

04/06/21 Tuesday

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WHO Does Not Back COVID-19 Vaccine Passports For Time Being, Spokesperson Confirms by [Mary F.](#)

Private US companies are working to develop “vaccine passports,” or a way for individuals to prove that they have been vaccinated against the novel coronavirus after the US President Joe Biden administration declared it would not issue a federal mandate that requires Americans to obtain such credentials.

In a briefing this week, the World Health Organization (WHO) revealed that it doesn’t approve of the practice of requiring vaccine passports for the time being.

“We as WHO are saying at this stage we would not like to see the vaccination passport as a requirement for entry or exit because we are not certain at this stage that the vaccine prevents transmission,” WHO spokesperson Margaret Harris said on Tuesday, as the [New York Post reported](#). “There are all those other questions, apart from the question of discrimination against the people who are not able to have the vaccine for one reason or another”.

The latest comments by the WHO come after Dr. Anthony Fauci, the Director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, revealed on Monday that the US federal government may provide guidance to private companies developing vaccine passports to ensure that “things are done fairly and equitably.”

“But I doubt if the federal government is gonna be the leading element of that,” Fauci also noted on the [“Politico Dispatch”](#) podcast.

In addition, White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Tuesday confirmed that the Biden administration will not be involved in the development of a “vaccine passport” system.

“The government is not now, nor will we be supporting a system that requires Americans to carry a credential. There will be no federal vaccinations database and no federal mandate requiring everyone to obtain a single vaccination credential,” Psaki told reporters at a briefing, [The Hill reported](#).

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis issued an executive order banning the use of vaccine passports last week.

“Today I issued an executive order prohibiting the use of so-called COVID-19 vaccine passports,” DeSantis said in a [statement](#) on Twitter. “The Legislature is working on making permanent these protections for Floridians and I look forward to signing them into law soon.”

Several Republican lawmakers, including DeSantis, have expressed concern over vaccine passports, arguing that COVID-19 vaccinations are not required by law and that vaccination records are private health information. Such lawmakers, which include US Representatives Lauren Boebert (R- CO) and Pete Sessions (R- TX), have also insinuated or directly stated that such passports would be a government overstep and would lead to two classes of citizens.

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Wisconsin Governor Declares State of Emergency Over Wildfire Conditions

by [Mary F.](#)

Last year, millions of acres were burned in a record wildfire season in multiple states across the United States including California, Washington and Oregon. In fact, there were around 2.3 million more acres burned last year than the 10-year-average.

The US state of Wisconsin this week signed an executive order declaring a state of emergency in response to increased wildfire conditions such as gusty winds and low humidity levels.

The [executive order](#) would allow state agencies to help with wildfire prevention, response and recovery efforts. In addition, the order would allow the Wisconsin National Guard to provide support in the event of a fire.

"With nearly the entire state experiencing high or very high fire risk, protecting Wisconsinites from the destructive dangers of wildfires is a top priority," Evers said in a news release obtained by [The New York Times](#).

In the past week, there have been 149 wildfires across Wisconsin, according to a [map](#) on the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) website. Over the weekend, many counties along the Illinois state border and counties along Lake Michigan were also under a [very high risk](#) for fire danger due to dry vegetation, warm temperatures, low humidity and increasing winds. There have also been at least 340 fires since the start of the year.

The DNR also announced in a press release on Saturday that annual burning permits have been suspended to prevent fires.

"To help us keep Wisconsinites safe, the DNR is asking you to avoid all outdoor burning including limiting the use of campfires and making sure to extinguish and dispose of cigarettes properly," a [news release](#) by the DNR reads. "Outdoor enthusiasts should also use caution with off-road vehicles or equipment that can create a spark and start a fire."

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Federal Judge Stands Behind Nike in Lawsuit Over Lil Nas-X 'Satan Shoes'

by [Mary F.](#)

US rapper Lil Nas X has made headlines in recent weeks after creating a Satan-themed pair of sneakers based on Nike's Air Max 97s model. The limited-edition shoes, which carry Nike's signature "swoosh" logo, purport to also include a drop of human blood in the midsoles.

US District Judge Eric Komitte ruled on Thursday that MSCHF Product Studio, the company that collaborated with Lil Nas X to produce the so-called "Satan Shoes," should temporarily curb production of its shoes, [CNBC reported](#).

The federal ruling comes three days after Nike sued MSCHF Product Studio, stating that the black-and-red, devil-themed sneakers infringe its trademark rights.

“MSCHF strongly believes in the freedom of expression,” the company said in a statement following the ruling. “We look forward to working with Nike and the court to resolve this case in the most expeditious manner.”

In addition, MSCHF’s lawyers have argued that the shoes are not typical sneakers, but rather “individually-numbered works of art,” CNBC reported.

Only 666 pairs of the shoes, printed with “Luke 10:18,” a biblical passage referring to Satan’s fall from heaven, were manufactured. All 666 shoes, which cost \$1,018 a pair, were sold out in minutes.

In a statement to [The Hill](#), Nike confirmed that the court has issued a temporary restraining order against MSCHF, but also noted that it doesn’t have “further details to share on pending legal matters.”

In a statement last week, Nike argued that the shoes have tarnished the company’s reputation, with thousands of people threatening to boycott the company.

“Nike filed a trademark infringement and dilution complaint against Mschf today related to the Satan Shoes,” Nike said in a company statement on Thursday, [CBS News reported](#). “We don’t have any further details to share on pending legal matters. However, we can tell you we do not have a relationship with Lil Nas X or Mschf. The Satan Shoes were produced without Nike’s approval or authorization, and Nike is in no way connected with this project”.

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Indonesian Defense Chief to Attend Friday ‘Roll Out’ of South Korean F-35 Competitor KF-X by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Indonesia has pushed to buy stealthy F-35 fighters from the US, which has so far only offered fourth-generation jets. However, Jakarta has proven less-than-picky about who it buys aircraft from, and its joint project with South Korea to build their own F-35 alternative could soon come to fruition.

Sacheon-si-based Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI) seems to have let slip that the world could get its first glimpse of the Korean Fighter-eXperimental (KF-X) stealth fighter this Friday, according to South Korean daily [Munhwa Ilbo](#). The paper noted Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto is expected to attend the rollout ceremony at the factory in Sacheon. Earlier this year, Indonesia’s commitment to the KF-X project was brought into question in some corners, with rumors it [would soon withdraw](#) its 20% commitment or seek to reduce it to 15% or 10% with a later pay date amid new economic troubles, as well as a \$5 billion loan from the South Korean government.

According to the [Korea Herald](#), Prabowo’s attendance was in question even by Monday, and while it would at least signal Jakarta’s commitment to the deal, the paper noted the presumptive presidential contender may simply be pursuing the much-needed cash.

The project to build a domestic fifth-generation fighter jet has set the duo back by \$7.9 billion. Although it looks aesthetically very similar to Lockheed Martin's F-35A - [as many competitor aircraft do](#) - the KF-X will be slightly larger and have two engines as opposed to the F-35's single thruster. It is expected to be faster than the F-35 or the F-16, the latter of which KAI has built under license, and it will come in single-seat and tandem two-seater versions.

In September, KAI posted a video from inside its Sacheon factory [showing final assembly](#) of the KF-X; observers noted the aircraft lacks an internal bomb bay, which is essential to maintaining a minimum radar return. According to [the KAI website](#), the fighter will have 10 external hardpoints.

Seoul has also agreed to buy at least 60 of its own F-35s from Lockheed, 20 of which will be the vertical-takeoff B-variant, for use on its forthcoming [CVX light aircraft carrier](#), formerly known as the LPX-II.

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Big Pharma Offers Veiled Threats as US Lawmakers Defend COVID-19 Vaccine Patent-Breaking Law
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

With much of the Global South expected to lag several years behind Western nations in their COVID-19 vaccination efforts, popular pressure is mounting for Western governments to relax or waive patent laws on the drugs' formulae, allowing their manufacture abroad, but cutting into pharmaceutical giants' profits.

On Monday, the comment period for revising the Bayh-Dole Act, a 1980 health care law allowing the US government to "march in" and break patents for drugs made using federal funds if regulators determine the price is exorbitantly high. The change, initiated by former US President Donald Trump, would weaken the act by denying the federal government the right to do so based on price alone.

In response, a group of nearly three dozen Democratic lawmakers has lobbied the Biden administration to withdraw the rule. Their efforts are supported by newly minted Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra, who as California attorney general [lobbied the Trump](#) administration on behalf of several US states in 2020 to use the "march in" power to slash the cost of remdesivir, a COVID-19 therapeutic drug.

The lawmakers are concerned about the high prices for a number of drugs made using public money, but in particular mention COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics.

"Pharmaceutical companies extract the highest prices from the sick and dying, and this proposal would embolden them to charge even higher prices by allowing them to price gouge with impunity," [the lawmakers wrote](#) in their March 29 letter.

While the US government has paid for at least the first vaccination against COVID-19 for every American, in the longer-term, many of the drugmakers are looking toward annual booster shots, [anticipating "significant opportunity"](#) to hike prices by nearly 900% once government's stop

being their primary customers, as Pfizer Chief Financial Officer Frank D'Amelio laid out at a meeting with Wall Street investors last month.

While Pfizer's vaccine is one of the few to have been made without explicit financial backing via the Trump administration's "Operation Warp Speed" program, it has nonetheless collected \$15 billion in COVID-related products over the last year, including nearly \$6 billion just in [vaccine purchases](#) by the US government.

Industry Rallies Around Patents

However, the Bayh-Doyle Coalition, a group of drugmakers and research firms that [banded together](#) at the start of the pandemic to "protect" the act, has protested, issuing a veiled threat that pharma giants might be reluctant to help develop life-saving drugs that could save millions of lives if their profits are in any way threatened.

"It will stop collaboration," Joe Allen, executive director of the coalition [told Roll Call](#) about enforcing march-in rights. "The danger is the next time you have a pandemic, are companies going to jump in to partner with you?"

The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America industry trade group has also [written a letter](#) to Biden asking him to support Trump's rule change, saying that "eliminating those protections would undermine the global response to the pandemic, including ongoing effort to tackle new variants, create confusion that could potentially undermine public confidence in vaccine safety, and create a barrier to information sharing."

International Pressure for WTO Waiver Grows

However, patent laws aren't just getting in the way of affordable domestic vaccinations: abroad, the pace of COVID-19 vaccination is highly unequal, with few of the world's formerly colonized nations expected to fully immunize their populations this year and with First World nations buying up multiple times their population requirements' worth of shots.

The United Nations [warned last month](#) that the poorest nations risk being left behind, and may not complete their immunizations until 2024; some nations, [such as Haiti](#), where US-backed President Jovenel Moise has unleashed death squads in an attempt to hold onto power against a [rising protest movement](#) that says his term legally expired in February, has no vaccination plans at all.

Last month, a group of 80 nations led by South Africa and India [renewed their request](#) for the World Trade Organization (WTO) to waive its Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPS) agreement rules in order to allow generic versions of COVID-19 vaccines to be manufactured in the poorer nations of the world. WTO director-general Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala has countered that Western governments should beef up their production of vaccines instead. Standing in the way is a small group of rich nations led by the United States and including the United Kingdom and European Union. Ahead of the WTO meeting last month, the US [Chamber of Commerce told](#) Okonjo-Iweala that "proposals to waive intellectual property rights are misguided and a distraction."

South Africa Draws AIDS Comparison

There is precedent for their concern. TRIPS has [protected the monopoly](#) on antiretroviral drugs developed by Western pharmaceuticals to treat human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) since it came into force in 1995. Previously, nations had a variety of patent practices, with many not regarding drug patents as part of the public interest, but TRIPS required nations to follow a new global standard on defending company patents for 20 years after their filing.

As a consequence, the only makers of these vital drugs were Western firms like Pfizer and Gilead, who were able to reap sufficient profits by selling to First World buyers for exorbitant prices that Third World buyers became an afterthought. A yearly regimen on an ARV drug in the US cost an average of [\\$10,000 per year](#) in 2000.

Peter Rost, a former Pfizer executive-turned-whistleblower, has [extensively criticized](#) his former industry, noting that the drug industry's standard practice "is to set the price at the level where you will maximize revenues. That means you are going to lose some patients because it's so high, but you're making up for it because the others are forced to pay that very high price ... There's a very big fear that they would ruin their own business model" if they allowed patent restrictions to wane, he added. "Drug companies are not there to protect the Third World - they're there to make money. Pure and simple, that's it."

South Africa and India led that fight, too, driven by public pressure from activist groups, and in 1998, the South African parliament passed a law allowing the country to buy anti-HIV drugs at the world's lowest rates. By 2001, a group of 39 medical companies [had sued Johannesburg](#) and lost, and Mumbai-based company [Cipla had begun](#) defiantly making its own generic antiretroviral drug available to buyers at just \$350 per year, or less than \$1 per day, bringing it within reach of millions of AIDS sufferers as the epidemic's epicenter shifted to Africa.

At the WTO meeting in March, South Africa's delegates drew [a direct comparison](#) to the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa, which has killed more than 11 million people on the continent and infected some 38 million people globally.

In February, IAVI and Scripps Research [announced the results](#) of a phase 1 clinical trial for a 'landmark' HIV vaccine based on Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine, which was developed with Operation Warp Speed backing. The vaccine reportedly boasts a 97% effectiveness rate.

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Biden Announces All US Adults Will Be Eligible for COVID-19 Vaccine in Two Weeks
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While the US has dramatically increased COVID-19 vaccine production in recent months, a major mishap at a Baltimore factory saw 15 million doses wasted after ingredients for two different vaccines were accidentally mixed.

On Tuesday, US President Joe Biden announced that all US adults will become eligible to receive a vaccine against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, two weeks earlier than previously planned.

"Despite the progress we are making as a nation, I want every American to know in no uncertain terms that this fight isn't over. This progress we have worked so hard to achieve can be reversed. Now is not the time to let down. Now is not the time to celebrate," Biden said at the White House. He noted that his administration remains on track to distribute 200 million vaccine doses in his first 100 days in office, which end on April 30.

He said that so far in his term, the US has administered 150 million COVID-19 vaccine doses out of an adult population of 209 million people. The total US population is 328 million.

