments and a bonus, in payments totaling \$420,000.

The payments to Daniels were part of a non-disclosure agreement Daniels signed to prevent her from going public about accusations that she had a sexual relationship with Trump, something that Trump denies.

Trump has repeatedly dismissed the investigation, as well as the various other legal challenges he is facing, as politically motivated witch-hunts.

Legal observers say the charges will likely focus on falsifying business records, because the Trump campaign reported that the payments were for legal services that Cohen never rendered. That would only result in a misdemeanor, but it has been suggested that by showing it was done to cover up another crime, it could be bumped up to a felony, though that would depend on untested legal theory.

Trump attorney Alina Habba released a statement after the news broke, calling Trump a victim of a corrupt justice system.

"A former president, a current candidate and my friend President Donald J. Trump is a victim of a corrupt and distorted version of the American justice system and history. He will be vindicated," Habba said.

Trump released a statement on his social media site calling the indictment "blatant Election Interference [sic]"

Prior to this indictment, Trump had managed to avoid legal trouble. He settled several lawsuits out of court and while he was impeached twice as president, he managed to avoid convictions both times.

In December, the Trump Organization was convicted on multiple tax fraud charges but Trump, who had passed off the day to day operations of the organization to his children, was not charged in that case.

Trump is also under investigation in Georgia, where prosecutors are looking into his and his allies alleged attempts to overturn the 2020 presidential election results in that state. And there is a federal investigation underway looking into his handling of classified documents after leaving office. That case resulted in an FBI raid on his Mar-a-Lago estate, where authorities seized thousands of documents from Trump's home.

Trump, who declared his intention to run for President again in 2024, would not be prevented from running for President, even if convicted.

Since the initial CNN report, several media outlets have confirmed with their sources that the Manhattan grand jury have voted to indict Trump.

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CDC Investigators in East Palestine Derailment Briefly Fell Ill- Reports

WASHINGTON, March 31 – Seven investigators from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) briefly fell ill in early March while conducting a house-to-house survey near the Norfolk Southern train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, CNN reported.

“Symptoms resolved for most team members later the same afternoon, and everyone resumed work on survey data collection within 24 hours,” a CDC spokesperson told CNN. “Impacted team members have not reported ongoing health effects.”

The symptoms of the investigators, some of whom belonged to the Epidemic Intelligence Service, included sore throats, headaches, coughing, and nausea – what residents themselves experienced after the derailment on February 3.

Norfolk Southern and federal and state agencies had insisted to residents that the air and water were safe after the train derailment, which led to the spilling of hazardous materials, and later, a deliberate burning to contain the vinyl chloride.

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Paul Whelan's Family Hopes Congressional Resolutions to Expedite His Release - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) – The family of Paul Whelan, who has been held in Russia on spying charges since 2018, expressed the hope on Friday that Congressional resolutions requesting his release will reach the attention of the relevant people in the Kremlin and the White House.

“We hope that these Resolutions will signal, both to their targeted audience in the Kremlin, as well as to the White House, the need to bring this sorry case of wrongful detention to a close,” Whelan’s family said in a statement.

Several members of the US Senate and the House introduced two different resolutions on Thursday calling to release Paul Whelan. Two similar resolutions were introduced earlier, according to the statement.

Russian authorities arrested Paul Whelan in the Moscow area in December 2018 and a court sentenced him to 16 years in prison on charges of espionage. Whelan has maintained that he is innocent and insisted that he arrived in Russia for a friend's wedding.

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Fed’s Preferred Inflation Gauge PCE Index Up 5% in Year to February vs 4.1% Six Months Ago

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Reserve's preferred inflation gauge, the personal consumption expenditures (PCE) price index, grew by 5% annually in February, compared to 4.1% six months ago in September, the Commerce Department said on Friday.

Without volatile food and energy prices, the "core" component of the so-called Personal Consumption Expenditures, or PCE, Index also grew 0.3% last month versus 0.6% in January. For the year, core PCE expanded at 4.6% versus the annualized rate of 5.5% in September 2022.

The mixed inflation readings suggested inflation as measured by the PCE Index was mostly abating if volatile food and energy prices were taken out of the mix.

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Biden Says No Plans to Expel Russian Diplomats Over Detention of US Journalist

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Friday he has no plans at the moment to expel Russian diplomats in response to the detention of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich in Russia.

"That’s not the plan right now," Biden told reporters when asked if he is going to expel Russian diplomats.

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Biden Says Not Going to Talk About Trump Indictment

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden on Friday declined to provide any comment on the indictment of his predecessor, Donald Trump, in a case regarding alleged hush money payments, according to a White House pool report.

"I have no comment on Trump," Biden told reporters at the White House.

When asked if he is worried about protests, he said "No. I'm not going to talk about the Trump indictment."

On Thursday, a Manhattan Grand Jury voted to indict Trump on charges related to his alleged role in a hush money payment and cover-up involving adult film star Stormy Daniels during the lead-up to the 2016 election.

CNN, citing unnamed sources, said Trump may be facing 34 counts tied to falsifying business records and is expected to appear in court on Tuesday.

Trump has denied all wrongdoing and called the probe a "witch hunt." The former president has also rejected all allegations of an affair with Daniels.

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Americans Continue to Hold Bleak View of Economy – Poll

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) – Americans continue to hold a bleak view of their economy, with 83% rating current conditions as "only fair" or "poor," according to a Gallup poll released Friday.

Moreover, a 72% majority say conditions are getting worse, with only 23% saying they are improving.

The results of the monthly national poll, conducted March 1-23, closely matched those of January and February.

At the same time, two-thirds of Americans, believe the country's leading problem is non-economic, with 20% identifying some aspect of the government. Among the third who cite some aspect of the economy or government finances as the leading problem, 12% point to inflation as the top culprit.

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US To Provide Costa Rica \$25Mln in Cybersecurity Support – White House

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) – The United States will provide Costa Rica \$25 million in cybersecurity support, White House’s National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said on Friday.

“Deputy National Security Advisor for Cyber and Emerging Technologies Anne Neuberger traveled to Costa Rica March 29-30 to announce the United States’ plan to provide \$25 million in cybersecurity support to the Government of Costa Rica,” Watson said in a statement.

This development demonstrates Washington’s commitment to help one of its closest partners secure its infrastructure and to support strong democracies in the region, she added.

With the support of the US, Costa Rica will be able to establish a national security operations center to quickly detect and respond to cyber attacks and implement cybersecurity protections for its government systems, according to the statement.

“This builds on the rapid support the U.S. provided to Costa Rica following two major ransomware attacks in the spring of 2022 that disrupted government services and led President Rodrigo Chaves Robles to declare a state of emergency,” Watson said.

During the trip, Neuberger met with senior government officials to underscore the US collaboration with global partners to bolster the government’s cyber infrastructure and ensure their citizens can access critical services. She also discussed bilateral cooperation on a range of regional technology issues, the statement added.

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Biden on WSJ Reporter Gershkovich Detained in Russia: ‘Let Him Go’

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Friday that Russia should let Evan Gershkovich go in his first public reaction to the detention of the Wall Street Journal reporter on espionage charges, according to a White House pool report.

"Let him go," Biden said when asked about his message to Russia regarding Gershkovich's case.

On Wednesday, Gershkovich was detained in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg on suspicion of espionage in favor of the United States. The Russian Federal Security Service said that the journalist had been collecting classified information about the activities of one of Russia's military-industrial complex firms.

On Thursday, the Lefortovo District Court of Moscow ruled that the reporter be put in pre-trial detention for two months. The Wall Street Journal denies the allegations of espionage. The Russian Foreign Ministry said consular access had been granted to Gershkovich.

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Trump Won’t ‘Hole Up in Mar-a-Lago’ After Indictment, Zero Chance of Plea Deal – Lawyer

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - There is "zero chance" former US President Donald Trump will take a plea deal after being indicted in a case presumably related to alleged hush money payments to adult film star Stormy Daniels, his lawyer Joe Tacopina said on Friday. "President Trump will not take a plea deal on this case. It's not gonna happen," Tacopina told NBC. "There's no crime. I don't know if it's gonna make it to trial because we have substantial legal challenges."

Asked if Trump plans to voluntarily surrender for his arraignment, the lawyer said Trump is "not going to hole up in Mar-a-Lago."

Trump's legal team expects the indictment to be unsealed early next week, he added.

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UPDATE 3 - Trump Indicted by Grand Jury, Says 'Political Persecution' Will Backfire on Biden (Adds more details, quotes, edits throughout)

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - A Manhattan Grand Jury has voted to indict former US President Donald Trump, CNN reported citing three sources familiar with the matter.

