

**2/23/24 Friday**

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Pouring Salt in the Wound: Barrel Graveyard Research Reveals a 'Bad Versus Worse' Result

It was previously believed that the barrels contained the dangerous pesticide known as DDT, but a new study shows the barrels could contain something that makes this predicament even more deadly.

A pollution site off the coast of Los Angeles is home to thousands of decaying barrels once thought to contain the pesticide Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT). However, according to a [study](#) that was published on Wednesday, the barrels are now believed to contain tritium and carbon-14.

"This is a classic situation of bad versus worse. It's bad we have potential low-level radioactive waste just sitting there on the seafloor. It's worse that we have DDT compounds spread across a wide area of the seafloor at concerning concentrations," said [David Valentine](#), the study's lead researcher.

"The question we grapple with now is how bad and how much worse."

According to the [EPA](#), tritium is a form of hydrogen that is radioactive, and is "produced naturally in the upper atmosphere when cosmic rays strike atmospheric gasses". But it can also be "produced by man during nuclear weapon explosions in reactors intended to produce tritium for nuclear weapons, and by reactors producing electricity".

Records reveal that it was standard practice for hospitals, labs and other industrial sites to discard barrels of toxic chemicals and radioactive waste [into the ocean](#) from the 1940s through the 1960s.

It is believed that the reported isotopes, including the tritium, would have decayed since it was dumped at this site. But researchers are still wary of what other toxic materials could have been dumped at the site.

And how many barrels are still leaking radioactive chemicals into the ocean still remains a mystery. A map from the International Atomic Energy Agency estimates that more than 56,000 barrels of radioactive waste may have been dumped into the Pacific Ocean, off the California coastline, between 1945 and 1970.

This follows a discovery of more than [25,000](#) "barrel-like" objects which were found using sonar in 2021, following an initial discovery of the barrel "graveyard" a year prior. Other toxicities could be even further reaching, as researchers are still unsure of how wide the dumping site actually is.

Researchers have been trying to track down the source of the DDT pollution which is still having adverse affects on ocean life some 3,000 feet beneath the surface across the seafloor. The pesticides, banned in 1972, have been linked to an aggressive cancer harming California sea [lions](#) and, being a "forever chemical", has managed to work its way up the marine food chain.

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### Over 100 New Deep Sea Species Possibly Discovered Off Coast of Chile

The new creatures include glass sponges, squat lobsters with barbed legs and beady eyes, as well as a new array of deep-sea corals, urchins, amphipods, sea stars and sea lilies.

Researchers leading a deep-sea expedition off the coast of [Chile](#) have managed to potentially uncover more than 100 previously unknown marine species as well as a handful of never-before-seen underwater mountains.

The Schmidt Ocean Institute, an oceanographic research nonprofit, accepted the [project](#) named "Seamounts of the Southeast Pacific," which focuses on seamounts (underwater mountains) in three areas: the Nazca and Salas y Gómez ridges, and the Juan Fernández and Nazca-Desventuradas marine parks.

The southeast Pacific is also a very geologically active region and is covered in hydrothermal vents that can help sustain a wide variety of life.

Researchers used the nonprofit's research vessel, [Falkor](#) (too), to conduct their research. The team also used an underwater robot capable of descending more than 14,000 feet, to bring data from ten seamounts back to the surface in order to advance Chile's marine protection efforts.

After mapping about 20,400 square miles (52,800 square kilometers) of ocean, the team found four previously unknown seamounts. One of which is 11,591 feet above the seafloor, making it more than four times taller than Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building.

"Every single seamount had a different type of ecosystem on it," said Hannah Nolan, an expedition and community outreach specialist for the Schmidt Ocean Institute.

The Nazca and Salas y Gómez ridges, which are made up of two chains of more than 200 seamounts that stretch a combined 1,800 miles, ended up being a treasure trove for sea sponges, said Javier Sellanes, a scientist at the Universidad Católica del Norte, who led the research. Sellanes said that only two species had previously been reported for the area, and that they can now add 40 different species to that list.

"We far exceeded our hopes on this expedition," said Sellanes. "You always expect to find new species in these remote and poorly explored areas, but the amount we found, especially for some groups like sponges, is mind-blowing."

The discovery is not only a huge win for the field of science, but for the world of conservation as well. The plethora of new species found within the Juan Fernández and Nazca-Desventuradas parks are legally protected from the threats of trawling—fishing by pulling and dragging a large net across the seafloor—as well as deep-sea mining. But the seamounts along the Nazca and Salas y Gómez ridges are currently [unprotected](#).

The researchers will have to bring their samples and findings to a lab to determine if their discoveries include new species. The second expedition aboard Falkor (too) will take place on February 24.

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Biden's Great-Great-Grandfather Reportedly Pardoned by Abraham Lincoln for Violent Crimes

In an opinion piece published on Saturday, Turley draws comparisons of criminal behavior between the current US president and that of his Civil War forefather.

According to a recent [report](#), US President Joe Biden's family history of crime can be traced back to the US Civil War. Court-martial records that were discovered at the National Archives in Washington reportedly show the violent crimes of Moses J. Robinette—the US president's great-great-grandfather. According to the documents, Robinette was charged with attempted murder after a fight with a fellow Union Army civilian employee—John J. Alexander—on the night of March 21, 1864.

The incident happened in the small corner of the Army of the Potomac's winter camp along the Rappahannock River near Beverly Ford, Virginia. In one of the mess tents at this camp, Alexander heard Robinette speaking ill of him to a female cook, and confronted him. A brawl broke out, and Robinette left Alexander bleeding from multiple cuts after he pulled a knife. Following the brawl, the charges said that Robinette had become intoxicated and incited “a dangerous quarrel”, while violating good order and military discipline. He was found guilty on all counts with the exception of “attempt to kill”, and was punished with two years' incarceration at hard labor. When he arrived at the Dry Tortugas islands near Key West, Florida where he would be incarcerated.

When he arrived, however, three Army officers who were personally acquainted with him had petitioned US President Abraham Lincoln to overturn his conviction. They wrote that his sentence was unduly harsh for “defending himself and cutting with a Penknife a Teamster much his superior in strength and Size, all under the impulse of the excitement of the moment.” They also asked that Lincoln think of Robinette's “motherless Daughters and sons at home!... [Praying for] your interposition on behalf of the unfortunate Father...and distressed family of loved Children, Union Daughters and Union Sons.” Lincoln then pardoned Robinette on September 1, 1864.

Robinette was a government contractor who was paid to give veterinary care for Union army horses. At the age of 42, Robinette was described as “full of fun, always lively and joking”, a description that Jonathan Turley, an American attorney and political commentator, has compared to the current sitting president in an opinion piece published on Saturday.

But the comparisons between the current US president and that of his great-great-grandfather appear to extend beyond their similar temperaments. In his [opinion piece](#), Turley notes the weight that this story gives to the quote, “No one f\*\*\*\* with a Biden,” that the president himself so bluntly [stated](#).

“Sixty years later, Moses's great-great-grandson was found by a special counsel to have willfully retained classified material, mishandled that material for decades, and to have probably shown the classified material to a ghostwriter who lacked clearance,” Turley writes of the current US president. “He was spared any criminal charge in part because he would make a sympathetic defendant due to his diminished mental faculties.

In addition, political allies of Biden are also quick to denounce those who wish to investigate the president as “traitors” or sympathizers of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

A Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) informant—[Alexander Smirnov](#)—was recently indicted over false claims he had made about the US president.

As a result, Representative Dan Goldman (D-NY) made the statement that anyone who looks further into the corruption scandal is a “knowing asset of Russian intelligence” and is “acting as an agent of Vladimir Putin”. And former Democratic Senator Clair McCaskill had made a similar viewpoint by demanding that the media stop further fact checks on Biden on “any subject”, Turley claims, adding that she has called those who criticized the US president and his family as “Putin lovers.”

“The charges against Alexander Smirnov have no bearing on dozens of allegedly corrupt payments and hundreds of emails that are being investigated by Congress,” writes Turley. “Try to ask the Bidens about the millions they have pocketed from foreign sources, and you are some kind of Russian dupe.”

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Lockstep US Support for Israel 'Eroding Confidence' of Americans in Own Government

Amidst a broader lack of trust in US institutions, the United States government has undermined its own credibility by repeatedly backing Israel’s dubious claims. Will it prove to be a fatal mistake?

In the latest development in the saga of Western countries’ support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the National Intelligence Council of the United States has ascribed “low confidence” to Israel’s claim that a small number of the organization’s staff members participated in [Hamis’ surprise October 7 attack on Israel](#). The finding was reported this week in US media.

Israel’s claim that some 0.4% of UNRWA’s more than 30,000 employees were involved in the armed operation dominated headlines just days after the UN-backed International Court of Justice (ICJ) instructed Israel to take measures to [prevent genocide](#) in the besieged Gaza Strip. The accusation against UNRWA led the United States and more than a dozen Western allies to [withdraw financial support for the agency](#), which is a lifeline for millions of Palestinian refugees. But it now appears that decision may have been premature, with US intelligence experts publicly casting doubt on Israel’s incendiary claim. Journalist Dan Lazare joined [Sputnik’s Political Misfits program](#) Friday to discuss the fallout from the development and what it means for Americans’ trust in their own government.

“The US will appease Israel because at this point that alliance is stronger than NATO, and I just don’t see the US breaking it,” said the author and political commentator, adding that “the Israeli assertions are difficult to back up.”

“I think that the US will go along [in undermining UNRWA],” Lazare said, despite the potentially embarrassing finding by US intelligence. “Ultimately the US is going to do whatever Israel wants

it to do, and this is a classic case of the tail wagging the dog. Israel is an essential US ally and it's so essential that essentially the US defers to Israeli decisions.”

Host Michelle Witte agreed, claiming the United States’ lockstep subservience to Israel – even in apparent defiance of its own intelligence community – powerfully discredits the US government in the eyes of its own people.

“It has to have the effect of eroding confidence among the American people in the American government, in the American government speaking truth to its population,” said Witte. “Because we can see Israel keeps making these accusations, we keep acting on these accusations, and then they keep turning out to not be true.”

The Israeli government has made a series of controversial claims defending its military operation in the Gaza Strip, which some international experts have claimed amounts to genocide. As the country’s military destroyed al-Shifa Hospital, the largest medical facility in Gaza, they justified the act with the claim the hospital had served as a “command and control center” for Hamas militants. [Investigations](#) by US media outlets found no evidence for the claim. Many of the more outlandish Israeli assertions surrounding Hamas’ October 7 attack have also been undermined or debunked. Claims that Hamas fighters engaged in mass killing and beheading of Israeli babies were found to be based on unreliable testimony. That didn’t stop President Biden himself from [falsely](#) insisting he saw photos of the alleged atrocity.

Observers have long pointed out that the United States faces a crisis of confidence in its institutions, with approval ratings for everything from courts to Congress at [record](#) lows. The phenomenon has generated widespread cynicism, which occasionally even results in political violence. Witte claimed the United States’ backing of Israel – despite the repeated debunking of its rhetoric – can’t help but further damage faith in the US government.

“More and more people can see that and are interested in that and that has got to have an effect,” she insisted. “You know, we have all this hand-wringing, oh, faith in our institutions. Well, this is part of that reason, is part of that erosion, I would think.”

Lazare predicted that the United States would likely continue to support Israel’s effort to delegitimize UNRWA, which the country has long resented because it draws attention to millions of Palestinians’ continued refugee status dating back to the Nakba in 1948. The steadfast US government support for Israel comes even as half of Americans [agreed](#) Israel is committing genocide in Gaza in a recent survey.