As a consequence, Biden bumped the previous goal of May 1 up by two weeks, to April 19, for every American adult to be eligible to receive the vaccine, which has been distributed on a tiered rollout that prioritized older and vulnerable parts of the population first. He added that the “vast majority” of the US adult population would receive at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine by the end of May.

However, despite the successes, Biden cautioned that vaccination levels are [nowhere near sufficient](#) to prevent cases from spiking once again, with less than half the US population protected.

“The vaccination program is saving tens of thousands of lives but the pandemic remains dangerous. Let me explain it in a single word: Time. Even moving at the record speed... we are not even halfway through vaccinating over 300 million Americans. This is going to take time,” he said.

Some US states have already moved to roll back their government safety mandates, with 10 states including Texas, Indiana, Montana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Wisconsin lifting their mandates to wear protective masks, [according to the](#) American Association of Retired Persons (AARP).

On Monday, the Texas Rangers professional baseball team played its first home game in Arlington, Texas, to a stadium [packed to capacity](#) with more than 40,000 fans. Biden previously called the decision a “mistake.”

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [the US recorded](#) 62,000 new COVID-19 cases on Monday, roughly the average since late February but down considerably from the early January highs, which peaked on January 8 at 315,000 new cases. Just 353 deaths were recorded on Monday, the lowest number since an anomalously low November date and before that, July. Nearly 556,000 Americans have died of the virus.

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China Offers to Tutor Planet Following Extreme Poverty Elimination
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Home to nearly one-fifth of the world’s population, China’s social policies have a dramatic effect on humanity as a whole. Despite a shift toward allowing capitalist markets in the late 1970s, the socialist state has still accounted for nearly three-quarters of global poverty elimination since then.

China’s State Council Information Office has [published a white paper](#) outlining how the socialist country can teach the rest of the world about how to alleviate poverty. In the last 40 years, China has lifted 770 million people out of poverty, declaring an end to its most extreme forms in November.

Titled “Poverty Alleviation: China’s Experience and Contribution,” the Tuesday document lays out some of the ways China’s decades-long struggle can help other parts of the globe. The paper makes special note that 2021 is the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist

Party of China, which “has united and led the Chinese people in the battle against poverty with unwavering faith and will over the past century.”

The paper has five sections, titled "The Solemn Commitment of the CPC," "Final Victory in the Fight against Extreme Poverty," "The Strategy of Targeted Poverty Alleviation," "Exploring a New Path of Poverty Alleviation" and "A Global Community of Shared Future Free from Poverty," respectively.

According to Song Guiwu, a professor at the Gansu Provincial Party School, which [the Global Times notes](#) faced some of the greatest challenges in the poverty alleviation campaign, the CPC's organizational capacity and the socialist economic system provided a ready-made structure for efficient decision-making and the pooling of resources for a large project. Meanwhile, its centralized structure helped ensure sufficient financial backing as well as a standardized system of procedures to make projects run smoothly.

Hong Tianyun, deputy head of China's newly established National Administration for Rural Vitalization, told reporters Tuesday the process involves assessing the poverty threshold and ensuring people's annual income reaches it, along with meeting all the basic needs of food, clothing, housing, basic medical care and compulsory education. The cutoff, Hong notes, is \$610 per year, which is higher than the World Bank's definition of extreme poverty and equal to the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda's goal.

One of the major resources China has to offer the world now is the Belt and Road Initiative, a massive infrastructure megaproject heavily financed by the Chinese government. According to a [World Bank study](#) published in 2018, the program will help lift 7.6 million people out of extreme poverty and 32 out of moderate poverty in partnering countries.

Extreme Poverty Eliminated

In November, Chinese President Xi Jinping declared “complete victory” in the 40-year drive to eliminate absolute poverty in China, with an average of 10 million people being lifted up per year for the last decade. According to [Xinhua News Agency](#), over the last 40 years, the country has lifted 770 million people out of poverty, more than 70% of the global total during that time.

The goal comes nearly a full decade ahead of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

As a result, the government is expected to declare achievement of a key victory later this year: creating a “moderately prosperous society in all respects,” which is a milestone on its goal of building “a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious” by 2049, the centenary of the socialist revolution that founded the People's Republic of China.

Zhang Xixian, a professor at the Party School of the Central Committee of the CPC, [told the Global Times](#) in November that the country's drive toward poverty alleviation was rooted in the two periods of history when the Chinese revolution had to build a mass base among the rural poor, first in the [Jinggangshan mountains](#) and then again at [Yan'an in northern Shaanxi](#) Province after the Long March. Together, they “form CPC's spiritual pedigree, becoming prominent features of the CPC and part of China's soft power.”

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Beauty Queen Knockout: 'Mrs Sri Lanka' Winner Winds Up in Hospital After Stage Trip-Up - Video

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The much-anticipated "Mrs Sri Lanka" beauty pageant was held over the weekend in Colombo, Sri Lanka, but this year's entry proved to be a much more contentious matter after a fellow beauty queen did the unexpected and snatched the winner's crown.

Pushpika De Silva, the 2021 winner of the "Mrs Sri Lanka" beauty contest, recently wound up in the hospital with head injuries after a last-minute mix-up saw her crown yanked from her head and given to a runner-up.

Video of the incident initially shows De Silva crowned the pageant winner by Shrianthi Rajapaksa, the wife of Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, after the runner-ups are presented. However, things took a turn for the worse when Mrs World 2020 Caroline Jurie announced that De Silva was divorced and as such did not meet the requirements to be a contestant.

"There is a rule that you all have to be married and not divorced. So, I am taking my first steps to say that the crown goes to the first runner-up," Jurie told the audience, before making her way to a very confused De Silva.

After the crown was forcibly removed from a tearful De Silva, the shocked presumed winner walked off stage as the second place winner was handed the crown.

In the aftermath, De Silva was treated at a local hospital for head injuries that were caused by the crown removal. The contestant noted in a [Facebook post](#) that the incident was a complete "injustice and insult," underscoring that she would be taking action in the matter.

De Silva also explained that while she was separated from her partner, she was not divorced. "A true queen is not a woman who snatches another woman's crown, but a woman who secretly sets another woman's crown!" De Silva wrote in a post.

A statement released by Mrs. World, Inc. labeled the weekend events as an "unfortunate incident" that has "deeply disturbed" officials associated with the organization, adding that Jurie's behavior is regrettable.

"[Jurie's] actions goes [sic] against the Mrs. Sri Lanka code of conduct and the predetermined regulations she is obliged to follow during her reign," the [statement](#) reads, noting that Jurie will be called on to "issue a personal statement apologizing for her conduct."

An investigation into the events has since been launched and De Silva has been recrowned as the pageant's official winner. It's unclear what repercussions may result from the ongoing probe.

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Facebook Removes Over 1,100 Accounts for Spreading 'Deceptive' Content

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Over the past three years, social media giant Facebook has been releasing monthly reports regarding accounts that have been removed from the platform for conducting “inauthentic behavior” and spreading “deceptive” information. The effort has been carried out in a bid to be more transparent over its procedures.

Facebook revealed in its latest monthly release on Tuesday that the social media company managed to remove over 1,100 accounts from around the world that took part in spreading “deceptive campaigns” targeting a variety of countries.

The [March report](#) indicates that investigators were able to remove 14 networks that officials traced back to 11 countries, including Albania, Iran, Egypt, Georgia, Mexico, Israel and Spain, among others. The initiative saw campaigns target both individuals within the campaign’s base country and netizens who were located abroad.

The platform’s findings also highlight that approximately 1,167 accounts were removed from Facebook, whereas 290 were removed from the Facebook-owned Instagram. Another 255 pages and 34 pages were taken down from Facebook.

Of the networks, five were traced back to Mexico and were determined to focus their efforts solely on targeting domestic audiences within the country’s Quintana Roo, Colima, Baja California and Nayarit states.

Mexico-linked campaigns accounted for 371 Facebook accounts and 120 pages that were booted off the site.

One of the operations that Facebook also managed to break down was a “troll farm” based out of Albania that primarily focused its targeting efforts on Iran. Researchers noted that the initiative was “not successful in building significant audiences over the years,” and had been managed by the People’s Mujahedin of Iran (MEK), an Iran-listed domestic terrorist group. The MEK-led accounts were most active in 2017 and again in late 2020, according to the report, which also noted that the accounts had photos of Iranian celebrities or deceased dissidents. “We know that influence operations will keep evolving in response to our enforcement, and new deceptive behaviors will emerge,” a [release](#) reads. “We are making progress rooting out this abuse, but as we’ve said before – it’s an ongoing effort.”

“We’re committed to continually improving to stay ahead. That means building better technology, hiring more people and working closely with law enforcement, security experts and other companies,” the post adds.

Facebook had [previously announced](#) in November that it removed a network of Iran-based accounts that had been targeting protests in Israel. The March report found that the organization behind the earlier effort had attempted to restart its operations over a period of several months, but that the platform was ultimately able to disrupt the initiative once again.

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Undesired Sequel - Political Cartoon

Earlier, Egypt's Suez Canal snatched headlines around the world while concerned onlookers wondered what would become of the prominent trade waterway after a massive cargo vessel became stuck for multiple days.

Reports surfaced on Tuesday that Egypt's strategic shipping channel was temporarily blocked for a second time after a crude oil tanker appeared to run aground within the canal's southern portion.

However, unlike the Panamanian-flagged [Ever Given](#) vessel, the tanker known as the Rumford did not wind up between a rock and a hard place. In fact, after encountering an engine failure, the Rumford was back on its merry way after the crew was able to remedy the situation.

The Suez Canal Authority noted in a [statement](#) that the incident was handled in a very "professional way," and that "maritime traffic was not affected." Some 84 ships managed to traverse the waters on both sides of the waterway throughout the day.

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UAE Authorities: Women Detained in Dubai for 'Indecent Video' Will Be Deported
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The Dubai Police Force detailed earlier this week that several people were detained on public debauchery charges over a photoshoot with naked women. Authorities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) warned others from engaging in similar "unacceptable behaviors," as the nude photoshoot does "not reflect the values and ethics of Emirati society."

Essam Issa Al Humaidan, Dubai's attorney general, announced Tuesday that all individuals involved in the "recently [publicized \[photoshoot\]](#) which contravened UAE law" will be deported from the Muslim-majority country.

"No further comment shall be made on the matter," the Tuesday statement concluded.

Dubai Police previously noted the individuals violated Articles 17 and 361 of the UAE's Federal Penal Code by organizing and participating in a nude photoshoot on a Dubai Marina balcony. The shoot gained global attention after lewd footage from the set was published on social media.

Article 17 relates to cybercrimes and the transmission of pornographic material. Those accused of violating the law stand to be punished with imprisonment and a fine between AED 250,000 to AED 500,000 (\$68,000 to \$136,000).

Per Article 361, one can be detained up to six months and/or charged AED 5,000 (\$1,360) for engaging in public debauchery.

It's worth noting the public debauchery scandal occurred less than two weeks ahead of the holy month of Ramadan, which begins on April 13 for Muslims.

Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Oleh Nikolenko recently revealed that, "according to preliminary information, among the detainees there are 11 citizens of Ukraine." "There are no Russian citizens among the detained girls, only one Russian citizen was detained on suspicion that he was the organizer of this event," said Ivan Gubanov, a Russian vice-consul

in Dubai. It was initially reported that some of the women detained in Dubai were Russian nationals.

The nationalities of the other women involved have not been revealed.

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Keeping Up With California: Caitlyn Jenner Eyeing Gubernatorial Campaign to Replace Newsom - Report

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Democratic California Governor Gavin Newsom is facing a possible recall election as officials verify more than 2 million signatures submitted by organizers last month. The last special recall election in California resulted in a win for Austrian-American actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican who served as California governor from 2003 to 2011.

Axios reported Tuesday that retired Olympic gold medal-winning decathlete Caitlyn Jenner is meeting with a number of political consultants to weigh a possible gubernatorial campaign. Jenner, a vocal Republican who announced her transition back in 2015, is receiving political advice from GOP fundraiser Caroline Wren, according to [the sources](#) "with direct knowledge of her deliberations."

The two reportedly became familiar with one another through their work with the conservative, LGBT-focused nonprofit American Unity Fund.

Wren [notably served](#) as an organizer for former US President Donald Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally prior to the January 6 riot at the US Capitol. Wren also held a position at Trump Victory, the former president's joint fundraising committee.

Whispers of Caitlyn Jenner trying to keep up with California come amid the possibility of a special [recall election](#), which requires around 1.5 million verified signatures. A total of 2,117,730 signatures were turned in by the March 17 deadline, and are now being verified by county election officials until April 29.

The recall effort, which Newsom has branded as "the Republican recall," emerged in response to the California governor's handling of the COVID-19 novel coronavirus pandemic, and the impact of related closures on small businesses.

"This is about Gavin Newsom and his failed policies that have put us in the state of despair we are in today," said Orrin Heatlie, the 52-year-old retired California cop leading the effort.

However, Jenner's manager, Sophia Hutchins, [told Politico](#) back in February that her client "is not running for governor, has never considered running for governor and is very happy doing the work that she is doing to promote LGBT rights and spending time with her 18 grandchildren and 10 children."

Additionally, former Republican California Governor Schwarzenegger has warned Newsom that there are many parallels between the present-day public sentiment, and the "dissatisfaction" of Californians back in 2003. The "Terminator" actor replaced then-Governor Gray Davis, a Democrat, after winning that year's special recall election.

"It's pretty much the same atmosphere today as it was then," said Schwarzenegger, the 38th governor of California.

"There was dissatisfaction, to the highest level. And it's the same with the momentum. Something that sets it off to a higher level, kind of the straw that breaks the camel's back ... like an explosion."

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Ohio 'Stand Your Ground' Law Goes Into Effect Despite Backlash From State Republicans
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Senate Bill 175 is a law originally intended to grant immunity to nonprofit organizations who allow licensed gun owners to bring firearms onto their premises. The bill was passed by the Ohio Senate in December with a controversial extension that states a legal gun owner has the right to defend themselves in public if facing imminent danger.

Ohio's Senate Bill 175, which is more popularly known as the "Stand Your Ground" law, took effect Tuesday, marking the Buckeye State as the latest to join three dozen other US states, across the Land of the Free.

