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Russian Defense Ministry: Damaged Moskva Cruiser Sunk After Entering Stormy Waters

The Russian Ministry of Defense announced on Thursday that the missile cruiser Moskva had sunk in the Black Sea.

"During the towing of the Moskva cruiser to the port of destination, the ship lost its balance due to damage to the hull received during the fire following the detonation of ammunition. The ship sank in a stormy sea," the ministry said in a statement.

The Defense Ministry said on Wednesday that Moskva had been hit by heavy fire, which partially detonated its ammunition stores. The crew was evacuated successfully and the fire was contained by late Wednesday, averting the risk of further ammunition detonation. Ukraine has claimedthat Moskva was hit by two R-360 Neptune anti-ship missiles.

After containing the fire, the Moskva was being towed back to Sevastopol for repairs.

The Slava-class guide-missile cruiser Moskva was built in 1979, not far from where it sank: in the 61 Communards shipyard in Nikolaev, then part of the Soviet Union. She was named Slava (glory) and was the lead ship of the Slava class, also known as Project 1164 Atlant. She was renamed Moskva (Moscow) in 2000, when she was also named flagship of Russia's Black Sea Fleet.

Slava/Moskva played a prominent role in regional events, including holding the Soviet delegation in 1989 during talks in Malta between Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev and US President George HW Bush.

The warship supported the 2008 intervention into Georgia in defense of Abkhazian independence and engaged in combat with Georgian Navy warships before being posted in the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi. During the events of March 2014, when Crimea seceded from Ukraine and voted to join the Russian Federation, Moskva blockaded the Ukrainian fleet in Lake Donuzlav. In 2015, Moskva was sent to the Eastern Mediterranean to play an air defense role in support of Russian operations in Syria.

The Russian special military operation in Ukraine was ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin on February 24 following requests by the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (DPR and LPR) to protect them against escalating attacks by Ukraine. Putin argued that the Donbass republics were subjected to "genocide" by Kiev and that Moscow was left with no other choice but to defend them after the Ukrainian authorities had failed to implement the Minsk agreement for resolving the conflict.

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US Energy Dept, Consultants at Odds Over US Oil Output Expectations for 2022

After announcing a total boycott of Russian petroleum products last month, the Biden administration has faced increasing pressure to compensate for the loss and stem rising oil and gasoline prices.

Consultancy firm East Daley Capital told Reuters on Thursday that by the end of the year, US oil production will have increased by 1.29 million barrels per day over 2021 numbers, putting total US oil production reaching 12.86 million barrels per day. That's 23% higher, or 300,000 barrels worth, than its projections about 2022 made last December.

Most of the anticipated increase will come from new wells sunk in the Permian Basin, a large region in western Texas and southeastern New Mexico that is rich in petroleum and natural gas deposits.

However, the East Daley projections go well beyond what the US Energy Information Agency (EIA) expects to happen.

The Department of Energy subsidiary said on Tuesday that higher costs of production and labor would combine with inflation to dampen the expansion of production. The EIA anticipated only a modest increase of 0.8 million barrels per day, reaching 12.0 million barrels per day by the end of the year. The trend will continue into 2023, they said, only increasing by 0.9 million barrels per day next year.

"It's hard to get pipe, sand, crews for drilling rigs, truck drivers," Mike Oestmann, CEO of Tall City Exploration, a company that drills oil wells in West Texas, told the Texas Tribune on March 25. He told the Austin-based outlet that the scarcity of supplies, equipment and people "is unlike anything I've ever seen."

That said, according to OilPrice.com, there were 332 drilling rigs in the Permian Basin last week - the highest count since April 2020.

Pressure has increased for the US to expand its domestic oil production since the US sanctioned Russia in late February in response to Moscow's recognition of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics and moving military forces into the Donbass to stop escalating Ukrainian attacks. Further sanctions followed the launching of Russia's special "neutralization" operation in Ukraine on February 24, and in early March, Biden announced a total boycott of Russian petroleum products.

According to the Wall Street Journal, citing EIA data, the US imported 8% of its oil from Russia last year, or about 672,000 barrels a day.

Brent Crude stood at $108.8 a barrel on Thursday, down from its $130 high last month, but still about 20% higher than the $91 a barrel it traded at before US sanctions. According to the American Automotive Association (AAA), the average US gas price nationwide was 4.07 a gallon on Thursday, about 12 cents cheaper than the previous week.

Rising gas prices have put new pressures on commodity prices, which had already hit a 40-year high thanks to pandemic-driven trends. To offset the trend, the US Federal Reserve increased interest rates last month and signaled it plans to do so several more times into the summer, and Biden ordered a massive release of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. The plan calls for distributing 1 million barrels of oil from storage facilities to oil companies each day for the next six months - the largest such release in US history.

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Florida Governor DeSantis Signs 15-Week Abortion Ban Into Law

Florida became the latest US state to sharply restrict abortions after Governor Ron DeSantis signed a 15-week ban into law on Thursday.
"We are here today to protect life," DeSantis said at Nacion de Fe in Kissimmee on Thursday. "We are here today to defend those who can't defend themselves."
The bill slashes the latest date at which a woman can obtain an abortion by nine weeks, from 24 weeks to 15 weeks. The only exceptions are if the abortion is necessary to save a mother's life, prevent serious injury to the mother, or if the fetus has a fatal abnormality.
DeSantis' move is just the latest in conservative legislative victories against abortion, which have followed the US Supreme Court's hearing of several abortion cases late last year, including one in which the Mississippi government asked the high court to reconsider its decision in Roe vs. Wade. The 1973 case legalized abortion nationwide as part of a woman's right to privacy, and created a legal framework for regulating it.
Just hours earlier, Kentucky's General Assembly voted to overrideGovernor Andy Beshear's veto of a 15-week abortion ban. A day prior, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt signed a law prescribing felony charges for healthcare workers who perform an abortion in the state, unless the mother's life is in danger. Two weeks ago, Arizona Governor Doug Ducey signed the state's own 15-week abortion ban into law.
Another type of law passed in Texas last year, which Idaho attempted to emulate, seeks to ban abortions extremely early, at just six weeks after conception, and to enforce it by way of third-party lawsuits. The structure is designed to frustrate attempts by the courts to strike them down outright.
The laws are all in open defiance of the high court's decision in Roe, which said that states cannot restrict abortion at all during the first trimester, which ends at roughly the 13th week of pregnancy, and could regulate but not ban abortions during the second trimester, which ends at roughly the 28th week.
The governors of many of the states pushing tight abortion bans have each claimed their still is the most pro-life state in the country. Many of the same states have also passed laws restricting the rights of transgender people by defining people only by the gender they were assigned at birth, as well as regulating school education about sex and sexuality, including LGBTQ identities.

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US Politico-Media 'Incestuous Relationship' Driving 'Wartime Propaganda' CNN Hit Piece, Journo Says

Over the last 20 years, US corporate media outlets have populated their 24-hour news cycles with a bevy of commentators from the military-industrial complex, including former Pentagon chiefs, CIA directors, and directors of national intelligence, all while purging their airtime of antiwar voices such as Phil Donahue's.

US corporate news agency CNN on Thursday published the story "two US cities host Russia-backed radio station that spreads war propaganda" in which, like so many previous reports about Sputnik News Agency, they failed to offer more than the most cursory look at the story subject's point of view.

"None of the Sputnik hosts we reached out to would speak with us for this story," CNN's Alex Marquardt claims in the story. However, according to Sputnik journalist Garland Nixon, he agreed to an interview on the condition that it be broadcast live. CNN declined.

"The hosts can often be heard parroting Kremlin talking points on Ukraine," the bit says, which was produced by the show "Anderson Cooper 360." Its example? "Back Story" host Lee Stranahan saying he "already knew that Ukrainian Nazis were real."

An interesting point to contest, given that CNN ran an article about the Azov Battalion's "neo-Nazi history" barely two weeks ago. Of course, the network has also made a bad habit of using an Azov officer, Denis Prokopenko, as a source for several news reports over the last month and failed to disclose Azov's ideology.

"They claim to simply be offering a different viewpoint, asking questions, challenging the narrative, which often veers into seeing conspiracies, seeding doubt and distrust - classic elements of disinformation," the video continues.

"On public airwaves, even if a station is backed by a country allegedly committing war crimes, they can, in the US, continue to broadcast," Marquardt concluded, without a hint of irony.

Privatizing Censorship

Jim Kavanaugh, a writer at The Polemicist and Counterpunch, told Radio Sputnik's The Critical Hour on Thursday that the attack on Sputnik, like those that silenced RT America last month, is being driven by the US media, not by the US government, which is all-too-eager to take up the banner of wartime propaganda due to the "incestuous relationship between the media and the politicians."

"This is part of an offensive that's been in the works for a long time now, for many years, against media in general, against oppositional media, anything outside the Overton window of the government narrative. But it's also a part, right now, of really, a regime of wartime censorship that the United States and the American media" is engaged in, Kavanaugh told co-hosts Garland Nixon and Dr. Wilmer Leon.

Kavanaugh said that networks like CNN were demanding censorship of anti-war media "essentially without the pressure of the government because in that report, they say 'oh, the FCC says they can't stop it, do any content restriction or content censorship, but we're here telling you that they should.'"

In the CNN report, Marquardt asked Scottie Nell Hughes, a former CNN contributor and temporary fill-in host for Stranahan's radio show: "We know that Russian state media is putting

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out lies about this conflict, and I say that as someone who is on the ground in Ukraine, so why should the United States tolerate having Russian state media on its public airwaves?"

Kavanaugh pointed out that American media has been engaged in "wartime propaganda," making its posturing against what they call "disinformation" by Russian media hypocritical at best.

"They've acknowledged it: they are the vehicles for the American government telling lies about the war in order to prop up support for Kiev's side and in order to generate support for America to go into a war," he said. "This is very dangerous."

"What they're doing is putting pressure on [RM Broadcasting owner Arnold Farolito] and they're trying to put pressure on any Americans involved in this [Sputnik News operations] to stop it."

Indeed, the National Association of Broadcasters, a trade association and lobby group that's no stranger to censorship of the airwaves, demanded last month that US broadcasters pull the plug on any operations with "Russian-sponsored programming." NAB CEO Curtis LeGeyt said in a statement that "while the First Amendment protects freedom of speech, however, it does not prevent private actors from exercising sound, moral judgment."