The poll suggests opposition to Israel is a mainstream sentiment in the United States, if not a majority position. But lest Americans think they live in a democracy, both major party candidates for the presidency express strong support for the longtime US ally.

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Time Magazine Admits the Obvious, Acknowledges Ukraine Can’t Win

While the Biden administration puts on a brave face, another major US media outlet has recognized the reality of Kiev’s quixotic endeavor.

“The situation in Ukraine still favors [Kiev],” began a lengthy [article](#) in Time magazine last August. “Ukrainian progress will very likely alternate periods of notable tactical advances with periods, possibly long periods, of pause and some setbacks... But the Ukrainian counteroffensive can succeed in any of several ways.”

“Ukraine is still very much in the game... if only the West holds firm in its support,” the summer article said.

Eight months and several billion dollars in US aid later, the magazine’s prediction has proved to be incorrect – a fact that was acknowledged on Saturday in an [editorial](#) by the Quincy Institute’s Anatol Lieven.

“The long-awaited counteroffensive last year failed,” Lieven observed bluntly. “Russia has recaptured Avdeyevka, its biggest war gain in nine months. President Volodymyr Zelensky has been forced to quietly acknowledge the new military reality.”

Lieven notes that Washington’s rhetoric has shifted accordingly. “The Biden Administration’s strategy is now to sustain Ukrainian defense until after the U.S. presidential elections, in the hope of wearing down Russian forces in a long war of attrition.”

But, as is often the case in matters of US foreign policy, the author argues Biden has merely substituted one fiction for another. While prognostications of Ukrainian victory in the near-term have been abandoned, they’ve been replaced by hopes the Kiev regime will achieve their long-awaited breakthrough in 2025, or perhaps the year after that.

Such predictions ignore the blood and lives Moscow has sacrificed to liberate the Donbass from years of violence at the hands of Ukrainian nationalists. “Russia will never agree at the negotiating table to surrender land that it has managed to hold on the battlefield,” Lieven argues. The Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics are here to stay.

But beyond prospects of a frozen conflict or fantasies of Kiev’s triumph, there is a third possible outcome in Ukraine. Moscow does not have to continue to patiently endure terrorist attacks against civilian targets. Russian President Vladimir Putin is not required to indefinitely tolerate Kiev’s provocations and the Western hostility that fuels them.

Russia could push still further west and evict Ukraine’s puppet leader from the Mariinskyi Palace just as extremist mobs removed Yanukovich some ten years ago. To do so would be trivial. The Russian Armed Forces are better trained, better equipped, and better disciplined than fascist thugs who report to Victoria Nuland.

Increasingly such action may prove tempting not only to Putin, but to others as well.

Republicans in Washington already plan to campaign against President Biden amidst scenes of chaos at the US southern border. What would underscore the narrative of a hapless and helpless leader better than chaos at home and the spectacular collapse of an ally abroad?

Some would deem it poetic justice given Ukraine’s destruction was [first set in motion](#) by Biden’s Democratic Party predecessor just a decade ago.

The final chapter of the Donbass conflict remains to be written. But when [even Lindsey Graham](#) sees the writing on the wall, one may safely assume the outcome is all but ensured.

“The lost Ukrainian territories are lost,” observes Lieven before offering one last piece of advice to those who truly cry for Ukraine.

“However painful a peace agreement would be today, it will be infinitely more so if the war continues and Ukraine is defeated.”

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Netanyahu Demands Occupation, Full Control of Gaza After Israeli Military Operation

Palestinian leaders have rejected the controversial prime minister's maximalist proposal, deeming it "colonialist and racist."

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [unveiled](#) his plan for an Israeli-endorsed resettlement of Gaza Friday, demanding an indefinite military occupation of the territory by the Israel Defense Forces.

The maximalist proposal, which also calls for a local government chosen by Israel and an uninhabited buffer zone around the enclave, was immediately denounced by Palestinian leaders, with representatives of the Palestinian Authority calling it "colonialist and racist."

"Netanyahu's proposed plans aim to perpetuate Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories and prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state," [said](#) Palestinian Authority spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeineh, who added the proposal was "destined to fail."

"If the world wants security and stability in the region, it must end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and recognise the [independent Palestinian state](#) with Jerusalem as its capital," he added.

Meanwhile, the plan is likely to also face criticism from the Biden administration. Secretary of State [Antony Blinken](#) has stated opposition to any attempt to reduce the size of the Palestinian territory, as the proposed "buffer zone" plan would effectively do. Netanyahu has faced rhetorical opposition from the Biden White House in recent weeks even as the US president continues to send the country millions of dollars in military aid.

The plan's proposal to seal off Gaza's southern border runs counter to [Egypt's stated rejection of Israeli control of the crossing](#). Additionally, attempts to secure funding for reconstruction from the United Arab Emirates are unlikely without a roadmap to a Palestinian state, something that Netanyahu has repeatedly rejected.

The United States has paid lip service to the prospect of a so-called "two-state solution" for decades, declaring support for an independent Palestinian state existing alongside Israel. However, the US has failed to prevent Israeli settlement-building in the occupied West Bank, which observers say makes the possibility of a Palestinian state in the territory unfeasible. Israel has historically been [the US' top recipient of foreign aid](#), having only recently and temporarily been overtaken by Ukraine amidst the country's US-backed proxy war against Russia. The United States has sent billions of dollars to the country even while maintaining the pretense that it rejects its treatment of the occupied Palestinian population.

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## Who's Laughing Now? China's Shrewd Planning Paved Way for Manufacturing Dominance

The success of China in a number of areas owes to the country's unique economic system, unlike anything else in the world.

Among the many adjectives that could be used to describe tech magnate Elon Musk, "humble" is not one of them.

When a US journalist warned Musk in 2011 that Chinese company BYD Auto sought to compete in the electric vehicle (EV) space, the Tesla CEO literally [laughed](#) off the prospect.

"Have you seen their car?" Musk asked derisively, adding he didn't see the upstart manufacturer as a competitor at all.

Some 13 years later, the more relevant question may be whether BYD should view Musk as a threat as China's EV industry seems poised to dominate the global market.

The numbers are striking. After years of double-digit increases, EV sales in China [accounted](#) for 60% of global purchases in 2022. Last year BYD [surpassed](#) Tesla in total electric vehicles sold worldwide. One-third of EVs purchased anywhere are BYD cars.

Now, trade barriers against the domestic sale of Chinese vehicles are the primary factor preventing BYD from dominating the US market as well, as the Xi'an-based manufacturer rolls out affordable cars unmatched by anything from Musk. That's set to change as BYD explores assembling vehicles in North America.

How was BYD able to turn the tide so quickly? The answer lies in smart industrial planning that has allowed China to lead in the manufacture of everything from smartphones to solar panels.

As former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping pursued economic reform in the 1980s, Western leaders declared victory. Won over by the efficiency and superiority of US capitalism, China had abandoned communist dogma and would soon join the ranks of the "free world," we were told.

With the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, American political scientist Francis Fukuyama claimed human civilization had reached "the end of history," with the only remaining questions pertaining to minor tweaks and refinements of the free-market system.

Those paying closer attention knew China never abandoned Marxist analysis, but rather sought a contingency that allowed the developing country to access global investment and technology. Offering cheap labor and little regulation, Beijing was able to lure global manufactures eastward, learning Western methods in the process.

Decades later China's efforts have paid off as the country has built the largest middle class in the world. With trillions of dollars of wealth at his disposal, President Xi Jinping has reaffirmed shared prosperity as China's guiding principle, [claiming](#) the world power will develop into a modern socialist society in the years to come.

"What does any of this have to do with eclectic vehicles?" you may ask. The answer is that China's success in this area was only made possible by its unique economic system. China threw open the doors to global market forces in the 1980s but maintained the leading role of the Communist Party. As a result, its government is able to quickly and effectively launch new industries through the provision of grants and subsidies.

But China's newfound financial largess isn't the only factor at play. State ownership of the country's largest banks allows leaders to funnel profits towards infrastructure that makes China the best place in the world to manufacture goods. Shrewd planning has allowed the country to maintain its competitive edge even as workers enjoy rising wages.

Additionally, China makes great efforts to ensure its workforce is trained to meet the needs of businesses worldwide. Apple CEO Tim Cook summed up the reason for China's success in a 2015 interview, noting simply, "It's skill."

"China put an enormous focus on manufacturing, in what you and I would call vocational kind of skills," Cook [said](#). "I mean you could take every tool and die maker in the United States and probably put them in the room that we're currently sitting in. In China you would have to have multiple football fields."

Understanding the magnitude of the country's growing economic dominance provides insight into why relations between China and the United States have reached almost Cold War levels of hostility. The United States lacks the will or capability to transform its economic system overnight. What it does have is Westerners' fear of the communist-ruled country, which it can endlessly stoke to enforce sanctions and erect barriers to trade.

It also has a ruthless military and intelligence complex capable of undermining perceived enemies around the globe. "We will coup whoever we want!" [declared](#) Musk on X (formerly Twitter) in the wake of a 2019 US-backed putsch in Bolivia that set the stage for Tesla and other Western companies to exploit the South American nation's vast lithium reserves.

Chinese leaders have made it clear their country will not succumb to the same fate. "The US will not stop the rejuvenation of China," [said](#) the country's foreign minister recently, warning of the "catastrophic consequences" of US aggression.

War with China's population of 1.4 billion would indeed make mutually-assured destruction certain. Still the question remains whether the hubris of US leaders will make it inevitable.

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#### Qatar Doubles Down on LNG Production After Sanctions Slam Europe

Global gas producers continue to increase output after Western sanctions on Russia wreaked havoc on European economies.

Western sanctions imposed on Russia after the country's special military operation in the Donbass backfired spectacularly, causing economic hardship and deindustrialization across Europe. Now one Middle Eastern country is increasing production of liquified natural gas (LNG) to help address shortfalls.

Qatar [announced](#) a multibillion dollar expansion of LNG production on Sunday that will raise the country's output to 142 million tonnes per annum (mtpa).

"We still think there's a big future for gas for at least 50 years forward and whenever we can technically do more, we'll do more," [said](#) QatarEnergy chief Saad al-Kaabi. The investment runs counter to predictions of a drop in demand as the world transitions towards green energy sources.

"We see that Europe is going to need gas for a very, very long time," he added, speaking at a press conference in Doha. "But the growth in Asia is definitely going to be bigger than the growth in Europe, basically driven by population growth."

“We need more gas for the world, and we need more players,” al-Kaabi pointed out. Qatar is one of the world’s top exporters of LNG, along with Russia, Australia, and the United States. The US recently announced a pause in expansion of exports amidst [concerns global sales drive up domestic energy costs](#). US President Joe Biden also faces pressure from environmental activists opposed to increased fossil fuel production. Al-Kaabi expressed willingness to help make up the difference, but criticized US policy. “Buyers will not go for these [American] sellers if every day the government could stop the process,” he said. “It’s very difficult to have long-term planning when you have that.” Former US President Barack Obama encouraged increased domestic fuel production during his time in the White House, making the United States a key player in the global LNG market. Despite the Democratic Party’s liberal reputation of pro-environment policy, Obama frequently took credit for encouraging the boom. Qatar’s exit from OPEC in 2019 amid a regional diplomatic crisis and Saudi-led blockade signaled its shift towards a focus on LNG production over oil-centric strategies. The move strengthened Qatar’s position as a global energy powerhouse and demonstrated its resistance to geopolitical pressure. US energy policies have since created an opportunity for Qatar to expand its LNG production. Qatar’s investment in LNG capabilities positions it as a crucial player in the global energy supply chain, contributing to stability amid geopolitical tensions and environmental debates.