The law, which was signed in January by Gov. Mike DeWine (R-OH), [emphasizes](#) that a legal gun owner can use deadly force if they reasonably believe it is in defense of life. The legislation also expands on the description of self-defense, noting that it also applies in public.

DeWine cleared the bill despite criticism from many Republican lawmakers who argued that the governor went against his own [2019 legislation](#) that sought to toughen background checks and boost penalties for felons committing new crimes with guns.

These legislative reforms to address gun violence [were proposed](#) following the August 2019 mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio, that saw Connor Betts shoot 26 people, killing nine and injuring 17 others. Betts later died after being fatally shot by police outside of Blind Bob's bar in Dayton. In response to the passing of the "Stand Your Ground" law, Ohio State Senate Minority Leader Kenny Yuko, who represents the state's Richmond Heights district, [told NBC](#) that "this is not what people meant when they asked us to 'do something' last year after the deadly mass shooting in Dayton."

Earlier, after signing the bill into law in January, DeWine acknowledged in a statement that he has "always believed that it is vital that law-abiding citizens have the right to legally protect themselves when confronted with a life-threatening situation."

The law allows an individual to use deadly force in public areas so long as they are not the aggressor, and reasonably and honestly believe the action to be necessary in order to prevent serious bodily harm or death.

The "Stand your Ground" law first passed in Florida in 2005 and has since been featured in a [study](#) by the American Journal of Public Health, which alleges that self-defense laws do not deter violent crime.

Others, including gun rights groups, have praised DeWine for signing the bill.

“We were quite happy that the governor followed through on his campaign promises to enact, to remove the duty-to-retreat requirement in the self-defense law in Ohio,” Joe Eaton, of the Buckeye Firearms Association, said in an interview with [WLWT5](#).

Eaton further insisted that the “Stand Your Ground” law does not mean someone can shoot first and ask questions later. “Of course, retreating, if at all possible, is still the safest and best and most recommended method because if you can avoid any type of situation that could endanger yourself or someone else, that always has to be the first priority,” he stressed.

Aside from Florida and Ohio, Texas, Alabama, Wyoming, Michigan, Mississippi, Kentucky and many other states have passed similar gun legislation.

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Former CIA Chief Believes UFOs May Exist, Hopeful Mankind 'Can Be Friendly'
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

James Woolsey is a former CIA head who served under the administration of US President Bill Clinton from 1993 until 1995. He co-authored a new book released in February named “Operation Dragon: Inside the Kremlin’s Secret War,” in which he alleges Lee Harvey Oswald killed former US President John F. Kennedy on orders from the Kremlin.

During a [recent interview](#) with The Black Vault’s YouTube channel, Woolsey spoke of his belief in extraterrestrial life, more so that he hopes mankind can find an “openness to new things,” and can be “friendly” to extraterrestrials if they ever made contact.

“I have been... not in the presence of but I’ve been in conversations with several individuals who have been close to an aircraft performing in an extraordinary fashion, in a fashion that has not yet come to be something people are comfortable to see,” Woolsey remarked on the show.

In the interview, Woolsey recalled a story told to him by “someone I respect” who informed him that their plane was stopped mid-air at 40,000 feet and did not operate as a normal aircraft.

When asked what was going on, Woolsey stated that he did not know but that over the years events such as that one usually involved “some kind of aircraft-like airframe.” Woolsey detailed various reports about “very curious behavior” seen in aircrafts by experienced pilots.

Additionally, the former CIA director explained how the possibilities behind the unexplained behavior may be something that is an extraordinary change from mankind’s current perception of reality and pushes a complex set of ideas about what is going on in the cyber world.

“Something is going on that’s surprising to a series of intelligent aircraft experienced pilots and we’ll just have to see what it is,” he said.

In the interview, host John Greenwald Jr, also highlights that other past CIA directors have spoken on their openness to the possibility of alien life forms. During a [December 2020](#) episode of the “Conversations with Tyler” podcast, former CIA director John Brennan said that life is defined in different ways, and that it would be “a bit presumptuous and arrogant for us to believe that there’s no other form of life anywhere in the entire universe.”

This development comes during a time where there has been a [rise](#) in UFO sightings that have resulted in requests for more information about extraterrestrial phenomena. Last year, the US

Department of Defense released a [statement](#) confirming three unclassified US Navy videos recorded between 2004 and 2015 that showed “unidentified aerial phenomena.”

Subsequently, the Pentagon [announced](#) the creation of an Unidentified Aerial Phenomena (UAP) Task Force whose mission is to detect, analyze and catalog UAPs that could potentially pose a threat to US national security.

Earlier, under the orders of former US President Donald Trump, the US defense sector was given a [180-day deadline](#) to disclose all information related to unidentified aerial phenomena, including details of any potential threats, and if foreign adversaries are suspected of controlling them. The report is expected to be released before June 1.

Most recently, John Ratcliffe, who previously served as Trump’s director of national intelligence, told [Fox News](#) that more sightings have been reported over the past few years than what has been revealed to the public. The former official emphasized that more reports have surfaced amid the [COVID-19 lockdown](#), and that documented encounters are not replicable by current technology, which makes it difficult to explain what they are.

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Arkansas Becomes First US State to Ban Transgender Youth Treatment After Veto Override by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Earlier, Arkansas’ Republican Governor Asa Hutchinson vetoed an anti-transgender health care bill known as the Save Adolescents From Experimentation (SAFE) Act. The measure effectively bans gender-affirming treatments, including surgery and hormone therapy, for people under the age of 18.

Arkansas lawmakers overrode Hutchinson’s veto on Tuesday, making Arkansas the first US state to outlaw treatment for transgender youth regardless of whether or not individuals have parental consent for medical care.

The Arkansas House of Representatives voted 71 to 24 to override Hutchinson’s veto, a measure that was subsequently followed by a 25 to 8 vote in the Senate.

In addition to banning gender confirming treatment to trans youth, the SAFE Act, which is also known as House Bill 1570, will also bar medical professionals from giving recommendations to other providers for such treatments.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Arkansas condemned the veto in a late [Tuesday statement](#) and has threatened legal action.

“Arkansas legislators disregarded widespread, overwhelming, and bipartisan opposition to this bill and continued their discriminatory crusade against trans youth,” Holly Dickson, the executive director of the Arkansas ACLU chapter, said in a statement. “Attempting to block trans youth from the care they need simply because of who they are is not only wrong, it’s also illegal, and we will be filing a lawsuit to challenge this law in court.”

Chase Strangio, deputy director for transgender justice with the ACLU’s LGBTQ and HIV Project, has also accused the Arkansas legislature of ignoring dozens of local doctors and national medical experts.

Strangio stressed that “gender-affirming care is life-saving care and banning that care will have devastating and in some cases deadly consequences.”

[Figures released](#) by the American Academy for Pediatrics notes that nearly 14% of adolescents have reported a previous suicide attempt. However, of that figure, 50% of the attempts were carried out by trans youth who were transitioning from female to male.

Arkansas legislature approved the bill last month along with a wave of [other bills](#) targeting the transgender community. Lawmakers in at least 25 states, including Mississippi, Arkansas and Tennessee have recently [enacted legislation](#) to restrict transgender athletes from competing in school sports.

The SAFE Act has faced opposition from many other groups including the American Academy of Pediatrics, which released a [statement](#) saying it opposes any laws that “discriminate against transgender and gender-diverse individuals or interfere in the confidential relationship between a patient and their physician.”

States like Alabama and Tennessee, who are also awaiting lawmakers’ decisions on similar legislation face backlash from critics like Dr. Morissa Ladinsky, an associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Ladinsky [told the BBC](#) that “the anticipation, uncertainty and fear” of losing gender-affirming care is “chipping away” at transgender youth.

In an interview with [NPR](#), Ladinsky further indicated that under the Alabama bill, she and her medical team could be charged with [Class C felonies](#) for prescribing puberty blockers or hormones. The medical professional could also be hit with a 10-year prison sentence.

Meanwhile, supporters argue they want to protect children from life-changing procedures they would later regret. The side effects of puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones are among the list of concerns, as well as cases where transgender people have [reversed](#) their decision to transition. Some [believe](#) gender-affirming procedures are “child abuse,” whereas other [claim](#) minors do not have the mental capacity to make such decisions.

The SAFE Act is scheduled to take effect on April 30.

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Graphic Video: New York Doormen Fired for Failing to Intervene in Attack on Elderly Woman by [Evan Craighead](#)

On March 29, a 38-year-old parolee convicted of killing his mother was caught on camera attacking a 65-year-old Asian American woman near Times Square in New York City, New York. While two doormen at a nearby building flagged down cops after the incident, some viewers of the viral footage have argued the men could have intervened sooner.

The Brodsky Organization announced on Tuesday that the NYC doormen who observed the March 29 attack were terminated, following an investigation that wrapped the same day.

"While the full lobby video shows that once the assailant had departed, the doormen emerged to assist the victim and flag down an [New York Police Department] vehicle, it is clear that required emergency and safety protocols were not followed," the statement read, as reported by the [Associated Press](#).

Security footage posted to social media last month showed 65-year-old Vilma Kari being kicked and stomped by a man. Kari is seen helpless on the ground as one of the doormen shuts the door.

Be advised, the footage below contains scenes some may find disturbing.

However, Service Employees International Union, Local 32BJ (SEIU 32BJ) - the workers' union - has detailed the doormen will be challenging the company's termination decision.

"We believe we must root out systemic racism in all its forms," SEIU 32BJ President Kyle Bragg said in a statement. "We believe that all union workers, especially workers of color who are often the subject of unfair treatment on the job, have a right to a fair process as outlined in their contract."

Elizabeth Kari, daughter of the 65-year-old victim, noted in a Sunday [GoFundMe post](#) that her mother "has been resting these past few days and wants to send her best as your energy, prayers, and thoughts have reached her and our family."

The fundraising campaign has raised \$254,655, despite its initial \$20,000 goal.

Lawyers for Brandon Elliot, the 38-year-old suspect, have called for the public to "reserve judgment until all the facts are presented in court."

Elliot has been charged with two counts of felony assault as a hate crime. The suspect is scheduled for arraignment on April 21.

A [March 2021](#) study by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, found that while overall hate crimes in the US dropped 6% in 2020, reports of anti-Asian hate crimes in 16 of the US' largest cities surged 145% last year.

Focus on the growing trend has led to a reemergence of race-related demonstrations in the US, including Monday's "Stop Asian Hate" [rally](#) in NYC.

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RPT - Canada Can Begin Re-Scheduling Ex-Nazi Deportation Hearings After Stay Motion Tossed - IRB

TORONTO, April 6 (Sputnik) - Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) can begin rescheduling deportation hearings against Helmut Oberlander after a federal court justice dismissed the former Nazi death squad member's motion to permanently stay proceedings, tribunal spokesperson Anna Pape told Sputnik.

The deportation proceedings against Oberlander were put on hold after a federal judge ordered a review, citing the defense's arguments regarding health issues and potential civil rights violations.

"Yes - the ID [Immigration Division] can now move to re-scheduling the admissibility hearing," Pape said Tuesday.

The IRB spokesperson added that nothing is scheduled at the present and the next hearing date will likely be set following a case management conference to explore availability for the hearing.

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RPT - Russian Monastery in US Needs Over \$100,000 for Repairs After Devastating Storm - Dean

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - Repairs continue on the major English-speaking Russian Orthodox Holy Cross monastery in the United States after the devastating winter storm in February, but more than \$100,000 is needed to cover all the material losses, monastery Dean Hieromonk Gabriel (Hooten) told Sputnik.

"Right now, the estimate for repair and replacement with some upgrades to prevent this situation from happening in the future is around \$110,000 give or take, though we have not attempted to calculate the lost income from our business during the month of the outages," father Gabriel said.

The monastery located in the mountains of West Virginia was severely damaged when a heavy winter storm hit several US regions and caused prolonged power outages.

"[Monks] need to consider the removal of damaged, dead and dangerous trees around the monastery buildings later this year, which will likely be expensive since specialty workers will need to be hired to bring down many trees without damaging the buildings," father Gabriel said.

As a result of donations from believers, the monastery currently received enough funds for its urgent needs, he said.

"Thanks be to God we have already raised what we need and will be able to take care of everything, glory to God," the monk added.

Holy Cross monastery is an English-speaking men's convent in the US under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia. The brotherhood numbers about 30 monastics.

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RPT: FEATURE - US Food Security Crisis: Record Numbers Go Hungry Amid Pandemic

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik), Barrington M. Salmon - Anne Miskey, the CEO of Union Station Homeless Services in Los Angeles, California, has watched with growing alarm as the pandemic throws people into states of hunger not witnessed in a generation.

In the Los Angeles area, where more than 1 in 4 households are suffering from food insecurity, Miskey said they have "absolutely seen a huge difference" in the numbers since the COVID outbreak in early 2020. Shining a bright light on this reality was an event in Pasadena last year where more than 2,000 meals were handed out to the homeless and hungry.

"We had people lined up around the block for two full days," Miskey told Sputnik.

Meanwhile, just as the need for help spiked across the country, a pandemic-induced shortfall in volunteers made matters worse, while the US public health system and the social safety net failed.

Miskey said before the pandemic, volunteers made significant contributions to the fight against food insecurity almost every night of the week at churches, synagogues, and food banks.

"But when COVID hit, volunteerism stopped," Miskey said.

AMERICA'S HUNGER CRISIS & COVID

Food insecurity in the United States, prior to the pandemic, was at its lowest level since the Great Recession, although it still affected around 37 million people, according to Feeding America, the largest hunger-relief organization in the country.

That number grew by eight million by the end of 2020 - largely as a result of COVID-19.

In March, the group forecasted that 42 million people may experience food insecurity in 2021.

In the District of Columbia, George Jones, CEO of Bread for the City, observed the debilitating effects of COVID-19 on the lives of so many who were already suffering in the nation's capital.

"Ten thousand people are getting food from us and about 100 people come to the center although we encourage them not to - and we hand them bags," he told Sputnik. "When looking at food insecurity, the world looks so different now. Our focus is getting people access to food and figuring out how to sustain a model that's equitable. The pandemic is not quite yet over so we are looking at a safe, reliable way to serve our clients."