The Manhattan District Attorney's office has been looking into Trump's alleged role in a hush money payment and cover-up involving adult film start Stormy Daniels during the lead-up to the 2016 election.

CNN, citing unnamed sources, said Trump may be facing 34 counts tied to falsifying business records and is expected to appear in court on Tuesday.

On Thursday, three lead prosecutors on the probe walked into the building where the grand jury was sitting in before the panel was scheduled to meet at 2:00 p.m. local time.

About three hours later, the prosecutors walked into the court clerk's office via a back door to begin the process of filing the indictment., the report added.

District attorney Alvin Bragg is next expected to negotiate Trump's surrender.

The development comes a day after media speculated that Trump's grand jury had gone on hiatus until late April.

If Trump agrees to surrender, he would then be photographed and fingerprinted at a New York state facility.

According to the New York Times, a conviction of Trump is not a sure thing.

"An attempt to combine a charge relating to the false records with an election violation relating to the payment to Ms. Daniels would be based on a legal theory that has yet to be evaluated by judges, raising the possibility that a court could throw out or limit the charges," the New York Times said.

Trump has denied all wrongdoing and has called the probe, like many others, a witchhunt. The former president has also rejected allegations of having an affair with Daniels.

Trump in a statement after the news broke said the jury's decision to indict him was tantamount to election interference.

"This is Political Persecution and Election Interference at the highest level in history," Trump said on Thursday. "The Democrats have lied, cheated and stolen in their obsession with trying to 'Get Trump,' but now they've done the unthinkable - indicting a completely innocent person in

an act of blatant Election Interference."

The "witch hunt" will backfire on Biden, Trump said, noting the unprecedented nature of the indictment.

The former president also slammed the district attorney who has been backed by prominent Democrats.

"Manhattan DA Alvin Bragg, who was hand-picked and funded by George Soros, is a disgrace. Rather than stopping the unprecedented crime wave taking over New York City, he's doing Joe Biden's dirty work," Trump said.

House Republican Conference chair Elise Stefanik in a statement said such election interference will energize tens of millions of voters to rally and cast a ballot for Trump "to save our great republic."

Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene took to Twitter with some strong words including calling for an impeachment of Biden.

"Impeach Biden. He's given us every reason and the family banking records and more are giving us receipts. But now that the gloves are off. Prosecute any and all crimes. Enough of this witch hunt bullshit."

Trump in another post on Truth Social said the Manhattan DA brought a "fake" charge against him knowing the former president "cannot get a fair trial in New York."

Meanwhile, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy warned that Bragg will be held to account by the lower chamber for "abuse of power" while Florida Governor Ron DeSantis said his state will not extradite Trump because of the questionable circumstances behind the Soros-backed district attorney.

"These Corrupt Democrat Prosecutors, all from poorly run and very dangerous Democrat run cities, are not going to choose the Republican Nominee, or the next President of the United States!" Trump said in a Truth Social post.

Later in the day, Trump's defense attorney said the indictment lacks any legal basis.

"What was once the most respected and revered district attorney's office in the nation has been fully bastardized by an opportunistic politician seeking, like many others, to cash in on the Trump brand," the former president's defense attorney Chris Kise told CNN. "The complete lack of legal basis, coupled with the politically targeted nature of the prosecution, should strike fear into every citizen in this country irrespective of their views of President Trump."

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Trump Expected to Appear in Court on Tuesday - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump is expected to appear in court on Tuesday for his arraignment over charges filed by Manhattan's district attorney, CNN reported citing multiple sources.

Trump was indicted by a grand jury earlier on Thursday and reportedly may face over 30 counts related to falsifying business records.

The former president denied the allegations and called the indictment political persecution and

election interference.

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Trump Says He Cannot Get A Fair Trial in New York

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump after getting indicted by the Manhattan District Attorney's office said he cannot get a fair trial in New York.

"They only brought this Fake, Corrupt, and Disgraceful Charge against me because I stand with the American People, and they know that I cannot get a fair trial in New York!" Trump said in a Truth Social post on Thursday.

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US House Will Hold Manhattan Prosecutor to Account for 'Abuse of Power' - Speaker

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will hold Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg to account for his alleged abuse of power over the indictment of former President Donald Trump, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said in a statement.

"The American people will not tolerate this injustice, and the House of Representatives will hold Alvin Bragg and his unprecedented abuse of power to account," McCarthy said on Thursday.

A Manhattan Grand Jury has voted to indict Trump in the coming days over his alleged hush-payment to adult film star Stormy Daniels in 2016 amid his run for US president. Prosecutors asked him to surrender and to face arraignment on charges that remain under seal.

Trump said the jury's decision to indict him was tantamount to election interference, but believes the so-called witch hunt will backfire on President Joe Biden.

The Manhattan District Attorney's office said it contacted Trump's legal team to coordinate his surrender for arraignment, but the specific date is not set yet.

However, CNN reported that Trump's arrest is likely to come early next week. CNN also reported that Trump faces 34 counts related to falsifying business records.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, Trump's possible Republican rival in the 2024 election, said in a statement that the state will not assist in an extradition request for Trump due to questionable circumstances surrounding the Manhattan District Attorney.

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Trump May Be Facing 34 Counts Tied to Falsifying Business Records - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump may be facing up to 34 counts in connection to allegedly falsifying business records, CNN reported citing sources familiar with the matter.

A Manhattan Grand Jury on Thursday voted to indict Trump in the coming days in a case involving an alleged hush-payment to adult film star Stormy Daniels in 2016 amid his run for US president. Prosecutors asked him to surrender and to face arraignment on charges that remain under seal.

CNN reported that Trump's arrest is likely to come early next week. Trump has denied any wrongdoing called the indictment election interference and political persecution.

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Manhattan DA's Office Says Contacted Trump's Lawyers to Coordinate His Surrender

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Manhattan District Attorney's office said it contacted the legal team of former US President Donald Trump to coordinate his surrender for arraignment, but the specific date is not set yet.

"This evening we contacted Mr. Trump's attorney to coordinate his surrender to the Manhattan D.A.'s Office for arrangement on a Supreme Court indictment, which remains under seal. Guidance will be provided when the arrangement date is selected," the statement said.

CNN reported that Trump's arrest is likely to come early next week.

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Governor DeSantis Says Florida Will Not Assist in Extradition Request For Trump

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor Ron DeSantis said in a statement that the state will not assist in an extradition request for former President Donald Trump due to questionable circumstances surrounding Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg.

"The weaponization of the legal system to advance a political agenda turns the rule of law on its head. It is un-American... Florida will not assist in an extradition request given the questionable circumstances at issue with this Soros-backed Manhattan prosecutor and his political agenda," DeSantis wrote on Twitter on Thursday.

DeSantis, who is Trump's possible Republican rival in the run up to the 2024 presidential election, said Bragg is stretching the law to target a political opponent.

A Manhattan Grand Jury has voted to indict Trump in the coming days. Prosecutors asked him to surrender and to face arraignment on charges that remain under seal.

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UPDATE 2 - Trump Indicted by Grand Jury, Says 'Political Persecution' Will Backfire on Biden (Adds more from Trump, reactions in paras 12 - 20)

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - A Manhattan Grand Jury has voted to indict former US President Donald Trump, CNN reported citing three sources familiar with the matter.

The New York Times reported an indictment may be announced in the coming days.

Prosecutors asked Trump to surrender and to face arraignment on charges that remain unknown for now, the report added.

The Manhattan District Attorney's office has been looking into Trump's alleged role in a hush money payment and cover-up involving adult film star Stormy Daniels during the lead-up to the 2016 election.

On Thursday, three lead prosecutors on the probe walked into the building where the grand jury was sitting in before the panel was scheduled to meet at 2:00 p.m. local time.

About three hours later, the prosecutors walked into the court clerk's office via a back door to begin the process of filing the indictment., the report added.

District attorney Alvin Bragg is next expected to negotiate Trump's surrender.

The development comes a day after media speculated that Trump's grand jury had gone on hiatus until late April.

If Trump agrees to surrender, he would then be photographed and fingerprinted at a New York state facility.

According to the New York Times, a conviction of Trump is not a sure thing.

"An attempt to combine a charge relating to the false records with an election violation relating to the payment to Ms. Daniels would be based on a legal theory that has yet to be evaluated by judges, raising the possibility that a court could throw out or limit the charges," the New York Times said.

Trump has denied all wrongdoing and has called the probe, like many others, a witchhunt. The former president has also rejected allegations of having an affair with Daniels.

CNN reported later that Trump's arraignment could come as early as next week.