Contrary to the fear that CNN tried to put behind the notion that Sputnik is "seeding doubt and distrust" about the American narrative, Kavanaugh said that was actually a good thing.

"'We can't have radio, media instilling doubt about the government'. That's just the opposite of what the media should be saying. They should be saying: 'our job is to tell you what the government won't and to show you why you should doubt the government," he said.

'Noble Lie' of Pro-War Propaganda

Leon recalled an NBC story from April 5 about how US media has consciously repeated US intelligence that "wasn't rock solid, officials said, to keep Russian President Vladimir Putin off balance."

"How dare you doubt the narrative of the government that admitted that it's lying to you," Leon said ironically, characterizing it as a type of "noble lie," a political ploy of social control dating back to Plato's Republic, which Leon summarized as "'we're lying to you because we have to."

The Howard University professor rejected the notion that Sputnik's reporting is simply "questioning" the dominant narrative: "we are providing evidence and analysis by those who know, that challenge the narrative."

"Every American knows they've been lied into war multiple times over the past two decades. I mean, let's go back to 'Remember the Maine," Kavanaugh said, recalling the role yellow journalism played in whipping up popular support for the Spanish-American War after the battleship USS Maine mysteriously sunk in Havana harbor in 1898.

The author said that in that situation, "the press is part of the government apparatus that is pushing you, manufacturing consent for war. And this is what's happening now. And for the media, for journalists to get up and say 'there's a real problem with any journalism, any media that sows doubt about that, that makes you think twice about that, about going to war, resist wartime propaganda that we're giving you,' I mean, that's just outrageous that a journalist could think that would be something that they should say or could say and have any credibility. But that's the stage we're at now and it's very frightening, and it's going to get worse, I think."

Another prescient example they cited was White House spokesperson Jen Psaki reportedly planning on leaving the Biden administration for a job at MSNBC, one of the agencies whose reporters are supposed to grill the press secretary daily and hold the government accountable.

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"From what's reported, she was negotiating between CNN and MSNBC while she was working for the White House. So the thought is, she was being deferential to both MSNBC and CNN, trying to negotiate the best position for herself," Leon noted.
"I'm not negotiating for a job with CNN or MSNBC, neither are you guys, and that's the point. There is this kind of incestuous relationship between the media and the politicians," Kavanaugh added.

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Lead Sarcophagus Found During Fire Restoration of Notre Dame to be Opened
By - Mary Manley

Paris, France suffered greatly in 2019 when their beloved Notre Dame Cathedral caught fire, devastating the Gothic church which dates back to the 12th century. The fire destroyed the cathedral's spire, most of the building's roof, and damaged the distinguished landmark.
Since Notre Dame's devastating fire in 2019, France has been working to reconstruct the Gothic cathedral which brings in roughly 13 million tourists every year.
As of November 24, 2020, those restorers said they had successfully removed all the charred scaffolding that would have otherwise risked collapsing. Rebuilders were also able to remove and dismantle the Grand Organ, a month ahead of schedule, according to Friends of Notre-Dame de Paris.
Last month, excavation works to prepare for the restoration of the cathedral's 330 ft. tall wooden roof ridge led to the discovery of several ancient tombs, including a 14th-century lead sarcophagus. Archaeologists were on the scene to ensure its unearthing was properly executed.
The French culture ministry reported that the tombs and sarcophagus were found beneath a layer of the cathedral's floor which was laid down in the 18th century, though they believe the lead sarcophagus most likely dates back to the 14th century.
Apart from being slightly dented after centuries of sitting beneath the heavy church floor, the ministry reportedly said the sarcophagus was in good condition.
Researchers threaded a small camera inside the coffin to get a glimpse of its secrets which they believe most likely belong to the remains of a prominent church dignitary.
"You can glimpse pieces of fabric, hair and above all a pillow of leaves on top of the head, a well-known phenomenon when religious leaders were buried," said Christophe Besnier, an expert from France's National Archaeological Institute. "The fact that these plants are still there indicates that the contents have been very well preserved."
French archaeologists announced on Thursday that they now plan to open the lead sarcophagus that was buried 65 feet underground after extracting it on Tuesday. For now, the sarcophagus and its contents are being held at a secure location before it makes its way to the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Toulouse.

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By opening the sarcophagus and studying its contents, researchers and forensic analysts are hoping to learn the gender and the state of health of the individual prior to death, as well as the individual's social ranking.

"If it turns out that it is in fact a sarcophagus from the Middle Ages, we are dealing with an extremely rare burial practice," said Besnier.

France's practice of studying deceased bodies falls under specific guidelines, so the person's remains will have to be studied "in compliance" with French laws, says Dominique Garcia, the head of Institut National de Recherches Archéologiques (INRAP).

"A human body is not an archaeological object," he said. "As human remains, the civil code applies and archaeologists will study it as such," Garcia added that for future uses, the body is treated as an anthropological asset as opposed to an archaeological object.

Following the fire at Notre Dame, French President Emmanuel Macron vowed in a televised address to the nation that he would rebuild the cathedral by 2024.

"Throughout our history, we have built towns, ports, churches. Many have been burnt due to revolutions, wars, due to mankind's mistakes. Each time, we have rebuilt them."

"The fire of Notre Dame reminds us that our story never ends. And that we will always have challenges to overcome. What we believe to be indestructible can also be touched," Macron said.

Rebuilding efforts will follow the designs of the 19th century architect Eugene Viollet-le-Duc, and will use original materials such as wood for roofing to ensure the authenticity of the cathedral's original Gothic style. Macron had suggested the idea of a more contemporary styled spire, but so few were interested in "upgrading" the historical treasure that the suggestion was dropped.

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Democratic Donor Ed Buck Sentenced to 30 Years for Drugging, Assaulting Vulnerable Black Men

By - Mary Manley

For nearly a decade, Buck preyed on vulnerable young Black men, some of them homeless, by overloading them with drugs and then sexually assaulting them while they were either immobile or unconscious. In two cases, the men he assaulted died due to fatal amounts of methamphetamine.

Ed Buck, 67, was once known as a wealthy Democratic political donor on the West Hollywood scene and viewed as an activist who played a role in issues such as fur bans and AIDS awareness; however, Buck's reputation will now take a major dive into disrepute. On Thursday, Buck was sentenced to 30 years in prison for drug, sex crimes, and the deaths of two vulnerable men.

The former political donor had a compulsive pattern of luring vulnerable Black men who were homeless and/or addicted to substances, to join him in his Laurel Avenue apartment, which one acquaintance described as "the grayest, drabbest place you'd ever seen." It's only decor: a

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table, a couch, a tool kit filled with crystal methamphetamine paraphernalia, sex toys, and large mirrors on the wall.

His "party and play" sessions, which refer to using methamphetamine during sex, were advertised on the gay hookup site Adam4Adam. A throng of men testified that Buck would offer them extra money if they allowed him to inject them himself. He forced the vulnerable men by threatening to withhold payment if they did not smoke enough or allow him to "slam," or inject crystal methamphetamine, into them.

Chelsea Norell, an assistant US attorney, wrote in a sentencing memo that Buck treated his male victims like "lab rats in his twisted experiment." Buck would lead his victims to overdose, and once they were either unconscious or immobile, he would continue to assault them either sexually and/or with more drugs.

During their search of Buck's apartment, cops found hundreds of graphic photos and videos that he took of men he had paid to inject meth while naked.

One victim said he has visited Buck's apartment at least 20 times over the course of six months. The victim used methamphetamine and GHB, and then sometimes, Buck would spray an ethyl chloride cleaning solvent on a rag and then hold it over the victim's mouth while he inhaled.

"[Buck] liked to see me where I was barely able to stand, barely conscious," the victim recalled. "He wanted me to be falling around all over the place," and then Buck "would be able to do whatever he liked as far as touching and everything of that sort."

One victim says he awoke from unconsciousness after Buck revved a chainsaw in front of him. The victim had been injected with a tranquilizer by Buck, and was unable to move until Buck became frustrated that the victim wasn't leaving his house and subsequently decided to power up a chainsaw and wave it in front of him.

Witnesses say that the former Democrat-donor would at times refer to Black men by using a racial slur.

"Buck always had a penchant for Black guys," said Charlie Harrison, an entrepreneur who was Buck's close friend between the 1970s and the 1980s. "He liked Black guys sexually. There was one guy he spent a lot of time with, but back then it was, as Buck said, mostly 'meaningful relationships by the hour.'"

Two men died at Buck's apartment. One victim was named Gemmel Moore, who Buck had flown into Los Angeles from Texas. Moore was only 26 when he died in July of 2017. The death was first ruled an accident, but an outcry made by Moore's mother reopened the investigation into whether or not the lethal dose of meth was self-administered.

"I'm the mother of a young man who was found dead last week in the West Hollywood home of powerful political activist Ed Buck," Moore'smother wrote to the publisher of WeHo Daily. "My son wasn't working and had no money when he left Texas. He didn't have the money to pay for his flight or buy the meth the coroner says killed him."

In 2017, following Gemmel Moore's death, civil rights attorney Nana Gyamfi accused the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department of "dragging their feet" in their investigation of Moore's death.

"It's very clear they are dragging their feet," Gyamfi said, who added that she had introduced detectives to several young men who said they had had drug encounters with Ed Buck. "We have no idea what they're waiting for. We ask them to treat Gemmel Moore like he's a rich white heterosexual woman," Gyamfi said. "They know how to do that. We know that [they] will get justice."

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What may have seemed like an accident at first soon looked more like a pattern when 18 months later, on January 7, 2019, a 55 year-old Black man named Timothy Dean was found dead at Buck's apartment. A toxicology report showed that the man had overdosed from a mix of methamphetamine with alcohol. Buck had wiped up Dean's vomit, blood and tossed syringes and pipes out of his window before bothering to call 911, according to Norell.

It was only when Buck allegedly caused the near-death of another man that authorities finally arrested him. In September of 2019, he had injected another male victim with three doses of methamphetamine. He survived and returned to Buck's apartment where he was again, about to overdose. Buck refused to call for help, and so the victim "sat on the couch, resigned to the same fate as Moore and Dean," wrote Norell. He then escaped and stumbled to a gas station that was close by and called 911. Buck was arrested a week later.

"He has killed two people and nearly a third," Norell wrote, "torn apart families, created and amplified debilitating addictions among the most vulnerable populations, and has done it all without an ounce of remorse."

