

**05/04/21 Tuesday**

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Virginia GOP Candidate Sues to Find Origin of 'Gay Democrat' Mass Text Attacking Him by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A Republican candidate for state office in Virginia has launched a lawsuit to get to the bottom of a homophobic text message sent to Republican convention delegates last week. His chief rival has denied responsibility, but it seems likely the message came from inside one of the campaigns in a hotly contested GOP race.

Republican Glenn Davis, who presently represents Virginia Beach in the Virginia House of Delegates but who is seeking to become Old Dominion's lieutenant governor in the November 2021 elections, filed a defamation suit Tuesday in a Norfolk Circuit Court directed against "Jane Doe" for the text message because the culprit's identity remains unknown. The suit seeks \$100,000 in nominal and compensatory damages and another \$350,000 in punitive damages. The cause of the suit is a text message sent out last week to Republican delegates to Virginia's GOP convention later this month that tried to cast Davis as insufficiently conservative by labeling him a "Gay Democrat." The text featured an image of Davis wearing a striped shirt at a PrideFest event in Hampton Roads he attended to show his support for LGBTQ rights posted on his public Facebook page.

According to the [Richmond Times-Dispatch](#), access to that information is limited to the statewide campaigns being waged by Republican candidates for the offices of governor, attorney general, and lieutenant governor, the lattermost of which is the office Davis is seeking. "Did you know Glenn Davis is a Gay Democrat? He voted for gun free zones, Medicaid expansion, the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment], to redefine marriage & for transgender men to be in girls' bathrooms. Help Glenn come out of the closet by not ranking him on May 8. Tim Hugo is the only conservative running for Lt. Governor," the text on the image states. Davis has emphasized that he is not gay, but "unapologetically supports equal treatment for the LGBTQ community," he says in the suit.

"I'm sorry for my colleague's #homophobia, but I don't believe the government has any place in our bedrooms PERIOD," [Davis tweeted](#) last week.

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China Passes 275 Million COVID-19 Vaccine Shots Mark as Campaign Hits 10 Million Per Day by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

When US President Joe Biden boasted on April 21 that the US vaccination campaign was "unmatched in the world," China was already poised to pass it. Now, China's vaccination pace is triple that of the US, with nearly twice as many total shots given out.

China's COVID-19 vaccination program has swung into full gear, hitting the goal of 10 million vaccine shots per day. However, not only is China vaccinating more of its people than the United States, it's also exporting nearly as many to poorer nations.

On Tuesday, China's National [Health Commission reported](#) that 279 million shots had been administered against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, as of Monday. NHC data also shows that the pace has been rapidly accelerating, exceeding 10 million doses per day on April 28, 29 and 30. On other days, vaccinations are between 4 and 5 million.

Ten million shots per day was the [goal Beijing set](#) in late March in order to meet their goal of vaccinating 40% of the country's 1.4 billion people by June, which is about 560 million. It's unclear how many people in China have been fully vaccinated, though.

#### Campaign Obstacles

Due to the incredible effectiveness with which the Chinese government responded to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Hubei Province in early 2020, the virus was effectively eradicated in China by the middle of last year and less than 91,000 cases have been reported in total, with just over 4,600 deaths - more than 100 times smaller than the death toll in the United States, where more than 577,000 people have died [as of Tuesday](#).

However, the absence of COVID-19 in the country has paradoxically deprived many Chinese of holding a serious regard for the dangers of the disease, resulting in slacking interest in being vaccinated against it. As a consequence, Beijing has had to roll out [some novel incentives](#) including offering people ice cream and even coupons for free grocery items if they go to get the jab. The [Global Times reported](#) that some communities are organizing "sharing sessions" where people who have gotten their shot tell others about the experience to destigmatize it.

China has produced five COVID-19 vaccines, including the well-known Sinopharm and Sinovac shots that have been shipped overseas by the millions, but also one from CanSino Biologics Inc; one from a Sinopharm affiliate, the Wuhan Institute of Biological Products, and the most recently approved one by Anhui Zhifei Longcom that require three doses but can be stored at room temperature, greeting increasing its availability in parts of the world where deep-freeze storage isn't possible.

#### China Ships Shots Abroad as US Sits

While China has [negotiated with 67 nations](#) on every inhabited continent to sell or give them vaccines, it is also working with the World Health Organization to provide Sinopharm and Sinovac shots [for the COVAX program](#). COVAX aims to provide shots to some of the world's poorest nations to ensure immunization even if they cannot pay, as the United Nations has [highlighted the dangers](#) posed to the entire globe of a pandemic that continues to rage in the Third World even as richer nations inoculate their entire populations.