Trump in a statement after the news broke said the jury's decision to indict him was tantamount to election interference.

"This is Political Persecution and Election Interference at the highest level in history," Trump said on Thursday. "The Democrats have lied, cheated and stolen in their obsession with trying to 'Get Trump,' but now they've done the unthinkable - indicting a completely innocent person in an act of blatant Election Interference."

The "witch hunt" will backfire on Biden, Trump said, noting the unprecedented nature of the indictment.

The former president also slammed the district attorney who has been backed by prominent Democrats.

"Manhattan DA Alvin Bragg, who was hand-picked and funded by George Soros, is a disgrace. Rather than stopping the unprecedented crime wave taking over New York City, he's doing Joe Biden's dirty work," Trump said.

House Republican Conference chair Elise Stefanik in a statement said such election interference will energize tens of millions of voters to rally and cast a ballot for Trump "to save

our great republic."

Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene took to Twitter with some strong words including calling for an impeachment of Biden.

"Impeach Biden. He's given us every reason and the family banking records and more are giving us receipts. But now that the gloves are off. Prosecute any and all crimes. Enough of this witch hunt bullshit."

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Raytheon Wins \$650Mln US Navy Contract to Build Next Generation Jammer - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Raytheon has won a more than \$650 million US Navy contract to manufacture the Next Generation Jammer (NGJ) Mid-Band (MB), the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Raytheon Co., El Segundo, California, is awarded a \$650,433,839... contract for the production and delivery of low rate initial production (LRIP) Lot III Next Generation Jammer (NGJ) Mid-Band (MB), to include 15 NGJ-MB LRIP ship sets (2 pods per ship set), 11 for the Navy and four for the government of Australia, as well as to provide associated spares, support equipment, non-recurring engineering and associated data," the release said on Thursday.

Most of the work on the project will be performed in Forest, Mississippi (50%), Dallas, Texas (37%) and El Segundo, California (10%) over the coming year and is expected to be completed in April 2024, the release said.

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Trumps Says NY Grand Jury Indictment 'Political Persecution,' Will Backfire

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said in a statement that a New York grand jury's decision to indict him is political persecution and election interference, adding that the move will ultimately backfire on US President Joe Biden.

"This is Political Persecution and Election Interference at the highest level in history," Trump said on Thursday. "The Democrats have lied, cheated and stolen in their obsession with trying to 'Get Trump,' but now they've done the unthinkable – indicting a completely innocent person in an act of blatant Election Interference."

The "witch hunt" will backfire on Biden, Trump said, noting the unprecedented nature of the indictment.

Earlier on Thursday, a grand jury in Manhattan voted to indict Trump on charges related to his alleged role in hush money payments to adult film actress Stormy Daniels ahead of the 2016 presidential election. Trump denies the allegations.

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New York Grand Jury Votes to Indict Ex-US President Donald Trump - Reports

(Adds details, background in paras 4-11)

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - A Manhattan Grand Jury has voted to indict former US President Donald Trump, CNN reported citing three sources familiar with the matter.

The New York Times reported an indictment may be announced in the coming days.

Prosecutors asked Trump to surrender and to face arraignment on charges that remain unknown for now, the report added.

The Manhattan District Attorney's office has been looking into Trump's alleged role in a hush money payment and cover-up involving adult film star Stormy Daniels during the lead-up to the 2016 election.

On Thursday, three lead prosecutors on the probe walked into the building where the grand jury was sitting in before the panel was scheduled to meet at 2:00 p.m. local time.

About three hours later, the prosecutors walked into the court clerk's office via a back door to begin the process of filing the indictment., the report added.

District attorney Alvin Bragg is next expected to negotiate Trump's surrender.

The development comes a day after media speculated that Trump's grand jury had gone on hiatus until late April.

If Trump agrees to surrender, he would then be photographed and fingerprinted at a New York state facility.

According to the New York Times, a conviction of Trump is not a sure thing.

"An attempt to combine a charge relating to the false records with an election violation relating to the payment to Ms. Daniels would be based on a legal theory that has yet to be evaluated by judges, raising the possibility that a court could throw out or limit the charges," the New York Times said.

Trump has denied all wrongdoing and has called the probe, like many others, a witchhunt. The former president has also rejected allegations of having an affair with Daniels.

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2016 election.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) –
US CITIZEN ARREST IN RUSSIA

* The Lefortovo District Court of Moscow has decided to arrest Wall Street Journal Moscow bureau correspondent Evan Gershkovich for two months over espionage suspicions, the court told Sputnik on Thursday.

* Gershkovich, who was detained in Yekaterinburg on a suspicion of espionage, was not engaged in any journalistic work there, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* The question of exchanging Gershkovich with the US is not on the table yet, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

* The United States is concerned by the detention of a Wall Street Journal reporter and US citizen in Russia on suspicion of espionage and is in contact with the media outlet, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

NATO MEETING

* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his NATO counterparts will discuss during a ministerial in Brussels next week Ukraine's needs to launch a counteroffensive against Russian forces this spring, US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Dereck Hogan said on Thursday.

* NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels next week will focus heavily on Ukraine and also discuss China's "malign behavior," a US official said.

* NATO allies do not plan to discuss during ministerial in Brussels next week Russia's plans to move tactical nuclear weapons into Belarus, Hogan said.

* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Brussels next week to attend the NATO foreign ministers meeting, State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vendant Patel said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Sixty-five Ukrainian soldiers completed their training on Patriot air defense systems this week and returned to Europe, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

* Bulgarian and Czech companies that illegally repair Soviet-made helicopters for the Ukrainian military are violating their international obligations, Russia's Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation (FSVTS) said.

* Russian air defense systems have intercepted Ukraine's new Hrim-2 operational-tactical missile for the first time, Russia's Defense Ministry said.

* Ukraine has lost over 340 soldiers and foreign mercenaries, as well as 24 pieces of military

equipment in the Donetsk direction over the past day, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

RUSSIA UNSC PRESIDENCY

* Russia plans to hold an informal Arria-formula meeting on the issue of evacuating children from the special military operation area in Ukraine during the upcoming chairmanship of the UN Security Council, Maria Zakharova, the Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman, said on Thursday.

* During Russia's chairmanship in the UN Security Council (UNSC) in April, a meeting of the council is planned to be held on the violation of military products export agreements, Zakharova said.

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov plans to chair a high-level open debate of the United Nations Security Council in April, Zakharova said.

MILITARY HELICOPTERS CRASH IN US

* All nine US service members on board two US Army helicopters were killed when they crashed during a routine training mission in Kentucky, ABC reported on Thursday, citing an Army official.

* US Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said it was a "heavy day" for the armed forces after two helicopters collided during a training mission in Kentucky, killing nine US soldiers.

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NATO Ministerial to Focus on Ukraine, Discuss China's 'Malign Behavior' - US Official

(Updates with details, background in paras 4-9)

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels next week will focus heavily on Ukraine and also discuss China's "malign behavior," a US official said on Thursday.

"This NATO ministerial will have a heavy focus on Ukraine. But ministers will also discuss global threats and challenges, including working with Indo-Pacific partners on the PRC's malign behavior, securing global supply chains, coordinating to protect democracies against emerging disruptive technology and expanding cooperation with emerging partners in the Global South," the official told reporters during a conference call.

The ministerial will echo the alliance's "continuing unity" and highlight its "ability to adapt and endure while also deterring the ongoing threats that seek to disrupt peace, security, and stability in the whole Euro-Atlantic area," the official added.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who will be in Brussels April 3-5, and his NATO counterparts will discuss during the ministerial Ukraine's needs to launch a counteroffensive against Russian forces this spring, Hogan said.

Ukraine has been reportedly preparing to launch a counteroffensive against Russia in the spring of this year, with a number of Western officials expressing their willingness to help Kiev. Last week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Ukraine is currently unable to launch a counteroffensive due to a shortage of weaponry.

Western countries have been supplying Ukraine with various types of weapons systems, including air defense missiles, multiple launch rocket systems, tanks, self-propelled artillery and anti-aircraft guns since Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine over a year ago. Moscow has repeatedly warned that arms deliveries do not contribute to a peaceful settlement and further escalate the conflict.

Moreover, Hogan said NATO allies are expected to discuss additional steps the alliance must take in April to help keep Ukraine's energy grid resilient as much as possible amid Russia's special military operation.

NATO allies, according to Hogan, do not plan to discuss during ministerial in Brussels next week Russia's plans to move tactical nuclear weapons into Belarus.

Blinken is also scheduled to have bilateral meetings on Tuesday with EU High Representative Josep Borrell, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, Hogan said, adding that other bilateral meetings may be announced as the trip unfolds.