While Bread for the City staff were paying \$40,000 a month to deliver food, during the pandemic, that cost has skyrocketed to \$500,000 a month, Jones said.

According to Bread for the City estimates, 324,000 DC households experience food insecurity. And each month, Bread for the City's two food pantries provide nutritious groceries - including fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats - to more than 8,400 clients living near the federal poverty line. In addition, the agency holds two monthly Farmers Markets that offers fresh produce to the community at large, and as a Grocery Plus distribution site, where staff distributes an additional 30-pound box of food to a small number of seniors.

Meanwhile, as a result of one of the fallouts of the coronavirus pandemic, millions of Americans have lost their jobs and have fallen thousands of dollars behind on rent and utility bills, straining to hold onto money to take care of basic needs. The stakes are high for some 20 million Americans who are receiving some kind of unemployment aid.

Miskey said those most deeply affected by the pandemic and the resulting lockdown and economic meltdown are those families that were already facing hunger or are one paycheck away from facing hunger.

She also said the pandemic highlighted the reliance on non-profits and faith groups who had to "pick up the slack" in order to support vulnerable families and individuals because government systems had failed.

Dr. Joseph Llobrera of the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, said the pandemic's effect on families and individuals has been startling.

"My guess is there are a lot of families who weren't suffering before the pandemic but families are dealing with loss of income and breadwinners taken by COVID-19," said Llobrera, director of Research and Interim Program Area Lead for the Food Assistance team. "Some families are one missed paycheck away from homelessness. We have a situation where people who never needed this help. It has exposed the country's safety net. Systems are so old and there's not been a lot of investment. We need a system that doesn't allow people to fall."

IMPACT ON CHILDREN

About 13 million children (1 in 6), according to Feeding America, are expected to be food insecure in 2021, slightly better than the 15 million that were last year.

Llobrera said based on the data he and his staff have been tracking the impact on children is "off the charts."

"I haven't seen anything like this in the last several decades," Llobrera told Sputnik. "A household Pulse survey shows that roughly 10 million kids are in households where they aren't getting enough to eat. Parents are usually trying to protect kids, shield them from lack of food, skip meals and hide so kids don't see it."

He said 2019 data captured before the pandemic showed one million children were "encountering the severity" of missing out on meals.

"We're going to pay the cost - mental and physical development - not just in the near term," Llobrera said. "It will affect childrens' ability to focus or do well in school and could affect high school completion rates, test scores and getting well-paying jobs as adults."

Llobrera said the US is different from a number of other countries in terms of what society sees as a worthwhile investment.

"Keeping food on the table, paying overhead, and housing stability... will pay dividends in terms of healthy, productive citizens down the road," he said. "Without this, kids will suffer and the effect will be borne by a generation of kids."

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Ukraine Official Says Kiev, Ottawa Closer to Decision on Taking Iran to ICJ over PS752

TORONTO, April 6 (Sputnik) - Kiev and Ottawa are closer to a decision on taking Iran to the International Court of Justice after Tehran announced charges in the downing of a Ukrainian passenger jet, Ukraine's Ambassador to Canada Andrey Shevchenko told Canadian state TV. Earlier in the day, Iran's military prosecutor's office indicted ten officials over the 2020 downing of Ukrainian International Airlines flight 752 that killed 176 people.

"I think this brings us even closer to [a] very important strategic decision on how we have to deal with this situation, including on a big decision whether we are going to take this case to the International Court [of Justice]," Shevchenko told the CBC on Tuesday. "I expect that all the legal actions will be coordinated, and I think Canada and Ukraine are naturally in a position to lead this process."

Shevchenko added that he would not speculate about when Ukraine would take such a step but emphasized that Kiev would coordinate with the other affected countries - Canada, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom - to seek answers about the tragedy.

Iran's Civil Aviation Organization, which oversaw the investigation, concluded last month that PS752 was brought down inadvertently by an Iranian missile after being mistaken for a hostile target amid confrontation with the United States. Ottawa and Kiev have rejected the report. Ukrainian International Airlines flight PS752 crashed shortly after takeoff from Tehran after being shot down by the Iranian military. The passengers were mostly Canadian and Iranian nationals and nine Ukrainian crew members.

The Iranian military said it was on high alert at the time of the accident, which happened hours after it fired missiles at two US bases in Iraq in retaliation for the drone strike that killed top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani.

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Canada's New Democrats to Formalize Policy Opposing Venezuela Interference, Sanctions - MP

TORONTO, April 6 (Sputnik) - Canada's opposition New Democrat Party (NDP) will formalize policy opposing interference in Venezuela's sovereign affairs and sanctions against the South American country during the party convention later this week, parliamentarian Don Davies said. Ahead of the NDP convention, which is set to kick off on Friday, several riding associations have put forth resolutions to adopt official party policy that would oppose interference in Venezuela's domestic affairs, remove Canada from the Lima Group and seek to end sanctions against the country.

"Those resolutions, which I firmly support, are already NDP policy... the principle of non-intervention and lifting of sanctions are both positions that have been expressed by our foreign affairs critics on many occasions, so I would say that all that does is formalizes the position we've already taken," Davies said on Tuesday during a virtual discussion concerning the humanitarian impact of sanctions on Venezuela.

The NDP's position will not sit well with Canada's other two main political parties, the governing Liberal Party and the official opposition Conservative Party, Davies said, noting the Conservatives' support for the US position on Venezuela and slamming Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal government's "appalling" foreign policy record that has been far from progressive.

The parliamentarian contended that sanctions are meant to bring countries into compliance with international rules, as opposed to the foreign policy ambitions of international heavyweights, like the United States. Davies also said Ottawa and other Western nations target left-wing governments with embargoes, while ignoring the transgressions of right-wing regimes and authoritarian states, like Saudi Arabia.

During the event, UN Special Rapporteur Alena Douhan addressed the debilitating impact of sanctions, particularly the human cost of embargoes against Venezuela, including water, food and energy scarcity.

According to Douhan, 40 percent of Venezuelans operate in what is known as the "grey zone" of the economy, do not pay taxes and are often involved in criminal activities. The UN Special Rapporteur cited instances of Venezuelan women resorting to work in the sex trade for food. Douhan explained that Venezuela's centralized system of government makes it difficult for international companies to steer clear of sanctions thus denying Venezuelans access to a variety of services and goods that are traditionally procured from abroad.

Targeted sanctions violate human rights because human rights are universal and are not conditional on ideological or moral judgements. If there is criminal wrongdoing, it needs to be pursued as such, Douhan said.

Davies said that Canadian parliamentarians do not get a thorough accounting of the human cost of the sanctions, saying that muted or biased mainstream coverage results in a 'slanted' view of the situation in Venezuela.

Venezuela is in the midst of a political quagmire, which began last year after Juan Guaido, then head of the opposition-controlled National Assembly, proclaimed himself an interim president of Venezuela in a bid to oust reelected Nicolas Maduro from power.

Venezuelan-Canadian relations sunk to new lows after Ottawa, in coordination with the United States and other NATO allies, recognized Guaido as the interim president of Venezuela. Russia, China and a host of other nations recognize Maduro as the only legitimate leader of the country. Canada is among a handful of countries that still recognizes Guaido, a failed coup leader, as Venezuela's president. The European Union revoked its recognition earlier this year.

Maduro said Guaido is an American puppet working with the United States to topple the government of Venezuela to seize the country's resources.

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Facebook Says Malicious Hackers 'Scraped' Data From 530 Million Users Prior to Sept 2019

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - Facebook said prior to September 2019 data was scraped from more than 530 million of its users.

"On April 3, Business Insider published a story saying that information from more than 530 million Facebook users had been made publicly available in an unsecured database. We have teams dedicated to addressing these kinds of issues and understand the impact they can have on the people who use our services. It is important to understand that malicious actors obtained this data not through hacking our systems but by scraping it from our platform prior to September 2019," the social media giant said in a statement on Tuesday.

Facebook said it believes the data in question was scraped using the platform's contact importer.

"When we became aware of how malicious actors were using this feature in 2019, we made changes to the contact importer. In this case, we updated it to prevent malicious actors from using software to imitate our app and upload a large set of phone numbers to see which ones matched Facebook users. Through the previous functionality, they were able to query a set of

user profiles and obtain a limited set of information about those users included in their public profiles," the release said.

The information, Facebook added, did not include financial information, health information or passwords.

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UPDATE - US Wishes to Discuss Boycotting 2022 Beijing Olympics With Allies, Partners - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The US government plans to discuss with its allies and partners jointly boycotting the 2022 Winter Olympics Games in Beijing, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said at a press briefing.

"It is something that we certainly wish to discuss. A coordinated approach will be not only in our interest but also in the interest of our allies and partners," Price said on Tuesday.

In March, the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and the European Union imposed sanctions on four Chinese officials and one entity for alleged human right violations against ethnic Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region of China.

In addition, US Senator Rick Scott sent a letter in March to sponsors of the International Olympic Committee demanding that the 2022 Winter Olympic Games be moved from Beijing to a city in another country because China has engaged in human rights abuses.

Later in the day, a State Department official clarified Price's remark, underscoring that the US position has not changed.

"We have not discussed and are not discussing any joint boycott with allies and partners," the official said as quote by Yahoo news.

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While Bread for the City staff were paying \$40,000 a month to deliver food, during the pandemic, that cost has skyrocketed to \$500,000 a month, Jones said.

According to Bread for the City estimates, 324,000 DC households experience food insecurity. And each month, Bread for the City's two food pantries provide nutritious groceries - including fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats - to more than 8,400 clients living near the federal poverty line. In addition, the agency holds two monthly Farmers Markets that offers fresh produce to the community at large, and as a Grocery Plus distribution site, where staff distributes an additional 30-pound box of food to a small number of seniors.

Meanwhile, as a result of one of the fallouts of the coronavirus pandemic, millions of Americans have lost their jobs and have fallen thousands of dollars behind on rent and utility bills, straining

to hold onto money to take care of basic needs. The stakes are high for some 20 million Americans who are receiving some kind of unemployment aid.

Miskey said those most deeply affected by the pandemic and the resulting lockdown and economic meltdown are those families that were already facing hunger or are one paycheck away from facing hunger.

She also said the pandemic highlighted the reliance on non-profits and faith groups who had to "pick up the slack" in order to support vulnerable families and individuals because government systems had failed.

Dr. Joseph Llobrera of the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, said the pandemic's effect on families and individuals has been startling.

"My guess is there are a lot of families who weren't suffering before the pandemic but families are dealing with loss of income and breadwinners taken by COVID-19," said Llobrera, director of Research and Interim Program Area Lead for the Food Assistance team. "Some families are one missed paycheck away from homelessness. We have a situation where people who never needed this help. It has exposed the country's safety net. Systems are so old and there's not been a lot of investment. We need a system that doesn't allow people to fall."

IMPACT ON CHILDREN

About 13 million children (1 in 6), according to Feeding America, are expected to be food insecure in 2021, slightly better than the 15 million that were last year.

Llobrera said based on the data he and his staff have been tracking the impact on children is "off the charts."

"I haven't seen anything like this in the last several decades," Llobrera told Sputnik. "A household Pulse survey shows that roughly 10 million kids are in households where they aren't getting enough to eat. Parents are usually trying to protect kids, shield them from lack of food, skip meals and hide so kids don't see it."

He said 2019 data captured before the pandemic showed one million children were "encountering the severity" of missing out on meals.

"We're going to pay the cost - mental and physical development - not just in the near term," Llobrera said. "It will affect childrens' ability to focus or do well in school and could affect high school completion rates, test scores and getting well-paying jobs as adults."

Llobrera said the US is different from a number of other countries in terms of what society sees as a worthwhile investment.

"Keeping food on the table, paying overhead, and housing stability... will pay dividends in terms of healthy, productive citizens down the road," he said. "Without this, kids will suffer and the effect will be borne by a generation of kids."

CONFLUENCE OF FACTORS TIED TO FOOD INSECURITY

Even after the pandemic passes, policy advocates and experts believe there are deeper structural problems in both government and society that need to be addressed, including structural racism.

Miskey and Jones explained that it is impossible to separate food insecurity from gentrification, low wages, displacement and homelessness.

COVID-19 has laid bare the structural, institutional, economic and racial inequities that separate African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans from their white counterparts. Marginalized communities have been hit particularly hard by the coronavirus.

"People need help but needing help is seen as something weak or bad. Healthcare workers, people of color and immigrants are making horrible wages," Miskey said. "They cannot afford afterschool care for kids, don't have money for affordable housing and struggle to make ends meet. This is a war against the poor. They tell people that they did this to themselves. There are millions of people who have no opportunity or who are intentionally excluded from opportunity. Racism is the #1 factor for excluding people."

Jones pointed to the harsh reality that the United States – and the planet for that matter – have been created where some have enough and others do not have adequate resources.

"We really aspire to create a world with equity, access to healthy food and water," Jones said.

"We continue to push government leaders and others to create an equity city even as we meet people where they are."

Jones said for himself, his staff and his organization, it is a battle on two fronts: fighting to erase systemic inequalities and helping link people without access to needed resources.

Meanwhile, homelessness is doubling under COVID and people are scrambling to step back from the abyss. A new report almost certainly underestimates the spread, depth and urgency of the crisis, and not by a little, federal officials warned.

The report showed a 2.2 percent increase in homelessness from the previous year, but that does not reflect the displacement of people who lost work as a result of the sharp downturn caused by the coronavirus. Even before the pandemic, homelessness was re-emerging as a major national problem, especially in big cities. The country's two biggest cities, New York and Los Angeles, account for a quarter of all homeless people counted in the 2020 survey.

Homelessness affects Black and Latino communities with disproportionate force. About 40 percent of people counted were Black, compared with their 13 percent representation in the population, and nearly a quarter of homeless people self-identified as Latino, a group that makes up about 18 percent of all Americans.

Miskey said as she views the challenges and devastation food insecurity has had on poor, near-poor, low-income and middle-class Americans, she feels anger and frustrated because most of this is and was avoidable.

"I agree with other critics that the US is a failed state. I think our systems have massively failed people," she said. "I think our system was set up to fail. What they are set up to do is to keep up the status quo, ensuring that those people of privilege and wealth maintain their privilege and wealth."

Meanwhile, everyone else is blamed for their supposed character defects or failures because all the opportunities are out there if you grab it, Miskey explained.