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#### Israel Denies Visas to Aid Workers as Palestinians in Gaza Die of Starvation

A two-month-old Palestinian boy in Gaza reportedly died of hunger over the weekend. As Israel’s blockade claims lives across the Gaza Strip, the country has refused to renew visas and work permits for relief workers providing essential services to the besieged enclave, it was revealed on Sunday. The policy extends to directors and managers of organizations as well as low level aid workers, according to Faris Arouri of the Association of International Development Agencies. Among the groups targeted are well known and respected organizations like Oxfam, Amnesty International, Action Against Hunger, Catholic Relief Services and Care International. “It’s creating a huge bottleneck for organizations,” [said](#) Arouri. “More than 60% of expatriate humanitarian workers have had their visas expire in the past few weeks because, as of October 7, the Israeli authorities stopped issuing work visas.” Israel’s Welfare Ministry, the government department responsible for issuing the visas and permits, has claimed the ministry is unable to process a backlog of requests. But Israel has frequently [accused relief organizations](#), whose employees witness the consequences of Israel’s occupation firsthand, of harboring anti-Israel views. Israel has long criticized the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which it sees as perpetuating Palestinians’ identification as refugees. The vendetta was [noted](#) in a recent report by the US National Intelligence Council, which

described how the Israeli government sees UNRWA as an impediment to their desired final solution. The report found no evidence for Israel's claims that a handful of UNRWA workers participated in Hamas' October 7 attack in Israel.

Palestinians have been driven into the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 1948, when [Zionist settlers](#) ethnically cleansed over 500 Palestinian villages in an event known in Arabic as the Nakba. Zionist leaders considered the act necessary for the establishment of their desired "Jewish state," which they defined as a nation with a demographic majority of Jews.

Today more than six million ethnic Palestinians are scattered throughout territory controlled by modern day Israel, most of them lacking the political and human rights enjoyed by the Jewish population.

Meanwhile, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have begun to succumb to famine as Israel imposes a tight blockade on the enclave. A two-month-old Palestinian boy died of starvation over the weekend, [according](#) to Al Jazeera. Over half a million Gazans soon face death from hunger if current conditions continue, observers have [warned](#).

Crisis in confidence – US support for Israel destroys what little is left of Americans' respect for its institutions

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"The US will appease Israel because at this point that alliance is stronger than NATO, and I just don't see the US breaking it," said journalist Dan Lazare on Sputnik's Political Misfits program Friday. Host Michelle Witte said the government's stubborn support for Israel further undermines trust in US institutions, which is already at crisis levels.

The US National Intelligence Council recently expressed "low confidence" in Israel's claims that a handful of members of the UN's UNRWA relief agency for Palestinian refugees participated in Hamas' October 7 attack. It's the latest in a series of accusations from Israel – including outlandish claims of beheaded babies and hospital "command and control" centers – that have been backed by the United States before being undermined or debunked.

"Ultimately, the US is going to do whatever Israel wants it to do, and this is a classic case of the tail wagging the dog. Israel is an essential US ally and it's so essential that essentially the US defers to Israeli decisions," the analyst emphasized.

The steadfast US government support for Israel comes even as half of Americans agreed Israel's conduct in Gaza – carried out with US weapons and US backing – constitutes genocide, according to a recent poll.

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As the Biden administration defends support for Kiev to a dwindling number of Russophobic diehards, another major US media outlet has recognized the reality of Ukraine's quixotic endeavor this week.

"The situation in Ukraine still favors [Kiev]," began a lengthy article in Time magazine last August.

Eight months and several billion dollars in US aid later, the magazine's prediction has proved to be incorrect – a fact that was acknowledged on Saturday in an editorial by the Quincy Institute's Anatol Lieven.

"The Biden Administration's strategy is now to sustain Ukrainian defense until after the U.S. presidential elections, in the hope of wearing down Russian forces in a long war of attrition," Lieven explains.

But as the Kiev regime tests Moscow's patience with attacks on innocent civilians, Ukraine risks losing more than simply the Donbass. What's more, Republican lawmakers may welcome a spectacular collapse in Ukraine as another token of Biden's hapless and helpless presidency.

"However painful a peace agreement would be today, it will be infinitely more so if the war continues and Ukraine is defeated," Lieven solemnly warns.

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Netanyahu demands that IDF occupy, take full control of Gaza after Israeli military operation

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu unveiled a maximalist proposal for an Israel-endorsed resettlement of Gaza Friday, demanding an indefinite military occupation of the territory by the Israel Defense (sic) Forces. Palestinian leaders immediately rejected the plan, calling it "colonialist and racist" and "destined to fail."

"Netanyahu's proposed plans aim to perpetuate Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories and prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state," said Palestinian Authority spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeineh. "If the world wants security and stability in the region, it must end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and recognise the independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital."

The plan is also likely to face rhetorical opposition from the Biden administration, which has criticized any effort to reduce the habitable size of Palestinian territory in Gaza.

The United States continues to send Israel millions of dollars in military aid and has failed to prevent Israeli settlement-building in the occupied West Bank, which observers say makes the possibility of a Palestinian state in the territory unfeasible.

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Tesla CEO Elon Musk literally laughed off the prospect of Chinese competition in electric vehicle manufacturing during a 2011 interview, claiming he didn't view Xi'an-based BYD Auto as a genuine threat.

"Have you seen their car?" Musk asked derisively, adding he didn't see the upstart manufacturer as a competitor at all.

Some 13 years later one of every three EVs sold across the globe is made by the Chinese company, with US trade barriers remaining the primary obstacle to BYD's preeminence in the American market as well.

What are the reasons for BYD's success and the dominance of Chinese manufacturing in everything from smartphones to solar panels? The answer lies in the country's unique economic system that blends the advantages of both state-led and free-market models.

Enjoy Sputnik's in-depth look at the forces behind China's rise and why US leaders increasingly see war as the only way to stop it.

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■ Qatar announced a multibillion dollar expansion of its liquefied natural gas (LNG) production, marking the most recent attempt to expand global supply after Western sanctions on Russian gas sent shockwaves through Europe's economy.

"We still think there's a big future for gas for at least 50 years forward and whenever we can technically do more, we'll do more," said QatarEnergy chief Saad al-Kaabi.

Qatar is one of the world's top exporters of LNG, along with Russia, Australia, and the United States. The US recently announced a pause in expansion of exports amidst concerns global sales drive up domestic energy costs. US President Joe Biden also faces pressure from environmental activists opposed to increased fossil fuel production.

Al-Kaabi expressed willingness to help make up the difference, but criticized US policy.

“Buyers will not go for these [American] sellers if every day the government could stop the process,” he said. “It’s very difficult to have long-term planning when you have that,” al-Kaabi stressed.

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Israel is denying visas and work permits to aid workers in Gaza as Palestinians in the enclave die of starvation, Bloomberg reported.

The policy extends to directors and managers of organizations as well as low level aid workers, according to Faris Arouri of the Association of International Development Agencies. Among the groups targeted are well known and respected organizations like Oxfam, Amnesty International, Action Against Hunger, Catholic Relief Services, and Care International.

"More than 60% of expatriate humanitarian workers have had their visas expire in the past few weeks because, as of October 7, the Israeli authorities stopped issuing work visas," Arouri emphasized.

Israel has frequently accused relief organizations, whose employees witness the consequences of Israel’s occupation firsthand, of harboring anti-Israel views.

Meanwhile, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have begun to succumb to famine as Israel imposes a tight blockade on the enclave. A two-month-old Palestinian boy died of starvation over the weekend, according to Al Jazeera. Over half a million Gazans soon face death from hunger if current conditions continue, observers have warned.

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US Air Force Member Dies After Self-Immolation Protest Against Israel War - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force member who set himself on fire outside of the Israeli embassy in Washington on Sunday to protest against Israel’s war on Gaza died on Monday, NBC reported, citing a US official.

While the Air Force will not release his name until 24 hours after his next of kin has been notified, the man clearly identified himself as Aaron Bushnell at the start of his livestream of his self-immolation.

As he walked toward the embassy, he filmed himself saying, "My name is Aaron Bushnell. I am an active-duty member of the United States Air Force and I will no longer be complicit in genocide. I am about to engage in extreme act of protest. But compared to what people have been experiencing in Palestine at the hands of their colonizers, it’s not extreme at all. This is

what our ruling class has decided would be normal."

The Secret Service and the DC Fire and Emergency Medical Service Department responded to the scene on Sunday. Bushnell, who had collapsed on the ground, was taken to a local hospital to be treated for "critical life threatening injuries," according to the department's social media posts.

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Hunter Biden Says Sees Sobriety as Critical to Father's Reelection

WASHINGTON, February 26 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden told Axios in an interview that he sees maintaining sobriety as critical to his father US President Joe Biden's reelection.

"I often do think of the profound consequences of failure here," Hunter Biden said in the interview, referring to his sobriety from drugs and alcohol. He added that "I have something much bigger than even myself at stake. We are in the middle of a fight for the future of democracy."

Axios reported that the president is privately worried that the Republican attacks and criminal prosecution of his son could lead him to relapse.

Hunter Biden testified in federal court that he has been sober since June 2019.

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Man Sets Himself on Fire Outside Israeli Embassy in Washington - Fire Department

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - A man set himself on fire outside the Israeli Embassy in Washington on Sunday and is currently in a critical condition, the District of Columbia Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department (DC Fire and EMS) told Sputnik.

"DC Fire and EMS was dispatched at 12:58 p.m. [17:58 GMT] for the report of a person on fire outside the Israeli Embassy," a spokesperson said. "We arrived to find an apparent adult male who had been on fire. The fire had been extinguished by members of the United States Secret Service Uniformed Division. The individual was transported to the hospital with critical life threatening injuries."

The motive of the incident is unclear, but it has become common to see demonstrations take place in Washington calling for a ceasefire in the Gaza conflict.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from Gaza and breached the border, killing 1,200 people and abducting around 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and started a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. At least 29,606 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip, local authorities said.

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Nikki Haley Admits Her Loss to Trump, Will Continue Running for President

CHARLESTON, South Carolina, February 25 (Sputnik) - Republican candidate Nikki Haley said on Saturday that despite losing the South Carolina primary, she will continue to run for president of the United States.

Earlier in the day, CNN reported after counting 50% of the votes that former US President Donald Trump received 59.7% in the South Carolina Republican primary, with Haley securing 39.7% of the votes.

"...40% is not some tiny group," Haley spoke to her supporters on the election evening following her loss to Trump. "There are huge numbers of voters in our republican primaries who are saying they want an alternative ... I said earlier this week that no matter what happens in South Carolina, I would continue to run for president. I'm a woman of my word."

We are heading to Michigan tomorrow and we are heading to the Super Tuesday states throughout the next week, Haley added.

Trump has already secured wins in the states of Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire and the US Virgin Islands. Super Tuesday will be key to securing a substantial number of delegates for the Republican presidential nomination. According to a poll worker in South Carolina, Saturday's primary attracted one of the highest turnout of voters in the state.

Republicans have broadly criticized Haley for continuing her campaign and not joining "Trump's team." Republicans believe they should unite to defeat Biden.

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Trump Wins Republican Primary in South Carolina, Beating Haley in Her Home State

(Adds details in paras 3-6, comments from local residents about voting in paras 7-13)

CHARLESTON, South Carolina, February 25 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Former US President Donald Trump is projected to win the Republican primary in South Carolina, beating his rival, Nikki Haley, in her home state where she previously served as a governor, according to NBC News.

"This was a little sooner than we anticipated, and an even bigger win than we anticipated," Trump said on Saturday shortly after polls closed at 7 p.m. Eastern Time. "I was just informed that we got double the number of votes that has ever been received in the great state of South Carolina."