"Buck used his money and privilege to exploit the wealth and power imbalances between himself and his victims, who were unhoused, destitute, and/or struggling with addiction," wrote Norell. "He spent thousands of dollars on drugs and party and play sessions that destroyed lives and bred insidious addictions."

Buck's lawyer, Mark Wekrsman, asked US District Judge Christina A. Snyder to see his client's "self-destructive behavior" through the eyes of an individual who himself has suffered abuse. When Buck was only 11 years-old, his father would sexually abuse him while his mother was out of the house. He was also molested by several Catholic priests during his childhood.

Buck became a millionaire at the age of 32 after flipping a struggling business, Rapid Info Franchise, and reselling it for $1 million. But by his 40s, he was starting to abuse amphetamines, which had been prescribed to him to treat narcolepsy. He then began abusing methamphetamine and was using it on a daily basis, from sometime in the 1990s until he was arrested in September 2019.

Buck's lawyers asked that he receive a sentence of ten years, but prosecutors argued that were he to be released back into society someday, he would continue to feed his compulsion and inject victims until the day he died.

"This man killed my son, Judge Snyder, please give this man the longest sentence allowed by law," said Moore's mother. "I warned him to stay away from Buck, now all I have is memories and his ashes."

Buck's Thursday sentencing saw him go to prison on two counts of distributing methamphetamine that resulted in the death of Moore and Dean, four counts of distributing methamphetamine, two counts of enticement to travel in interstate commerce for prostitution and one count of maintaining a drug involved premises.

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Videos: Clashes Erupt After Israeli Forces Storm Grounds of Al-Aqsa Mosque
By - Mary Manley

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Clashes broke out in the area come shortly after three Jews were arrested on Thursday by the Al-Aqsa Mosque's guards while attempting to conduct a Passover sacrifice at the holy site.
Clashes erupted at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem early Friday after Israeli forces stormed what is the third holiest site in Islam.
Video footage shared by Twitter user @SuleimanMas1 shows flash bangs being ignited, effectively prompting any nearby individuals to leave the area. As Israeli police appear to be using stun grenades, others are seen responding to Israeli forces by throwing random, found objects like stones.
Palestinian media service have since detailed that Israeli forces fired tear gas canisters into the tribal prayer hall of the Al-Aqsa Mosque.
A video shows some individuals shooting fireworks in retaliation. It is unclear which "side" of the conflict is shooting the fireworks.
Press TV News reported that at least 17 Palestinians were injured after Israeli forces stormed the mosque firing tear gas and other harmful weapons at the worshippers.
The Red Crescent in Jerusalem reported "seven injuries to the upper extremities of the body were evacuated from Al-Asbat Gate to Al-Quds Hospitals, and there are still a number of injuries inside Al-Aqsa Mosque."
This is not the first time Israeli police have attacked worshipers at the Al-Aqsa Mosque.
In July of 2018 Israeli soldiers stormed the holy site firing tear gas and stun grenades at Muslim worshipers. In the 2018 attack at least 15 Palestinians were injured, including three guards of the mosque.
Tensions between Palestinians and Israelis have been growing in a lead-up to Ramadan, according to analysts. “We are moving gradually towards an escalation – the conditions are ripe for an explosion,” Jerusalem-based political analyst Mazen Jaabari told Al Jazeera.
In May 2021, tensions reached a new level and saw Israeli and Hamas forces launching repeated strikes on one another over a period of 11 days.

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Prince Harry and Meghan Visit Queen Elizabeth for the First Time in UK Since Breaking Royal Ties
By - Mary Manley

The visit follows Prince Harry’s absence at the memorial service to his late grandfather, Prince Philip, whom Queen Elizabeth II had been married to for 73 years. The visit may have been prompted by the Queen’s strike of ill health in February when she tested positive for COVID-19, which left her “very tired and exhausted.”
A spokesperson for the Duke and Duchess of Sussex confirmed that the couple visited the Queen at her home, Windsor Castle. The visit was a stop en route to the Invictus Games in the Hague, of which Prince Harry is founder of. The Invictus Games is an international sporting

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event in which injured or sick servicemen, both those injured or still serving, play various sports as a means of recovery.

This is the first time in two years that the couple has visited the Queen Elizabeth after moving to Meghan's home state, California. Harry was last in the UK sans Meghan for the unveiling of a statue of his late mother, Princess Diana. Harry had been joined by his brother, Prince William, on July 1, 2021 to unveil the memorial on what would have been the princess's 60th birthday.

The two broke ties from the family by stepping down as senior royals on January 8, 2020, following Meghan's mistreatment by the UK press, as well as what Harry called a "lack of support and lack of understanding" from other senior members of the royal family.

The relationship between the couple and members of the royal family grew awkward after the couple did a bombshell interview with Oprah Winfrey in which they revealed that a certain royal family member had made a racial comment about how "dark" their baby, Archie, was going to be once born because Meghan is Black.

The couple's delay for visiting could have been prompted by a series of issues: the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, as well as the birth of their second child in June of last year. She is named Lilibet Diana in honor of both the queen and Princess Diana.

In addition to these delays, Prince Harry says he has been facing challenges regarding his royal security privileges. A Home Office decision had previously ruled that he would be unable to pay for police protection himself while in England, leaving him and his family at risk in visiting the UK.

The couple's return to the UK to visit the queen may have been prompted by her recovery from COVID-19, which the 95 year-old monarch says left her "very tired and exhausted." The queen will not be attending this year's Easter service and will be celebrating her 96th birthday on April 21. Her Platinum Jubilee will be celebrated in June.

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Elon Musk Wants to Make Twitter's Algorithm Open Source, Enable Free Speech
By - Ian DeMartino

Twitter and other social media sites have been struggling with regulating speech on their platforms. Billionaire Elon Musk has been advocating for free speech in public forms and made a bid to purchase Twitter earlier today.

Hours after publicly making a bid to buy Twitter outright for $41.3 billion and days after becoming its largest stock holder, Elon sat down for a long form interview during TED2022 Conference in Vancouver where he explained his vision for the social media company.

Musk called Twitter a "town square" and that having free speech in that space is important for civilization's survival, though he emphasized that Twitter, like all public forums, are beholden to the laws of the countries they operate out of. Calling for direct violence on someone would not get a free pass on Musk's Twitter, but most other forms of speech would.

"I think when in doubt, let the speech exist. If it is a gray area, let the tweet exist," the world's richest man said. "Maybe if it's controversial, don't promote the tweet. I'm not saying I have all

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the answers here. I do think that we want to be very reluctant to delete things and be very cautious with permanent bans. I think time outs are better than permanent bans."

Critical to Musk's vision is open sourcing Twitter's algorithm that decides which tweets get promoted or demoted.

"I think the issue is having a black box algorithm that promotes some things and not other things. I think it can be quite dangerous. I think the code should be on Github, so people can look through it and say 'I see a problem here, I don't agree with this,' then they can highlight issues and suggest changes."

Open source software is when code is posted in a public forum, most commonly but not necessarily on sites like Github, that enables anyone to audit and suggest changes to the code. Programmers can also copy the code, make changes and use it for their own projects in a process called "forking."

Some of the most popular software in the world is open sourced. The operating system Linux is a prime example, but there are others. The web browser Firefox, the messaging app Signal, the coding language Python, the graphics and animation tool Blender, Bitcoin and most other cryptocurrencies are all open source software.

Typically, successful open source projects are more secure, and often more feature-rich than their closed source counterparts. With potentially thousands or tens of thousands of programmers looking over the public code, bugs and vulnerabilities are quickly sussed out.

If Musk doesn't accept those changes, the algorithm will be out there free for anyone to take, use and modify on their own social media site.

"It won't be perfect. But we want to have the perception and reality that speech is as free as reasonably possible. A good sign of free speech is that if someone you don't like is allowed to say something you don't like. And it is damn annoying when someone you don't like says something you don't like. That is a sign of a healthy functioning free speech situation."

But what about critics who worry that having the world's richest man hold the keys to the world's most popular "town square," the interviewer asked.

"You have Mark Zuckerberg owning Facebook*, Instagram and Whatsapp and a share ownership structure that will have Mark Zuckerberg the fourteenth still controlling those entities. Quite literally. We won't have that at Twitter."

The multibillionaire also stressed that he would not be editing tweets himself and that the important thing is that everyone knows how the algorithm works and the platform is open about it when things are changed, demoted or promoted.

The talk then moved on to Musk's other plans for Twitter, including the often requested edit button. Musk said it is definitely coming if he has his way. To avoid people taking advantage of likes and retweets of a popular statement by editing their tweet to say something else entirely, Musk suggested that he may make it so editing a tweet clears out its retweets and likes. He may also limit the amount of time the edit button is available on a tweet.

Asked if he had the funding secured to buy Twitter, the world's richest man simply replied "I have sufficient assets," a comment that brought laughter to the crowd.

Besides Twitter, Musk also talked about his fights with the SEC, robot butlers, Tesla's past, Dogecoin, and what he thinks it will take to make sustainable energy a reality.

*Facebook is an organization banned in Russia

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US Mortgage Rates Above 5%, Highest in More Than a Decade
By - Ian DeMartino

A large number of first time home buyers, combined with the supply chain issues and construction halts brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, caused housing prices to skyrocket through 2021 and early 2022. The Federal Reserve is responding by raising interest rates. Mortgage rates have risen by 2% since the start of the year, pushing them higher than 5% for the first time in eleven years.

That, combined with record high home prices, are making it harder than ever for Americans to buy their first home. Just a year ago the interest rate was 3.04%, and it was even lower in 2020. But in an attempt to bring housing prices down and fight inflation by making borrowing more difficult, the Federal Reserve has been gradually increasing interest rates.

That strategy may pay off; online searches for “homes for sale” have dropped 10% recently, but the immediate result is a combination of high home prices and high interest rates that are pricing many first time home buyers out of the market. The median price of a home has risen from $209,200 in December 2020 to $357,300 today.

With the 2% increase, borrowers will be paying an additional $115 per month for every $100,000 financed. Adding in the increase in housing prices and buyers could be spending $600 or more extra per month for the same house.

The low rates buyers enjoyed before this year are credited with helping revive the housing market after the 2008 crash. However, while construction slowed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and supply chain issues, scores of people started looking to move to houses that better fit America’s increasingly remote work habits, causing prices to skyrocket.