According to a report published [Tuesday in Nature](#), COVAX has shipped about 50 million of the 2 billion doses it expects to ship this year. However, the explosion of cases in India, which has now begun buying up the vaccines made in-country, pose a danger to those plans, as does the fact that only a very small number of US vaccines have been shipped to COVAX as of yet. COVAX and China's separate support are some of the few ways in which many poorer nations will get timely access to COVID-19 vaccines, since a US-led group of First World nations continues to [adamantly oppose waivers](#) on intellectual property laws to allow generic versions of their vaccines to be produced worldwide.

As of yet, the US has only provided a tiny amount of vaccines abroad, [pledging 60 million](#) doses of AstraZeneca's CoviShield vaccine would be sent abroad in the coming months. In March, the Biden administration also sent Canada and Mexico 4 million of the same shot, but US President Joe Biden said late last month the US was ["not yet" ready](#) to begin vaccinating other nations. According to US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](#)) data, 147.5 million Americans have received at least one dose of a vaccine as of Monday afternoon, with daily numbers vacillating between 2.5 million and 900,000 per day over the last week. Biden announced on Tuesday that the US was ready to "immediately" begin vaccinating adolescents once health authorities approve, having already lowered the COVID-19 vaccination age to 16 in recent weeks.

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Turkey to Prioritize Homemade TF-X Fighter Program After F-35 Exit, Aims for 2025 Debut by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While the US has attempted to export the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter to other nations, the jet's huge price tag has remained a major impediment, leaving several nations to try and build their own rough equivalents.

After Turkish defense industries lost \$1.4 billion in contracts due to Washington booting Turkey from the F-35 program, Ankara's military procurement chief has pledged to prioritize production of the country's home-grown replacement for the F-35, the forthcoming TF-X fighter.

Ismail Demir, Turkey's undersecretary for defense industries, announced the shift in an April 30 television interview, according to [Defense News](#). Three days prior, Temel Kotil, CEO of Turkish Aerospace Industries, said the Turkish government had "earmarked an additional \$1.3 billion" for Phase 1 of the TF-X program, adding that 6,000 engineers were working on the project. "My [top priority] is the TF-X program. It definitely has to be done," Kotil said, as quoted by Defense News.

TAI hopes the aircraft, a rough analogue of the Lockheed Martin F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, will fly for the first time in 2025 or 2026.

In March, [Kotil estimated](#) the aircraft's cost would be similar to the F-35's as well, at roughly \$100 million per jet. He expects TAI will produce two aircraft per month.

Turkey was removed by the US Congress from the F-35 program last year after it refused to cancel a [\\$2.5 billion purchase](#) of Russian-made S-400 Triumf air defense systems. US defense leaders feared the advanced missile system working in conjunction with the F-35 [would reveal weaknesses](#) in the jet's stealthy design that could be exploited by Russia or other countries that use the S-400, such as China.

Turkey was expected to buy 100 F-35s and had already received eight, although they were stored at US airfields where Turkish pilots were being trained to fly them.

Turkish industries built several parts for the jet as part of an international assembly team, and its removal from that team has caused trouble on both sides, with the jet's cost expected to

increase by about 3%, Matthew Bromberg, chief of the military engines division for jet engine maker Pratt & Whitney, [told US lawmakers](#) last month.

TAI [revealed a model](#) of the TF-X at the Paris Air Show in 2019. Kotil readily admitted the company's experience making the F-35's fuselage had informed the TF-X design. According to properties stated at the reveal, the aircraft will be broadly comparable to the F-35 in terms of range, maximum takeoff weight, and engine thrust output, but will be a bit faster, capable of reaching Mach 2.

However, Ankara could still look to other nations to acquire more immediate replacements for the lost F-35s, including Russia's Su-57 stealth fighter, [according to Turkish](#) Industry Minister Mustafa Varank.

In March, Bloomberg reported that Turkey was considering partnering with Pakistan on the TF-X program as well as other projects, including the Siper long-range air defense system capable of shooting down ballistic missiles. Last year, Turkey also invited Malaysia to join the program, with Bangladesh, Kazakhstan and Indonesia also considered potential partners. UK-based BAE Systems will also be working with TAI on the TF-X.

However, Jakarta is unlikely to be interested, considering its continued participation in the KF-21 Boromae fighter project with South Korea has already been [cast into doubt](#). Korea Aerospace Industries [revealed the first](#) completed KF-21 jet last month at a ceremony in Sacheon. South Korea has already pledged to buy at least 60 F-35s from Lockheed Martin, so the KF-21 is foreseen as an advanced replacement of the country's other aging jets imported from the US decades ago. The jet does not have an internal weapons bay, meaning it won't be nearly as stealthy as the F-35.