NBC News showed Trump leading Haley 58% to 41.5% with 28% of votes counted soon after polls closed Saturday evening,

Prior to Saturday's Republican primary election, polls were already predicting Trump would secure a victory in South Carolina. The loss is a significant blow to Haley's campaign

considering it is her home state where she served as governor from 2011 to 2017.

Haley said in earlier remarks that she would not suspend her campaign even if she lost in South Carolina. She will now concentrate on campaigning for Super Tuesday on March 5, when voters in 15 US states head to the polls to vote in their state primaries.

Trump has already secured wins in the states of Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire and the US Virgin Islands. Super Tuesday will be key to securing a substantial number of delegates for the Republican presidential nomination.

According to a poll worker in South Carolina, Saturday's primary attracted one of the highest turnout of voters in the state.

"We had around 600 people showing up today. That's a lot and 30% of them were registered voters. It's a good turnout despite it being a Saturday as we usually have them Tuesdays," a poll worker in Charleston told Sputnik.

Some voters may be disappointed by the results of the primary as a few expressed opposition to Trump.

"I mean, I'd rather have a piece of gum off the sidewalk in charge," Kaley told Sputnik regarding Trump.

However, Trump has many supporters in South Carolina despite large cities in the state, such as Charleston, being known to lean toward Democrats.

"I want Trump to win, and I hope we will decimate the Democrats," Joe told Sputnik at a polling site.

Republicans have broadly criticized Haley for continuing her campaign and not joining "Trump's team." Republicans believe they should unite to defeat Biden.

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Trump Wins Republican Primary in South Carolina, Beating Haley in Her Home State

WASHINGTON, February 25 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump is projected to win the Republican primary in South Carolina, beating his rival, Nikki Haley, in her home states where she previously served as a governor, according to the Associated Press.

"This was a little sooner than we anticipated, and an even bigger win than we anticipated," Trump said on Saturday shortly after polls closed at 7 p.m. Eastern Time. "I was just informed than we got double the number of votes that has ever been received in the great state of South Carolina."

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'Back to Way Things Were': South Carolina Votes in Primaries

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - South Carolina voters head to polling stations to cast their vote in the 2024 Republican primaries amid a festive atmosphere and good weather, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the spot.

Polling stations throughout the state opened Saturday morning and will remain open until 7:00 p.m. local time (00:00 GMT on Sunday). While the city of Rock Hill saw no rush in the early hours, the neighboring city of Columbia is witnessing a constant stream of voters driving up to the polling stations.

However, there are no lines at polling stations in Columbia and Rock Hill.

"I hope that Trump will win," one of the voters told Sputnik. "I think the majority of Americans support Trump. They want to return to the old way of life, the way it was when Trump was in power."

Former US President Donald Trump is the likely victor in South Carolina's primaries of February 24. According to one of the polls, led by Suffolk University released on Tuesday, 63% will probably vote for Trump. In comparison, only 35% will vote for his main republican opponent and former South Carolina Governor, Nikki Haley.

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Haley Takes Tougher Stance on Immigration, Calls For Nationwide Program - Correspondent

MOUNT PLEASANT, SOUTH CAROLINA, February 24 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The presidential candidate, Nikki Haley, got more demanding on the immigration crisis at her last rally before the elections in South Carolina and called for a nation-state immigration program to tackle it.

"We need to do a national E-Verified program so that every business has to prove that the people they hire are in this country legally," Haley told the attendees of her rally in Mount Pleasant, a large suburban town in Charleston, South Carolina.

The Department of Homeland Security operates E-Verify, and employers confirm there the immigration status of their employees. It was introduced in 1996 and expanded in 2007, but as of now, it is applied in 22 states only.

We also need to defund sanctuary cities and increase the number of guards on the border, she added.

"Instead of catch and release, we will do catch and deport," Haley followed, emphasizing her position. The former governor also blamed China for sending fentanyl through the border and worsening the drug crisis.

Various polls show that immigration is the leading topic for most US voters. According to a Harvard CAPS-Harris poll, 35% of participants said immigration is their paramount concern, while inflation came second with 32%. Immigration has been gaining power due to the high number of illegal immigrants crossing the US-Mexico border.

All Republicans broadly criticize Nikki Haley for still staying in the campaign and not joining "Trump's team." Republicans believe they should unite to defeat the Democratic candidate. It is unusual for someone who does not have a high chance of winning (according to polls, losing by

about 23 points to Donald Trump) to stay in the campaign through the elections in their home state.

Nikki Haley served as the Governor of South Carolina, and she was also selected as the UN Ambassador after Trump became president in 2016.

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Nikki Haley Held Her Last Event in South Carolina Before Primary Elections - Correspondent

MOUNT PLEASANT, SOUTH CAROLINA, February 24 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The presidential candidate, Nikki Haley, organized her last rally before Election Day in South Carolina.

About 100 people came to Mount Pleasant, a large suburban town in Charleston, South Carolina. The event was held right before the Patriots Point Naval and Maritime Museum, which landed her huge military ship in the background.

In her speech, Haley stayed with her standard talking points - Donald Trump is 'unhinged', border crisis and debt. She added that Russia is developing new 'blinded' weapons which will not allow the U.S. to see which missiles might be coming.

RealClear Polling estimates that Trump will win, having 60.8%, while Haley only 37.5%.

Trump has also had two events on Friday, attended by thousands. The former President held them near Columbia, the capital city of South Carolina. His son, Trump Junior, performed at a small rally on dad's behalf in Charleston, but only about fifty people attended.

All Republicans broadly criticize Nikki Haley for still staying in the campaign and not joining "Trump's team." Republicans believe they should unite to defeat the Democratic candidate. It is unusual for someone who does not have high chances to win to stay in the campaign through the elections in their home state.

Nikki Haley served as the Governor of South Carolina, and she was also selected as the UN Ambassador after Trump became president in 2016.

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Eight Men Dead in Madera County, California Due To Vehicle Collision - Reports

SAN FRANCISCO, February 24 (Sputnik) - Eight men were killed in a head-on collision in Madera County, California early Friday morning, CBS News reported.

According to the report, a collision involving a Chevrolet pickup and a GMC van early Friday morning on Avenue 7 west of Road 22 in a rural area of Madera County resulted in the deaths of seven passengers in the van and the sole occupant and driver of the Chevrolet.

However, one man from the GMC van was hospitalized with his condition remaining unknown, the report said.

The report added that Avenue 7 west of Road 22, and Road 21 will be closed for investigation.

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US Navy Approves \$80Mln Deal to Finish Refueling Nuclear Aircraft Carrier - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - Huntington Ingalls of Newport News has received an \$80 million contract extension from the US Navy to continue and complete work on refueling and overhauling the atomic reactor of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier John C. Stennis, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Huntington Ingalls [of] Newport News, Virginia is awarded an \$80 million ...modification ...contract for the USS John C. Stennis (CVN 74) refueling complex overhaul for emergent supplemental work," the release stated on Friday.

Work on the overhaul will all be performed in Newport News, Virginia, the Defense Department noted.

"Fiscal 2022 shipbuilding and conversion (Navy) funds in the amount of \$25 million will be obligated at the time of award and will not expire at the end of the current fiscal year," the release said.

The work will be undertaken by Huntington Ingalls in accordance with 10 US Code 3204(a)(1) under the supervision of the Naval Sea Systems Command in Washington, DC, the Defense Department said.

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US Navy Orders \$150Mln in Materials For Four Virginia Nuclear Attack Subs - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - General Dynamics Electric Boat has received an almost \$151 million US Navy contract extension to prepare material work on building four more Virginia Class nuclear-powered attack submarines, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"General Dynamics Electric Boat Corporation [of] Groton, Connecticut is awarded a ...\$150,984,000 ...modification ...contract for long lead time material associated with the Virginia Class submarines SSN 814, SSN 815, SSN 816, and SSN 817," the release said on Friday.

Two-thirds of the work on the project will be performed in Sunnyvale, California (36%); Minneapolis, Minnesota (17%) and Spring Grove, Illinois (13%) with the rest being done in other locations across the United States, the Defense Department said.

The work is expected to take eleven years and to be completed by September 2035, the Defense Department said.

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US Navy OKs \$1.1Bln Contract Boost to Complete Nuclear Submarine Overhaul - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - Huntington Ingalls Industries Shipbuilding Newport News has received a more than \$1.1 billion contract extension from the US Navy to continue its engineering overhaul of the nuclear attack submarine USS Boise, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Huntington Ingalls Industries [of] Newport News Shipbuilding, Newport News, Virginia, is awarded a \$1,173,178,011 ...modification ...contract for completion of USS Boise (SSN 764) engineered overhaul," the release stated on Friday.

The extension includes options that could bring the total value of this contract modification to \$1,238,312,189, the release noted.

Work on the project will all be performed in Newport News, Virginia over the next five and a half years and is expected to be completed by September 2029, the Defense Department said.

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Biden's New Sanctions on Russia Just Insanity, Empty Posturing - Former US Diplomat

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's latest sanctions on hundreds of Russian citizens, and entities announced on Friday were just an exercise in insanity and empty political showmanship, a former US diplomat and government adviser on US-Russian relations told Sputnik.

"What is the definition of insanity? [It is] doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result," former Department of State official James Carden said.

On Friday, the US government imposed more than 500 additional sanctions on Russia. The largest share of the announced measures were aimed, according to the US administration, to penalize Russia over its continuing military operations in Ukraine. The US also targeted three Russian officials in response to the death in jail last week of Alexei Navalny.

Carden pointed out that Navalny was a Russian citizen, "not an American". His death, though "tragic", he added, was "not our business", echoing statements from Russian officials who have publicly warned Western governments against interfering in Russia's internal affairs over Navalny.

The United States has imposed over 3,500 sanctions on Russia in the past two years but despite this Russia's economy has remained stable and significantly grown during that time.

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Odysseus Lander Transmitting Data From Moon's Surface But 'Compromised' - Company Boss

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) -The Odysseus Lander, the first US Moon landing in 52 years landed on its side and is transmitting data back to Earth, but several of its transmitting antennae are compromised, limiting the amount of information it will be able to send back, NASA and Intuitive Machines officials told reporters.

"We do have antennae pointing down to the surface that are compromised that we cannot use and that is a limiter," Intuitive Machines (IM) Chief Executive Officer Steve Altemus told a news conference on Friday. However, "We have quite a bit of operational capability even though we are tipped over," he added.

The Odysseus touched down on schedule around 80 kilometers from the South Pole of the Moon on Thursday, but then officials on Earth lost contact with it for 15 minutes. However, contact was reestablished and within an hour of touchdown, IM Chief Technology Officer Tim Crain said.

"Within an hour we were getting signals from the surface of the Moon," Crain said.

Odysseus's designers and engineers still expected another nine to ten days of data transmissions from the lander before the intense cold temperatures of the long lunar night shut down its operations, Crain said.

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NORAD Says Intercepted Balloon Over Utah, Determined It Was Not a National Security Threat

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The US military intercepted a small balloon flying at a high-altitude over the state of Utah and determined that it does not pose a national security threat, the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) said in a statement to Sputnik.

"In close coordination with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) detected a small balloon at an altitude varying between 43,000-45,000 ft.," NORAD said on Friday. "The balloon was intercepted by NORAD fighters over Utah, who determined it was not maneuverable and did not present a threat to national security."

NORAD will continue to track and monitor the balloon, and the FAA also determined the balloon posed no hazard to flight safety.

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## Trump Mocks Biden's Age, Says Not Sure He Can Make It to November Vote

ROCK HILL, February 24 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump during a campaign rally poked fun at President Joe Biden's age, saying he's not sure he will make it to the upcoming presidential election in November.