While relief may not be coming anytime soon, the trend is still moving upwards and 5% is not the highest we have seen in relatively recent times. In 2007 and 2008, interest rates exceeded 6%.

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Biden Nominates Michael Barr as Fed Bank Regulator After Raskin Withdrawal

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday he is planning to nominate Michael Barr as the Fed's big banks regulator in his second attempt to fill the post.

"Today, I am announcing my intent to nominate Michael Barr as the next Vice Chair for Supervision of the Federal Reserve. Michael brings the expertise and experience necessary for this important position at a critical time for our economy and families across the country," Biden said in statement.

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According to Biden, Barr - who served as Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Financial Institutions under President Barack Obama - has played a critical role in protecting consumers. "I will work with Senate Banking Committee Chair Sherrod Brown to move Barr's nomination forward quickly, and urge the Senate to swiftly confirm the four eminently qualified nominees for the Board of Governors—Jerome Powell, Lael Brainard, Philip Jefferson, and Lisa Cook—currently awaiting a vote," the president added.

In March, Biden said that he was withdrawing his nomination of economist Sarah Bloom Raskin to the board of the Federal Reserve due to opposition by Senate Republican rivals, urging them to fast-track instead four other names he put up for governance of the central bank.

Raskin's nomination was opposed by Senate Republicans who feared she would be too aggressive when in policing climate risks within the financial system and would overstep the unelected central bank's boundaries. That aside, they alleged that she helped a hedge fund obtain a coveted master account at the Federal Reserve, using her influence as deputy Treasury Department secretary.

Biden expressed regret about the opposition shown toward Raskin, saying her nomination had broad support — from the banking and financial services community, former members of the Federal Reserve's Board of Governors, multiple Nobel Prize winners, consumer advocates and respected economists from around the country.

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Blinken to Visit Panama April 19-20 for Conference on Migration - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit Panama on April 19-20 for a ministerial conference on migration, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel to Panama April 19-20 to co-host a Ministerial Conference on Migration and Protection with the Government of Panama. Following the commitments expressed at the Regional Migration Ministerial in Colombia in October 2021, Secretary Blinken and representatives of regional governments participating in the Ministerial will discuss collaboration on safe, orderly, and humane migration throughout our hemisphere," Price said.

Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas will join Blinken in Panama.

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UPDATE - Elon Musk Says Would Be 'Indefensible' Not to Put Twitter Purchase to Shareholder Vote

(Updates para 2 with Vanguard ownership percentage)

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WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Entrepreneur Elon Musk said that letting the Twitter board of directors decide whether to accept his offer to purchase 100% of the social media company's shares instead of putting the decision to a vote by shareholders would be indefensible.
Earlier on Thursday, Musk filed an offer with the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to purchase 100% of Twitter for $54.20 per share, valuing the company at $43 billion.
Musk is currently Twitter's second largest shareholder, having purchased 9.2% of the company earlier in April. Only Vanguard owns a larger percentage at 10.29%, according to an April 8 SEC filing.
"Absolutely. It would be utterly indefensible not to put this offer to a shareholder vote. They own the company, not the board of directors," Musk said via Twitter on Thursday in response to a question whether a rejection by the company's board of directors would be in opposition to the financial interests of the shareholders.
Musk said during a TED Talk forum that there is an alternative plan to take over the company if his offer is rejected. However, he also expressed doubts about whether he will be able to complete the acquisition.
Musk appeared at the event after Twitter's substantial shareholder Prince Alwaleed of Saudi Arabia said he was rejecting the takeover bid, which he said undervalued the company and its potential.
As one of Twitter's most-prolific users, Musk said his main concern is with the platform's overreach in moderating content and censorship. n March, he tweeted out a poll that asked Twitter users whether the site adhered to the principle of free speech.
"Given that Twitter serves as the de facto public town square, failing to adhere to free speech principles fundamentally undermines democracy," he said. "What should be done?" He subsequently declared himself a "free speech absolutist."

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RNC Votes Not to Participate in US Presidential Commission-Organized Debates - Release

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The Republican National Committee (RNC) voted unanimously to no longer participate in debates in the United States organized by the Commission on Presidential Debates, the RNC said in a statement.
"The Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) is biased and has refused to enact simple and commonsense reforms to help ensure fair debates including hosting debates before voting begins and selecting moderators who have never worked for candidates on the debate stage," RNC Chairwoman Rona McDaniel said in the statement on Thursday.
McDaniel said debates are an important part of the democratic process and the RNC is committed to free and fair debates. Consequently, the RNC pledged that Republicans are "going to find newer, better debate platforms to ensure that future nominees are not forced to go through the biased CPD in order to make their case to the American people."
McDaniel said this move will restore faith in American elections and ensure that Republican candidates can compete on a level playing field, the statement said.

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Dark Web Inside Trader 'The Bull' Pleads Guilty in US Court - Justice Department

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - A 30-year old Greek man who went by the online pseudonym "The Bull" pleaded guilty in a US court to insider trading on the so-called dark web, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"Damian Williams, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, announced today that Apostolos Trovias, a/k/a 'The Bull,' pled guilty and was sentenced earlier today to time served, following approximately eleven months in custody, in connection with his scheme to solicit and sell confidential, pre-release earnings, deal, and other information regarding public companies," the press release said on Thursday.

Trovias used websites on the dark web and encrypted messaging services to solicit and sell confidential information about publicly traded companies for his own enrichment, according to the press release.

Trovias designed and built a website called the Inside Information Auction Site to facilitate the purchase and sale of insider information, using a membership fee and commission model, the press release said.

Law enforcement arrested Trovias in Peru and extradited him to the United States for prosecution. Trovias was also ordered to pay $6,700 in forfeiture, the press release said.

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FBI Says N. Korea-Linked Hackers Responsible for Last Month's $620Mln Crypto Theft

WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The FBI said that the Lazarus Group and APT38 cyber criminal groups had connections to North Korea and were responsible for stealing $620 million in cryptocurrency.

"Through our investigation we were able to confirm Lazarus Group and APT38, cyber actors associated with the DPRK [North Korea], are responsible for the theft of $620 million in Ethereum reported on March 29," the FBI said in a statement on Thursday.

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Engineers Halt Artemis 1 Fuel Loading Rehearsal Again After New Hydrogen Leak - NASA

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WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - Flight engineers have once again halted the repeatedly troubled and delayed wet dress rehearsal of the Artemis 1 moon rocket after a new hydrogen leak from the tail service mast, a NASA official blog announced.

"While loading liquid hydrogen (LH2) on the rocket's core stage earlier this afternoon, engineers detected a leak on the tail service mast , which is located at the base of the mobile launcher and connects to the core stage," the blog said on Thursday.

Engineers then stopped loading liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen (LOX) on the core stage. The launch director gave approval for teams to chill down the interim cryogenic propulsion stage (ICPS) liquid hydrogen lines to collect additional data and they have completed that activity, NASA said.

"Engineers will not load LH2 or LOX into the ICPS tanks, due to an issue with a helium check valve experienced several days ago. When teams paused propellant loading earlier today, there was about 49% of LOX on the core stage and about 5% of LH2 was loaded into the core stage tank prior to the hydrogen leak," NASA added.

The terminal countdown also did not take place on Thursday due to the modified configurations and delays with propellant loading. Teams are reassessing the next steps and will determine a go-forward plan, according to NASA.

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Wall Street Down 2nd Week in Row Amid US Interest Rate Hike Fears

NEW YORK, April 15 (Sputnik) - Wall Street tumbled for a second week in a row after Federal Reserve Bank of New York President John Williams said that doubling down on interest rates was a "reasonable option" for battling inflation, intensifying worries that the economy might go into recession due to the central bank's actions.

The three major US stock indexes - the S&P 500, the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the Nasdaq Composite - fell by an average of 1.2% at Thursday's close. On a weekly basis, they were down 2.2% on the average, closing the week a day earlier than usual due to the Good Friday holiday.

Stocks lost in three of the week's four sessions while Treasury yields rose on speculation that the Fed will raise interest rates aggressively to combat decades-high inflation. The expiration of stock options on Thursday amplified equity market movements.

In Thursday's trade, the yield on the ten-year US Treasury note topped 2.8% after Williams said that speeding up the pace of monetary tightening to include half-percentage-point hikes is a reasonable option.

The S&P 500 - which groups the top 500 US stocks - finished the day down 54 points, or 1.2%, at 4,393. For the week, it fell 2.4%.

The Nasdaq Composite - which houses the biggest technology names of the world, including Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google - closed Thursday down 293 points, or 2.1%, at 13,351. For the week, the Nasdaq lost 3.9%.

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The Dow, which lists travel, aviation and cross-industry value stocks, settled the day down 113 points, or 0.3%, at 34,451. For the week, the Dow fell 0.4%.
Unrelenting inflation pressure has forced Federal Reserve policy-makers to embark on the fastest pace of interest rate hikes in 40 years to measure up to price growth.
After slashing rates to nearly zero at the height of the COVID-19 outbreak, the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, or FOMC, approved the first pandemic-era rate hike on March 16, raising rates by 25 basis points, or a quarter point
Many FOMC members have concluded since that the hike was too tame to rein in inflation galloping at its fastest pace since the 1980s and that more aggressive increases of 50 basis points may be needed in the future.
The central bank's typical target for inflation is just 2% a year - a level it considers "neutral." To get to this, it envisages that it will need six more rate hikes this year - one every monthly FOMC meeting.

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UPDATE - US Charges 3 Russian Officials for Weakening US Partnership With European Allies - Filing
(Modifies para 3, provides additional details in para 4)
WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) - The US government has charged Russia's Duma deputy chairman, his chief of staff and a staff member, for their part in an alleged disinformation scheme to weaken the United States' partnership with European allies and undermine Western sanctions, according to an indictment unsealed on Thursday.
"ALEKSANDR MIKHAYLOVICH BABAKOV, ALEKSANDR NIKOLAYEVICH VOROBEV and MIKHAIL ALEKSEYEVICH PLISYUK, the defendants, have operated an international foreign influence and disinformation network to advance the interests of the Russian Federation," the indictment said. "Through these operations aimed at influencing the course of international affairs, the defendants worked to weaken US partnerships with European allies, undermine Western sanctions."
The defendants are charged with three counts of conspiracy, including a conspiracy to act as an agent of a foreign government without notifying the US Attorney General, conspiracy to commit visa fraud and a conspiracy to violate the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, and they face a maximum sentence of 30 years in prison, US Justice Department said in a press release.
It is alleged that between 2012 and 2017 the three defendants schemed to advance Russia's foreign policy objectives as well as to impact US policy towards Russia through an array of actions, including the recruitment of at least one American citizen and attempts to meet with members of US Congress, the release said.
The indictment also provides for forfeiture of all kinds of the defendants' assets allegedly used to commit the offense, including any vessel, vehicle or aircraft.
The indictment is being unsealed amid an unprecedented economic, financial and other sanctions imposed on Russia in light of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine. Russia

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launched the special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops.
Russia has said the aim of its special operation is to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine and that only military infrastructure is being targeted.