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US Urges Russia to Act 'Professionally' During UNSC Presidency – White House

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – The United States calls on Russia to conduct itself in a professional manner during its upcoming presidency of the United Nations Security Council, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

“We urge Russia to conduct itself professionally during its scheduled presidency in April,” Jean-Pierre told reporters.

Russia’s presidency of the UN Security Council starts on April 1.

Jean-Pierre noted that the council does important work on peace and security around the world but said the US expects Russia will use its seat for “spreading disinformation.”

“A country that flagrantly violates the UN Charter and invades its neighbor has no place on the UN Security Council. Unfortunately Russia is a permanent member of the Security Council, and no feasible international legal pathway exists to change this reality,” she said.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Thursday that Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov plans to chair a high-level open debate of the United Nations Security Council in April.

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US Persons Must Obtain License to Pay Russia ‘Exit Tax’ for Assets Divestment – Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – US persons are required to receive a special license to be able to pay the so-called “exit tax” payment, established by Russia, for assets divestment with

respect to the countries considered unfriendly by Moscow, the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) explained on Thursday.

On Monday, the Russian Ministry of Finance said that companies from unfriendly countries will be required to pay at least 10% of half of their market value to the Russian budget if they decide to divest from Russian assets. Moreover, such companies will be required to voluntarily send to the budget at least 10% of the market value of the relevant assets, if the sale of assets is carried out at a discount of more than 90% of the market value.

“US persons whose divestment from the Russian Federation will involve the payment of such an exit tax require a license from OFAC prior to the payment of such tax, unless otherwise authorized by OFAC,” OFAC said.

On February 24, the Department of the Treasury issued a general license 13D that authorized certain administrative transactions involving US persons and the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, the National Wealth Fund of the Russian Federation, and the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation if such transactions are ordinarily incident and necessary to the day-to-day operations in the Russian Federation of such US persons through June 6.

OFAC clarified that any payment of exit taxes is not considered ordinarily incident and necessary to day-to-day operations in the Russian Federation and, thus, is not authorized under the general license 13D.

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White House Indo-Pacific Coordinator Says India Will ‘Never Be’ Ally of India Despite Ties

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - White House Indo-Pacific Affairs Coordinator Kurt Campbell said on Thursday that India will never be an ally of the United States despite close ties between the two countries.

“India is a great power. India is not an ally of the United States and will never be an ally of the United States, but it does not mean that we will not be close partners and share many things,” Campbell said during a Center for a New American Security event.

Campbell added that he considers the US-India relationship the most important bilateral relationship for the US in the 21st century.

The US seeks to deepen its relationship with India through more people-to-people, educational and health partnership, Campbell also said.

Western media have recently led a smear campaign against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in an effort to incite unrest in the country, Major General Dhruv Katoch, an Indian military expert and director of India Foundation research center, told Sputnik.

India’s independent foreign policy aspirations and neutral stance on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in the face of pressure have upset a number of Western countries, Katoch said.

US President Joe Biden plans to host Modi for a state dinner in Washington this year, potentially in June, US media reported earlier this month.

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US Welcomes ICJ Decision on Iran Assets Case, But Regrets That It Covers Only Part of Them

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – The United States welcomed the decision of the International Court of Justice over the freezing of certain Iranian assets, but expressed regret that the final judgment covered only a part of them, State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Thursday.

“Today the International Court of Justice issued a judgment in the Certain Iranian Assets case rejecting the vast majority of Iran’s case under the now-terminated Treaty of Amity. This is a major victory for the United States and victims of Iran’s state-sponsored terrorism,” Patel said in a statement.

The ICJ ruled that the freezing of a part of Iran's assets by the United States is illegal and ordered the US to pay compensation, Vice President of the court Kirill Gevorgian said earlier on Thursday.

The United States commended the ICJ ruling related to Iranian Bank Markazi, but expressed frustration over the conclusion that the turnover of assets of other Iranian agencies and instrumentalities to US victims of Iran’s activities was inconsistent with the Treaty of Amity, Patel said.

“U.S. courts directed the turnover of assets to victims pursuant to U.S. laws that have helped those and other victims of state-sponsored terrorism receive compensation for the grave losses that they and their families have suffered,” he added.

Patel emphasized that the ICJ decision will have no impact on the US laws that allow American victims of terrorism to seek compensation from Iran. Washington will continue to support those people and seek to hold Iran and other state sponsors of terrorism accountable, he added.

Gevorgian said earlier in the day that the US violated its obligations under the Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations and Consular Rights of 1955 with Iran, and thus has to pay compensation to Tehran for the consequences and violations of international obligations.

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Six US Servicemembers Diagnosed With Brain Injuries After Syria Base Attacks - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Six US servicemembers have been diagnosed with traumatic brain injuries after strikes on American bases in Syria, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"There were an additional six US servicemembers that have subsequently been diagnosed with traumatic brain injury as a result of the Iranian-backed attacks," Ryder said during a press briefing.

Four servicemembers were injured as a result of an attack on a coalition base near Hasakah in northeastern Syria and two others were injured in an attack on Green Village, also in

northeastern Syria, Ryder said.

The brain injuries were identified as part of standard post-attack screenings, which remain ongoing, Ryder said.

On March 23, a drone presumably of Iranian origin attacked a US base in Syria's Hasakah province, killing a contractor.

On the same day, the US launched retaliatory strikes on facilities controlled by Iranian-backed militia groups in Syria. US forces were again targeted for the second day in a row as rockets hit the Green Village base, which houses American troops.

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NATO Ministerial to Focus on Ukraine, Discuss China's 'Malign Behavior' - US Official

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - NATO foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels next week will focus heavily on Ukraine and also discuss China's "malign behavior," a US official said on Thursday.

"This NATO ministerial will have a heavy focus on Ukraine. But ministers will also discuss global threats and challenges, including working with Indo-Pacific partners on the PRC's malign behavior, securing global supply chains, coordinating to protect democracies against emerging disruptive technology and expanding cooperation with emerging partners in the Global South," the official told a briefing.

The ministerial will echo the alliance's "continuing unity" and highlight its "ability to adapt and endure while also deterring the ongoing threats that seek to disrupt peace, security, and stability in the whole Euro-Atlantic area," the official added.

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NATO Doesn't Plan to Discuss Next Week Russia's Move to Put Nukes in Belarus - US Official

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - NATO allies do not plan to discuss during ministerial in Brussels next week Russia's plans to move tactical nuclear weapons into Belarus, US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Dereck Hogan said on Thursday. "There will be no talks dedicated to Belarus during the NATO ministerial," Hogan said when asked about Russia's plans to move tactical nuclear weapons into Belarus.

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NATO Allies Next Week will Discuss Ukraine's Needs for Counteroffensive - US Official

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his NATO counterparts will discuss during a ministerial in Brussels next week Ukraine's needs to launch a counteroffensive against Russian forces this spring, US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Dereck Hogan said on Thursday.

"We need to make sure that Ukraine has what it needs to be able to mount a successful counteroffensive and then of course be able to hold what [territory] they do [take], so this is sure to be part of our discussion," Hogan said during a conference call.

Ukraine has been reportedly preparing to launch a counteroffensive against Russia in the spring of this year, with a number of Western officials expressing their willingness to help Kiev. Last week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Ukraine is currently unable to launch a counteroffensive due to a shortage of weaponry.

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Washington Seeks Cold War-Style Communication Mechanisms With China-Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration expects to see increasing challenges in the Indo-Pacific region and seeks Cold War-style communication mechanisms with China to prevent competition between the countries from escalating into a direct conflict, National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell said on Thursday.

"I think we believe that given the fact that our forces [US and Chinese] operate in proximity, we are going to have increasing challenges. I think we seek those kinds of communication mechanisms. I think that's a responsible step. We built those during the Cold War. We think that they're appropriate now, and we believe that the strategic rationale is clear for taking those steps more directly," Campbell said during a discussion hosted by the Center for a New American Security in Washington, D.C.

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Coming Months to See If Diplomacy Between US, China Can Be Reestablished - White House

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – The United States and China will see in the coming months whether constructive bilateral diplomacy will be reestablished between the countries following the air balloon incident, National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell said on Thursday.

"I think in Bali, [US] President [Joe] Biden and President Xi [Jinping] made clear that they were going to take careful steps to build a more predictable, stable relationship I think some of those steps were interrupted by the unanticipated giant spy balloon that went across the United

States. And I think you will see in the coming months whether it's going to be possible to reestablish effective predictable constructive diplomacy between the United States and China," Campbell said during a discussion at the Center for a New American Security in Washington DC.