Similarly, Japan attempted to develop its own parallel of the F-22 Raptor fighter jet, a slightly older sibling to the F-35 also built by Lockheed Martin, after Congress banned sale of the jet to any other nation. Mitsubishi produced the experimental X-2 Shinshin stealth fighter, a testbed that never yielded an operational fighter but which the experience of having developed is being used to inform the country's [futuristic F-X fighter](#), expected to hit the skies in the middle of the next decade.

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Postponing Olympic Games Supported by Nine of Japan's Prefectural Heads, But Not Hosting Tokyo

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Nine of Japan's 47 prefectural governors recently said the forthcoming Tokyo Olympic Games should be cancelled or postponed due to the rise in COVID-19 cases in the country, according to a recent poll.

The questionnaire was sent by the national daily paper [Mainichi Shimbun](#) to all 47 governors on April 20 and returned by April 28 and included two questions. One question asked if their province stood to gain by the games being held, and the second asked what they thought should be done about the games in the interests of their residents' health, providing four

possible answers: they should be held no matter what; they should be cancelled or postponed depending on the circumstances; now is not the time to decide; or simply "I don't know." Nine said the games shouldn't go ahead as scheduled, which would have the first of several test events held on May 9 and the opening ceremonies on July 23. Five others said they didn't know what should be done and the rest declined to pick any option. Of those who said the games should be postponed or cancelled, several were near the capital of Tokyo and planned on hosting some of the games, including Ibaraki, Saitama, Yamanashi, Nagano and Shizuoka prefectures.

While Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike chose no answer, he did reply with a message saying that "We are all in the fight to suppress the pandemic, and we will continue to prepare a safe and secure event."

The Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics Organizing Committee [said last month](#) that the "show will go on," pandemic or not, after the games were postponed from their original 2020 schedule due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic earlier that year.

However, that was before Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga declared a [state of emergency](#) on April 23, imposing new restrictions in the metropolitan Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and Hyogo prefectures. However, the emergency period is set to expire on May 11 and serious cases keep rising. [Kyodo News Agency](#) reported on Monday that patients hospitalized with severe COVID-19 symptoms had reached its highest-ever point in the country.

Japan has seen 3.2 million cases of COVID-19 overall, with about 10,400 deaths, according to data compiled by [Johns Hopkins University](#). On Monday, 4,475 new cases were reported in the country, part of a continuous upward trend from March 1 when just 688 new cases were reported.

An opinion poll [conducted by Kyodo](#) in early April, as the latest wave was beginning to accelerate, found that 72% of the Japanese public believe the games should either be postponed or cancelled.

Medical staff are reportedly also against the games going ahead, arguing they cannot take the added burden of caring for both COVID-19 sufferers and Olympic athletes.

Some [10,000 medical workers](#) will be needed for the games, which will take place during the hottest time of year. The Japanese Nursing Association was recently asked to contribute 500 volunteer nurses for the event, but the suggestion sparked fury.

"I am furious at the insistence on staging the Olympics despite the risk to patients' and nurses' health and lives," Susumu Morita, secretary general of the Japan Federation of Medical Workers' Unions, said in a Monday statement to [the Guardian](#). "We must stop the proposal to send nurses who are engaged in the fight against a serious coronavirus pandemic to volunteer at the Olympics."

Organizers of the games have implemented numerous safety measures designed to keep athletes and the public safe as the games go ahead, including [cancelling the tickets](#) for roughly 630,000 foreign spectators to the games, banning [domestic spectators](#) from the test games scheduled prior to the official games and [requiring regular testing](#) for all athletes.

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Washington Pushing Taipei to Prioritize US Auto Companies Amid Chip Shortage, Commerce Sec. Says

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Back in January, Taiwan's Economics Ministry announced the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co Ltd (TSMC) would begin prioritizing the production of auto chips if it could further increase capacity. TSMC Chairman Mark Liu has since projected the chipmaker will be able to meet its "minimum requirement" for customers before the end of June.

Speaking at a Council of the Americas event on Tuesday, US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo claimed Washington is advocating for American automobile manufacturers in conversations with the Taiwanese government and chipmakers like TSMC - the world's contract chipmaker.

"We're working hard to see if we can get the Taiwanese and TSMC, which is a big company there, to, you know, prioritize the needs of our auto companies since there's so many American jobs on the line," she said.

"As I said there's not a day goes by that we don't push on that."

Raimondo's comments come two days after TSMC Chairman Liu was featured in a "60 Minutes" broadcast on CBS. Liu said the Taiwan-based chipmaker first heard about the US' auto [chip shortage](#) in December, and has been working since January to meet the increased demand.

"Today, we think we are two months ahead, that we can catch up the minimum requirement of our customers, before the end of June," Liu said, emphasizing that this does not mean the auto chip shortage will end during the same period.