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Oil Prices Up Almost 9% on Week After Losing 13% in Previous Fortnight

NEW YORK, April 14 (Sputnik) - Crude prices jumped almost 3% on Thursday and nearly 9% on the week as traders remained concerned that the European Union might phase in a ban on Russian oil imports.
Gains in oil were limited earlier in the day as Chinese refiners appeared set to cut by 6% crude throughput in March. The reduction would be on a scale last seen in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic two years ago.
The market, however, resumed its rally of the past two sessions after the US media reported that the European Union was moving toward adopting a phased-in ban of Russian oil, to give Germany and other countries time to arrange alternative suppliers.
Russia remains Europe's biggest energy supplier and any talk of the bloc looking for alternate supplies has been met with skepticism so far.
Soon after the media reports appeared, buyers swooped in on more lots of crude futures. Some shorts also covered their positions ahead of the Good Friday holiday, which meant a longer weekend for US markets.
Global crude benchmark Brent finished up $2.92, or 2.7%, on the day at $111.70 per barrel. For the week, Brent rose 8.7%, after two back-to-back weekly losses that left it down by 13%.
New York-traded US crude benchmark West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, settled Thursday's trade up $2.70, or 2.6%, at $106.95. For the week, WTI rose 8.8%, after the 13% tumble over two previous weeks.
"Heading into the long weekend, oil was vulnerable to some profit-taking, but a major pullback is still unwarranted given the supply situation and as economic slowdown concerns are still far from happening," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.
The International Energy Agency warned on Wednesday that roughly 3 million barrels per day of Russian oil could be shut in from next month, due to sanctions or buyers voluntarily shunning Russian cargoes.
Major global trading houses plan to curtail crude and fuel purchases from Russia's state-controlled oil companies from May to stay in compliance with Western sanctions, media reports on Wednesday.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, April 15 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS
* The United States expects to ship all of its new $800 million military aid package to Ukraine within four weeks, a senior US Defense Department official said on Thursday.
* Documents show that Ukrainian specialists have been working on the creation of delivery vehicles for weapons of mass destruction, Igor Kirillov, the head of the radiation, chemical and biological defense of the Russian Armed Forces, said.
* US President Joe Biden said that his administration is in the process of making a decision on which high-level official to send to Kiev.
* Ukrainian militants have mined a dam and an overpass in the Donbas, Col. Gen. Mikhail Mizintsev, the head of the Russian Defense Ministry's National Defense Control Center, said.

SHELLING OF RUSSIAN TERRITORY
* Governor of Russia's Belgorod Region Vyacheslav Gladkov said on Thursday that the Spodariushino village was shelled from Ukraine and added there were no civilian casualties.
* Gladkov said that another village, Zhuravlevka, was shelled from Ukraine, adding that several houses got damaged.
* Two Ukrainian combat helicopters crossed into the Russian airspace pn Thursday and made at least six strikes at residential buildings in the Bryansk Region, the Russian Investigative Committee said.
* Several people were injured as Ukrainian forces shelled the village of Klimovo located in Russia's Bryansk region some 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) from the border, Governor of the region Alexander Bogomaz said.

ENERGY MARKETS
* Polish state-owned oil and gas company PGNiG has challenged the decision of the European Union General Court that rejected a complaint against Gazprom's antitrust practices, the company said on Thursday.
* Banks of "unfriendly countries" are delaying payments for Russian energy, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.
* The Netherlands will not allow its companies to comply with Moscow's demand to pay for gas in rubles, Bloomberg reported on Thursday, citing the country's authorities.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS
* The United States in coming weeks will announce steps to crack down on Russia sanctions evasion, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.
* The United States has a "muscle memory" of cooperation with Russia and continues to work with Moscow on the Iran nuclear deal and the International Space Station, Sullivan said.
* There is malicious activity in cyberspace originating in the United States, and Moscow is taking actions to protect the country from cyberattacks, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
* The United States has not run out of options to put pressure on Russia with a view to bringing the Ukraine conflict to an end, Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said.

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RUSSIAN CRUISER MOSKVA INCIDENT

* Russia's guided missile cruiser Moskva has sunk amid bad weather while being towed to be repaired, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Thursday.

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US Committed 700 Switchblade Weapon Systems to Ukraine Since August - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The United States has committed 700 Switchblade weapon systems to Ukraine as part of seven drawdowns of military equipment totaling $3.2 billion since August, US Defense Department said in a press release.

The most recent US package of security assistance worth $800 million for Ukraine, announced by President Joe Biden on Wednesday, includes 300 Switchblades, 500 Javelin anti-tank missiles, 200 M113 armored vehicles as well as 16 Mi-17s helicopters.

At the end of March, the Defense Department committed 100 Switchblades, which are a combination of a drone and a missile, and they have already been delivered to Ukraine, according to US officials.

The Defense Department has been training in the United States a small number of Ukrainians on how to operate the Switchblades. At present, the Defense Department is considering options for additional training with respect to the most recent equipment dispatch, which also includes howitzers, counter artillery and the Sentinel air defense radars.

The United States remains the largest supplier of military aid to Ukraine among 30 other allies.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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Elon Musk Says Would Be 'Indefensible' Not to Put Twitter Purchase to Shareholder Vote

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - Entrepreneur Elon Musk said on Thursday that letting the Twitter board of directors decide whether to accept his offer to purchase 100% of the social media company's shares instead of putting the decision to a vote by shareholders would be indefensible.

Earlier on Thursday, Musk filed an offer with the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to purchase 100% of Twitter for $54.20 per share, valuing the company at $43 billion.

Musk is currently Twitter's largest shareholder, having purchased 9.2% of the company earlier in April.

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"Absolutely. It would be utterly indefensible not to put this offer to a shareholder vote. They own the company, not the board of directors," Musk said via Twitter in response to a question whether a rejection by the company's board of directors would be in opposition to the financial interests of the shareholders.
Musk said during a TED Talk forum that there is an alternative plan to take over the company if his offer is rejected. However, he also expressed doubts about whether he will be able to complete the acquisition.
Musk appeared at the event after Twitter's substantial shareholder Prince Alwaleed of Saudi Arabia said he was rejecting the takeover bid, which he said undervalued the company and its potential.
As one of Twitter's most-prolific users, Musk said his main concern is with the platform's overreach in moderating content and censorship. n March, he tweeted out a poll that asked Twitter users whether the site adhered to the principle of free speech.
"Given that Twitter serves as the de facto public town square, failing to adhere to free speech principles fundamentally undermines democracy," he said. "What should be done?" He subsequently declared himself a "free speech absolutist."

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State Dept. Says Reports About US Citizen Captured in Ukraine 'Not True'

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - US State Department spokesperson Ned Price on Thursday said reports about the capture of a US citizen in Ukraine by Russian forces are not true.
"I cannot confirm that because reports that this US citizen was captured in Ukraine are not true. I can not offer anything further due to privacy considerations," Price told reporters when asked about publications in Russian social media accounts that American Joseph Ward Clark is captured. "I have reason to believe that this individual safe."
Price declined to discuss details due to privacy considerations.

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Musk Hints at 'Plan B' for Twitter, But Says Not Sure as Takeover Bid Rejected

NEW YORK, April 14 (Sputnik) - Twitter's largest shareholder Elon Musk hinted on Thursday that he might have a "Plan B" for acquiring the rest of the stake in the social media giant that he did not already own, after another substantial shareholder rejected his takeover bid.
Appearing at a Ted Talk forum to discuss a wide range of business and personal issues, Musk was asked whether he had an alternative plan to take over Twitter, to which he said: "There is." But in the same breath, he said he was "not sure that I will actually be able to" complete the acquisition of the microblogging site.

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Musk was consistent about one thing though - that it was '"very important" to make Twitter "be [part of] an inclusive arena for free speech". That has been his stand since he announced his intent to delist the company off the stock exchange and take it private.
The chief executive of electric car-maker Tesla and cryptocurrency advocate did not elaborate on the so-called Plan B.
One of Twitter's most-prolific users, Musk's main concern with the microblogging site appeared to be over its moderation policies. In March, he tweeted out a poll that asked Twitter users whether the site adhered to the principle of free speech.
"Given that Twitter serves as the de facto public town square, failing to adhere to free speech principles fundamentally undermines democracy," he said. "What should be done?" He subsequently declared himself a "free speech absolutist".
Musk appeared at Thursday's TED Talk after Twitter's long-time and substantial shareholder Prince Alwaleed of Saudi Arabia said he was rejecting the takeover bid, which he described as below value.
"I don't believe that the proposed offer by @elonmusk ($54.20) comes close to the intrinsic value of @Twitter given its growth prospects," the billionaire Saudi prince, a substantial shareholder in many top US corporations and one of the world's most famous investors, wrote in a message issued on Twitter itself. "Being one of the largest & long-term shareholders of Twitter, @Kingdom_KHC & I reject this offer."
Musk's offer of $54.20 for a share of Twitter, which valued the company at $43 billion, came on Thursday after he bought an earlier stake of 9.2% in the company on April 4 at $49.97 per share or almost $3 billion.
Alwaleed owns 5.2% of Twitter, raising his stake in the firm with additional stock purchases made in October 2015, according to an image the prince attached to his tweet.
Twitter shares were down 0.9% at $45.42 at 2:40 PM ET (18:40 GMT) after Musk's remarks. The shares jumped 27% on April 4, closing at $49.97, after his initial stake buy.

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Pentagon Not Ruling Out Future Security Aid for Ukraine That Includes More Stingers

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) – The United States does not preclude further shipments of Stinger weapons systems to Ukraine as part of military aid packages, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.
"I would not rule out going forward in future drawdown packages or deliveries of security assistance that there might be additional Stingers going forward," Kirby told a press briefing.