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US Military Base in Maryland on Lockdown Amid Reports of Armed Individual - Statement

March 30 (Sputnik) - US military facility Joint Base Andrews in Maryland has been placed on lockdown amid reports of an armed individual near its housing area, the base said on Thursday. "An armed individual has been reported near base housing. Stay away from base housing," Joint Base Andrews said in a statement. "Individual is a white male, wearing a purple sweatshirt, black shorts, carrying a ar-15 style rifle [sic] with no orange tip."

The base has been placed on lockdown due to the armed individual, the statement added. Security forces are in the process of looking for the suspect, the statement also said.

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White House Says Russia's Espionage Charge Against Gershkovich 'Not Accurate'

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing on Thursday that a Russian court's espionage accusation against Wall Street Journal Evan Gershkovich is not accurate.

"The charge of espionage is ridiculous. That is not accurate," Jean-Pierre said when asked if Gershkovich ever worked for or does work for the US government.

Jean-Pierre declined to get into any further specifics when asked if Gershkovich had any possible links to the US government.

Russia's Foreign Ministry said consular access has been granted to Gershkovich.

Earlier in the day, the Lefortovo District Court of Moscow told Sputnik that it has decided to arrest Gershkovich for two months over espionage suspicions.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) said that Gershkovich was detained in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg on suspicion of espionage for the United States. According to the FSB, Gershkovich collected classified information about the activities of one of Russia's military-industrial complex firms.

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Biden Asks for Restart of Bank Stress Tests That Trump Rescinded

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden called on Thursday for a resumption of annual stress tests for US banks capitalized at between \$100 billion and \$250 billion as he pinned a spate of recent financial institution failures on the decision of his predecessor Donald Trump to end such tests.

“Liquidity rules originally created under the Dodd-Frank Act required banks with between \$100 and \$250 billion in assets to hold sufficient high-quality liquid assets to cover expected net outflows during a stress period,” the White House said in a statement, referring to a regulation created in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. “The Trump Administration eliminated these rules for banks below \$250 billion in assets.”

A crisis in US banking erupted earlier this month after inadequacy in risk mismanagement and other “safe” practices at California-based Silicon Valley Bank led to billions of dollars in customer deposit withdrawals. Almost simultaneously, two other banks — Signature and First Republic — faced similar deposit runs, suggesting a contagion.

The White House said an analysis found Silicon Valley Bank well below the liquidity threshold that would have applied had the Trump administration not exempted it from stress test rules.

“Unfortunately, Trump Administration regulators weakened many important common-sense requirements and supervision for large regional banks like Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank, whose recent failure led to contagion,” the statement said.

The spotlight fell even harsher on US banks in recent weeks as troubles in European banking blew up at around the same time, resulting in the collapse of famed Swiss investment bank Credit Suisse, which had to be bought over by compatriot UBS. German banking giant Deutsche Bank’s brand was also scarred by balance sheet worries.

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US, Allies Invoke OSCE Mechanism to Examine Russia's Transfers of Ukrainian Children

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – The United States and its partners invoked the OSCE Moscow Mechanism to examine reports of what they claim is the “forced transfer” of Ukrainian children during Russia’s special military operation, State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Thursday.

“The United States and 44 other countries, with the support of Ukraine, invoked the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) Moscow Mechanism requesting that the OSCE’s Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) establish an expert mission to examine allegations of the forced transfer of children in those parts of Ukraine’s territory temporarily controlled or occupied by Russia, as well as allegations that Ukraine’s children have been deported to the Russian Federation,” Patel said in a statement.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said earlier on Thursday that Moscow plans to hold an informal Arria-formula meeting on the issue of the evacuation of children from the zone of the special military operation in Ukraine during its UN Security Council

presidency in April.

The expert group set up under the OSCE mechanism will look into whether transfers of children violate international law, Patel stated.

"This mission will also be tasked with collecting, consolidating, and analyzing any evidence that could be shared with relevant accountability mechanisms as well as national, regional, or international courts or tribunals that may have jurisdiction," he added.

Moscow has repeatedly denied allegations of forceful deportations of Ukrainian children.

Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said earlier in March that Moscow intends to return Ukrainian children who had been evacuated to Russia due to military activities back to Ukraine when conditions on the ground are safe.

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US Confirms Kidnapping of 2 Citizens in Haiti, Says in Contact with Haitian Authorities

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United States has confirmed that two American citizens have been kidnapped in Haiti and is in contact with Haitian authorities, State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Thursday.

"I can confirm the kidnapping of two US citizens in Haiti, regular contact with Haitian authorities, and [we] will continue to work with them and our US government interagency partners but I don't have any other specific updates to offer at this time," said Patel during a press briefing.

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US Contemplates Asking Black Americans on Census About Slave Ancestry – Reports

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration is weighing whether to add categories to the US Census that would help better distinguish between African Americans who are descendants of enslaved Africans and black immigrants who came to the country in recent years, The Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday.

The Biden administration is studying whether to redefine how race and ethnicity are measured on government forms, with potential far-reaching implications for how other institutions collect demographic data, the newspaper said.

The administration has so far only solicited comments from the public about identifying Black Americans' ancestry. The administration has also asked whether the term "American Descendants of Slavery" or "American Freedmen" would be the best terms to describe the group. The term "Foundational Black Americans" is another option under discussion, according to the report.

The change would help quantify those eligible for slavery reparations if the federal or state government ever agrees to pay, the Journal said.

The Biden administration may also combine current race and ethnicity questions so that "Hispanic or Latino" would no longer be a separate question, but would be one of several choices people would have on the race question, the report noted.

The administration has also reportedly proposed creating a new race question category for Americans of Middle Eastern or North African heritage.

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Austin Briefed on Canceled SpaceX US Military Satellite Launch - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has been briefed on the last-second cancellation of a SpaceX launch intended to carry 10 military satellites into low Earth orbit, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"The Secretary, as I'm sure you can imagine, is aware of a lot of things, and certainly has been briefed on that," Ryder said during a press briefing, when asked about the canceled launch.

Earlier on Thursday, SpaceX canceled the launch just three seconds before liftoff due to an "auto abort," SpaceX said in a statement.

The SpaceX Falcon 9 booster is set to carry a payload of 10 military early-warning and communications satellites. The vehicle and payload are in good condition, and teams are resetting for another launch attempt on Friday, the statement said.

It is not uncommon for space launches to go through checklists to detect anomalies to ensure the safety and security of payloads, Ryder also said.

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US Fed Says Fined Wells Fargo \$67.8Mln for Poor Oversight of Sanctions Compliance

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – The US Federal Reserve announced on Thursday that its board fined Wells Fargo bank \$67.8 million for inadequate oversight of sanctions compliance risks that resulted in more than \$530 million worth of prohibited transactions between 2010 and 2015.

"The Federal Reserve Board on Thursday announced that it has fined Wells Fargo & Co., of San Francisco, California, \$67.8 million for the firm's unsafe or unsound practices relating to historical inadequate oversight of sanctions compliance risks at its subsidiary bank, Wells Fargo Bank, N.A. Wells Fargo & Co.'s deficient oversight enabled the bank to violate U.S. sanctions regulations by providing a trade finance platform to a foreign bank that used the platform to process approximately \$532 million in prohibited transactions between 2010 and 2015," the Federal Reserve said in a press release.

Separately, the US Department of the Treasury said on Thursday that Wells Fargo agreed to pay \$30 million to settle its potential civil liability for violations of sanctions against Iran, Syria,

and Sudan.

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US Assesses 8 Iran-Backed Militants Killed in Syria Strikes - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United States assesses that eight Iran-backed militants in Syria were killed during strikes on Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) targets, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"We now assess that eight militants were killed in our strikes against two IRGC Quds Force facilities near Deir ez-Zor," Ryder said during a press briefing.

The militants are believed to have been individuals associated with the IRGC, but not Iranian themselves, Ryder added.

The strikes came following an unmanned aerial vehicle attack on a US coalition base in Syria earlier this month, which resulted in the death of one contractor. The strikes show that US forces will not be attacked with impunity, Ryder said.

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Pentagon Says 65 Ukrainian Soldiers Completed Patriot Training in US This Week

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – Sixty-five Ukrainian soldiers completed their training on Patriot air defense systems this week and returned to Europe, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"Just this week, 65 Ukrainian air defenders completed Patriot training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and have now arrived back in Europe," Ryder said during a press briefing.