"There's a time lag. In car chips particularly, the supply chain is long and complex. The supply takes about seven to eight months," he added.

According to the official, the US should spend more money on research and development (R&D), and be more open to global cooperation when it comes to [semiconductors](#).

"I think [the] U.S. ought to pursue to run faster, to invest in R&D, to produce more Ph.D., master, bachelor students to get into this manufacturing field instead of trying to move the supply chain, which is very costly and really non productive," he said. "That will slow down the innovation because-- people trying to hold on their technology to their own and forsake the global collaboration."

Intel, a US semiconductor company based in California's Silicon Valley, announced in March that it would make an estimated \$20 billion investment in two new factories, or 'fabs,' in Arizona.

Intel's newest factory, Fab 42, became fully operational in 2020 on the company's Ocotillo campus in Chandler, Arizona. Fab 42 produces microprocessors using the company's 10nm manufacturing processes. In March 2021, Intel announced a \$20 billion investment to build out two new factories (or "fabs") on the Ocotillo campus. The company expects to begin planning and construction activities this year.

"Intel is the only company with the depth and breadth of software, silicon and platforms, packaging, and process with at-scale manufacturing customers can depend on for their next-generation innovations. IDM 2.0 is an elegant strategy that only Intel can deliver – and it's a winning formula," said Intel CEO Pat Gelsinger in a [quoted statement](#).

Shortly after Intel's announcement, [TSMC announced](#) plans to invest \$100 billion in advanced chip research and development over the next three years.

Since then, reports [have circulated](#) suggesting TSMC will be expanding in the US state of Arizona, which is already home to the site of a \$12 billion TSMC fab expected to begin production in 2024.

Citing three people familiar with the matter, Reuters reported on Tuesday that TSMC is planning to build five additional fabs.

"The United States requested it. Internally TSMC is planning to build up to six fabs," one person said.

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US Special Envoy Travels to Africa in Hopes of Mediating Efforts to Resolve Nile Dispute  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt have been working for decades to come to a mutual agreement about the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) amid issues over the impact it would have on the water security in each country. Sudan has threatened to take legal action against Ethiopia if an agreement cannot be reached.

On Tuesday, US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman will take a trip through Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan in a weeklong African tour with hopes of mediating efforts to resolve the Nile dispute.

Feltman, as an international broker of the negotiations for GERD, will hold meetings with government officials, as well as officials from the United Nations and the African Union from May 4 through May 13.

"The special envoy's travel underscores the administration's commitment to lead a sustained diplomatic effort to address the interlinked political, security and humanitarian crises in the Horn of Africa, and he will coordinate US policy across the region to advance that goal," the US Department of State said, [according](#) to the ArabWeekly.

Eritrean Foreign Minister Osman Saleh and presidential adviser Yemane Ghebreab arrived in Khartoum on Tuesday to begin talks with Sudanese officials over the Nile dam and the longtime border dispute between Sudan and Ethiopia. Eritrea has seen increased tension with Sudan after the government deployed troops to the Tigray region to fight with Ethiopian federal forces currently in conflict there.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has claimed that the government would move forward with the project come the rainy season in July, despite the lack of negotiations with Egypt and Sudan. Ethiopia is the source of [85%](#) of the Nile's water and serves as the manager of the GERD. In building the dam, the primary goal is to establish energy that will be provided to millions of people who currently live off the grid.

Ethiopia has disagreed with the aim of the negotiations, complaining that the proposed treaties deny a fair share of the Nile water to those living upstream. Ethiopian officials have felt that

Sudan in particular is working under [colonial agreements](#) that were established under the 1902 border agreements and the 1959 Nile waters agreements.

Sudan, Ethiopia's northern neighbour, has concerns regarding the potential impact of the construction of the dam on its own infrastructure.

"We do not need to remind Ethiopia that the irrational complacency in using such misleading claims and disavowing previous agreements also means compromising the Ethiopian sovereignty over the Benishangul region, to which sovereignty over it was transferred from Sudan according to some of these agreements in particular," the Sudanese Foreign Ministry in a statement on Tuesday.

The most severe negative effect of GERD will be on downstream countries, particularly Egypt, who will be impacted the most during periods of drought. Ethiopia, which will be the main proprietor of the dam, has been asked to provide [more assurance](#) on the management of the GERD's reservoirs and the safety standards.

Ethiopia currently plans to take five years to fill the dam, which in turn would reduce Egypt's water supply by 36%, effectively destroying half of the farmland in the region. Egypt has asked that Ethiopia in return take extra precautions to ensure a decent flow of water through the Nile in order to make up for the expected water shortage. This would mean possibly spreading out the filling of the dam over a longer course of time.

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'Not True': White House Rejects Report About US Prisoner Exchange With Iran  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price shot down reports surrounding the prisoner exchange, telling reporters that allegations of a "prisoner swap deal" with Iran "are not true."