"The fact is, our system creates massive barriers for opportunity and doesn't allow huge chunks of our communities to actually access those things. That's the shame of our system, the shame of our government. We're a system, as I said before, where we have a war on the poor, not a war on poverty," Miskey concluded.

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Canada Can Begin Re-Scheduling Ex-Nazi Deportation Hearings After Stay Motion Tossed - IRB

TORONTO, April 6 (Sputnik) - Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) can begin rescheduling deportation hearings against Helmut Oberlander after a federal court justice dismissed the former Nazi death squad member's motion to permanently stay proceedings, tribunal spokesperson Anna Pape told Sputnik.

The deportation proceedings against Oberlander were put on hold after a federal judge ordered a review, citing the defense's arguments regarding health issues and potential civil rights violations.

"Yes - the ID [Immigration Division] can now move to re-scheduling the admissibility hearing," Pape said Tuesday.

The IRB spokesperson added that nothing is scheduled at the present and the next hearing date will likely be set following a case management conference to explore availability for the hearing.

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US Legislation Targets China Influence at Confucius Institutes in American Universities

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - US colleges and universities with China-funded Confucius Institutes would face numerous restrictions, including a requirement that agreements be publicly disclosed, under legislation announced by Senator Marsha Blackburn.

"They [Confucius Institutes] allow China to discretely influence what college students are taught about topics like Hong Kong and Tiananmen Square and impede freedom of speech on campus," Blackburn said in a press release on Tuesday.

Blackburn noted that Beijing recently "rebranded" the institutes, now active in 55 US colleges and universities, as centers for "language exchange and cooperation" to avoid government oversight.

The legislation would require Confucius Institutes to be located apart from university Chinese language departments, the removal of Chinese officials from institute oversight, public disclosure of Chinese agreements with universities and an end to confidentiality agreements included in the agreements.

Cosponsors of the Transparency for Confucius Institutes Act include Senator Ted Cruz and Congressmen Kevin Cramer, Tommy Tuberville, Mike Braun, Josh Hawley and Rick Scott, according to the release.

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Arab-American Sues US for Persecution After Refusing to Be FBI Informer - ACLU

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - Ahmad Chebli, an Arab-American resident of Michigan, is suing the US government for persecuting him after he refused to serve as an informer for the FBI and was then placed on the "No Fly List" effectively banning him from flying on any domestic flight, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said in a news release.

"[W]ith the help of the ACLU, I'm bringing a lawsuit to challenge the government's actions and placement of me on the No Fly List," Chebli, who is a US citizen, said in the release on Tuesday. "I want a fair process to clear my name. And I want to make sure no one suffers what my family and I have suffered."

In an August 2018 interview set up by the FBI, Chebli said he repeatedly insisted that he did not want to work for the FBI, but they kept pressuring him. The FBI agents then accused him of being affiliated with a terrorist group, an allegation he said was false and he vehemently denied. Then the agents threatened his family too, he said.

"For my family and me, this entire ordeal has been devastating. I exercised my right not to work as an FBI informant in my community and the government punished me. Because I'm on the No Fly List, I cannot visit family and friends abroad, or travel for work or to fulfill my religious pilgrimage obligation as a Muslim," Chebli said in the release.

Chebli is married with two young children and is a business owner and an engineer in the state of Michigan's automotive industry, according to the release.

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Coronavirus Antibody Protection From Moderna Vaccine Lasts at Least 6 Months - Report

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The immunity against the novel coronavirus produced by the Moderna vaccine remained active at least six months after the second dose, a report in the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) said.

"Antibodies that were elicited by mRNA-1273 [Moderna vaccine] persisted through six months after the second dose, as detected by three distinct serologic assays," a press release explaining the NEJM report said on Tuesday.

The NEJM based its report on an examination of 33 healthy adult participants who received the Moderna shot in an early trial of the vaccine, the release said.

Ongoing studies continue to monitor immune responses beyond 6 months as well as determining the effect of a booster dose to extend the duration and breadth of activity against emerging viral variants, the release added.

Moderna has created a booster shot, now in clinical trials, in response to the mutated versions of the virus, even though current vaccines are believed effective against existing variants, according to the Food and Drug Administration.

Pfizer, the maker of a similar two-dose vaccine also authorized by the FDA, recently announced that its immunity also lasted at least six months.

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California to Fully Reopen By June 15 on Condition of Residents Vaccinating - Governor

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - California will fully reopen by June 15 if its residents continue to get vaccinated against the novel coronavirus and the rate of hospitalizations stays stable, Governor Gavin Newsom said on Tuesday.

"We are announcing today that on June 15, we will be moving beyond the blueprint (of pandemic safety measures), if we continue the good work," Newsom said during a briefing. California's five-week window for reopening was based on its encouraging pace of vaccinations and receding rate of hospitalization, Newsom said.

"With more than 20 million vaccines administered across the state, it is time to turn the page on our tier system and begin looking to fully reopen California's economy," Newsom said in a statement released earlier in the day.

In the terms of hospitalization, there were just 2,005 people hospitalized with one new confirmed case of the virus in the past 24 hours, a 23 percent decrease from two weeks ago, state health statistics showed.

Newsom, however, urged Californians to remain vigilant with respect to safety measures.

"We can now begin planning for our lives post-pandemic but we will need to remain vigilant and continue the practices that got us here - wearing masks and getting vaccinated," the governor said, adding that the "light at the end of this tunnel has never been brighter".

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Biden Says Has Not Discussed With President Xi China's Responsibility for Coronavirus

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters on Tuesday that he has not spoken to his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping about China's alleged responsibility for the spread of novel coronavirus across the world.

"No, I haven't had that conversation with President Xi," Biden replied to a question if he had a chance to ask his counterpart if reports that China may have misled the world at the beginning of the pandemic are true.

Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, repeatedly accused China of covering up the coronavirus outbreak and failing to warn the world about the danger of a pandemic.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) -

JCPOA TALKS IN VIENNA

* Russia's permanent representative to international organizations Mikhail Ulyanov said on Tuesday that positive results can be expected in the negotiations on restoring the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement.

* US representatives were not present at the very meeting of the commission on the nuclear deal with Iran, which took place earlier in the day, Ulyanov said.

* The United Nations hopes that Tuesday's meeting of the Joint Commission of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was a step in the right direction that will revive the nuclear agreement, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

* It is too early to talk about a major breakthrough on the issue of the Iran nuclear deal, but a turn from talks to specific steps has been secured, Ulyanov said.

US HYPERSONIC MISSILE FAILED LAUNCH

* A US hypersonic weapon failed to launch due to an issue that occurred during its first booster vehicle flight test on April 5, the Air Force said on Tuesday.

IMF WORLD ECONOMIC OUTLOOK

* The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has revised upward its forecast for global economic growth this year by 0.5 percentage points to 6 percent, fund revealed in its World Economic Outlook on Tuesday.

* The IMF in a report revised upward its forecast for Russia's economic growth this year by 0.8 percentage points to 3.8 percent.

* The IMF has revised upward its forecast for economic growth in the United States this year by 1.3 percentage points to 6.4 percent,

* The IMF has revised upward its forecast for China's economic growth in 2021 to 8.4 percent and its forecast for growth in 2022 to 5.6 percent,

* The IMF revised upward its forecast for the European Union's economic growth this year and in 2022.

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New Coronavirus Variants Spread in US, Number of Cases Up - Biden

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden warned on Tuesday that new types of the novel coronavirus are spreading across the United States and the number of people testing positive is increasing.

"New variants of the virus are spreading and moving quickly. Cases are going back up, hospitalizations are no longer declining. While deaths are still down, way down from January, they are going up in some places," Biden said in a televised address.

The US president praised the scale of the nationwide coronavirus vaccination effort during which 62 million people have been fully inculcated, but admitted the outreach is still not enough. "The vaccination program is saving tens of thousands of lives but the pandemic remains dangerous. Let me explain it in a single word. Time. Time. Even moving at the record speed... we are not even half way through vaccinating over 300 million Americans. This is going to take time," Biden said.

Biden announced that every adult American will be eligible for a vaccine since April 19 instead of the initial deadline of May 1.

A number of Americans have said they do not want to be vaccinated in light of the fact that the vaccine producers have skipped testing phases and are exempt from legal liability as well as the fact that the shots are effectively gene therapies with a large number of potential side effects, including death.

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OPCW Examining Syria's Explanations on Sample Analysis Results - UN Disarmament Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, April 6 (Sputnik) - The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is studying a note verbale sent by Syria with explanations regarding analysis results of samples collected in September last year, UN Under-Secretary-General of Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu said on Tuesday.

Nakamitsu said that in February, the OPCW Declaration Assessment Team (DAT) shared the results of the analysis of these samples with the Syrian authorities.

"DAT received preliminary comments from the Syrian technical experts regarding the presence of chemicals identified in these samples, some of which were unexpected," Nakamitsu told the UN Security Council.

Nakamitsu said the OPCW Technical Secretary received a note verbale from Syria on March 8 with further explanations regarding the sample analysis results. The Technical Secretariat is analyzing these explanations and additional engagement with the Syrian national authority, she added.

Throughout the Syrian conflict, which has been ongoing since 2011, Damascus has been accused of using chemical weapons against the civilian population. The Syrian side has been continuously denying these allegations.

In 2014, the OPCW set up the fact-finding mission to establish the truth about the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Russia has accused the OPCW of being biased against Syria and claimed that the organization was being used as a political tool by Western countries to put pressure on "undesirable" states.

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Canadian Court Rejects Ex-Nazi Oberlander's Bid to Stay Deportation Proceedings – Ruling

TORONTO, April 6 (Sputnik) - A Canadian federal judge on Tuesday dismissed former Nazi death squad member Helmut Oberlander's bid to permanently stay deportation proceedings against him.

Lawyers for the former Schutzstaffel (SS) member have accused the Canadian government of withholding sensitive documents critical to the case.

"I come to the conclusion that the Court should not entertain Mr. Oberlander's request and should not exercise its discretion in favor of a permanent stay of proceedings at this point in time," Federal Court of Canada justice Denis Gascon said in the ruling.

Oberlander's legal counsel say the federal government withheld confidential documents from the 1986-87 Commission of Inquiry on War Criminals in Canada report, better known as the Deschenes Commission, according to which the commission never established clear evidence of Oberlander's participation in any war crimes or crimes against humanity.

Oberlander only learned of the commission's findings through a Toronto Star article that was included in the evidence submitted by government lawyers for the former SS member's admissibility hearing, which was set to commence last month, according to documents filed by his defense team.

However, the federal court justice ruled that the abuse of process allegations must be brought before the Immigration and Refugee Board's Immigration Division (ID) first.

Gascon noted that the temporary stay is already more than what could be granted if the judicial review of the case goes Oberlander's way. The deportation proceedings against the former Nazi death squad member are currently on hold after a federal judge ordered a review, citing the defense's arguments regarding health issues and potential civil rights violations.

The judge added that he sees no exceptional circumstances that would warrant immediate intervention by the Federal Court before the ID has an opportunity to review the abuse of process allegations brought forward by Oberlander's legal team.

In an interview with Sputnik, international criminal lawyer John Philpot warned that Canadian deportation proceedings against former Nazi Helmut Oberlander could be prolonged for up to an additional two years after the country's Federal Court ordered a stay of hearings, noting the significance of a review being granted, considering that only 3 to 4 percent of deportation cases are reviewed.

The veteran attorney said the defense's strategy is to prolong the case until Oberlander, who is 96, dies.

The legal representatives for Oberlander have not responded to multiple requests for an interview.

Oberlander has been embroiled in legal battle with the Canadian government since 1995, when the latter began trying to strip him of his citizenship, citing his failure to disclose his links to death squads. After a lengthy legal battle, Oberlander was stripped of his citizenship for the fourth time and final time in 2017 and Canada's Supreme Court issued a ruling last December that blocked any possibility for Oberlander to appeal this decision.

An adjudicator ruled in October that the IRB has the jurisdiction to pursue the deportation of Oberlander, concluding that no abuse of process had occurred.

Additionally, Oberlander faces legal scrutiny in Russia, where investigators say he was complicit in the massacre of 27,000 civilians, including orphaned children, in Russia's Rostov region. Federal Security Service (FSB) files obtained by Sputnik revealed that Oberlander, a former interpreter for the Sonderkommando SS-10A death squad, played a role in the massacre. Russia's Investigative Committee has sent a request to the Canadian authorities to provide legal materials related to the probe of Oberlander's role in the massacre. However, in an interview with Sputnik in December, the Russian Embassy in Ottawa said the Canadian government did not request documents related to the case and has refused to cooperate despite Moscow's request for legal assistance. The Russian Embassy added that "influential defenders" are working to delay the deportation process.

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US Renews 'Do Not Travel' Advisory for Syria - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The United States extended a warning against travel by Americans to Syria due to the threat of terrorism and other violent crimes, and the added threat of the coronavirus pandemic, the State Department said on Tuesday. "Do not travel to Syria due to COVID-19, terrorism, civil unrest, kidnapping, armed conflict, and risk of unjust detention," the State Department said in a press release. Because the US Embassy in Damascus suspended its operations in February 2012, American diplomats are unable to provide emergency services to Americans in Syria, the release said. The advisory also warned of extreme personal risks to Americans who travel to Syria to engage in "armed conflict," and of severe penalties for Americans who support terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliates [banned in Russia]. The advisory replaces a previous US government warning issued August 6, 2020, the release said.

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US Wishes to Discuss Boycotting 2022 Beijing Olympics With Allies, Partners - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The US government plans to discuss with its allies and partners jointly boycotting the 2022 Winter Olympics Games in Beijing, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday. "It is something that we certainly wish to discuss. A coordinated approach will be not only in our interest but also in the interest of our allies and partners," Price said during a press briefing. In March, the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and the European Union imposed sanctions on four Chinese officials and one entity for alleged human right violations against ethnic Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region of China.

In addition, US Senator Rick Scott sent a letter in March to sponsors of the International Olympic Committee demanding that the 2022 Winter Olympic Games be moved from Beijing to a city in another country because China has engaged in human rights abuses.