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Biden Says Ready to Go to Ukraine

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WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he is ready to visit Ukraine.
He first told reporters that his administration is in the process of making a decision on sending senior officials to Ukraine.
When asked by a reporter whom he would send, the president replied: "Are you ready to go?"
The journalist asked in return "Are you?" and Biden responded "Yeah."

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US Charges 3 Russian Officials for Weakening US Partnership With European Allies - Filing
(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-6)
WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The US government has charged Russia's Duma deputy chairman, his chief of staff and a staff member, for their part in an alleged disinformation scheme to weaken the United States' partnership with European allies and undermine Western sanctions, according to an indictment unsealed on Thursday.
"ALEKSANDR MIKHAYLOVICH BABAKOV, ALEKSANDR NIKOLAYEVICH VOROBEV and MIKHAIL ALEKSEYEVICH PLISYUK, the defendants, have operated an international foreign influence and disinformation network to advance the interests of the Russian Federation," the indictment said. "Through these operations aimed at influencing the course of international affairs, the defendants worked to weaken US partnerships with European allies, undermine Western sanctions."
The defendants are charged with three counts of conspiracy, including to act as an agent of a foreign government without notifying the US Attorney General, commit visa fraud and violate the International Emergency Economic Powers Act.
The indictment also provides for forfeiture of all kinds of the defendants' assets allegedly used to commit the offense, including any vessel, vehicle or aircraft.
The indictment is being unsealed amid an unprecedented economic, financial and other sanctions imposed on Russia in light of Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine. Russia launched the special operation after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops.
Russia has said the aim of its special operation is to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine and that only military infrastructure is being targeted.

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Blinken Says Avoiding Direct Conflict With Russia in Interest of US

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WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - It is the United States' national interest to avoid a direct military conflict with Russia amid the situation in Ukraine, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"The [US] president has to make sure that he is looking out for the interests of the American people, one of those interests is making sure the best of our ability that we don't get into direct conflict with Russia," Blinken said.

The United States wants to avoid doing things that could lead to a wider war, he added.

The United States has approved a handful of military assistance packages for Ukraine over the last several months, which include lethal aid such as Javelin and Stinger weapons systems.

On Wednesday, President Joe Biden said that he had approved an additional $800 million in weapons, ammunition and other security assistance to Ukraine. The new package includes artillery systems, artillery rounds, armored personnel carriers and Soviet-made helicopters. This package is the seventh drawdown of equipment from US inventories for Ukraine.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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US Sends Envoy to Seoul to Discuss North Korea's ICBM Launches - State Department

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has sent its top diplomat dealing with North Korean issues to Seoul to discuss Pyongyang's recent intercontinental ballistic missile tests, the Department of State said on Thursday.

"US Special Representative for the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] Ambassador Sung Kim will travel to Seoul from April 18-22," the press release said. "Kim will meet with [South] Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Noh Kyu-duk and other senior officials to discuss ... the international community's response to the DPRK's recent ICBM launches."

Kim will meet with other senior South Korean officials to discuss other issues on the peninsula and will be accompanied by Deputy Special Representative for the DPRK Jung Pak, the State Department said.

The United States and South Korea remain committed to ongoing close collaboration on North Korean issues as they seek to advance complete denuclearization and permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula, the press release added.

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Biden Deeply Concerned About Avoiding World War III, Nuclear Conflict - CIA Chief

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WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is deeply concerned about avoiding a third world war as well as avoiding the threshold in which a nuclear conflict becomes possible amid the conflict in Ukraine, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William Burns said on Thursday.

"We're obviously very concerned. I know President Biden is deeply concerned about avoiding a third world war about avoiding a threshold in which, you know, nuclear conflict becomes possible" Burns said.

Burns pointed out that although Russia is at higher nuclear alert levels, the United States has so far not seen a lot of practical evidence of the kind of deployments or military dispositions that would reinforce that concern.

However, the CIA is monitoring the situation very intently and no one takes lightly the threat posed by a potential resort to tactical nuclear weapons or low yield nuclear weapons, Burns added.

US media reported that the White House assembled a team of security officials to develop response plans for the United States and its allies in case Russia engages weapons of mass destruction in Ukraine. The response team was established by US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan's memorandum in February, four days after the start of Russia's special operation in Ukraine.

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US Jury Finds Member of Islamic State 'Beatles' Execution Cell Guilty - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - A US jury found El Shafee Elsheikh, a member of the ransom and execution group "the Beatles" belonging to the Islamic State's terror group (banned in Russia) guilty on all charges against them, the Telegraph reported on Thursday.

Elsheikh, 33, was found guilty on all charges, including hostage-taking, kidnapping and supporting a terrorist group, for his role in the capture and murder of two journalists and two aid workers from the United States/ by the terror cell, the report said.

Elsheikh and the Beatles group appeared in execution videos sent around the world in response to unpaid ransom demands the group placed on captured individuals. The group is believed to have beheaded around two dozen hostages, the report said.

The Islamic State terrorist was captured alongside fellow alleged group member Alexanda Kotey by Kurdish forces in 2018 and later transferred into US custody, the report said.

The leader of the group, Mohammed Emwazi, dubbed "Jihadi John," was killed in an airstrike in November 2015. The fourth member, Aine Lesley Davis, was convicted and sentenced in 2017 in Turkey to seven-and-a-half years in prison, the report added.

Elsheikh faces a life sentence in prison for his crimes, according to the report.

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US Export-Import Bank to Back Made in America Industry Initiative - White House Officials

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The Export-Import (EXIM) Bank will act to help fund the "Make More in America Initiative," to boost the US manufacturing sector at home and abroad, senior White House officials announced in a statement on Thursday.

"Today, the EXIM Bank Board of Directors voted unanimously to approve the Make More In America Initiative," National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and National Economic Council Director Brian Deese said. "This program will expand the export prowess of American manufacturing and support new jobs for Americans all across the country."

The EXIM bank will act to financially support the initiative through its XIM Bank's new Domestic Finance Initiative, Sullivan and Deese said.

"Establishment of this initiative was a key recommendation from the President's Executive Order 14017 to build more resilient, secure, and sustainable supply chains. We applaud the EXIM Bank's Board in moving forward to bring this initiative to life," they said.

Investing in domestic manufacturing is critical for US economic and national security and the initiative will support the Biden administration's efforts to expand America's global competitiveness in industries including clean energy, clean technology and semiconductor production, Sullivan and Deese said.

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Twitter Long-Time Substantial Shareholder Prince Alwaleed Rejects Musk Takeover Bid

NEW YORK, April 14 (Sputnik) - Twitter's long-time and substantial shareholder Prince Alwaleed of Saudi Arabia said on Thursday he was rejecting a takeover bid by Elon Musk, describing the tech-entrepreneur and influencer's offer for the microblogging service as below its value.

"I don't believe that the proposed offer by @elonmusk ($54.20) comes close to the intrinsic value of @Twitter given its growth prospects," the billionaire Saudi prince, a substantial shareholder in many top US corporations and one of the world's most famous investors, wrote in a message issued on Twitter itself. "Being one of the largest & long-term shareholders of Twitter, @Kingdom_KHC & I reject this offer."

Musk's offer of $54.20 for a share of Twitter, which valued the company at $43 billion, came on Thursday after he bought an earlier stake of 9.2% in the company on April 4 at $49.97 per share or almost $3 billion.

The chief executive of electric car-maker Tesla and cryptocurrency advocate said Twitter needed to be taken private to grow and become a platform for free speech.

Alwaleed owns 5.2% of Twitter, raising his stake in the firm with additional stock purchases made in October 2015, according to an image the prince attached to his tweet.

Twitter shares were down 0.4% at $45.69 at 1:36 PM ET (17:36 GMT) after Alwaleed's response to Musk's offer. The shares jumped 27% on April 4, closing at $49.97, after Musk's initial stake buy.

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US Identified 10 Aircraft Likely Violating Export Controls on Russia - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The United States has identified ten additional aircraft that may be violating export controls imposed on Belarus and Russia, the US Commerce Department said in a press release on Thursday.
"Today, the US Commerce Department, through its Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS), publicly identified ten additional aircraft in likely violation of US export controls, including the first seven Belarusian owned/operated commercial aircraft identified since restrictions on Belarus were tightened via regulation effective on April 8, 2022," the release said.

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White House Says Has No Comment on Proposed Purchase of Twitter by Elon Musk

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has no comment on the proposed purchase of 100% stake in Twitter by entrepreneur Elon Musk, White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.
Musk in a filing with the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) offered to purchase 100% of Twitter for $54.20 per share, according to a letter Musk sent along with the filing.
“This is an offer by a private investor and we don’t have any comment here. The SEC is independent and would handle any review processes if this moves forward,” Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing when asked about the proposed purchase.
The potential sale would put Twitter’s market capitalization above $43 billion. If the offer is rejected, Musk would have to reconsider his position as a shareholder in the social media company, according to his letter.

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Harris Calls Israeli President on Terror Attacks, Reaffirms US Support - White House

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - Vice President Kamala Harris has expressed official condolences to Israel on the latest wave of terror attacks and repeated official US support in a telephone call with President Isaac Herzog, the White House said in a readout of the conversation.

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"Vice President Kamala Harris spoke today with President Isaac Herzog of Israel," the readout said. " She extended Passover greetings to him and the people of Israel and expressed condolences on behalf of the Biden-Harris administration and the American people over Israeli deaths from recent terrorist attacks in Israel."
The vice president condemned the attacks in the strongest terms and underscored that US support for Israel's security and self-defense was unwavering, the readout added.
Harris also expressed support for continued efforts to reduce tensions and said she and other US leaders would continue to stay in close touch on these and other issues affecting Israel's security and the stability of the region, according to the readout.

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US Charges 3 Russian Officials for Weakening US Partnership With European Allies - Filing

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The US government has charged Russia's Duma deputy chairman, his chief of staff and a staff member, for their part in an alleged disinformation scheme to weaken the United States' partnership with European allies and undermine Western sanctions, according to an indictment unsealed on Thursday.
"ALEKSANDR MIKHAYLOVICH BABAKOV, ALEKSANDR NIKOLAYEVICH VOROBEV and MIKHAIL ALEKSEYEVICH PLISYUK, the defendants, have operated an international foreign influence and disinformation network to advance the interests of the Russian Federation," the indictment said. "Through these operations aimed at influencing the course of international affairs, the defendants worked to weaken US partnerships with European allies, undermine Western sanctions."