The White House reiterated on Tuesday that reports of the US reaching a prisoner exchange deal with Iran are unfounded, underscoring that a prisoner swap is not part of ongoing talks in Vienna.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki [remarked](#) during a briefing that "reports over the weekend that an agreement had been reached to exchange prisoners was not true."

"There is no agreement at this time on the release of these four Americans," she stated, adding that efforts to bring home Americans being detained in Iran have been "raised at the highest level" through direct and indirect channels between Washington and Tehran.

The press secretary further stressed that the topic has not been raised as part of ongoing talks in Vienna, which are meant to revive the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and bring both the US and Iran back into compliance with the nuclear deal's stipulations.

Reports of a possible prisoner swap emerged over the weekend after Iranian state TV reported that Tehran would release four Americans accused of spying in exchange for the release of some \$7 billion Iranian oil funds frozen under US sanctions reimposed under the Trump administration.

The source cited by the outlet also indicated that a deal between the UK and Iran had been finalized, and that it would effectively see the release of British-Iranian national Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe in exchange for the UK paying off a £400 million debt to Iran. The debt dates back to the 1970s, when the UK failed to deliver tanks that Iran had bought at the time. Zaghari-Ratcliffe has been [imprisoned](#) in Iran since 2016 on spying charges. However, after finishing a five-year sentence, she was recently given an extra year behind bars after being found guilty of propaganda against the Iranian state.

Whereas the US has repeatedly indicated that the reports are untrue, the UK has downplayed the claims and stated discussions over the debt are [ongoing](#).

Both Price and Ron Klain, who serves as the White House chief of staff, [rejected](#) the reports on Sunday. Saeed Khatibzadeh, the spokesperson for the Iranian foreign minister's office, also [denied](#) the report.

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#### Supreme Retirement - Cartoon

Former US President Donald Trump managed to appoint a whopping three justices to the US Supreme Court, despite efforts to shoot down the nominations of Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett. Looking ahead, liberal politicians are now trying to ensure the bench does not lean even more toward the conservative side of the political spectrum.

Newly surfaced reports suggest that there is a growing push among liberals for Supreme Court Associate Justice Stephen Breyer, who just happens to be the oldest sitting member on the bench, to announce his retirement at the end of the term in June.

The move, according to [NPR](#), is rooted in concerns that Democrats could lose the slim majority they currently have in the US Senate come the next round of US elections, and thus will be unable to replace Beyer with a new like-minded justice. At present, the US' highest court has a 6-3 conservative majority.

Although some politicians have been much more careful about their calls for Breyer to retire, now all have followed suit. Earlier this month, the Demand Justice group took a more proactive stance and had a billboard truck circle the US Supreme Court, with a sign that read "Breyer, retire."

Earlier, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki [indicated](#) that US President Joe Biden has no intention to pressure Breyer into retirement, noting that the commander-in-chief believes Breyer will step down "when he decides it's time to no longer serve."

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'She's Got Real Problems': McCarthy Reportedly Trashes Cheney on Hot Mic Amid House GOP Infighting

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In the wake of the deadly January 6 Capitol riot, Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY) was one of ten Republican lawmakers within the US House of Representatives to vote in favor of impeaching former US President Donald Trump for inciting the insurrection. Now, House GOP members are seeking to boot her out of the top leadership job she holds in the chamber.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) was recently caught admitting to feeling fed up with Cheney, noting on a hot mic that he has seriously “lost confidence” in her ability to serve as the chairperson of the House Republican Conference.

The individual who serves as the chair of the House Republican Conference is responsible for a variety of congressional procedures, such as coordinating media availability for GOP leadership events. However, more importantly, the lawmaker chosen for the role is responsible for voicing the House Republican message to the American public.

In a tape [reviewed](#) by Axios, McCarthy is reportedly heard telling “Fox & Friends” anchor Steve Doocy that “[Cheney’s] got real problems,” and that he’s “had it” with her.

“I’ve had it with her. You know, I’ve lost confidence,” McCarthy says to Doocy. “Well, someone just has to bring a motion, but I assume that will probably take place.”

The remarks, which came just moments before the conservative duo were set to go for an on-air interview, differed completely from the comments that McCarthy gave to Doocy for the [live segment](#).

Instead, McCarthy acknowledged that he’d only heard House GOP members were growing “concerned” with Cheney’s ability to execute the responsibilities of the post, specifically about her ability to “carry out the message” of the Republican Party.

“There’s no concern about how she voted on impeachment. That decision has been made,” McCarthy told Doocy. “We all need to be working as one if we’re able to win the majority. Remember, majorities are not given; they are earned. And that’s about the message about going forward.”