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NASA Sets April 11 Tentative Launch Date for Inaugural Flight of Mars Rover Helicopter

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) – The Ingenuity helicopter that flew to Mars on the belly of the Perseverance Rover will tentatively attempt to begin flying on April 11, NASA said on Tuesday. "The rover will provide support during flight operations, taking images, collecting environmental data, and hosting the base station that enables the helicopter to communicate with mission controllers on Earth," NASA said in a press release.

The space agency plans to announce results of what would be the first-ever attempt at a powered, controlled flight on another planet with a televised webcast at 3:30 a.m. EDT (7:30 a.m. GMT) on Monday, the release said.

The release cautioned that the flight date may shift as engineers work on the deployments, preflight checks, and vehicle positioning of both the Perseverance and Ingenuity rovers, which will monitor, photograph and collect data from the helicopter.

Ingenuity arrived at Mars' Jezero Crater attached to the belly of NASA's Perseverance rover, which completed a nearly flawless landing on the Red Planet on February 18.

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US on Brink of Another COVID-19 Surge - Top Pandemic Expert Fauci

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is on the brink of another COVID-19 surge despite leading the world in vaccinations against the virus, top US pandemics expert Anthony Fauci warned on Tuesday.

The United States was not yet experiencing a so-called fourth wave of the coronavirus, said Fauci, who is director of allergy and infectious diseases at the National Institute of Allergy and a key leader of President Joe Biden's coronavirus response team.

"But we're really on the brink of a surge," he said in an interview with the US National Press Club. "It's really a critical time right now because we could just as easily swing up into a surge." He said new infections had fallen since a January peak but were inching up again, registering north of 30,000 cases a day.

"We're just essentially tempting another wave, if we get to 60,000 cases a day."

Fauci said it would be wrong for Americans to ease up on masking and social distancing on the assumption that the country was exceeding vaccination targets.

A record 4 million COVID-19 vaccines a day were administered to Americans last Thursday. President Joe Biden has also set a target of administering 200 million COVID-19 vaccines by May, leading the global immunization drive against the virus.

Fauci, however, expressed concern that the authorities' efforts might be defeated by public complacency.

"People really have what we call COVID-19 fatigue," Fauci said, adding that the easing of safety measures could defeat efforts by the authorities to break the back of the virus. "We just don't want to have to go back to really shutting things down. That would be terrible," he added.

Since its global outbreak in March 2020, the COVID-19 has impacted the United States more than any other country, with nearly 31 million Americans infected by the virus and more than 550,000 of them dying from complications caused by it.

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Canadian Court Rejects Ex-Nazi Oberlander's Bid to Stay Deportation Proceedings - Ruling TORONTO, April 6 (Sputnik) - A Canadian federal judge on Wednesday dismissed former Nazi death squad member Helmut Oberlander's bid to permanently stay deportation proceedings against him.

Lawyers for the former Schutzstaffel (SS) member have accused the Canadian government of withholding sensitive documents critical to the case.

"I come to the conclusion that the Court should not entertain Mr. Oberlander's request and should not exercise its discretion in favor of a permanent stay of proceedings at this point in time," Federal Court of Canada justice Denis Gascon ruled on Tuesday.

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RPT - US Has Aligned Interests With Russia, China in Iran Nuclear Talks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The United States has aligned interests with both Russia and China in the ongoing talks in Vienna on reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement and views the two countries as partners in this effort, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"We do have alignment in [many] areas when it comes to our interests with those of Moscow and Beijing," Price said. "It is certainly not in the interest of Moscow, it is certainly not in the interest of Beijing for Iran to be on the path to a nuclear weapon or for Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon. We do see them as partners in this fairly narrow effort."

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US Hails Vienna Talks as Welcome, Constructive Step on JCPOA - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The United States sees the ongoing Vienna talks as a welcome and constructive step to get a better understanding how to restore mutual compliance with the Iran nuclear agreement, US State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Tuesday.

"Certainly as a step forward, a broad step forward these discussions in Vienna, even we are not meeting directly with the Iranians... it is a welcome step, it is a constructive step, it is a potentially useful step," Price said during a daily briefing.

The capital of Austria hosts an in-person meeting of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) members to discuss steps needed to fully restore the deal. The US team participated in consultations with counterparts from China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom, but held no direct talks with Iran.

"The utility of this setting in Vienna is that there can be real-time interaction, albeit indirect between the United States and in turn the Iranians, with those messages ferried back and forth by our allies and partners," Price said. "In the end we hope that we are able to leave Vienna... with a better understanding of a roadmap for how we get to that end state - mutual compliance." According to Price, Vienna talks focus on how to bring Iran, which breached nuclear-related commitments, and the US, which reimposed sanctions, into compliance with the 2015 deal.

"Those are the two working groups, those are the two issues that are on the table. The shorthand is compliance for compliance," the spokesman said.

The US delegation is led by Special Envoy for Iran Rob Malley. Price said that he expects Malley to stay in Vienna for at least "the good part of the week."

In 2015, Iran signed the JCPOA with the P5+1 group of countries. The agreement required Iran to scale back its nuclear program and downgrade its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief. In 2018, the US withdrew from the JCPOA and began imposing sanctions on Iran in violation of the agreement.

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US Defense Chief to Visit Israel Next Week for Talks on Iran, Syria, Lebanon - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is expected to have high-level meetings with counterparts in Israel next week to discuss matters concerning Iran, Syria, and Lebanon, Axios reported on Tuesday, citing Israeli officials.

During his visit, Austin is expected to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz, the report said.

The report added that Israeli officials plan to raise concerns over the Trump-era US-Israeli security understandings that are crucial for maintaining Israel's military advantage in the region. The Pentagon declined to comment on Austin's expected visit, the report said.

Earlier on Tuesday, media reported that an Iranian vessel belonging to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Forces (IRGC) was attacked off the coast of Eritrea in the Red Sea.

Last week, Iran attacked a cargo ship that belongs to Israeli company XT Management. In late February, an explosion occurred on the Israeli ship in the Gulf of Oman. No one was harmed but Israel's Netanyahu accused Iran of carrying out the attack, however, Tehran denied the allegations.

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NASA Tests Orion Space Capsule With Splash in Pool to Gauge Ocean Landing Impact
WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The Orion spaceship, designed for a 2024 human mission to the Moon, splashed down in a swimming-pool like structure to measure the impact of an ocean landing in a test televised by NASA on Tuesday.

"The water impact tests are looking at dropping the crew module in a variety of conditions, looking at how the structure responds to that water landing, which is a pretty significant event," Orion Project Manager Debbie Korth said while moderating the test.

Tuesday's seven-foot drop allowed the capsule to accelerate to about 10 miles per hour before the splash, after which the cone shaped craft bobbed in the water, providing data from 500 sensors.

NASA began a series of drop tests in late March to prepare for the first crewed flight of the Orion scheduled for 2023.

The four-person capsule is designed to carry humans in orbit around the moon in 2024, from which at least two astronauts will use a lander to descend to the lunar surface for the first time since the last Apollo mission in 1972, NASA said.

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Biden Administration Funded 'Limited' Construction of Border Wall - White House

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - There is limited construction on the southern border that has been funded under the Biden administration, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

Homeland Security (DHS) Chief Alejandro Mayorkas told department employees last week there is a chance the border wall construction will be continued to finish some remaining gaps in the existing barrier, the Washington Times reported on Monday.

"There is some limited construction [for the wall] that has been funded and allocated for but it is otherwise paused," Psaki told reporters when asked about the DHS chief's comment on filling gaps.

On January 20, President Joe Biden ordered to halt wall construction at the US southern border and in February informed Congress that he terminated the national emergency at the southern border and halted the diversion of funds for the construction of a wall by his predecessor Donald Trump.

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US Defense Chief to Visit Israel Next Week for Talks on Iran, Syria, Lebanon - Reports

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is expected to have high-level meetings with counterparts in Israel next week to discuss matters concerning Iran, Syria, and Lebanon, Axios reported on Tuesday, citing Israeli officials. During his visit, Austin is expected to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz, the report said.

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US Recovery From COVID Rapid Enough to Reach Full Employment in 2022 - Yellen

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The United States expects economic recovery from the COVID-19 to be rapid enough to bring the country back to full employment by 2022, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Tuesday.

"As we deal with the pandemic, we're expecting rapid recovery and I'm hopeful we'll be back to full employment next year," Yellen said during a discussion at the virtual Spring Meetings of the World Bank Group and International Monetary Fund.

Yellen's comments came after a gain of 916,000 jobs in March cited by the Labor Department in the monthly US nonfarm payrolls report issued Friday. Economists polled by US media had expected a growth of only 660,000 jobs in March.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said last month that while US recovery from the COVID-19 had been encouraging, the country still had a long way to go in reaching full employment, defined by a jobless rate of 4.0 percent or lower. In March, that rate was at 6.0 percent.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus pandemic. The Labor Department says nearly 8.5 million of those jobs have yet to return.

One particularly encouraging data was the non-manufacturing purchasing managers index for March, published by the Institute for Supply Management on Monday.

The ISM non-manufacturing PMI surged to 63.7, beating economists' target of 59. It was the best service sector performance since 1997, indicating the strength of the recovery from the COVID-19.

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Effects of Pandemic to Add \$2.8Trln to US Deficits in Next 10 Years - Budget Office

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The United States' deficits will increase by \$2.8 trillion over the next ten years because of revenues lost in the novel coronavirus pandemic and the relief packages passed by Congress, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) said in a report on Tuesday.

"According to CBO's estimates, the effects on revenues and mandatory spending of laws enacted during the second session of the 116th Congress will increase budget deficits in fiscal year 2020 and cumulatively over the 2020–2030 period," the report said.

The CBO report estimates the CARES Act and the 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act will add about \$2.8 trillion to the total deficit by 2030 due to the \$634 billion reduction in US revenues and a \$2.2 trillion increase in mandatory spending.

For the first five months of fiscal year 2021, the federal budget deficit reached \$1.43 billion. In early March, the CBO said the US government's debt held by the public is projected to grow to more than 202 percent of annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) over the next 30 years to 2051.

A growing debt burden could increase the risk of a fiscal crisis and higher inflation as well as undermine confidence in the US dollar, making it more costly to finance public and private activity in international markets.

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US Has Aligned Interests With Russia, China in Iran Nuclear Talks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The United States has aligned interests with both Russia and China in the ongoing talks in Vienna on reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement and views the two countries as partners in this effort, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press briefing on Monday.

"We do have alignment in [many] areas when it comes to our interests with those of Moscow and Beijing," Price said. "It is certainly not in the interest of Moscow, it is certainly not in the interest of Beijing for Iran to be on the path to a nuclear weapon or for Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon. We do see them as partners in this fairly narrow effort."

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US Hails Vienna Talks as Welcome, Constructive Step on JCPOA - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The United States sees the ongoing Vienna talks on reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement as a welcome and constructive step to get a better understanding how to restore mutual compliance, US State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters on Tuesday.

"Certainly as a step forward, a broad step forward these discussions in Vienna, even we are not meeting directly with the Iranians... it is a welcome step, it is a constructive step, it is a potentially useful step," Price said during a daily briefing.

Price also said the utility of the setting in Vienna is that there can be real-time interaction, albeit indirect between the United States and in turn the Iranians, with those messages ferried back and forth by the US allies and partners.

"In the end we hope that we are able to leave Vienna... with a better understanding of a roadmap for how we get to that end state - mutual compliance," he added.

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Missouri Man Sentenced to 12 Years for Attempting to Buy Chemical Weapon- US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - Missouri resident Jason William Siesser has been sentenced to 12 years in prison after he tried to purchase a chemical weapon on the dark web, the US Justice Department said in a release on Tuesday.

"A Missouri man was sentenced to 12 years in federal prison without parole today for attempting to purchase a chemical weapon, capable of killing hundreds of people, on the dark web with Bitcoin," the release said.

On August 4, Siesser pleaded guilty to one count of attempting to acquire a chemical weapon on two occasions between June 14 and August 23, 2018 and one count of aggravated identity theft, the release said.

The defendant used Bitcoins to place orders for a highly toxic chemical in amounts capable of killing many people, the release also said.

During a search warrant at Siesser's residence, law enforcement officers located boxes with about 10 grams of cadmium arsenide, 100 grams of cadmium metal and 500 ml of hydrochloric acid, the release added.

Siesser was planning to use the chemicals to kill a person that became a reason for a painful breakup as writings found in the residence showed, according to the release.

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Ukraine Aspiring to Join NATO for Many Years, Up to Alliance to Decide - White House

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - Ukraine has aspired to join NATO for many years but it is up to the alliance to decide whether it will accept the country, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Monday.

"One, that has long been the aspiration of Ukraine and one that has been raised in a range of conversations with US officials over the course of several years," Psaki said. "We would, of course, defer to the Ukrainian government on reading out what they raised on the call with the President."

Psaki emphasized this is a decision for NATO to make but the United States continues to be a recipient of Ukraine's interests.

The United States has consistently reassured Ukraine that it supports its sovereignty and is now discussing with its allies concerns about increasing regional tensions and ceasefire violations.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Ukrainian president discussed the recent escalation in the eastern Donbas region with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, and expressed the belief that NATO membership was the only way to end the war.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Ukraine's membership in NATO would only exacerbate existing domestic problems, since residents of the self-proclaimed republics in Donbas view it as a "profoundly unacceptable" prospect.

Ukraine has been trying to join NATO after canceling its non-aligned status in 2014. Ukraine changed its constitution in 2019 to enshrine its aspiration for NATO membership. The move was met with criticism in Russia, which has repeatedly criticized the buildup of this alliance in eastern Europe.

In June 2019, Ukraine acquired the status of a NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner. The country's new status does not imply its membership in the alliance. The military bloc continues to support Kiev's aspiration to become a full member.

Ukraine plans to discuss the reintegration of Crimea at the Crimean Platform summit, scheduled for August 23, on the eve of its Independence Day. Kiev has invited Turkey, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada and the United States, among other nations, to join the platform.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in March that Ukraine's efforts to "return" Crimea were illegitimate and would be perceived by Moscow as a threat of aggression against Russia.

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Russian Monastery in US Needs Over \$100,000 for Repairs After Devastating Storm - Dean

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - Repairs continue on the major English-speaking Russian Orthodox Holy Cross monastery in the United States after the devastating winter storm in February, but more than \$100,000 is needed to cover all the material losses, monastery Dean Hieromonk Gabriel (Hooten) told Sputnik.