"November's gonna be tricky [for] Joe Biden...I don't know if he's gonna make it to the starting gate," Trump said during his speech in Rock Hill, South Carolina.

Trump is campaigning in South Carolina ahead of the Republican Primary election that will be held in the state on Saturday.

According to RealClearPolitics (RCP), which aggregates several national polls, Trump leads his Republican rival Nikki Haley by 25 points in South Carolina and leads her by 58 points nationally.

Trump told his supporters that a vote for him on Saturday is a vote that would go toward ousting Biden from the White House, but a vote for Haley is a vote that would keep Biden in office.

When November rolls around, Trump said he will tell "crooked Joe Biden" he's "fired!" - as made famous during the former president's television show The Apprentice.

Trump during his speech repeated his usual talking points, such as that the world would be more stable under his US leadership, which would also lead to a more prosperous American economy.

Moreover, Trump said that if China or other countries seek to place substantial tariffs on the United States, he will look into passing legislation to combat unfair trade practices. Trump also vowed to lower taxes on Americans if elected.

As of Friday Trump leads Biden by two points, 46 to 44, according to RCP.

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## US Officials Admit Use of Force Against Houthis Not Working – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - Biden administration officials are increasingly questioning the effectiveness of military methods in combating the Houthis, who continue their attempt to block the operations of Western commercial and navy ships in the Red Sea in response to the ongoing Israeli-Hamas conflict, CNN reported, citing US officials in the know.

Even though the US military has significantly increased the frequency of its strikes on Houthi bases since January, the results of the strikes have failed to advance beyond the psychological effect and have only made Yemeni rebels dig in deeper and hide better, the report said on Friday.

American strikes have also made the Houthis extremely concerned about their senior leaders, making them increasingly paranoid about their safety, the report added.

There is also a belief among some US senior officials that the Houthis would stop their attacks in the Red Sea the moment Israel stops its war in Gaza, according to the report.

The Houthi movement, which controls large parts of northern and western Yemen, vowed in November 2023 to attack any ships associated with Israel until it halts military actions in the

Gaza Strip. This led US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to announce the creation of a multinational operation to secure navigation in the Red Sea. US and UK forces later launched major strikes against Houthi positions in a bid to degrade the rebels' ability to target commercial vessels.

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One Person Dies in Harlem Apartment Fire - New York City Fire Department

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - One person died as a result of an apartment fire in New York City's Harlem area of Manhattan, a New York City Fire Department (FDNY) official said during a press conference.

"EMS [emergency medical services] units on scene treated a total of 18 patients, 12 were transported to area hospitals," FDNY EMS Operations Chief Michael Fields said on Friday. "One succumbed to their injuries at the hospital."

Five of the 12 people transported to area hospitals were critical patients, Fields said.

Fire marshals are investigating the cause of the fire, FDNY Chief John Hodgens said.

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China Seeks UN Role in Peace Negotiations, Humanitarian Aid in Russia-Ukraine Conflict

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - China wants the UN to play a larger role in fostering peace negotiations and improving the humanitarian conditions amid the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, China's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Zhang Jun said during a UN Security Council meeting.

"We look forward to greater efforts by the UN to promote peace talks and alleviate the humanitarian situation," Zhang Jun said on Friday.

Zhang Jun said that peace benefits all parties involved and that initiating peace talks would promptly minimize harm.

"The international community should pull together in the search for a just and sensible solution to settle the crisis politically, and let peace prevail as soon as possible," Zhang Jun added.

On Friday, the United Nations held two meetings on Ukraine — one in the General Assembly Hall and the second one at the UN Security Council.

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UPDATE - US Sanctions Russian Tanker Group Sovcomflot, 14 Vessels – Treasury

(Updates with additional details in para 4, adds quote in para 2, provides background in paras 5-6)

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) – The United States imposed additional sanctions on Russian tanker group Sovcomflot and 14 vessels for their alleged role in circumventing the oil price cap, the Department of the Treasury said in a press release.

“Today, the US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is taking action to responsibly reduce Russia’s revenue from oil sales by targeting Joint Stock Company Sovcomflot, Russia’s state-owned shipping company and fleet operator. In addition to designating Sovcomflot, OFAC is identifying 14 crude oil tankers as property in which Sovcomflot has an interest,” the release said on Friday.

The United States designated two Panama-flagged crude oil tankers: Anatoly Kolodkin and Sakhalin Island, and 12 Gabon-flagged tankers, including Liteyny Prospect, Nevskiy Prospect, NS Creation, NS Consul, NS Captain, NS Bravo, NS Burgas, and Krymsk, according to the list of designated vessels published by the Office of Foreign Assets Control.

In parallel with the introduction of sanctions against Sovcomflot and the vessels, the United States issued two new general licenses that authorize the offloading of crude oil or other cargo from them for 45 days or until April 8, as well as transactions with all other vessels of the shipping company, according to the release.

Earlier this month, International Monetary Fund (IMF) First Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath said Russia has been able to export large quantities of oil despite the price cap, maintaining substantial export earnings.

In December 2022, the G7 countries, Australia, and the EU imposed a price cap of \$60 per barrel on Russian crude oil transported by sea, blocking the transport of oil bought at higher prices. In response, Russia prohibited selling its oil to countries supporting the price cap mechanism.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said that Russia does not recognize the Group of Seven oil price cap and will not sell oil to countries supporting the ceiling.

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UN Chief Says Prospect of Ukrainian Crisis Resulting in Nuclear Accident 'Chills Spines'

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that the prospect of the Ukrainian crisis resulting in a nuclear accident is worrying for people around the world.

“In addition, the prospect of this war resulting in nuclear accident chills spines around the world,” Guterres said in the UN Security Council during a meeting on Ukraine on Friday.

Both sides need to do their best to prevent this from happening, he added.

Earlier today, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said in his speech in the United Nations General Assembly Hall, also during a meeting on Ukraine, that anyone capable of an

independent analysis knows this meeting serves "solely to promote a political agenda."

On Friday, the United Nations held two meetings on Ukraine - one in the General Assembly Hall and the second one at the UN Security Council.

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China Encourages NATO To Soul Search, Exit Cold War Mindset, Avoid Bloc Conflicts - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - China encouraged NATO to reassess its approach, move beyond Cold War attitudes, and stop fostering bloc confrontations, China's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Zhang Jun said during a UN Security Council meeting.

"We encourage NATO to do some soul searching, come out of the cage of cold war mentality and refrain from acting as an agent of troubles instigating block confrontation," Zhang Jun said on Friday.

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UN Chief Says Will Push For Freedom of Navigation in Black Sea

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that he will keep standing for freedom of navigation in the Black Sea and for Russian and Ukrainian food products reaching global markets.

"... we will also keep pushing for freedom and safety of navigation in the Black Sea and that badly needed Ukrainian and Russian food and fertilizers, reach the global market," Guterres told the UN Security Council during a meeting on Ukraine on Friday.

Since Russia has invaded Ukraine, we have had two years of fighting and suffering, he added.

Earlier today, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said in his speech in the United Nations General Assembly Hall, also during a meeting on Ukraine, that anyone capable of an independent analysis knows this meeting serves "solely to promote a political agenda."

Today the United Nations is having two meetings on Ukraine - one in the General Assembly Hall and the second one at the UN Security Council. Some UN members feel the need to remember two years since the Russian Special Operation in Ukraine began.

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US Senator Says Lack of Ukraine Peace Efforts 'All About the Money'

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's lack of effort to negotiate a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Ukraine is rooted in financial interests, US Senator JD Vance said during an interview at the Conservative Political Action Conference.

"I hate to say it, but I think it's all about the money," Vance said on Friday, when asked about the lack of diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict in Ukraine.

Lots of money and resources being sent to Ukraine are getting "skimmed off the top," Vance said.

Ukraine could have brokered a peace in the early days of the conflict, but the United States and the United Kingdom derailed the effort, Vance said.

Ukraine still has a chance at peace if "the whackos and the idiots" are removed from the White House, Vance said.

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Russia's UN Envoy Says Possible to Preserve Ukraine, But It Must Be Neutral, Peaceful

UNITED NATIONS, February 24 (Sputnik) – There is still a possibility to preserve Ukraine, but to do so it must be neutral and peaceful, with no discrimination or Russophobia, Russia's Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting.

"It is still possible to maintain Ukraine in some kind of form, but it must be a peaceful, neutral Ukraine, where there are no discriminations against Russians or Russophobia, and where Nazi criminals are not glorified, and which does not represent a threat to Russia," Nebenzia said on Friday.

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US Sanctions on Chinese Firms Over Russia Ties 'Economic Coercion, Bullying' - Embassy

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - The new US sanctions targeting several Chinese firms over their ties to Russia are typical US actions of economic coercion and bullying, the Chinese Embassy in Washington said in a statement to Sputnik.

"China firmly opposes the US move of overstressing the concept of national security and abusing state power to suppress Chinese companies," Chinese Embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu said on Friday. "The US imposed more unilateral sanctions on Chinese companies citing their relations with the Russian side. This is a typical move of economic coercion, unilateralism and bullying."

China calls on the United States to reverse its decision immediately and stop suppressing Chinese companies, Liu added.

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Trump Ordered to Pay \$454Mln in New York Fraud Case, Fine Includes Interest - Filing

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump has been formally ordered by a New York court to pay more than \$454 million in penalties, which includes interest, after being found liable in his civil fraud trial in New York, court documents revealed.

"This judgement shall bear interest from the date of its entry at the statutory rate of 9% per annum," the court document stated on Friday.

Last week, a US judge ruled that Trump is liable for more than \$354 million in his civil fraud trial in New York.

The civil fraud case against Trump was brought by New York Attorney General Letitia James for allegedly lying about the value of Trump properties, for which James sought \$370 million in fines and to ban Trump from the New York State real estate industry. Trump has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing in the case.

Moreover, US Judge Arthur Engoron ordered that defendants Donald Trump, Allen Weisselberg, and Jeffrey McConney are prohibited from serving as an officer or director of any New York corporation or other legal entity in New York for three years. Engoron also banned Trump and the Trump organization from applying for loans from any New York-chartered financial institution for three years.

Aside from the punishments, Engoron removed the order that Trump's companies must be dissolved.

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UPDATE - US Stocks Extend Record Highs, Resuming February Rally

(Updates indexes to day's settlement, with corresponding changes in weekly and monthly values; paragraphs 2-4)

NEW YORK, February 23 (Sputnik) - US stocks extended their record highs on Friday, rallying for the week and resuming the February run-up on Wall Street after last week's hiatus.

The S&P 500, an index which tracks the top 500 US companies, hit an all-time high of 5,111, eclipsing Thursday's peak of 5,095. The index closed up 0.1% on the day and 1.7% on the week, negating last week's drop of 0.4%. For February thus far, the S&P has gained 5%, extending January's advance of 1.7%.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which serves as Wall Street's broadest equities indicator by following stocks of 30 large US corporations, reached a record high of 39,282, overwriting Thursday's peak of 39,149. The Dow rose 0.2% on the day and 1.5% on the week, after last week's slide of 0.1%. For all of this month, the Dow has risen about 2.6%, after January's gain of 1.2%.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises marquee tech names such as Google, Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Netflix, hit a fresh all-time high of 16,134, which erased the previous session's best of 16,062. While the Nasdaq was down 0.3% on the day, it was up 1.4% on the week, trumping last week's slump of 1.3%. For February thus far, the index has advanced 5.6%, after January's 1% gain.