Although McCarthy has largely left it to his fellow House Republicans to blast Cheney, the Tuesday slip-up marks the first time that he has directly stated his stance on the matter.

Jeremy Adler, Cheney’s spokesperson, [responded](#) to remarks made during the on-air interview by stating that talk of her removal from the House GOP leadership post is rooted in “whether the Republican Party is going to perpetuate lies about the 2020 election and attempt to whitewash what happened on Jan. 6.”

“Liz will not do that,” Adler stressed. “That is the issue.”

The latest developments also came as reports surfaced that House Republicans were eyeing the possibility of ousting Cheney by the end of the month and replacing her with a lawmaker who doesn’t pose a threat to the party’s core message.

Incidentally, the office of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) took the infighting opportunity to toss some jabs across the aisle, releasing a [mock](#) “help wanted” ad for GOP lawmakers.

Congressional aides [told](#) Axios that potential replacements currently include Reps. Elise Stefanik (R-NY), Ann Wagner (R-MO), Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA) and Jackie Walorski (R-IN). The conference, which needs a two-thirds vote of the 212 caucus members to replace Cheney, is expected to meet on May 15.

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Wisconsin Army National Guard Member Charged Over Deadly Capitol Riot  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, three other US service members were charged for their participation in the deadly Capitol riot that unfolded in early January after a bevy of Trump supporters opted to unsuccessfully cease the congressional confirmation of the US election results.

A member of the Wisconsin Army National Guard was recently charged over his participation in the storming of the US Capitol, effectively becoming the fourth active service member linked to the violent insurrection.

Documents publicly released by the US Justice Department identifies the offending individual as Abram Markofski, who has since been revealed to be a private first class enlisted in the Wisconsin Army National Guard since 2019.

Maj. Joe Trovato, a spokesperson for the guard, further [informed](#) The Washington Post that the infantryman is assigned to the 1st Battalion, 128th Infantry Regiment.

A [criminal complaint](#) released by the Justice Department states that Markofski has been charged with: entering and remaining in a restricted building or grounds, disorderly and disruptive conduct in a restricted building or grounds, violent entry or disorderly conduct, and parading, demonstrating, or picketing in a Capitol building.

Markofski was arrested on Monday alongside an associate identified as Brandon Nelson, who has been charged with the same four offenses by federal prosecutors.

An FBI affidavit that was released with the complaint states that the pair traveled together by vehicle from Madison, Wisconsin, to Washington, DC, on January 5, eventually arriving in the nation's capital the following day to attend the "Stop the Steal" rally held by former US President Donald Trump near the White House.

As the day progressed, the pair ultimately wound up at the Capitol, where they admitted to spending approximately 40 minutes inside the federal building. While Nelson suggested that they were guided indoors by law enforcement officials, Markofski stated that an officer had urged them to leave the building.

Images obtained by the agency show the pair sporting red baseball caps while walking the grounds. Nelson was identified by an unidentified associate who tipped off investigators, whereas Markofski was tracked down through a search warrant presented to tech giant Google that allowed officials to trace him via an email associated with his phone number.

After their arrest, Nelson and Markofski were released, pending a virtual hearing scheduled for May 10, according to the [Military Times](#), which also noted that the pair are presently barred from entering Washington, DC.

Aside from Markofski, a Virginia National Guard member and two Army Reserve soldiers have been charged in connection to the storming of the US Capitol. The Post reported that all four were part-time service members.

To date, [more than](#) 400 individuals have been arrested over ties to the January unrest. The arrestees include dozens of military veterans.

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US DoD 'Fairly Close' to Finalizing Recommendations for Space Force National Guard, Top General Says  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The 2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) called on the US Department of Defense to provide the US Congress with recommendations for a potential Space Force Reserve element. Presently, members of the National Guard are conducting space missions in seven US states and the territory of Guam.

Gen. Daniel Hokanson, chief of the US National Guard Bureau, revealed on Tuesday that he believes the Pentagon is "fairly close" to finalizing recommendations for creating a formal Space National Guard element of the US Space Force (USSF).

"Among my most pressing concerns ... [is] the establishment of a Space National Guard," the National Guard Bureau chief said in written testimony to members of the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee on Tuesday.

Hokanson also highlighted that the Air and Army National Guard units are already providing the USSF with some 11% of its forces.

"For 25 years, National Guard space units have provided operational, unit-equipped, surge-to-war capability to protect our nation's vital interests in this contested domain," he said. Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN), chair of the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee, expressed support for the forthcoming recommendations, as well as the accompanying cost projections.

"I'm looking forward to a breakdown on how much this is going to cost to set up a Reserve and a Guard Space Force, as you're referring to," the subcommittee chair told Hokanson. "What would it look like in all 50 states and if it's kind of a hybrid where you're using facilities that are already in existence with the Air Force."