"Right now, the estimate for repair and replacement with some upgrades to prevent this situation from happening in the future is around \$110,000 give or take, though we have not attempted to

calculate the lost income from our business during the month of the outages," father Gabriel said.

The monastery located in the mountains of West Virginia was severely damaged when a heavy winter storm hit several US regions and caused prolonged power outages.

"[Monks] need to consider the removal of damaged, dead and dangerous trees around the monastery buildings later this year, which will likely be expensive since specialty workers will need to be hired to bring down many trees without damaging the buildings," father Gabriel said.

As a result of donations from believers, the monastery currently received enough funds for its urgent needs, he said.

"Thanks be to God we have already raised what we need and will be able to take care of everything, glory to God," the monk added.

Holy Cross monastery is an English-speaking men's convent in the US under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia. The brotherhood numbers about 30 monastics.

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Trudeau Says Canada Facing 'Very Serious' Third Wave of COVID-19 Pandemic

TORONTO, April 6 (Sputnik) - Canada is on the verge of a "third wave" of the coronavirus pandemic resulting from a surge in variant cases across the country, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday.

"Around the world countries face a very serious third of this pandemic. Right now, so is Canada," Trudeau told reporters.

The new wave of the pandemic is reportedly being spurred by rising caseloads in the provinces of Ontario and British Columbia.

Ontario is in the early days of a third province-wide lockdown since the onset of the pandemic, with the province recording an average of more than 3,000 new daily cases over the past week. Experts estimate that variants - particularly the B.1.1.7 one first identified in the United Kingdom - now make up two-thirds of all new cases.

In British Columbia, public health officials are sounding the alarm about the surge in cases of the P.1 variant that was first identified in Brazil. Since the beginning of April provincial health authorities have logged over 737 cases of the Brazilian variant.

Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam expressed concern that the P.1 variant may reduce the efficacy of vaccines.

Trudeau said that he will discuss the situation in Ontario with Premier Doug Ford later in the day, and the situation nation-wide during a virtual roundtable with provincial premiers on Wednesday.

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US Charges 25 Members of Puerto Rico Gang With Drug Trafficking - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The US government has indicted 25 members of a gang in the territory of Puerto Rico on charges of conspiring to distribute illegal drugs, the Justice Department said on Tuesday.

"The indictment alleges that from in or about the year 2016, to the date of the return of the indictment, the drug trafficking organization distributed cocaine base (commonly known as "crack"), heroin, cocaine, and marihuana," the Justice Department said in a press release. As part of the conspiracy, the members of the trafficking gang established drug points that moved within different areas inside a public housing project to avoid police detection, the release said.

At different points during the conspiracy the leaders provided members of the organization with firearms to protect themselves, the narcotics, and their proceeds, the release added.

Of the 25 gang members indicted, nine face additional gun charges, according to the release.

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Biden to Announce Universal Vaccination Eligibility By April 19 - White House

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will announce later on Tuesday that every adult American will be eligible to get a coronavirus vaccine by April 19 rather than May 1 as announced previously, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters.

"The President will announce officially later this afternoon that we have reached 150 million shots in arms since entering government and that by April 19 all adult Americans will be eligible to get the vaccine," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Psaki said the announcement will mean that all adults can vaccinate on April 19 "if they have not already done that beforehand."

The Biden administration has also vowed to secure by the end of May enough supplies to vaccinate every adult American against the novel coronavirus.

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UN Voices Concern Over Attacks on Myanmar Health, Education Systems - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, April 6 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has expressed its concern about attacks against Myanmar's health and education systems amid the violence triggered by the military coup, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"Since February 1, there have been at least 28 attacks against hospitals and health personnel and seven attacks against schools and school personnel," Dujarric said.

The spokesman added that health volunteers are also being targeted, and attacks against ambulances prevent responders from reaching civilians wounded by security forces. Myanmar's military carried out a coup on February 1, arresting top officials over alleged electoral fraud and declared a one-year state of emergency. The military takeover triggered mass protests, leading to violent clashes with the military and repression against peaceful demonstrators. According to the United Nations, at least 568 people have been killed and thousands have been detained.

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US Believes in Diplomacy to Resolve Iran's Nuclear Problem - White House

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to believe there is a diplomatic path to resolve the Iranian nuclear problem, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Tuesday after the first day of multilateral talks on reviving the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran.

"Today is the first day of discussions, as you know. These discussions are happening in Geneva and they are happening through our European counterparts and partners. We expect them to have difficult portions, we expect this to be a long process. And we continue to believe that a diplomatic path is the right path forward and there are benefits to all sides," Psaki said during a press briefing.

On Tuesday, Vienna hosted an in-person meeting of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) members to discuss steps to fully restore the nuclear agreement. The US team participated in consultations with counterparts from China, France, Germany, Russia and the United Kingdom, but held no direct talks with Iran.

Psaki lamented former President Donald Trump's decision to pull the United States out of the JCPOA.

"They left us with a far decreased visibility of Iran's nuclear capability... of an understanding of how close they were to acquiring a nuclear weapon. That's not in anyone's interest, certainly not the American people," Psaki said.

In 2015, Iran signed the JCPOA with the P5+1 group of countries and the European Union. The agreement required Iran to scale back its nuclear program and downgrade its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief. In 2018, the US withdrew from the JCPOA and began imposing sanctions on Iran in violation of the agreement.

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Trudeau, Ukraine President Discuss 'Shared Concerns' Over Russia's Military Activity

TORONTO, April 6 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau held a call with Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky and voiced his concerns over reports about Russian military movements near the border with Ukraine.

"[Zelensky] and I discussed our shared concerns about recent Russian military activity and ongoing aggression in the Donbas and in Crimea," Trudeau told reporters.

Trudeau added that he reaffirmed Canada's "unwavering support and friendship" for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity during the call.

Despite the Minsk peace agreements, ceasefire violations continue in the Donbas region, where the Ukrainian military launched a special operation against the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics in 2014. According to UN data, about 13,000 people have died in the Donbas conflict.

On Friday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the current situation on the contact line in Donbas is "frightening" amid many provocations made by the Ukraine military.

Peskov said Russia is taking measures to ensure the security of its borders amid the increased NATO activity, which obliges Moscow to be on alert. Russia does not threaten anyone but it moves troops on its territory as it wishes, he added.

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Arrested US Cosmetics Executive Faces Charges of Violating Iran Sanctions - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The president of a cosmetics firm, who was arrested Tuesday, faces bank fraud and money laundering charges over shipments to Iran that violated US sanctions, the Justice Department said.

"Michael Rose allegedly sold more than \$350,000 in goods to an Iranian importer in violation of US sanctions and allegedly committed related money laundering and bank fraud crimes," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Rose was arrested by the FBI and Commerce Department's Office of Export Enforcement earlier on Tuesday and is slated to appear in court later in the day, the release said.

Between 2015 and 2018, Rose participated in a conspiracy to evade U.S. sanctions on Iran by exporting more than \$350,000 worth of cosmetics to an importer in Iran that disguised the destination using multiple front companies, the release added.

In addition to shipping goods and accepting payments in violation of U.S. sanctions, Rose also filed false information on Commerce Department export forms indicating the products were destined for the United Arab Emirates, according to the release.

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UN Believes Coronavirus 'Vaccine Passport' Issue Should Be Depoliticized - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 6 (Sputnik) - The debate concerning so-called "vaccine passports" has to be depoliticized while considering both positive and negative aspects of having such a document, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday. "There's a lot of discussions going on. But the answer is not a simple one," Dujarric said when asked what the UN's position on vaccine passports was. "I think what is important though is to try to depoliticize the issue and look at the privacy, the health and obviously the economic benefits and come up with a solution that doesn't make the issues of inequity and lack of privacy even worse."

The idea of introducing a vaccine certificate or negative test to exercise basic rights and freedoms such as travel or receiving services has raised major legal and ethical concerns. Opponents say vaccine passports infringe on basic individual rights, including to privacy, and represent a significant government overreach contrary to established democratic norms and practices.

Dujarric pointed out that a vaccine passport could facilitate the much-needed resumption of travel and trade. However, he said, the concept of having such a passport brings about the privacy and inequity concerns that need to be examined.

Last week, US State of Florida Governor Rick DeSantis signed an executive order that prohibited entities from requiring any kind of documents certifying coronavirus vaccination to obtain a service or be permitted to enter a place.

In March, the World Health Organization advised against rolling out vaccination passports.

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Consumers Spent \$900Bln Online Globally in 2020 - Mastercard

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - Online sales in 2020 accounted for about \$900 billion spent by consumers globally or approximately 20 percent of all retail spending, the Mastercard Economics Institute said in a report on Tuesday.

"\$900,000,000,000. That's how much more was spent at online retailers globally in 2020 as Covid-19 kept consumers at home. Across the world, e-commerce made up roughly \$1 out of every \$5 spent on retail in 2020, up from about \$1 out of every \$7 spent in 2019," the report said.

The trend of a growing number of consumers choosing online stores continues in 2021 with countries where digital retail had a larger share before the coronavirus pandemic see larger gains from e-commerce than countries that had a smaller share, the report said.

Results show that pre-pandemic share of digital retail in Russia and the United States was around 5 and 11 percent, respectively, and surged to 14.1 and 22 percent, respectively, when the pandemic reached its peak.

Grocery e-commerce will be the sector with the longest digital impact of the pandemic with 70-80 percent of the peak surge, the report added.

International e-trade increased 25-30 percent from March 2020 through February 2021, according to the report.

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Global Oil Benchmark Brent to Average \$61 Per Barrel in Second Half of 2021 - EIA

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The global oil benchmark Brent is expected to average \$61 per barrel in the second half of 2021, some \$3 more than estimated a month ago, due to higher demand projections, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) said Tuesday.

"EIA forecasts that Brent prices will average \$65/b in the second quarter of 2021, \$61/b during the second half of 2021, and \$60/b in 2022," the agency said in its April Short-Term Energy Outlook (STEO) report.

In March, the EIA forecast that Brent will average \$58 per barrel in the second half of the year because of challenges to energy demand from the coronavirus pandemic.

But in the latest iteration of the STEO, the agency said conditions have improved.

"Rising Brent prices in March continued to reflect expectations of rising oil demand as both COVID-19 vaccination rates and global economic activity have increased," the EIA said.

Based on the revised expectations, the EIA said it has raised by 180,000 barrels per day its estimate for 2021 global oil demand growth, to 5.5 million barrels daily.

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UN Hopes Vienna JCPOA Meeting Represents 'Step in Right Direction' - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, April 6 (Sputnik) - The United Nations hopes that Tuesday's meeting of the Joint Commission of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was a step in the right direction that will revive the nuclear agreement, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

The in-person meeting of the Joint Commission of the JCPOA was held in Vienna on Tuesday. There were no direct contacts between Tehran and Washington despite the presence of a delegation from the United States.

"We hope this is a first step in the right direction. We have always expressed our support for the JCPOA, which is an important multilateral agreement, and we hope that the agreement will get back on track," Dujarric said.

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US Hypersonic Missile 'Did Not Launch' Due to Issue During Test - Air Force

WASHINGTON, March 6 (Sputnik) - A US hypersonic weapon failed to launch due to an issue that occurred during its first booster vehicle flight test on April 5, the Air Force said on Tuesday. "The Air Force had a setback in demonstrating its progress in hypersonic weapons on April 5 when its first booster vehicle flight test encountered an issue on the aircraft and did not launch," the Air Force said in a statement circulated by reporters via Twitter.

The Air Force said the test missile was safely retained on a B-52H Stratofortress bomber, which returned to the Edwards airbase in California.

Last year, the United States launched an accelerated push to develop hypersonic missiles that fly between five and 20 times the speed of sound in response to successful demonstrations of the technology by China and Russia.

The so-called ARRW missile is expected to reach early operational capability by fiscal year 2022. It's first captive-carry flight test was conducted in June 2019, while the Air Force and Lockheed Martin completed the second ARRW flight test in August 2020.

The US military is developing at least three types of hypersonic weapons - the Navy's Conventional Prompt Strike, the Army's Long Range Hypersonic Weapon and ARRW for the Air Force.

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Texas Governor Bans 'Vaccine Passports' as Requirement to Get Access, Service - Order

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott on Tuesday issued an executive order that prohibits any state agency to require residents to share their vaccination status in order to get a service or enter any location.

"State agencies and political subdivisions shall not adopt or enforce any order, ordinance, policy, regulation, rule, or similar measure that requires an individual to provide, as a condition of receiving any service or entering any place, documentation regarding the individual's vaccination status for any COVID-19 vaccine administered under emergency use authorization" Abbott said.

The governor said an individual's vaccination record is private health information and no government entity should compel disclosure of this information by mandating a so-called "vaccine passport."

Last week, Florida Governor Rick DeSantis also signed an executive order that prohibited entities to require any kind of documents certifying coronavirus vaccination to obtain a service or be permitted to enter a place.

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US Designates Paraguay Politician for Corruption, Aiding Transnational Crime - Blinken

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is designating a member of the Paraguayan legislature for his involvement in significant corruption and his alleged ties to organized crime, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced in a statement on Tuesday. "I am announcing today the public designation of a Representative in the Paraguayan Legislature's Lower House, Ulises Rolando Quintana Maldonado due to his involvement in significant corruption," Blinken said. "Mr. Quintana engaged in acts that facilitated transnational organized crime, undermined the rule of law and obstructed the public's faith in Paraguay's public processes."

Blinken explained the designation was made under the provisions of the Department of State's Foreign Operations and Related Programs Appropriations Act of 2021.

"In addition to the designation of Mr. Quintana, I am publicly designating his wife, Mirtha Beatriz Esperanza Farina Velaustegui. This action renders both Mr. Quintana and his wife as ineligible for entry into the United States," he said.

The United States continued to support the people of Paraguay in their fight against corruption and to hold their elected leaders accountable, Blinken added.

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US Marks Increase of 500,000 Job Openings in February to Reach 7.4Mln - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The number of job openings in the United States stood at 7.4 million in February, improving by half-a-million job opening from the previous month, the US Labor Department said in its monthly Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS) on Tuesday.