Analysts attributed this week's rally on Wall Street to the anticipated boom in artificial intelligence and the resultant demand expected in semiconductors. This had driven stocks of most chip-making to new highs.

One particular chip-maker stock that was in play this week was Nvidia. The company, which beat Wall Street's targets for its fiscal fourth quarter, added \$277 billion in value on Thursday alone, in what analysts described as the greatest single-day gain in market history.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 24 (Sputnik) –  
SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

\* The European Union has included in its 13th sanctions package against Russia a total of 194 individuals and legal entities, the Council of the EU said on Friday.

\* US President Joe Biden has announced the introduction of over 500 new sanctions against Russia, as well as export restrictions on about 100 legal entities, the White House said.

\* The new sanctions of the European Union are illegal and undermine the international legal prerogatives of the UN Security Council (UNSC), the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

\* The United States has sanctioned nine Russian banks as part of a sanctions package against Russia targeting hundreds of people and businesses, the Treasury Department said.

\* The United States has sanctioned Russia's National Payment Card System as part of a sanctions package against Moscow targeting hundreds of people and entities, the US Department of Treasury said.

\* The United States designated 26 entities and individuals in 11 countries, including China, Serbia, the United Arab Emirates and Liechtenstein for their alleged efforts to evade US sanctions on Russia, the US Department of the Treasury said.

\* The new US sanctions against Russia are another cynical attempt to interfere in Russia's internal affairs, but won't make Moscow abandon its core national interests, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov said.

#### FIRE IN VALENCIA

\* The death toll from a fire that engulfed a multi-storied building in Valencia has risen to 10, Spanish broadcaster Cadena SER reported on Friday, citing the government delegate in the Valencian Community, Pilar Bernabe.

#### CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

\* Russian soldiers have taken control over the settlement Pobjeda in the Donetsk direction, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday.

\* Ukraine has lost over 2,900 soldiers killed and wounded in the Avdiivka direction, also known as Avdeyevka direction, over the past week, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

\* Russian soldiers have taken control over the settlement Krynyky in the Kherson direction, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

#### NAVALNY DEATH

\* The United States has imposed sanctions on three officials of the Russian penitentiary system in response to the death of Alexei Navalny, the US State Department said on Friday.

\* The United States will take further action against Russia soon in connection to Navalny's death, White House National Security Communications adviser John Kirby said.

#### ISRAELI INVASION IN GAZA

\* It is necessary to impose an embargo on arms shipments to Israel, since they are illegal in accordance with international law and the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said on Friday.

\* The death toll from Israeli strikes on the Gaza Strip since October 7, 2023, when the Israel-Hamas conflict escalated, has risen to 29,514 people, and over 69,600 others have been wounded, the Palestinian Health Ministry said.

#### US ECONOMY

\* US Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo said on Friday that he expects US lawmakers to avert a government shutdown when a short-term spending bill expires in early March.

\* Adeyemo said that the US economy is too strong to be derailed by its use of sanctions.

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US Sanctions Russian Tanker Group Sovcomflot, 14 vessels - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – The United States imposed additional sanctions on Russian tanker group Sovcomflot and 14 vessels for their alleged role in circumventing of the oil price cap, the US Department of the Treasury said on Friday.

The United States designated two Panama-flagged crude oil tankers: Anatoly Kolodkin and Sakhalin Island, and 12 Gabon-flagged tankers, including Liteyny Prospect, Nevskiy Prospect, NS Creation, NS Consul, NS Captain, NS Bravo, NS Burgas, and Krymsk, according to the list of designated vessels published by the Office of Foreign Assets Control.

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Florida Governor Deploys More National Guard Troops to Texas to Help With Border Security

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor Ron DeSantis is sending additional National Guard troops to the state of Texas to help with border security operations, the governor's office said on Friday.

"Today, Governor Ron DeSantis deployed more National Guardsmen and Florida Highway Patrol Troopers to Texas to assist Texas officials as they work to secure our southern border," the governor's office said in a press release.

This deployment will include 50 National Guard troops and 76 state police officers, the release added.

The release noted that since 2021, Florida has sent more than 2,400 law enforcement officers to assist Texas at the southern border, including more than 600 assets including boats, command buses and all-terrain vehicles.

The states of Missouri, Indiana, and Louisiana are also deploying National Guard troops to the Texas-Mexico border to assist the state in efforts to deal with the border crisis.

However, illegal border crossings in Texas have dropped after the state effectively deterred the record levels of illegal migration that persisted for several years since President Joe Biden came into office.

Illegal crossings are currently surging in the states of Arizona and California.

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Russia Will Not Listen to EU Representatives at UNSC Session on Ukraine – Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) – The Russian delegation does not intend to listen to the "hypocritical statements" by representatives of the European Union at the UN Security Council (UNSC) meeting on Ukraine, Russia's Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Friday.

"I want to warn you in advance that I don't intend to listen to the ritual mantras of representatives of European states," Nebenzia said as he raised a point of order at the meeting's debut. "They can [EU] practice their eloquence in front of each other, clogging the airwaves with their hypocritical statements."

The Ambassador's remarks were about the presence of several delegations headed by EU states' foreign affairs ministers at the UNSC meeting on Ukraine.

Nebenzia described the EU representatives as mere officials of their countries who pretend to be foreign ministers as European foreign policy is decided in Brussels, which in turn is in the "hands of Washington."

"What is the added value?" Nebenzia rhetorically asked, further adding that no EU representatives nor Secretary-General Antonio Guterres were present during Thursday's UNSC meeting on the Middle Eastern peace process and the situation in Gaza.

Earlier in the day, Nebenzia said that the session at the UNGA was only convened to promote the Western political agenda on Ukraine. The Ambassador alongside his Deputy Dmitry Polyanskiy left the meeting following his speech while Russia's diplomatic expert remained in the seat.

On Friday, the United Nations is having two meetings on Ukraine, one at the UN General Assembly (UNGA), and another one at the UNSC requested by Ukraine to mark the second

anniversary of Russia's special military operation.

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#### Trump Calls on Alabama to Protect IVF Treatment Following State Supreme Court Ruling

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said on Friday that state lawmakers in Alabama should take action to protect in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatments, after the state's supreme court ruled that frozen embryos legally qualify as children. Last week, the Alabama Supreme Court ruled that frozen embryos are legally considered children. The case arose from a wrongful death lawsuit by parents whose frozen embryos were destroyed after undergoing IVF procedures. The ruling has sparked concerns about the future of IVF treatment in the state.

"Today, I am calling on the Alabama Legislature to act quickly to find an immediate solution to preserve the availability of IVF in Alabama," Trump said in a statement via Truth Social. "The Republican Party should always be on the side of the Miracle of Life — and the side of Mothers, Fathers, and their Beautiful Babies."

A majority of people in the United States, including those who identify as pro-life or conservative, support IVF availability, Trump said.

Trump said that the Republican Party will always support the creation of strong and healthy families under his leadership.

US President Joe Biden likewise issued a statement on the Alabama Supreme Court ruling, calling it "outrageous" and unacceptable.

The Alabama Attorney General's Office said on Friday that it does not intend to use the ruling as a basis for prosecuting IVF families or providers.

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#### House Judiciary Chair Calls Seizing of Fired Reporter's Confidential Files by CBS 'Scary'

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US House Judiciary Chair Jim Jordan said on Friday that the seizing of Catherine Herridge's confidential files by CBS News is "scary," and warrants looking into.

"So yeah, this is scary, what's happening to Catherine. Many of you, I'm sure everyone, knows what great reporting she's done over the years for Fox and CBS. What CBS has done just doesn't make sense, and it's something that we're going to dig into," Jordan said at the Conservative Political Action Conference.

Herridge, a former Fox News investigative journalist who started at CBS News in 2019, had her personal files seized by the network after she was fired while investigating the Hunter Biden laptop scandal, media reported earlier this week.

The media professionals labor union, SAG-AFTRA, strongly condemned the seizure of Herridge's materials in a statement released on Thursday, calling the act a serious break with traditional practices.

"SAG-AFTRA strongly condemns CBS News' decision to seize Catherine Herridge's reporter notes and research from her office, including confidential source information. This action is deeply concerning to the union because it sets a dangerous precedent for all media professionals and threatens the very foundation of the First Amendment," the statement said.

Herridge was among the 20 CBS News employees fired last week as part of a larger wave of staffing cuts by the network's parent company, Paramount Global.

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UPDATE - Oil In Yo-Yo Mode, Erasing Previous Week's Gains Amid Supply-Demand Tussle

(updates lede, paragraphs 1-4)

NEW YORK, February 23 (Sputnik) - Crude prices closed lower on Friday, erasing all of the previous week's gains, as the tug-of-war over supply and demand kept the oil market volatile despite a broad rally since the start of the year.

West Texas Intermediate, the benchmark for US crude, settled the day down 2.7% at \$76.49 a barrel. For the entire week, the so-called WTI was down 3.4%, negating all of the prior week's gain of 3.1%

Since trading for February began, the US crude benchmark has seen swings, tumbling 7.4% in the first week before recovering 6.3% in the next. For all of February, WTI is still in the positive, with a gain of 1.2% that followed through with January's advance of almost 6%.

WTI aside, London-traded Brent, the global benchmark for crude, settled Friday's trade down 2.5% at \$81.62. For the week, it showed a loss of 2.2%, after the prior week's gain of 1.6%. For the month thus far, Brent is up 1.5% after January's rise of 4.6%.

Friday's swoon in both WTI and Brent was attributed to peace talks in Gaza, which traders said could tamp down the possibility of supply disruptions to crude shipments from the oil-rich Middle East.

Federal Reserve officials consistently signaling no cuts to US interest rates shortly also hurt sentiment in a market counting on credit easing for traders.

The Fed has kept US rates unchanged in a 5.25%-5.5% range since July last year. The majority of the central bank's policy-makers, in a meeting last month, voiced concerns about moving too soon to cut rates despite stronger-than-desired inflation.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, grew 3.1% in the year to January. The Fed's long-term target is to bring CPI growth to 2% or lower per annum.

Before the 2020 coronavirus outbreak, CPI rarely crossed 2% a year. In June 2022, the reading, however, hit a four-decade high of more than 9% per annum.

On the Gaza conflict front, truce talks were underway in Paris in what officials said could be the most serious push in weeks to strike peace in the Israel-Hamas war and secure the release of hostages held in Palestinian territory.

Ceasefire talks could ease geopolitical tensions that have gripped the Middle East since the latest round of fighting in Gaza began in October, oil analyst Tim Evans noted. Despite this, Iran-backed Houthi militants supporting Hamas continued to threaten vessels in the surrounding Red Sea, keeping a slight premium on oil prices.

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Blinken Says US Sanctions on Russia Effective, Will Have Long-Term Impact

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday that sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and its partners have already proven effective.

"I believe that already these sanctions, these restrictions, have had a significant impact on Russia," Blinken said during a press conference in Argentina.

The sanctions will have a growing, long-term impact on Russia and its ability to modernize, Blinken said.

Earlier on Friday, the US sanctioned hundreds of people and entities to mark the two-year anniversary of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, as well as the death of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

The sanctions package is the largest single action taken by the US, Blinken said.

On Thursday, International Monetary Fund (IMF) spokesperson Julie Kozack said that Russia's economy has surprised spectators in terms of strength and growth, despite sanctions efforts. However, the IMF expects sanctions and human capital issues to impact the Russian economy in the medium term, Kozack said.

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Biden's Approval Rating Drops to 38%, Approaching Record Low - Poll

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's approval rating has declined to 38%, one point away from his all-time low and significantly below the typical reelection benchmark, according to a Gallup poll released on Friday.