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White House Says Russia Seeking to Send Delegation to DPRK for Arms Deal

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – The White House believes that Russia is seeking to send a government delegation to North Korea to offer Pyongyang food deliveries in exchange for munitions amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We also understand that Russia is seeking to send a delegation in North Korea, and that Russia is offering North Korea food in exchange for munitions," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby added that the White House has "taken note" of North Korea's recent statement that Pyongyang will not provide or sell arms to Russia, but will continue to monitor this closely.

Earlier on Thursday, the United States imposed sanctions on Slovakian national Ashot Mkrtchyan for alleged attempts to facilitate an arms deal between Russia and North Korea in violation of US restrictions.

US authorities accused Mkrtchyan of having attempted, directly or indirectly, to import, export, or reexport to, into, or from the DPRK arms or related materiel.

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White House Says US Not Notified Ahead of Time About Gershkovich's Arrest in Russia

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday that the United States was not notified ahead of time about the arrest of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich in Russia.

"I wouldn't say that we had some sort of a heads up or something, or indications that there was going to be some new move against American journalists in general," Kirby said during a conference call.

The White House was surprised to learn about Gershkovich's detention, but it is unclear now if his arrest is in retaliation to a separate matter.

Russia's Foreign Ministry said consular access has been granted to Gershkovich.

Earlier in the day, the Lefortovo District Court of Moscow told Sputnik that it has decided to arrest Gershkovich for two months over espionage suspicions.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) said that Gershkovich was detained in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg on suspicion of espionage for the United States. According to the FSB, Gershkovich collected classified information about the activities of one of Russia's military-industrial complex firms.

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Whelan's Family Says US Fails to Resolve Espionage Cases of Americans in Russia

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – The United States has not succeeded in resolving cases of Americans detained in Russia on espionage charges, the family of Paul Whelan said on Thursday after Russia arrested Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich.

"Unfortunately, the White House does not seem to have found a way to resolve cases like Paul's, where an American is falsely charged with espionage by the Kremlin," the Whelans said in a statement.

Earlier in the day, the FSB said that Gershkovich was detained in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg on suspicion of espionage for the United States. The Lefortovo District Court of

Moscow later formally arrested the journalist for two months. The Wall Street Journal denies the allegations of espionage.

Whelan's family said they were sorry to hear about Gershkovich's detention.

"While Paul did not have the benefit of the State Department's travel advisory warning that Russia takes American hostages, it sounds as though the frame up of Mr. Gershkovich was the same as it was in Paul's case," they stated.

The family called on US authorities to increase efforts to release Paul Whelan and make "more difficult" decisions if necessary.

"If Paul's case remains a priority, it begs the question whether enough resources have been brought to bear - leveraging the Executive Order, among other things - to encourage the Kremlin to redress the injustice they have inflicted on Paul. And if they haven't, then perhaps the well-meant words about being a priority are just that: words," the statement said.

At the same time, the Whelans thanked the State Department for its efforts to find a way to release Paul. "It is clear that some people have the will if not the means to bring Paul home," they said.

Paul Whelan — a citizen of the US, Canada, the UK and Ireland — was arrested in Russia in December 2018 and sentenced to 16 years in prison on charges of espionage. Whelan has maintained that he is innocent and insisted that he arrived in Russia for a friend's wedding.

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UN Chief Concerned Over Growing Trend of Harassed, Detained Journalists - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is worried about the increased trend in which journalists are being detained or harassed, Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"The Secretary-General has expressed his concern over and over again on the growing trend where we are seeing journalists being harassed or detained or worse, just for doing their job," Dujarric told a briefing.

The Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told Sputnik that Consular access has been granted to the arrested Wall Street Journal Moscow bureau correspondent Evan Gershkovich.

Earlier in the day, the Lefortovo District Court of Moscow told Sputnik that it has decided to arrest Gershkovich for two months over espionage suspicions. The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) said that Gershkovich was detained in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg on suspicion of espionage for the United States. According to the FSB, Gershkovich collected classified information about the activities of one of Russia's military-industrial complex firms.

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UN Finds ChatGPT 'Worrying', Cautions Companies On Released Information - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres finds ChatGPT worrying and urges companies to behave responsibly, spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"It is very worrying. This artificial intelligence technology can have huge amounts of benefits: in education, in science but companies need to be responsible on how the information will be released," Dujarric told a briefing.

Information can be misused, he added.

On March 25, personal user data of ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot, was compromised because of a bug, which was later discovered by chatbot developer OpenAI. In total, around 1.2 percent of ChatGPT subscribers were affected by the data leak, the company said, adding that the figure is "extremely low."

ChatGPT gained popularity after its launch in November 2022, acquiring its first million users in less than a week. In late January, Microsoft said it would invest "billions of dollars" in OpenAI. Earlier in March, OpenAI introduced a new multimodal AI model, GPT-4, capable of recognizing both text and images, as well as solving complex problems with greater accuracy.

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UN Chief Concerned Over Myanmar Authorities Dissolving Parties in Opposition-Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 30 (Sputnik)- The United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres is worried about the military regime in Myanmar dissolving opposition parties, the United Nations Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"The Secretary-General is deeply concerned by reports that the Union Election Commission, appointed by the military in Myanmar, has dissolved 40 opposition parties, including the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi," the statement said. "Any attempts to undermine democratic institutions and processes will only deepen the crisis and delay the return to a fully democratic and inclusive Myanmar."

The Secretary-General renewed his call on the neighboring countries and other member states to talk to the military and bring them back to political inclusivity.

The military came to power in Myanmar in February 2021. The opposition resorted to an armed struggle after a brutal crackdown on peaceful demonstrations by the military regime and the police. Ever since, explosions of improvised devices and landmines planted on roads have become a regular occurrence in some of the regions of the country.

On Monday, the head of Myanmar's military government said that restoring peace and stability was the main goal of the armed forces and the main prerequisite for transferring power to a civilian government.

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with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Defense Chief Says Saddened by Loss of 9 Servicemembers in Kentucky Helicopter Crash

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Thursday that he is saddened by the loss of nine military servicemembers who died in a helicopter crash during a routine training mission in Kentucky.

“Last night, we lost nine servicemembers in an accident during a routine training mission in Kentucky,” Austin said in a statement. “I’m saddened by this tragic loss, and I am working with Army leadership to make sure our troops and their families receive the care that they need in the wake of this accident.”

At approximately 10 p.m. local time on Wednesday, two 101st Airborne Division helicopters crashed in Trigg County, Kentucky, US Army Fort Campbell said on Thursday.

The crewmembers were flying two HH60 Blackhawk helicopters when the incident occurred, the fort said in a statement.

The incident is currently under investigation, the statement added.

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US House Speaker McCarthy Says Prepared to Meet With Biden on Debt Ceiling ‘Any Time’

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said on Thursday that he is prepared to meet with President Joe Biden at any time to negotiate a debt ceiling raise, but that Biden does not appear interested in meeting.

“[Biden] apparently doesn’t want to meet, and I don’t understand why,” McCarthy said during a press conference. “I’m ready at any time, at any moment. I’ll come tonight.”

Last month, Biden and McCarthy met to discuss raising the debt ceiling and other economic policy matters, following which both leaders said they hope for further talks.

McCarthy reiterated Republican calls to address rising government spending before authorizing a higher borrowing limit.

Last week, McCarthy said Biden is jeopardizing US financial markets by delaying negotiations on a debt ceiling raise. In response, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Congress has a constitutional obligation to address the debt limit and urged Republicans to “stop playing games” with the economy.

Biden welcomes a separate conversation with McCarthy on the US’ fiscal future, Jean-Pierre added.

Failing to raise the debt ceiling could be catastrophic, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said earlier this month. The Treasury has already taken extraordinary measures ahead of a potential default on US financial obligations later this year.

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with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Kirby Says Biden Briefed on Reports About Gerschkovich, His Detention in Russia

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US President Biden has been briefed about reports regarding the detention of Wall Street Journal journalist Evan Gerschkovich in Russia, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"The President was briefed this morning on the reports about Evan Gerschkovich and his detention in Russia," Kirby said during a conference call.

The US Embassy in Moscow has been in contact with the Russian Foreign Ministry to gain consular access to Gerschkovich, Kirby said. He added that it is unclear if Gerschkovich's arrest is in retaliation to a separate matter.

The White House advised Americans not to travel to Russia and suggested that any US citizens in the country should leave immediately, Kirby said.

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US Sanctions Slovakian National For Attempt to Facilitate Arms Deals Between Russia, DPRK

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – The United States imposed sanctions on Slovakian national Ashot Mkrtychev for attempts to facilitate an arms deal between Russia and North Korea in violation of US restrictions, the US Department of Treasury said on Thursday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned one individual for attempting to facilitate arms deals between Russia and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)," the statement said.