"The number of job openings edged up to 7.4 million on the last business day of February," the JOLTS report said. In January, jobs openings stood at 6.9 million.

Economists polled by US media had expected February job openings to be little changed from January at just under 7 million.

The health care and social assistance sectors led job openings in February, followed by accommodation and food services and the arts, entertainment and recreation industries, the report showed.

The JOLTS number comes on the heels of job gains cited by the Labor Department for March under the non-farm payrolls report. The US economy added a total of 916,000 jobs last month versus the 660,000 expected by economists.

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US Sanctions 2 Mexican Drug Cartel Enforcers, Businesses - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The US government imposed economic penalties on two alleged assassins of Mexico's Jalisco drug cartel, a facilitator and two related businesses, the Treasury Department said on Tuesday.

"These two individuals have allegedly helped orchestrate assassinations using high-powered weaponry on behalf of CJNG [Jalisco cartel], a Mexico-based organization that is responsible for trafficking a significant proportion of the fentanyl and other deadly drugs that enter the United States," the Treasury Department said in a press release.

In addition to sanctions against the two purported assassins - Carlos Andres Rivera Varela and Francisco Javier Gudino Haro - the Treasury Department said it also named travel agent Alejandro Chacon Miranda, who facilitates transportation for senior cartel members, and two cartel businesses.

The designations were imposed under the US Drug Kingpin Act. The penalties prohibit transactions by US persons that involve property or interests in property of sanctioned individuals, Treasury Department added.

Since June 2000, more than 2,200 entities and individuals have been sanctioned under the Kingpin Act, according to Treasury Department.

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US Hypersonic Missile 'Did Not Launch' Due to Issue During Test - Air Force

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"The Air Force had a setback in demonstrating its progress in hypersonic weapons on April 5 when its first booster vehicle flight test encountered an issue on the aircraft and did not launch," the Air Force said in a statement circulated by reporters via Twitter.

The test missile was safely retained on a B-52H Stratofortress bomber, which returned to Edwards airbase.

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Blinken, Panama Foreign Minister Agree to Fight 'Malign Influence' - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Panamanian Foreign Minister Erika Mouynes spoke on Tuesday and agreed to counter what they termed as "malign influence" in Central America and around the world, Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout on Tuesday.

"They also spoke of the importance of countering malign influence in the region and globally," Price said. "Finally, they discussed the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for continued cooperation to protect our populations and economies."

Blinken emphasized that the United States shared interests in working with Panama to enhance regional stability, prosperity and security as well as play a leadership role among its neighbors on human rights, climate issues and migration, the readout said.

Blinken stated his appreciation for the strong bonds between the governments and peoples of the United States and Panama and reiterated the US commitment to the bilateral relationship, the readout added.

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UN Helping Thousands Displaced by Civil Strife in Northern Mozambique - Refugee Agency

UNITED NATIONS, April 6 (Sputnik) - Emergency aid efforts have been expanded to help multiple thousands of people fleeing attacks by insurgents in northern Mozambique, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spokesperson Babar Baloch said at a press briefing on Tuesday.

"UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, continues to work around the clock to assist thousands of people reaching safety in northern Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province," Baloch said. "A recent attack by insurgents on the coastal town of Palma has forced out at least 11,000 people, with thousands more reported to be trapped inside the area."

Civilians have been arriving in Pemba, Nangade, Mueda and Montepuez by foot, road, and boat since March 24, following the attack and the humanitarian flights that helped evacuate hundreds at first have now been suspended pending further clearance by authorities, Baloch said.

"UNHCR teams in Pemba have received worrying reports from displaced populations that over 1,000 people fleeing Mozambique and trying to enter Tanzania were not allowed to cross the border to seek asylum. ... UNHCR calls on Mozambique's neighbors to provide access to territory and asylum procedures for those escaping violence and seeking protection," he said. Three years of turmoil in northern Mozambique have displaced nearly 700,000 people in the country and UNHCR officials have warned that this number could cross the million mark by June if the ongoing violence does not stop, Baloch added.

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US Navy Confirms Active Shooter Incident at Fort Detrick Involving Sailors - Statement

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The US Navy on Tuesday confirmed that an active shooter incident took place at a military facility in the state of Maryland involving its service members. #US Navy can confirm there was an active shooter incident at Fort Detrick, Maryland, involving US Navy Sailors," the Navy said via Twitter. "We will continue to update with additional details as the situation evolves."

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Over 27Mln Suffer From Acute Hunger in DRC - World Food Program

*UNITED NATIONS, April 6 (Sputnik) - The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has become the country with the highest number of people in urgent need of food assistance in the world as over 27 million people, or one in three, are suffering from acute hunger there, the World Food Program (WFP) said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The number of people affected by high acute food insecurity in the DRC is estimated at 27.3 million or one in three people, including nearly seven million people grappling with emergency levels of acute hunger," the statement said. "This makes the central African country home to the highest number of people in urgent need of food security assistance in the world."

The recurring conflicts remain the leading cause of hunger, but another key factor worsening the situation include the collapsing economy, the statement said.

The WFP also said its staff has met families who have been surviving by eating only taro root or cassava leaves boiled in water.

Together with the Food and Agriculture Organization, the WFP called for an urgent intervention to strengthen support to the DRC, especially in crisis areas.

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Long Range Drone With Human Pilot Option Completes 9,000-Mile Flight - Northrop Grumman

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The Firebird multi-sensor aircraft, a hybrid designed to fly with or without a human pilot, demonstrated its capabilities in a series of flights covering nearly 9,000 miles of US airspace, Northrop Grumman said on Tuesday.

"Our flights showcased one of its key differentiators - the ability to position the system in a manned configuration, then convert to autonomous operations for persistent ISR [intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance] in under two hours," Northrop Grumman Vice President for Autonomous Systems Jane Bishop said in a press release.

The company flew Firebird almost 9,000 miles around the US with stops in Washington, DC, and a nearby base in the state of Maryland, as well as demonstration visits in the states of Ohio and Florida, the release said.

Humans piloted the aircraft in national airspace between destinations, where the plane's ability to fly as a drone could be demonstrated along with the ability to install new sensor payloads in as little as 30 minutes, according to the release.

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UNICEF Chief Urges Countries With Excess Vaccine Supply to Share Doses With Other Nations

UNITED NATIONS, April 6 (Sputnik) - Governments that acquired more doses of COVID-19 vaccine than needed to vaccinate their entire adult population in 2021 should immediately loan or share most of the excess doses to the COVAX facility to allocate them equitably among other nations, UN Children's Fund Executive Director Henrietta Fore said in a statement on Tuesday. "At the current rate, there is simply not enough vaccine supply to meet demand. And the supply available is concentrated in the hands of too few," Fore said. "Governments that have contracted to receive more 'future doses' than required to vaccinate their entire adult populations this year, should immediately loan, release or donate most or all excess contracted doses for 2021 to COVAX, so they can be allocated equitably among other countries." Fore warned the virus and mutations would win unless governments drive towards a strategy that will enable equitable access for all.

To get ahead of the pandemic, Fore asked countries, businesses and partners to increase the scale and geographic diversity of manufacturing capacity by simplifying Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) through voluntary and proactive licensing by IPR holders.

Additionally, the UNICEF chief called on governments to end vaccine nationalism and remove direct and indirect export- and import-control measures that impede exports of COVID-19 vaccines, ingredients and supplies.

Fore further appealed to countries with a sufficient supply of vaccine doses to consider donating at least 5 percent of their doses immediately and commit to continued contributions throughout the year.

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IMF Says Supports US Government's Idea of Implementing Global Minimum Corporate Tax

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) supports the US government's initiative to introduce a global minimum corporate tax, IMF Chief Economist Gita Gopinath told reporters on Tuesday.

"We are very much in favor of a global minimum of corporate tax," Gopinath said during a press briefing.

Gopinath said the IMF has expressed concern regarding significant tax shifting, tax avoidance and tax heavens, she added.

Such practices are reducing the tax base from which governments can collect revenue, Gopinath also said.

"We still have to study very carefully this new proposal from the Biden administration," she added.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Monday that the United States is working with the Group of 20 nations on a minimum corporate tax rate for the world to achieve prosperity and a level playing field for all.

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German Space Agency Upgrades Monitoring of Orbiting Objects With Lockheed Martin System

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - Germany's space agency plans to upgrade the nation's ability to monitor thousands of satellites and orbiting debris with the addition of the iSpace system, developer Lockheed Martin said on Tuesday.

"iSpace is the newest upgrade of the experimental mission system and will interface to German sensors to include the Tracking and Imaging Radar, GSSAC [German Space Situational Awareness Center] Optical Sensor and German Experimental Surveillance and Tracking Radar," Lockheed Martin said in a press release.

The iSpace system tracks thousands of objects orbiting the earth by collecting data from a worldwide network of government, commercial and scientific community surveillance sensors, the release said.

With more than 300,000 objects orbiting Earth, the iSpace system provides real-time awareness and warnings of potential collisions, maneuvers, satellite breakups, and other anomalies, while suggesting corrective actions, the release added.

The iSpace system was first deployed in 2017 by the US Air Force at a radar site on the Kwajalein Atoll in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, according to the release.

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US Carrier Strike Group Entered South China Sea – Navy

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) – The USS Theodore Roosevelt carrier strike group has returned to the South China Sea, the US Navy said on Tuesday.

"The Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group (TRCSG) entered the South China Sea on April 4 to conduct routine operations," the Navy said in a press release.

This is the second time the Navy deployed the TRCSG to the South China Sea this year, the release noted.

The current deployment will see the strike group conduct anti-submarine operations, maritime strike exercises, rotary-wing flight operations and other training, the Navy said.

Over the past several years, China has increased its territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea region, overlapping with the interests of several nations.

The United States views the South China Sea as an international waterway and sends warships to routinely patrol the region in so-called freedom of navigation exercises.

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Two Victims, One Suspect Down in Shooting in US City of Frederick, Maryland - Police

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - A gunman in the US city of Frederick, Maryland shot at least two people before being taken down, local police said on Tuesday.

"We are on scene responding to an active shooter in the 8400 block of Progress Drive.

Currently there are two victims and one suspect is down," the Frederick Police said via Twitter.

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Blinken, Colombia's President Duque Trade Views on Venezuela, Climate Change - State Dept

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Colombian President Ivan Duque in a phone call exchanged views on the situation in Venezuela, climate change and other matters of shared concern, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"The Secretary and President Duque discussed their shared commitment to the restoration of democracy and rule of law in Venezuela and Colombia's efforts to promote democracy throughout the region," Price said in a readout. "Secretary Blinken conveyed his appreciation for President Duque's government's decision to grant temporary protected status to the more than 1.7 million Venezuelan migrants in Colombia"

During the phone call, which took place on Monday, Blinken and Duque also spoke about ways to renew their focus on issues like climate change, the protection of human rights and regional economic recovery from the pandemic, Price said.

The United States does not recognize Maduro as Venezuela's president, supports opposition leader Juan Guaido and works through sanctions and diplomatic pressure to bring about "free and fair" elections in the country. Maduro has accused Guaido and the United States of trying to topple the government in Caracas to seize Venezuela's national resources.

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US Concerned by Reports of Saudi Arabia Sentencing Aid Worker - State Dept

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned over reports that Saudi Arabia has sentenced a local Red Crescent aid worker to a 20-year prison term and is closely monitoring the case, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout on Tuesday.

"We are concerned by reports that a Saudi counterterrorism court sentenced Saudi aid worker Abdulrahman al-Sadhan to 20 years in prison followed by a 20-year travel ban," Price said. "We will continue to monitor this case closely throughout any appeals process."

Price noted that the US has conveyed to Saudi officials at all levels that freedom of expression should never be a punishable offense.

"We will continue to elevate the role of human rights in our relationship with Saudi Arabia and encourage legal reforms that respect the human rights of all individuals," Price said.

Multiple media outlets have reported that Abdulrahman may have been arrested in connection with an anonymous Twitter account he used to highlight human rights and social justice issues.

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IMF Revises Upward Forecast for EU Economic Growth to 4.4% in 2021 - Outlook

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) revised upward its forecast for the European Union's economic growth this year and in 2022.

Regional GDP growth is forecast to be 4.4 percent in 2021 and 3.9 percent next year, the fund revealed in its World Economic Outlook on Tuesday. The current estimates mark an increase by 0.3 and 0.2 percent, respectively, from the IMF's estimate in January.

The IMF highlighted significant differences between its current and previous forecasts for Italy (1.2 percent), Spain (0.5 percent) and France (0.3 percent) for this year, while the 2022 estimates for these countries remain virtually unchanged.

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IMF Revises Upward Forecast for China's Growth in 2021 to 8.4% - Outlook

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has revised upward its forecast for China's economic growth in 2021 to 8.4 percent and its forecast for growth in 2022 to 5.6 percent, the fund said in its World Economic Outlook on Tuesday.

In January, the IMF projected China's growth to reach 8.1 percent this year and 5.6 percent in 2022.

"China had already returned to pre-COVID-19 GDP in 2020, whereas many others are not expected to do so until well into 2023," the World Economic Outlook said.

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IMF Upgrades Forecast for Global Economic Growth to 6% in 2021 - Outlook

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has revised upward its forecast for global economic growth this year by 0.5 percentage points to 6 percent, fund revealed in its World Economic Outlook on Tuesday.

The IMF has also revised upward its forecast for global economic growth in 2022 by 0.2 percentage points to 4.4 percent, the report said.

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IMF Revises Upward US Economic Growth to 6.4% in 2021 - World Economic Outlook

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has revised upward its forecast for economic growth in the United States this year by 1.3 percentage points to 6.4 percent, the IMF said in its World Economic Outlook released on Tuesday.

The IMF has also upgraded its forecast for US economic growth in 2022 by 1 percentage points to 3.5 percent.

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IMF Revises Upward Forecast for Russia's Economic Growth to 3.8% in 2021 - Outlook

WASHINGTON, April 6 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in a report on Tuesday revised upward its forecast for Russia's economic growth this year by 0.8 percentage points to 3.8 percent.

The IMF, however, downgraded its earlier forecast for Russia's economic growth in 2022 by 0.1 percentage points to 3.8 percent, the fund revealed in its World Economic Outlook.