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CIA Chief Says Russia's Operation in Ukraine Represents 1st Immediate Threat to Future

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William Burns said on Thursday that the number one immediate threat to the future is Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.
"Four big challenges will shape our future: the first is the immediate threat posed by renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine," Burns said during remarks at the Georgia Institute of Technology.
On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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Burns said Russian President Vladimir Putin was mired in a combination of grievance, ambition and insecurity over the last several years.
The CIA chief said he learned over the years during his time as US Ambassador to Russia to never underestimate Putin's relentless determination, especially on Ukraine.

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Blinken, Kuleba Discuss US Latest Defense Package to Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba discussed by telephone the latest defense aid package from the United States to Ukraine, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price revealed in a readout of the conversation.
“Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Kuleba discussed the most recent Presidential drawdown for an additional $800 million for weapons, ammunition, and other security assistance for Ukraine’s defense," the readout said. "They noted that the steady supply of materiel from the United States and its Allies and partners has been instrumental in Ukraine’s successful fight against Russia’s forces.”
The United States is resolved to continue to provide security, economic and humanitarian support to the government and people of Ukraine as they defend against Russia's special military operation, which Blinken characterized as President Vladimir Putin’s "brutal and unprovoked war,” the release said.
On Wednesday, President Joe Biden said that he had approved an additional $800 million in weapons, ammunition and other security assistance to Ukraine. The new package includes artillery systems, artillery rounds, armored personnel carriers and Soviet-made helicopters. This package is the seventh drawdown of equipment from US inventories for Ukraine.
On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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US Lawmakers Question Dianne Feinstein’s Mental Fitness to Serve in Congress - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - Long-time US Sen. Dianne Feinstein is having her mental fitness to continue public service in Congress questioned by fellow lawmakers amid a purported decrease in sharpness recently, the San Francisco Chronicle reported on Thursday, citing anonymous colleagues and staffers.

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"I have worked with her for a long time and long enough to know what she was like just a few years ago: always in command, always in charge, on top of the details, basically couldn't resist a conversation where she was driving some bill or some idea. All of that is gone," one lawmaker said in the report. "She was an intellectual and political force not that long ago, and that's why my encounter with her was so jarring. Because there was just no trace of that."
Feinstein's memory is rapidly deteriorating and it appears as though she is unable to fulfill her job duties without extensive help from staff, three former staffers and four fellow senators reportedly said. However, the memory lapses are not constant, with Feinstein on some days appearing to be as mentally sharp as ever, the report noted.
Feinstein's mental fitness is bad and getting worse, one Democratic senator said in the report. Feinstein purportedly has difficulty keeping up with conversations and does not seem to fully recognize even longtime colleagues, the report added.
Feinstein said in a statement that she is still performing her job well and declined an interview, according to the report. Nancy Pelosi also reportedly said in a statement that she has not noticed any decline in Feinstein's memory.
Feinstein has served as a member of the US Senate since 1992, representing California. Her term is set to run through the end of 2024.

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Russian Ships in Black Sea Moved Away From Coast After Moskva Incident - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - About half-a-dozen Russian warships, dispersed in the northern part of the Black Sea, have been moved further away following the incident on the Russian missile cruiser Moskva and are currently no closer than about 80 nautical miles (92 miles) from the coast, a senior US Defense Department official said on Thursday.
"Between four and five [ships] or so, those that were as close or closer to the coast than the cruiser [Moskva] have all moved south. At this point, we hold them no closer than about 80 nautical miles from the coast. But ships move and I can't predict where there will be an hour from now," the official said during a press briefing.
Earlier on Thursday, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said Russia's guided missile cruiser Moskva is heading to the port of Sevastopol in Crimea for repairs following a major explosion on board whose cause remains unknown at present.
The Russian Defense Ministry said on Thursday that the Moskva experienced a heavy fire and ammunition detonations. All the crew members were safely evacuated and the cause of the fire is currently being investigated.
The ship, whose initial name was Slava, was laid down in 1976 in Nikolaev and commissioned in 1983.

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Russia at UN Urges West to Lift Sanctions on Moscow to Avoid Global Food Crisis

UNITED NATIONS, April 14 (Sputnik) - Western countries should lift unilateral sanctions on Russia if they really want to avoid a global food crisis, Russia's deputy envoy to the UN, Dmitry Polyanskiy, said on Thursday.
"If you really want to help the world avoid a food crisis, lift your unilateral sanctions, and poorer countries will feel the difference. If you are not ready for this, then do not engage in demagoguery and do not try to mislead everyone," Polyanskiy told a UN Security Council meeting.
He stated that the main factor of instability today is not the Russian special military operation in Ukraine, but sanctions imposed on the country.
These sanctions are "intended to rupture supply chains and financial channels in paying for any supplies from Russia, except for energy needed by the West," the dipomat noted.
Speaking at the UNSC meeting earlier in the day, US envoy Linda Thomas-Greenfield said that the Russian operation in Ukraine had exacerbated the already fragile food situation in Yemen.
On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian provocations. Russia said that the aim of its special operation is to demilitarize and "denazify" Ukraine and that only military infrastructure is being targeted. In response, Western countries have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow.

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US Has Not Run Out of Options to Pressure Russia - Ambassador to UN

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The United States has not run out of options to put pressure on Russia with a view to bringing the Ukraine conflict to an end, Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Thursday.
"We have not run out of options," Thomas-Greenfield said. "We continue to ramp up our efforts. We continue to build our coalition of the willing against the Russians."

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US Home Ownership Costliest in Generation as Mortgages Rates at 10-Year Highs- Loan Agency

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The rate paid by Americans for a fixed 30-year mortgage has hit more than ten-year highs, putting home ownership in the United States at its costliest in a generation, the Freddie Mac home loan agency said on Thursday.

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"This week, mortgage rates averaged five percent for the first time in over a decade," Freddie Mac Chief Economist Sam Khate said in a statement. "As Americans contend with historically high inflation, the combination of rising mortgage rates, elevated home prices and tight inventory are making the pursuit of homeownership the most expensive in a generation."
The 30-year fixed-rate average jumped to 5% with an average 0.8 point - up from 4.72% a week ago and 3.04% a year ago, the release said.
Unrelenting inflation pressure has forced policy-makers at the Federal Reserve to embark on the fastest pace of interest rate hikes in 40 years to measure up to price growth.
After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by the COVID-19 pandemic measures, the US economy expanded by 5.7% in 2021, growing at its fastest pace since 1982.
However, the rate of inflation grew even faster. The Consumer Price Index expanded by 7% in the year to December and 8.5.% in the 12 months to March, both also at their fastest in four decades.
The Federal Reserve slashed rates to nearly zero at the height of the coronavirus outbreak. After two years of unchanged rates, the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, or FOMC, approved its first pandemic-era hike on March 16, raising rates by 25 basis points, or a quarter point.
Many FOMC members have since said that the hike was too tame to rein in inflation, and that more aggressive increases of 50 basis points may be needed in the future.
The Federal Reserve's typical target for inflation is just 2% a year - a level it considers "neutral". To get to this level, the central bank envisages that it will need six more rate hikes this year - one every monthly FOMC meeting from now.
On the home ownership front, dire housing shortages since the financial crisis of 2007-2008 have led to a scramble among buyers, triggering record high prices.
Prices of existing homes fell to $357,300 in February from June's median high of nearly $363,000. But the combination of higher mortgage rates and tight supply still made it hard for some buyers to compete, according to realtors.

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Pentagon Says Russia Eyes Achieving Tangible Goals in Donbas Within Next Couple of Weeks

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that Russia intends to achieve some physical tangible goals in Donbas within the next couple of weeks, a senior US defense official said on Thursday.
"We do think that in general, that they want to achieve some physical tangible objectives in the Donbas, within the next couple of weeks," the official said.
The official could not specify when they expect Russia will begin this offensive.
On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. Russia said that the aim of its operation is to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine.

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US to Train Ukrainians on Newly Arriving Military Equipment in Europe - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The training of Ukrainians on how to operate new military systems that are being delivered to their country will take a "few days" and will be most likely conducted in Europe, a senior US Defense Department official said on Thursday.

"We do not assess that it's going to take longer than a few days max to get them trained up on those systems," the official said during a press briefing. "Most likely it will occur in Europe. That's the working plan right now."

The systems the Ukrainian military will learn to use include howitzers, counter artillery radars and the Sentinel air defense radars, the official said.

US European Command chief Gen. Tod Wolters is "aggressively" working out how to provide the training without pulling out significant number of Ukrainian fighters from the country amid Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the official added.

President Joe Biden said he had approved an additional $800 million in weapons, ammunition and other security assistance to Ukraine. The new package includes artillery systems, artillery rounds, armored personnel carriers and Soviet-made helicopters. This package is the seventh drawdown of equipment from US inventories for Ukraine.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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Biden Says US Has Not Made Decision Yet on Sending Senior Officials to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that his administration is in the process of making a decision on which high-level official to send to Kiev.

"We're making that decision now," Biden told reporters when asked if he will send US officials to Ukraine.

On Wednesday, US media reported that the Biden administration was considering to send a high-level official to Kiev to meet with Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The options include the US president, Vice President Kamala Harris, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, or Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, according to reports.

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CIA Director Calls China 'Single Most Important' Challenge for US in 21st Century

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - China is the United States' single most important geopolitical challenge in the 21st Century, Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns said on Thursday.

"The second [challenge to shape the future] is the longer term problem posed by China's ambitious leadership, the single most important geopolitical challenge as far out I can see into the 21st Century," Burns said during remarks at Georgia Institute of Technology.

Burns characterized President Xi Jinping's China as being in many ways the most profound test the CIA has ever faced. Moreover, Burns pointed out that China had a GPD of about $15 trillion and is a top trading partner with 120 countries, and is a leader in artificial intelligence, 5G, drones, hypersonic technology and web applications.

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Police Shooting of Black Man in Michigan Sparks Recurring Protests Following Video Release

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The shooting of a 26-year old Congolese immigrant by a police officer in Grand Rapids, Michigan, has sparked recurring public protests after the release of video footage showing the incident.

On April 4, a police officer pulled over Patrick Lyoya due to a suspected license plate violation. The video footage shows that the exchange between the two became heated after Lyoya refused to stay in his car as ordered by the officer. Lyoya then tried to run away, prompting the officer to run after him and begin grappling on a nearby front lawn.