US authorities accused Mkrtychev for having attempted, directly or indirectly, import, export, or reexport to, into, or from the DPRK any arms or related materiel, it added.

As the Treasury noted, in late 2022 and early 2023, Mkrtychev communicated with North Korean officials to obtain over two dozen kinds of weapons and munitions for Russia in exchange for materials ranging from commercial aircraft, raw materials, and commodities.

"Mkrtychev's negotiations with DPRK and Russian officials detailed mutually beneficial cooperation between North Korea and Russia to include financial payments and barter arrangements. He confirmed Russia's readiness to receive military equipment from the DPRK with senior Russian officials," the statement said.

The Treasury stated that Russia completed its preparations for the deal and was ready to receive materials from and transfer materials to the DPRK. Mkrtychev also worked with a Russian individual to locate commercial aircraft suitable for delivery to the DPRK, the statement said without sharing additional names.

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with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Yellen Suggests Tightening Financial Regulations After Bank Failures

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen suggested Thursday that reforms to tighten financial regulations are in order, following the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank.

“We have made much progress in the past 15 years. But recent events show that, clearly, our work is not done,” Yellen said in prepared remarks released prior to her speech at a National Association for Business Economics conference. “These events remind us of the urgent need to complete unfinished business: to finalize post-crisis reforms, consider whether deregulation may have gone too far, and repair the cracks in the regulatory perimeter that the recent shocks have revealed. We must also address new areas of risk.”

Yellen noted that “regulatory requirements [had] been loosened in recent years” and an evaluation of the impact was necessary

She added that vulnerabilities in the nonbank sector also needed to be addressed, including in shadow banking, money markets, open-end funds, hedge funds, and digital assets. She noted that regulations did not account for “spillovers” to the rest of the financial system during periods of extreme stress.

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US In Direct Contact With Russia on Detention of US Journalist - White House

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The US State Department has been in direct contact with the Russian government regarding the detention of American journalist Evan Gershkovich and is working to secure consular access, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

"Last night, White House and State Department Officials spoke with Mr. Gershkovich's employer, the Wall Street Journal. The Administration has also been in contact with his family. Furthermore, the State Department has been in direct touch with the Russian government on this matter, including actively working to secure consular access to Mr. Gershkovich," Jean-Pierre said in a press release.

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US Concerned by Detention of Wall Street Journal Reporter in Russia - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned by the detention of a Wall Street Journal reporter and US citizen in Russia on suspicion of espionage and is in contact with

the media outlet, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"We are deeply concerned over Russia's widely-reported detention of a US citizen journalist. We are in contact with the Wall Street Journal on this situation," Blinken said in a statement.

Earlier in the day, the Lefortovo District Court of Moscow told Sputnik that it decided to arrest Wall Street Journal Moscow bureau correspondent Evan Gershkovich on suspicion of espionage. The Wall Street Journal denies the allegations.

The Biden administration continues to urge US citizens in Russia to depart immediately, Blinken added.

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Taiwan's President to Engage With Lawmakers During 'Transit' Through US - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen will have an opportunity to engage with various members of US Congress during her "transit" through the United States, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink.

"We anticipate that President Tsai will have an opportunity to meet with members of the Taiwan diaspora. We expect that she'll have an occasion to exchange views and deliver remarks with various groups, and we also anticipate, as has always been the case, that President Tsai will have an opportunity to engage with various members of Congress," Kritenbrink said during a press briefing.

Earlier on Friday, Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen arrived in New York for the first time in more than three years on a stopover ahead of visits to Central American self-governed islands of Guatemala and Belize.

Later the same day, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning said that China firmly opposed any official interactions between the US and Taiwan as well as any visits by Tsai to the US under whatever pretext, calling Tsai's plans to stop in the US just for a transit "a lie."

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Early Warning Military Satellite Launch Aborts 3 Seconds Before Liftoff - SpaceX

(Updates lead, adds SpaceX quote in para 3)

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - An automatic abort shut down the planned launch of a SpaceX Falcon 9 booster carrying a payload of 10 military early warning and communications satellites into low earth orbit (LEO) from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California only three seconds before liftoff on Thursday.

The event was broadcast live.

"Falcon 9 had an auto abort just prior to T-O," SpaceX said in an official statement. "Vehicle and payload are in good health; teams are resetting for a launch attempt tomorrow, March 31 at 7:29 a.m. PT [14:29 GMT]."

The Falcon 9 booster is to carry the Space Development Agency's (SDA) Tranche 0 mission to LEO from Space Launch Complex 4E at Vandenberg to serve as part of SDA's Proliferated Warfighter Space Architecture, a new layered network of 28 planned satellites that will provide global military communication and missile warning and tracking capabilities, SpaceX said.

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US House Passes Republican Bill to Address Rising Energy Costs, Boost Domestic Production

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday passed the Lower Energy Costs Act, a Republican bill aimed at addressing rising energy costs in the United States through boosting domestic production and other measures.

House lawmakers passed the bill in a vote of 225-204, mostly along party lines. The bill now heads to the Democrat-led Senate for consideration.

The legislation would increase US energy production, boost the production and processing of critical minerals and reform the permitting process.

"There's no reason we should be getting energy from foreign countries when we can make it here cleaner, more efficient, and at a dramatically lower cost than anywhere else in the world. This bill achieves that," House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement.

The White House said US President Joe Biden would veto the bill in its current form, claiming it is a "thinly veiled" license to pollute the environment. The bill would raise costs for families by rolling back household energy rebates and investments in clean energy, contrary to its intended impact, the White House said.

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US Must Stay Ahead of China, Russia in AI, Machine Learning – Cyber Command

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – The United States should maintain an edge over Russia and China in artificial intelligence, machine learning and other major cyber capabilities, US Cyber Command chief Gen. Paul Nakasone said on Thursday.

"When I think about China and Russia, our ability to stay ahead of them in areas like artificial intelligence, machine learning and a series of partnerships and being able to leverage the private sector – this is what we must continue to do," Nakasone said at a US House Armed Services Committee hearing, when asked about Washington's preparedness for competition in cyber space in the future.

This is an area where the United States always has to improve its capabilities, he added.

"We have to make sure we are watching this very carefully," Nakasone said.

Nakasone warned of the two nations' alleged efforts to make cyber attacks more sophisticated and intensive.

"One of the things that we do see is a rise in both scope and sophistication of our adversaries, both in terms of their ability to conduct cyber intrusions and attacks and their ability to defend their data," he said.

Nakasone refrained from specifying how much Russia, China, Iran and North Korea spent on cyber security last year.

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US Condemns Burma's Election Commission for Dissolving 40 Political Parties – Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that Washington condemns the decision of Burma's Union Election Commission to abolish 40 political parties.

"We strongly condemn the Burma military regime-controlled Union Election Commission's decision to abolish 40 political parties, including the National League for Democracy (NLD)," Blinken said in a statement.

According to those developments, Blinken added that future elections would be "deeply flawed," stressing that they would not represent the will of the Burmese people.

Moreover, the decision to dissolve all those parties, including the NLD which was elected during the 2020 elections, shows that the current military government continues to actively undermine popular will to participate in a multi-party democracy, Blinken continued.

Accordingly, he added that Burma's crackdown on political dissent and efforts to "eradicate" civic spaces are aimed at further strengthening their own power and political interests.

Secretary Blinken said the U.S. calls on the Burmese military government to revoke the decision, and put an end to the violence inflicted on the people of Burma, noting the government must free all prisoners "unjustly" detained and respect its commitments under international law.

"We remain committed to supporting genuine multiparty democracy," Blinken said, noting the importance of peace and respect for human rights.

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Eleven Countries Commit to Controls on Commercial Spyware – White House

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – The US and ten other countries have issued a joint statement committing to implementing domestic and international controls on commercial spyware.

"We, the governments of Australia, Canada, Costa Rica, Denmark, France, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States, recognize the threat posed by the misuse of commercial spyware and the need for strict domestic and international controls on the proliferation and use of such technology," the release read.

The countries committed, subject to national legal frameworks, to implementing the Guiding Principles on Government Use of Surveillance Technologies and the Code of Conduct developed within the Export Controls and Human Rights Initiative.

They noted that spyware was often used to intimidate opponents, curb dissent, limit freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, or association, enable human rights violations, and suppress civil liberties. They warned that the abuse of commercial spyware posed a growing, significant risk to national security, including to government information systems.

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US House Committee Passes Resolution to Audit Money Sent to Ukraine - Rep. Greene

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – US Congresswoman for Georgia Marjorie Taylor Greene announced on Thursday that her resolution to audit "every single" taxpayer dollar for Ukraine was passed by the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

"I'm happy to announce that my resolution to audit every single American taxpayer dollar sent to Ukraine has PASSED the House Foreign Affairs Committee. The American People deserve to know where all of their money is being sent," Greene wrote on social media.