Rep. Ken Calvert (R-CA) also conveyed support for the establishment of a Space National Guard component of the USSF, "especially for states that have existing significant space missions."

The National Guard presently has 14 total space units located in Alaska, California, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, New York, Ohio and Guam, according to Military.com.

Per the NDAA enacted earlier this year, the US may not establish either a Space National Guard or a Space Reserve element of the USSF until these recommendations are approved by Congress.

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RPT - US Aware of Reports of Swiss Diplomat's Death in Iran, Offers Condolences - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is aware of the reports of the death of a senior Swiss embassy employee in Tehran, and offers condolences to the diplomat's family, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

Earlier in the day, Iranian media said that the First Secretary of the Swiss embassy died in a fall from a high-rise in the Iranian capital. The 51-year-old reportedly represented US diplomatic interests in Iran.

"We have seen the reports of the tragic passing of a member of the Swiss Embassy in Tehran," the spokesperson said Tuesday. "We extend our heartfelt condolences to the officer's family and colleagues."

The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs said it was in contact with Iran on the matter.

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Yellen Vows to Respect Federal Reserve Independence Even if Disagreeing With Central Bank

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen vowed to respect the independence of the Federal Reserve and its Chairman, Jerome Powell, even if she disagrees with monetary policies advocated by the central bank.

"I am a strong believer in and have argued strenuously for the Fed independence," Yellen, a former central bank chair herself, said in a live-streamed interview with the Wall Street Journal on Tuesday. "I intend to do exactly the same sitting in the Treasury as I felt was appropriate when I was at the Fed. I have regular meetings with Chair Powell. That's a long-standing tradition. We have wide range of issues we talk about, but it is entirely up to the Federal Reserve to manage monetary policy."

Yellen's remarks came after she said earlier on Tuesday that US interest rates might have to rise from the near zero level to prevent overheating of an economy rebounding from the coronavirus pandemic.

The Federal Reserve has kept rates at between zero and 0.25 percent range since March 2020 to aid recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. Powell reiterated last week that he had no plans of raising rates for now, despite the central bank's projections that the economy will rebound 6.5 percent this year from a 3.5 percent decline in 2020.

In her interview, Yellen emphasized that she was not predicting or recommending the Federal Reserve to raise interest rates, but rather respond to an earlier question on investors' expectations. She also said the Biden administration's spending plans would involve some reallocation of resources within the economy that could cause some very modest increase in interest rates.

The Federal Reserve's priority was to fulfil its twin mandates of ensuring price stability and maximum employment, "and I know they will do the right thing to ensure we have that," Yellen added.

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#### Chauvin Asks for Retrial Over Floyd's Death 2 Weeks After Conviction

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - Former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin filed an appeal for a retrial after being convicted of murdering unarmed Black man George Floyd, a court document revealed.

The request alleges that publicity during the proceedings together with a Minneapolis court's refusal to change a venue and its failure to sequester the jury deprived Chauvin of a due process and a fair trial, according to the appeal filed by attorney Eric Nelson on Tuesday. Last month, Chauvin was found guilty of second- and third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in Floyd's death. The sentencing is expected next month.

Last May, while trying to arrest Floyd who was accused of using a fake \$20 bill at a local convenience store, Chauvin, now 45, kneeled on the neck of the Black man three times for almost a total of ten minutes. After complaining "I can't breathe" when Chauvin's knee was on his neck, Floyd became unconscious during the arrest and died later at a hospital.

Floyd's death triggered mass protests in a large number of major cities in the United States, where demonstrators denounced police brutality and demanded justice for Blacks who suffered at the hands of US police officers.

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#### US, French Top Diplomats Discuss Need for Security in Chad - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with the French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian in London, where the two discussed the need for security and democracy in Chad following the death of the country's long-time president Idriss Deby last month, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Le Drian discussed long-term security and the need for a democratic transition in Chad following the passing of President Deby," Price said on Tuesday. After the 68-year-old Deby died from injuries sustained during a visit to troops fighting rebels in the north of the country, the Transitional Military Council assumed power. The council formed a transitional government composed of 40 ministers.

Deby, a former military officer, was president of Chad from 1990 until his death this year.

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#### Top US Senate Democrat Concerned Deadly Protests in Colombia Risk Destabilizing Region

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Menendez in a statement expressed concern over the risk the recent deadly clashes between police and protesters in the Colombian city of Cali poses to regional stability.

Residents of Cali have been protesting since last Wednesday, against an increase in gas prices and utility bills as part of a state-proposed tax reform. President Ivan Duque called the reform off on Sunday, but protesters have continued to rally, calling for a nationwide demonstration on May 5.