The poll tracked Biden's job approval ratings among US adults across six key issues including his overall job performance, the situation in Ukraine, the US economy, the Middle East conflict, immigration issues, and foreign affairs.

The poll revealed that public satisfaction with immigration issues fell to a "new low" of 28%, 3 points down from November. Biden's approval rating for handling the conflict between Israel and Hamas is down by 2 points to 30%.

The approval ratings for Biden's handling of the US economy and the Ukraine conflict have improved to 36% and 40%, respectively.

Biden's approval rating has remained below 44% since August 2021, and his average third-year rating of 39.8% ranks as the second lowest among post-World War II presidents during their first term, the pollster said.

The poll was conducted from February 1-20.

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US Stocks Extend Record Highs, Resuming February Rally

NEW YORK, February 23 (Sputnik) - US stocks extended their record highs on Friday, rallying for the week and resuming the February run-up on Wall Street after last week's hiatus.

With about two hours to settlement, the S&P 500, an index which tracks the top 500 US companies, hit an all-time high of 5,111, eclipsing Thursday's peak of 5,095. While the index was down 0.1% on the day, it was up 1.8% on the week, negating last week's drop of 0.4%. For February thus far, the S&P has gained about 5%, extending January's advance of 1.7%.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which serves as Wall Street's broadest equities indicator by following stocks of 30 large US corporations, reached a record high of 39,282, overwriting Thursday's peak of 39,149. Although the Dow was flat on the day, it showed a 1.3% gain on the week, after last week's slide of 0.1%. For all of this month, the Dow has risen about 2.5%, after January's gain of 1.2%.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises marquee tech names such as Google, Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Netflix, hit a fresh all-time high of 16,134, which erased the previous session's best of 16,062. While the Nasdaq was down 0.2% on the day, it was up 1.5% on the week, trumping last week's slump of 1.3%. For February thus far, the index has advanced 5.6%, after January's 1% gain.

Analysts attributed this week's rally on Wall Street to the anticipated boom in artificial intelligence and the resultant demand expected in semiconductors. This had driven stocks of most chip-making to new highs. One particular chip-maker stock that was in play this week was Nvidia. The company, which beat Wall Street's targets for its fiscal fourth quarter, added \$277 billion in value on Thursday alone, in what analysts described as the greatest single-day gain in market history.

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US Congressman Says Lawmakers Should Cut Other Spending to Offset Foreign Aid

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States should offset foreign aid spending by cutting equivalent amounts of spending on other areas, US Congressman Matt Gaetz said on Friday.

"We shouldn't have any foreign aid to any other country without corresponding cuts to our own

bloated federal budget,” Gaetz said during remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference. “If you want to send aid to Israel, fine. Pay for it by defunding the United Nations.” The US is neither the world’s police force nor its “piggy bank,” Gaetz said. The US government is saddling future generations with debt, while the country becomes weaker, Gaetz said. Gaetz’s remarks come amid discussions in the US Congress on legislation to provide Ukraine and Israel with billions of dollars in aid, to which some lawmakers have also demanded the inclusion of border security measures.

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#### US Congressman Says Arrest of Smirnov ‘Double Standard’ From Steele’s Trump Dossier

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department’s decision to charge former FBI informant Alexander Smirnov with allegedly lying to investigators about the Biden family represents a double standard from their handling of uncorroborated information provided by ex-informant Christopher Steele about former US President Donald Trump, US House Judiciary chair Jim Jordan said on Friday.

“It sure is quite a contrast that Christopher Steele can give false information about President Trump and he continues to get paid, [while] this guy, this Mr. Smirnov, can give false information — what they’ve said is false information — and he gets arrested,” Jordan said during an interview at the Conservative Political Action Conference.

Jordan called the situation a “double standard” of the US justice system.

A dossier compiled by Steele was reviewed by federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies as part of their investigations into alleged Trump-Russia ties. The FBI used the dossier as justification to spy on the Trump campaign.

However, a probe by US Special Counsel John Durham into the origins of the FBI’s investigation into alleged ties between Trump and Russia found that Steele’s sub-source, Igor Danchenko, never provided information corroborating Steele’s dossier. Danchenko described his own sourcing as “rumor and speculation,” Durham said.

The Durham report concluded that the FBI never should have launched its probe into alleged ties between Trump and Russia. Steele has yet to face criminal prosecution in relation to the matter. Danchenko was indicted on charges of lying to the FBI about the identities of his own sources, but was acquitted.

Earlier this month, the US Justice Department charged Smirnov with allegedly lying about Joe and Hunter Biden’s ties to Ukrainian energy company Burisma. Smirnov was arrested, ordered released by a judge then arrested again, which his lawyers have called a violation of constitutional rights.

The situation comes amid an impeachment inquiry by House lawmakers into alleged criminal activity by the Biden family, including foreign bribery and influence peddling.

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Oil Prices Fall by More Than 2%, Erasing Previous Week's Gains

NEW YORK, February 23 (Sputnik) - Oil prices appeared headed for a lower close Friday, in a drop erasing all of the previous week's gains, as a tug-of-war over supply-demand kept the market volatile despite a broad rally since the start of the year.

With 30 minutes to the day's settlement, West Texas Intermediate, the benchmark for US crude, was down 2.4% at \$76.75 a barrel. For the entire week, the so-called WTI was down 3.1%, negating all of the prior week's gain.

Since trading for February began, the US crude benchmark has seen swings, tumbling 7.4% in the first week before recovering 6.3% in the next. For all of February, WTI is still in the positive, with a gain of around 1% that followed through with January's advance of almost 6%.

WTI aside, London-traded Brent, the global benchmark for crude, was down 2.1% to \$81.89 in Friday's trade. For the week, it showed a 2% loss, after the prior week's gain of 1.6%. For the month thus far, Brent is up 1.4% and January's rise of 6.3%.

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Schumer Says Zelenskyy Told Him Ukraine Will Lose War With Russia Without US Aid

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Friday that Volodymyr Zelenskyy told him Ukraine would lose the conflict with Russia without US military assistance.

"President Zelenskyy told me and our delegation that Ukraine will lose the war with dire consequences for the Ukrainian people, the US, and democracy & freedom without this vital aid," Schumer wrote on X.

House Speaker Mike Johnson and the House must pass the Senate's national security bill as soon as possible, Schumer added.

Schumer is on a visit to Ukraine marking the second anniversary of Russia's special military operation. The congressional delegation, which also includes senators Jack Reed, Michael Bennet, Richard Blumenthal, and Maggie Hassan, met with Zelenskyy.

The visit comes after the US Senate passed a \$95 billion supplemental funding bill with \$60 billion in additional Ukraine aid and \$14.1 billion in security assistance for Israel, but no border security measures. House Speaker Mike Johnson said that the lower chamber has no plans to consider the current legislation after the Senate failed to propose "adequate" border security provisions.

Earlier this month, Rep. Anna Paulina Luna drafted the SCHUMER (Senators Can Help Underpin Military Engagement and Readiness) Act, a bill that seeks to require members of Congress who advocate for military aid to Ukraine to serve on the conflict's front lines

themselves.

Russia has consistently warned against the continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict. Moscow also sees the Ukraine conflict as a hybrid war led by the United States.

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RPT- Thousands of Trump Supporters Gather in South Carolina to Take Part in Rally-Correspondent

ROCK HILL (South Carolina), February 23 (Sputnik) – Thousands of people gathered in the US city of Rock Hill in South Carolina to participate in a campaign event with former US President Donald Trump, a Sputnik correspondent reports from the ground.

Trump is bringing his supporters together a day before the upcoming Republican primaries in South Carolina. The event has not started yet, but thousands of people have been seen in hats and scarves with Trump 2024 logos waiting in line for over a kilometer despite the changeable weather with rain, wind, and hot sun.

Trump is expected to address the audience at 4 p.m. EST (9 p.m. GMT).

South Carolina is the home state of a major Trump rival in the Republican race, Nikki Haley, who also served as governor here. The Republican primaries will take place here on February 24. Different polls predict a victory for Trump.

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Trump is expected to address the audience at 4 p.m. EST (9 p.m. GMT).

South Carolina is the home state of a major Trump rival in the Republican race, Nikki Haley, who also served as governor here. The Republican primaries will take place here

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Treasury's Adeyemo Says US Economy Too Strong for US Sanctions to Impact Dollar's Role

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo said on Friday that the US economy is too strong to be derailed by its use of sanctions.

"My view about this question of whether the use of sanctions is going to lead to some challenges to the dollar is that the thing that's going to matter to the dollar's role in the global economy is the strength of our economy ultimately ... I feel good about the fact that the dollar, America's financial system, is going to remain dominant in the world, and we're going to make sure that we take sanctions as a tool to be used in a way that is targeted and multilateral in order to make sure that they are effective," Adeyemo said during a panel discussion with the Council on Foreign Relations.

Earlier in the day, the United States announced 500 new sanctions against Russia that targeted its financial, defense and energy sectors.

In an interview with Tucker Carlson earlier this month, Russian President Vladimir Putin called the US's use of the dollar as a foreign policy tool one of the biggest strategic mistakes by the US leadership. Even American allies are now downsizing their US dollar reserves, with more countries shifting to national currencies in bilateral trade, Putin pointed out.

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Treasury's Adeyemo Says Expects Congress to Avert Government Shutdown in March

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo said on Friday that he expects US lawmakers to avert a government shutdown when a short-term spending bill expires in early March.

"My view is that we're not going to see the government shutdown, but in order for that to happen, it requires Speaker [Mike Johnson] and others in Congress to keep the deal that they've cut and that's what I expect to happen," Adeyemo said during a panel discussion with the Council on Foreign Relations.

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Blinken Says US 'Disappointed' by Israeli Plans to Expand Settlements

(Updates with additional details in para 6, provides background in para 7)

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is disappointed with Israel's plans to develop 3,000 new settler homes, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday. "On settlements: we've seen the reports, and I have to say we're disappointed in the

announcement," Blinken said during a press conference in Argentina.

Earlier this week, the Israeli government reportedly held a meeting on advancing plans in the coming days to develop thousands of settler homes in the West Bank.

The United States' long-standing policy has been that new settlements are counterproductive to an enduring peace, as well as inconsistent with international law, Blinken said.

The Biden administration maintains firm opposition to settlement expansion, Blinken said. Expanding settlements weakens, not strengthens, Israel's security, Blinken added.

Later in the day, White House National Security Communications adviser John Kirby said that new Israeli settlements are "counterproductive to the cause of peace" with the Palestinians and admitted that they constitute a breach of international law.

On February 1, US President Joe Biden issued an executive order to implement new measures against those behind the violence in the West Bank, including the use of sanctions. After that, Washington sanctioned four Israeli citizens who had "directly perpetrated violence, and those who have engaged in repeated acts of intimidation, property destruction, leading to the forced displacement of Palestinian communities," the White House press office said.

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Canada Imposes Russia-Related Sanctions on 10 Individuals, 153 Entities - Ministry

(Adds details in lede, paras 5-7; background in paras 8-9)

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – Canada on Friday announced a new batch of Russia-related sanctions targeting 10 individuals and 153 entities and slapped export bans on goods that could be used in the production of weaponry intended for Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

"The Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, today announced that Canada is imposing additional sanctions on 10 individuals and 153 entities under the Special Economic Measures (Russia) Regulations," Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said in a statement.

Among those sanctioned are Russian President Vladimir Putin's aide Igor Levitin, as well as businessmen Sergei and Nikolai Sarkisov.

The sanctions, however, mainly target Russia's defense industry sector. The sanctions list includes Russian Helicopter Systems, defense corporation Almaz-Antey, Ilyushin Aviation Complex, Reshetnev Information Satellite Systems, Voentorg and Voentorg-Retail. The sanctions also target the Russian Defense Ministry's Newspaper Krasnaya Zvezda and the Federal News Agency.