During the encounter, the video footage shows Lyoya and the officer engaged in a struggle over the officer's Taser. The officer then got on top of Lyoya's back while grappling with him over the Taser, at which point he repeated his order to let go of the Taser before shooting him in the back of the head with a handgun.

The officer, who is yet to be identified, has been placed on paid administrative leave while the incident is investigated. Grand Rapids Police Department (GRPD) Chief Eric Winstrom said the unnamed officer will not be identified publicly unless there criminal charges are brought up against him.

GRPD released multiple sources of video footage showing the incident between Lyoya and the officer, including cell phone footage from the passenger riding with Lyoya, body camera footage from the officer and dashcam footage from the officer's car.

The shooting sparked public demonstrations in Grand Rapids, with protesters gathering Wednesday evening at Rosa Parks Circle and marching to the GRPD headquarters. Organizers told protesters that the public demonstrations would resume on Thursday evening.

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Civil Rights attorney Benjamin Crump, who has been retained by the Lyoya family, demanded that the officer who killed Lyoya be fired, arrested and prosecuted.

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US Consumer Confidence Jumps as Fuel Prices Come Off Highs - UMich Survey

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - US consumer confidence appears to have risen in April as fuel prices came off record highs to encourage Americans to reconsider purchases they might have thought of dropping just a month earlier, the University of Michigan (UMich) said in its survey of consumers.

"Retail gas prices have fallen since the March peak, and that fact was immediately recognized by consumers," Richard Curtin, chief economist of the UMich Consumer Surveys, said in a news release. "Perhaps the most surprising change was that consumers anticipated a year-ahead increase in gas prices of just 0.4 cents in April, completely reversing March's surge to 49.6 cents."

The pump price of gasoline in the United States averaged $4.07 per gallon on Thursday, down from record highs of above $4.30 last month.

The UMich Consumer Sentiment Index showed a reading of 65.7 for early April, up from 59.4 in March.

"Nearly the entire gain was in the Expectations Index, which posted a monthly gain of 18.0%, including a leap of 29.4% in the year-ahead outlook for the economy and a 17.2% jump in personal financial expectations," Curtin said.

He said a strong labor market bolstered wage expectations among consumers under the age of 45. "Consumers still anticipate that the national unemployment rate will inch downward, acting to improve consumers' outlook for the national economy," Curtin added.

The White House said last week that over a four-week period, fewer Americans filed jobless claims than at any time in US history. Hourly earnings for workers have also grown almost without stop over the past year.

Curtin, however, cautioned that Umich's April survey offered only tentative evidence of stronger consumer sentiment to come, with multiple uncertainties remaining.

The US economy "is still too close to recession lows, to be reassuring," Curtin said, adding that uncertainties include more fallout from the Russia-Ukraine conflict and potential impact from new coronavirus variants.

After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by the COVID-19, the US economy expanded by 5.7% in 2021, growing at the fastest pace since 1982.

However, inflation grew at the fastest pace in four decades. The Consumer Price Index expanded by 7% in the year to December and 8.5.% in the 12 months to March.

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US Expects to Ship All of New $800Mln Military Aid to Ukraine Within 4 Weeks - Official

WASHINGTON, April 13 (Sputnik) - The United States expects to ship all of its new $800 million military aid package to Ukraine within four weeks, a senior US defense official said on Thursday.
"Of $800 million worth of material it will take us about four weeks total, total, to close out that $800 million," the official told a briefing.
It takes 3-4 days to get the first shipment in the air after its authorization, the official said.

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Canada to Conduct Review of Defense Policy - Defense Minister

TORONTO, April 14 (Sputnik) - Canada will conduct a review of its defense policy amid the changing geopolitical environment, including the armed conflict in Ukraine, Minister of National Defense Anita Anand announced on Thursday.
"We will… undertake a review of defense policy to ensure that we remain ready to meet current and emerging threats," Anand told reporters at Canadian Forces Base Trenton.
The defense minister said the world is "a much less safe place than it was two years ago and, certainly, two months ago," referring to the geopolitical shifts spurred by the coronavirus pandemic and Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.
Anand emphasized that Canada must make the necessary adjustments to remain a "valuable ally and partner."

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Russian Strike on NATO Nation Supplying Materiel to Kiev Would Invoke Article 5 – Sullivan

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - A Russian strike on a NATO country where military assistance for Ukraine is present would be a "game changer" and invoke Article 5 of the alliance's founding treaty, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.
"The United States is not operating inside the territory of Ukraine. So if the Russians were to obviously strike NATO territory where the materiel is being assembled, that would invoke Article 5 and be a complete game changer," Sullivan said at an event hosted by the Economic Club of Washington, DC.
He said that Russia's attempts to interdict this materiel inside Ukraine have been limited.
"Of course, that's something we're constantly watching. Part of the effort is to ensure there is a resilient and diverse method of getting it in," he added.

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Article 5 provides for collective defense – if a NATO ally is the victim of a military attack, every other member of the alliance will consider it to be an act of violence against all members and will take necessary actions.

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Canada to Deploy Some 150 Troops to Poland to Help With Ukrainian Refugees - Defense Chief

TORONTO, April 14 (Sputnik) - Canada will deploy up to 150 military personnel to Poland in order to assist the country's efforts to care for Ukrainian refugees, Minister of National Defense Anita Anand announced on Thursday.
"I am announcing, today, the deployment of up to 150 Canadian Armed Forces personnel - with approximately 100 personnel in the immediate term - who will assist Poland's efforts to support and care for Ukrainians fleeing violence," Anand told reporters at the Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Trenton.
Canadian troops will be deployed to refugee reception centers, join a Polish military-led "humanitarian task force" and assist Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) with processing would-be refugee seekers to Canada, Anand said.
According to the UN Refugee Agency, more than 4.2 million people have fled Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation on February 24. Russia said it launched the operation after the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. Russia also said that it acts to achieve two objectives - demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine.

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Pentagon Says Russian Guided Missile Cruiser Moskva Heading to Sevastopol for Repairs

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - Russia's guided missile cruiser Moskva is heading to the port of Sevastopol in Crimea for repairs following a major explosion on board whose cause remains unknown at present, US Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.
"She [Moskva] was operating about 60 miles or so south of Odessa. And we know she suffered an explosion. [F]rom the images that we've been able to look at, it looks like there's a pretty sizable explosion too. We don't know what caused that explosion. We do know that the ship is operating under her own power. She looks to be heading more to the east now, probably heading into port of Sebastopol for repairs," Kirby said in an interview with CNBC.
However, Kirby pointed out that the Defense Department does not rule out that the Moskva, which is the flagship of Russia's Black Sea fleet, was hit by a Ukrainian coastal defense missile.

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While Ukrainian troops possess Neptune anti-ship missiles, the United Kingdom recently said they provided Ukraine with Harpoon anti-ship missiles.
The Russian Defense Ministry said on Thursday that the Moskva experienced heavy fire and then ammunition detonations. All the crew members were safely evacuated but the cause of the fire is being investigated.
The ship, whose initial name was Slava, was laid down in 1976 in Nikolaev and commissioned in 1983.

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US Has No Plans to Return Seized Russian Yachts, Will Put Them to 'Better Use' - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The United States will not return yachts which it has seized from Russian businessmen and will instead put them to a better use, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.
"The president [Joe Biden] is actively looking at how we can deal with the fact that as we seize these assets, our goal is not to give them back. Our goal is to put them to a better use than that. But I'll be careful in what I say today because there's an ongoing kind of policy process around how we end up dealing with that question. But rest assured, the goal is not just to sit on them for a while and then pass them all back," Sullivan told an event hosted by the Economic Club of Washington, DC.
Since the beginning of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, Western countries have rolled out comprehensive sanctions, including restrictions on the Russian central bank, export control measures, SWIFT cutoff for select banks, and closure of airspace to all Russian flights. Many foreign companies have suspended their Russian operations.
In addition, the US has launched a multilateral Transatlantic task force to "identify, hunt down, and freeze" the assets of sanctioned Russian companies and billionaires, including their yachts and mansions, with some EU nations following suit.

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US to Ease COVID-19 Travel Warnings Next Week as Pandemic Declines - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - The US government is going to reduce the level of its travel advisory warnings next week in response to the easing of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the State Department announced in a media note on Thursday.
"Starting next week, the State Department travel advisory levels will no longer automatically correlate with the CDC COVID-19 THN [travel health notice] level," the note said. "[I]f the CDC raises a country's COVID-19 THN to a Level 4, the State Department's travel advisory for that country will also be raised to a Level 4: Do Not Travel due to COVID-19."

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The State Department said next week's update will leave approximately 10% of all travel advisories at Level 4: Do Not Travel.
"This 10% includes Level 4 Travel Advisories for all risk indicators, not just COVID-19. We believe the updated framework will help US citizens make better informed decisions about the safety of international travel," the note said.
However, although conditions have recently improved, the COVID-19 pandemic is not over and therefore the State Department continues to advise travelers to consider COVID-19 conditions and restrictions at their destinations when considering international travel, according to the note.

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US Jobless Claims Rise Higher Last Week From 55-Year Low - Labor Dept.
WASHINGTON, April 14 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims ticked higher last week from the previous week's 55-year low, according to Labor Department data that otherwise showed little change to trends in the nation's bustling employment market.
"In the week ending April 9, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 185,000, an increase of 18,000 from the previous week's revised level," a news release from the Labor Department said Thursday.
The department revised up claims for the week ended April 2 by 1,000 to 167,000. Despite that revision, the previous week's data showed filings to be at their lowest since at least 1968.
For the week to April 9, economists polled by US media had expected claims to average 170,000, or 15,000 below what the department reported.
President Joe Biden said in a statement released by the White House last week that over a four-week period, "fewer Americans had filed jobless claims than at any time in our nation's recorded history."
Joblessness among Americans reached a record high of 14.8% in April 2020, with the loss of some 20 million jobs in the aftermath of the coronavirus breakout. Jobs recovery has, however, been stellar over the past year, with the jobless rate moving down to 3.6% in March. A jobless rate of 4% or below is regarded by the Federal Reserve as "maximum employment."
Aside from ramping job numbers, the United States is experiencing one of the greatest transformations of its employment market as COVID-19 measures upended labor supply and work trends, putting employees' demands above those of employers.

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