The committee passed the motion in a 90-20 vote.

Earlier in March, Greene had said she remained committed to not supporting initiatives to send more money to Ukraine, rather encouraging Kiev to find a diplomatic resolution to the conflict.

In February, the congresswoman had introduced a Resolution of Inquiry into Taxpayer Dollars Spent in Ukraine. Greene's proposal was aimed at achieving better transparency on where and how the funds were spent.

The resolution, among other things, would request that US President Joe Biden, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken provide the House Committee with all information on the use of taxpayer money sent to Ukraine.

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Heritage Foundation Says Filing Complaint Against AOC for Alleged Lies During Hearing

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The Heritage Foundation filed an ethics complaint against US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez for allegedly lying about the Libs of TikTok Twitter account during a House hearing, the Washington-based think tank said on Thursday.

"We don't appreciate members of Congress lying, especially about American citizens. That's why Heritage's Oversight Project filed a complaint to the Office of Congressional Ethics to investigate Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez for lying about Libs of TikTok creator Chaya Raichik," the Heritage Foundation said in a statement via Twitter.

Heritage Foundation and Raichik accuse Ocasio-Cortez of lying about the Libs of TikTok

account by claiming during a congressional hearing that it posted “false information” about Boston Children’s Hospital providing gender-affirming hysterectomies to minors. Ocasio-Cortez alleged the claim was a lie circulated by “far-right influences.”

Last year, Boston Children’s Hospital and other medical centers claimed to have received an influx of harassment and threats after the allegations they perform gender-affirming surgeries on minors spread online.

The complaint against the congresswoman notes that the hospital claims to perform such gender-affirming surgeries on eligible adolescents.

Heritage Foundation and Raichik shared videos on Thursday of them serving the ethics complaint to Ocasio-Cortez’s office.

“You’re actually super transphobic and I never want to share a space with you,” Ocasio-Cortez said, before walking away from Raichik.

Raichik has been praised by figures including former US President Donald Trump for her Libs of TikTok account, which shares videos of left-wing political content, with a focus on transgender issues and the so-called “grooming” of minors.

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Early Warning Military Satellite Launch Aborts 3 Seconds Before Liftoff - SpaceX

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - SpaceX engineers aborted the planned launch of 10 military early warning and communications satellites into low earth orbit (LEO) from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California only three seconds before liftoff on Thursday.

The event was broadcast live.

The Falcon 9 booster was to carry the Space Development Agency's (SDA) Tranche 0 mission to LEO from Space Launch Complex 4E (SLC-4E) at Vandenberg to serve a part of SDA's Proliferated Warfighter Space Architecture, a new layered network of 28 planned satellites that will provide global military communication and missile warning and tracking capabilities, SpaceX said. No reason for the abort was given.

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US Denies Privileges to Individual, Companies in Iran Export Case – Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) denied on Wednesday the export privileges of Kenneth Peter Scott and two companies he owns for 20 years for allegedly attempting to export communications equipment to Iran without authorization, according to a release.

“BIS will not tolerate exporters using third countries as transshipment points to prohibited destinations such as Iran and providing false statements to law enforcement agents to cover up

such illicit activities,” said Assistant Secretary Matthew Axelrod in the release.

The denial resolves five alleged violations of export regulations by Scott Communications, Inc. and Mission Communications, LLC, related to efforts to export two radios to Jordan with the knowledge that they were destined for Iran without the required license. The companies also failed to maintain appropriate records and file Electronic Export Information (EEI). Scott himself also made false or misleading statements to FBI and BIS agents.

The companies admitted to the alleged conduct as part of the settlement.

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Pentagon Says US Conducted Four Successful Cyber Security Operations in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – US military has conducted four cybersecurity Hunt Forward operations in Ukraine in recent years, including one mission just before the beginning of the conflict in 2022, US Cyber Command (CYBERCOM) chief Gen. Paul Nakasone said on Thursday.

“These four operations, include the operation that took place 70 days prior to the invasion, I think, were extremely successful,” Nakasone said during the hearing at the US House Armed Services Committee.

During these missions the US military and their Ukrainian partners were able to identify

malware and other threats, Nakasone noted. "We were able to reassure our partner that we are going to provide support. And I think that among all the different things that occurred, it is incredibly important," he added.

The US General said that the Pentagon began its Hunt Forward operations as an effort to secure elections in the country from foreign interference in 2018. "Since that time, we have conducted 47 missions in 22 countries on 70 different networks," he said.

CYBERCOM described Hunt Forward Operations as defensive cyber missions conducted at the request of other countries. Special US military teams help their local partners to observe and detect malicious cyber activity on host nation networks, CYBERCOM said.

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US Economy Grew 2.1% Last Year, Down From 5.9% in 2021 - Final GDP Reading

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The US economy grew 2.1% last year, slowing from a 5.9% expansion in 2021, as exports and consumer spending declined, the Commerce Department said Thursday in its final reading for gross domestic product in 2022.

GDP in the fourth quarter of last year grew by 2.6%, a shade lower than the earlier estimate of 2.7%. The Commerce Department issues three GDP readings for each quarter.

Growth in the preceding third quarter of 2022 was 3.2%, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, a unit with the Commerce Department, said in a news release.

The lower readings for both year-on-year and quarter-on-quarter GDP were due to shrinking shipment of US-made goods and weaker spending by Americans, who command about 70% of economic activity.

"The revision primarily reflected downward revisions to exports and consumer spending," the release said. "Imports, which are a subtraction in the calculation of GDP, were revised down."

For 2023, the Federal Reserve has projected GDP growth at an even slower 0.4% as the economy adjusts to the possibility of a recession.

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Former US Attorney for Missouri Says Biden, Social Media Companies Engaged in Censorship

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – Former U.S. Attorney General and current Senator for Missouri Eric Schmitt testified on Thursday that President Joe Biden's administration and social media companies have jointly engaged in the country's "largest speech censorship".

On Thursday, U.S. Senator Eric Schmitt, Attorney General for Louisiana Jeff Landry, the Special Assistant Attorney General for Louisiana John Sauer and Professor of Constitutional Law at Stanford Matthew Seligman, were called to testify before the Weaponization of the Federal Government Hearing,

The testimony happens as Missouri and Louisiana have sued the Biden Administration for its alleged involvement in freedom of speech censorship under the guise of fighting “disinformation”, jointly with social media companies such as Meta(organization banned in Russia), Twitter, and YouTube.

“The Biden Administration has coerced social media companies to censor disfavored speech. The Biden team has publicly threatened social media companies with removing legal protections, blamed social media companies for societal problems, and accused social media companies of killing people,” Schmitt said during the hearing.

During his testimony, Schmitt presented several instances of the Biden administration's alleged censorship efforts during the 2020 elections, notably when the president suggested Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg be subject to civil liability and even criminal prosecution for not engaging in censoring “disfavoured speech”.

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Yellen Suggests Tightening Financial Regulations After Bank Failures

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen will suggest on Thursday that reforms to tighten financial regulations are in order, following the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank, according to her prepared remarks.

"We have made much progress in the past 15 years. But recent events show that, clearly, our work is not done," Yellen said in prepared remarks released prior to her speech at a National Association for Business Economics conference. "These events remind us of the urgent need to complete unfinished business: to finalize post-crisis reforms, consider whether deregulation may have gone too far, and repair the cracks in the regulatory perimeter that the recent shocks have revealed. We must also address new areas of risk."

Yellen noted that "regulatory requirements [had] been loosened in recent years" and an evaluation of the impact was necessary

She added that vulnerabilities in the non-bank sector also needed to be addressed, including in shadow banking, money markets, open-end funds, hedge funds, and digital assets. She noted that regulations did not account for "spillovers" to the rest of the financial system during periods of extreme stress.

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US Army Secretary Says 'Heavy Day' for Forces After Black Hawk Helicopter Crash Kills 9

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said it was a "heavy day" for the armed forces after two helicopters collided during a training mission in Kentucky, killing nine US soldiers.

"Thank you for your comments and thoughts and prayers for the families of our soldiers who were killed in the crash. Our hearts go out to them. It's a heavy day for the Army," Wormuth said during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on Thursday.

All nine US service members on board two US Army helicopters were killed when they crashed during a routine training mission in Kentucky on Wednesday.

Gen. James C. McConville, chief of staff of the Army, during the Senate hearing expressed condolences to the families of the crews who have been informed of their loss.