The list also includes insurance firms RESO-Garantia and AlfaStrakhovanie, the Bank of Saint Petersburg and the world's largest titanium producer VSMPO-AVISMA.

In addition, Ottawa has also introduced export restrictions on several goods that could be used in the production of weaponry intended for Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, GAC added.

"The prohibition applies to explosives, including detonators, that are used in the mining and construction industry. The export ban also includes an additional 20 controlled items that are

known to be used by Russia to produce and manufacture weapons," the ministry said.

In response to the new batch of sanctions, Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik that the measures were meaningless and would not influence Russia's sovereign policy. The diplomat said retaliation would follow.

Since 2014, Canada has imposed sanctions on more than 2,900 individuals and entities in Russia as well as alleged "enablers" in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova.

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Russian Envoys Left UNGA on Ukraine Following Nebenzia's Speech - Correspondent

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia and his Deputy Dmitry Polyanskiy left on Friday the UN General Assembly Hall during a meeting on Ukraine after Nebenzia delivered his speech, while Russia's diplomatic expert remained in the seat.

The Russian Mission to the UN told Sputnik that it was not supposed to be a gesture and the seat did not remain empty.

The diplomats left during a speech by Deputy Prime Minister of Luxembourg Xavier Bettel, who was offended by their departure, saying that there can be no dialogue with the Russians.

In diplomacy, leaving seats can be interpreted as a gesture of disagreement with the topic or the speaker, yet it can be done purely because the person has more important work arrangements to fulfill.

Earlier today, Nebenzia said in his speech that anyone capable of an independent analysis knows this meeting serves "solely to promote a political agenda."

Today the United Nations is having two meetings on Ukraine - one in the General Assembly Hall and the second one at the UN Security Council. Some UN members feel the need to remember two years since the Russian Special Operation in Ukraine began.

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White House Says US to Take More Action Against Russia Over Navalny's Death

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The United States will take further action against Russia soon in connection to Alexey Navalny's death, White House National Security Communications adviser John Kirby said on Friday.

"You can expect more from the administration with respect to holding the Kremlin accountable for Mr Navalny's death," Kirby told reporters in light of the 500 sanctions the United States rolled against Russian financial, defense, and other sectors.

Last week, the Russian prison service said that Navalny died while incarcerated, adding that an investigation into the cause of death is underway. President Joe Biden said on the same day

that the United States is unaware of how exactly Navalny died but he nevertheless blamed Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin has called such statements by Western politicians outrageous and unacceptable.

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UPDATE - Canadian Sanctions 'Meaningless,' Will Not Influence Russia's Sovereign Policy – Stepanov

(Adds background in paras 2-3, details in paras 5-7)

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – Canada's latest batch of sanctions on Russia are "meaningless" and will not influence Russia's sovereign policy, Russian Ambassador to Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik on Friday.

The Canadian government began to sanction Russian citizens and entities in 2014, following Crimea's reunification with Russia by means of a referendum. The list has now surpassed 2,900 names since the onset of Russia's special military operation in February 2022 and includes alleged "enablers" in Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova.

Stepanov had noted back in November that sanctions imposed on Russia by Canadian authorities confirmed the "anti-democratic" nature of the government in Ottawa.

"Another round of sanctions by [Prime Minister Justin] Trudeau's cabinet is meaningless, just like all previous measures of this kind. Russian citizens and organizations couldn't care less. Sanctions cannot and will not influence Russia's sovereign policy. And, of course, a response will follow," Stepanov said.

On Friday, Canada imposed new Russia-related sanctions on 10 individuals and 153 entities. Among those sanctioned were Russian President Vladimir Putin's aide Igor Levitin and businessmen Sergei and Nikolai Sarkisov.

Among other notable names, are Russian Helicopter Systems, defense corporation Almaz-Antey, Ilyushin Aviation Complex, Reshetnev Information Satellite Systems, Voentorg and Voentorg-Retail. The list includes insurance firms RESO-Garantia and AlfaStrakhovanie, the Bank of Saint Petersburg, lithium producer VSMPO-AVISMA, the Russian Defense Ministry's Newspaper Krasnaya, and the Federal News Agency.

Global Affairs Canada said the sanctions were announced to mark the second anniversary of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine and are aimed at obstructing Moscow's ability to pursue its military endeavor by destabilizing its defense industry.

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Blinken Says US Sanctions on Russia Effective, Will Have Long-Term Impact

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday that sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and its partners have already proven effective.

"I believe that already these sanctions, these restrictions, have had a significant impact on Russia," Blinken said during a press conference in Argentina.

The sanctions will have a growing, long-term impact on Russia and its ability to modernize, Blinken said.

Earlier on Friday, the US sanctioned hundreds of people and entities to mark the two-year anniversary of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, as well as the death of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

The sanctions package is the largest single action taken by the US, Blinken said.

On Thursday, International Monetary Fund (IMF) spokesperson Julie Kozack said that Russia's economy has surprised spectators in terms of strength and growth, despite sanctions efforts. However, the IMF expects sanctions and human capital issues to impact the Russian economy in the medium term, Kozack said.

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Blinken Says US 'Disappointed' by Israeli Plans to Expand Settlements

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is disappointed in Israel's plans to develop 3,000 new settler homes, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday. "On settlements: we've seen the reports, and I have to say we're disappointed in the announcement," Blinken said during a press conference in Argentina.

Earlier this week, the Israeli government reportedly held a meeting on advancing plans in the coming days to develop thousands of settler homes in the West Bank.

The United States' long-standing policy has been that new settlements are counterproductive to an enduring peace, as well as inconsistent with international law, Blinken said.

The Biden administration maintains firm opposition to settlement expansion, Blinken said. Expanding settlements weakens, not strengthens, Israel's security, Blinken added.

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Biden To Welcome Italy's Prime Minister Meloni in White House On March 1 - White House

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will welcome Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to the White House on March 1, highlighting the enduring partnership between the United States and Italy, the White House said in a statement on Friday.

"President Biden will welcome Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni of Italy to the White House on March 1 to reaffirm the strong relationship between the United States and Italy," the statement

said.

The leaders plan to discuss shared strategies for tackling global challenges, the statement said. "They will discuss shared approaches to address global challenges, including their commitment to continue supporting Ukraine as it confronts Russia's aggression, preventing regional escalation in the Middle East, delivering humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza, developments in North Africa, and close transatlantic coordination regarding the People's Republic of China," the statement said.

The statement added that they would also talk about Italy's G7 presidency and make plans together before the NATO Summit in Washington.

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UNGA Meeting on Ukraine Solely to Promote Political Agenda - Russian Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, February 23 (Sputnik) - Friday's meeting at the UN General Assembly on Ukraine is only a part of the Western political agenda and does not reflect reality, the Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Friday.

"Anyone who is capable of an independent unbiased analysis of the situation - it is obvious that the topic under discussion today at the United Nations General Assembly has nothing to do with reality and serves solely to promote a political agenda," Nebenzia said in the United Nations hall during a meeting on Ukraine.

The truth is very uncomfortable for our Western colleagues because they would have to admit that they provoked Ukraine, he added.

On Friday the United Nations is having two meetings on Ukraine - one in the General Assembly Hall and the second one at the UN Security Council. Some UN members feel the need to remember two years since the Russian Special Operation in Ukraine has started.

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Canadian Sanctions 'Meaningless,' Will Not Influence Russia's Sovereign Policy – Stepanov

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – Canada's latest batch of sanctions on Russia are "meaningless" and will not influence Russia's sovereign policy, Russian Ambassador to Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik on Friday.

"Another round of sanctions by [Prime Minister Justin] Trudeau's cabinet is meaningless, just like all previous measures of this kind. Russian citizens and organizations couldn't care less. Sanctions cannot and will not influence Russia's sovereign policy. And, of course, a response will follow," Stepanov said.

On Friday, Canada imposed new Russia-related sanctions on 10 individuals and 153 entities. Among those sanctioned were Russian President Vladimir Putin's aide Igor Levitin, as well as

businessmen Sergei and Nikolai Sarkisov.

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Canada Sanctions Russian Defense Ministry's Newspaper Krasnaya Zvezda, Federal News Agency

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – The Canadian government sanctioned on Friday as part of its latest sanctions package on Russia the Russian Defense Ministry's Newspaper Krasnaya Zvezda as well as the Federal News Agency.

The Canadian government began to sanction Russian citizens and entities in 2014, following Crimea's reunification with Russia by means of a referendum. The list has now surpassed 2,900 names since the onset of Russia's special military operation in February 2022 and includes alleged "enablers" in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova.

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Canada Sanctions Russia's Bank of Saint Petersburg, World's Largest Titanium Producer

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – Canada on Friday sanctioned Russia's Bank of Saint Petersburg as well as VSMPO-AVISMA, the world's largest titanium producer, as part of its latest sanctions batch.

The Canadian government began to sanction Russian citizens and entities in 2014, following Crimea's reunification with Russia by means of a referendum. The list has now surpassed 2,900 names since the onset of Russia's special military operation in February 2022 and includes alleged "enablers" in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova.

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US Cracks Down on Russian Exploration Giant Rosgeologia, Subsidiaries – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – The United States has imposed sanctions on the Russian state exploration company Rosgeologia and its subsidiaries and affiliates as part of the largest sanctions package to date in response to the death of Alexei Navalny and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the US Department of the State said on Friday.

Besides Rosgeologia itself, the United States also imposed sanctions on its subsidiary companies, including Yuzhmorgeologiya and Zarubezhgeologiya, as well as two research vessels, Yuzhmorgeologiya and Gelendzhik, owned by the former, for operating in the

engineering sector of the Russian economy, the US State Department said in a fact sheet.

The new sanctions also target eight companies affiliated with Rosgeologia, including NPTS NEDRA AO, Irkutskgeofizika AO, Severo Vostochnoe PGO, Severo Kavkazskoe PGO, Sibirskoe PGO, Chelyabinskgeosemka AO, Dalnevostochnoe PGO, Dalmorneftegeofizika AO, and Sevmorneftegeofizika (SMNG), the fact sheet said.

In relation to SMNG, the United States imposed sanctions on six vessels belonging to it and exploited for geological exploration: Akademik Primakov, Professor Logachev, Akademik Lazarev, Akademik Nemchinov, and Professor Ryabinkin, according to the fact sheet.

Moreover, the department of the Treasury is also cracking down on three more companies managed by Rosgeologia: Vniigrugol AO, Vniizarubezhgeologiya VZG AO, and Amige AO, the fact sheet added.

The United States is also designating the Bavinet, a survey and research vessel operated by Amige, and the Akademik Aleksandr Karpinskiy, a research vessel operated by JSC Polar marine Geosurvey Expedition, also managed by Rosgeologiya.

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US Sanctions Cynical Attempt to Interfere in Russia's Internal Affairs –Ambassador Antonov

WASHINGTON, February 23 (Sputnik) – The new US sanctions against Russia are another cynical attempt to interfere in Russia's internal affairs, but won't make Moscow abandon its core national interests, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov said on Friday.

“The new illegitimate restrictions are another blatant and cynical attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of the Russian Federation to force us to abandon the protection of our fundamental national interests, to cause a crack in the Russian society on the eve of the presidential election, a key moment for any democratic country,” Antonov said in a statement.

Earlier on Friday, the Biden administration unveiled the largest package of sanctions to date against more than 500 organizations and individuals in Russia and other countries for their alleged involvement in the death of Alexei Navalny and for supporting Russia in the ongoing conflict with Ukraine.