"Colombia is a close partner and ally whose stability and success is in the national interest of the US," Menendez said via Twitter on Tuesday. "I urge Colombian authorities and stakeholders to deescalate & create space for real dialogue to settle political differences and chart a better course for their country."

Menendez urged local authorities in Cali to respect human rights and standards of use of force. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said it was "deeply alarmed" by police firing at protesters overnight Tuesday and expressed its "profound shock" over multiple casualties. The UN agency has been notified of at least 14 deaths, including one officer, since the start of the protests, "the majority" of which have been peaceful so far, according to the statement.

Colombia's chief human rights official has reported 16 casualties, including one police officer, in the first four days of the protests. According to the Ministry of Defense, to date 846 people have sustained injuries and 431 have been detained.

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US Has No Regulatory Framework to Deal With Cryptocurrency Issues - Yellen

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States does not have an adequate regulatory framework to deal with cryptocurrency issues, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a live-streamed interview.

"While there are several agencies that arguably have some ability to address this through regulation, I frankly don't think we have a framework in the United States that is quite up to the task," Yellen told the Wall Street Journal on Tuesday.

Cryptocurrencies have been gaining popularity over the years with investors but some governments have generally been wary due to concerns that they could be used for funding illicit activities, even as central banks, including the US Federal Reserve, plan to launch their own digital coins in the future.

Yellen has called Bitcoin, the granddaddy of the cryptocurrencies, an "inefficient" payment system that was too volatile for the average user or investor, and could be misused for illicit finance.

The cryptocurrency trade has nevertheless thrived and now even top universities like Harvard and Yale have added Bitcoin to their portfolio of assets.

On Tuesday, S&P Dow Jones Indices, the leading name in global financial indexes, said it has launched a series of digital asset benchmarks to track the performance of Bitcoin and Ethereum, the world's top two cryptocurrencies by market capitalization.

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Chauvin Asks for Retrial Over Floyd's Death 2 Weeks After Conviction

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - Former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin filed an appeal for a retrial after being convicted of murdering unarmed Black man George Floyd, NBC reported.

The request alleges that publicity during the proceedings together with a Minneapolis court's refusal to change a venue and its failure to sequester the jury deprived Chauvin of a due process and a fair trial, the report said Tuesday.

Last month, Chauvin was found guilty of second- and third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in Floyd's death. The sentencing is expected next month.

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Sixty More Starlink Satellites Launched on Falcon 9 Booster Rocket - SpaceX

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - A Falcon 9 booster rocket has launched a constellation of 60 more Starlink communications satellites into orbit into a televised launch from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, SpaceX announced.

The mission was successfully launched on schedule at 3:01 p.m. Eastern Time on Tuesday. It raised the number of Starlink constellation satellites successfully flown into earth orbit over the past two months since March 1 to 420.

SpaceX said the satellites were carried on a reused Falcon 9 booster rocket that had been used for eight previous successful payload launches. It was also the company's 115th successful launch of a Falcon 9 launch.

Starlink consumer hardware is used to transmit and receive signals from the satellite constellation for broadband service. The company has received "over half a million" pre-order reservations for its service so far, including advance deposits on its hardware, SpaceX said.

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Biden Seeks to Fund US Growth With Tax Revenues, Not Budget Deficits - Yellen

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is determined to fund US development through higher taxes imposed on large corporations and the wealthy rather than via budget deficits that would further imperil the economy, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said.

"The president himself has been clear that he does want a tax revenue stream that pays for the programs that he's proposing, so they don't add to the deficit which is already obviously quite large," Yellen said during a live-streamed interview with the Wall Street Journal.

Biden has said he intends to bring the top marginal income tax rate in the United States to 39.5 percent, from the current 37 percent, on households making \$400,000 or more a year. For people earning more than \$1 million a year, Biden has proposed a capital gains tax of 39.6 percent, compared to the current rate of 20 percent.

The US president has said these increases are meant to raise \$1.8 trillion over the next decade to fund childcare, universal pre-kindergarten education and paid leave for workers, the president said. Biden has also said he plans to raise corporate taxes from the current 21 percent to 28 percent to fund a \$2.3 trillion infrastructure program.

Yellen said the tax burden on large corporations and the wealthy in the United States "is not currently high, so we do have some physical room" for maneuver. She added that the Treasury Department "can run deficits, but they need to be typically contained over time to have a sustainable fiscal path."

The US budget deficit stood at \$1.71 trillion in the first six months of fiscal 2021, after growing by a record \$660 billion in March, the Treasury Department said in its monthly balance sheet reported last month.

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UPDATE - Trump Launches New Communications Platform

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump has launched a new communications platform that enables him to share comments and content with the rest of the world months after he was banned from the major social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and others.

"In a time of silence and lies, a beacon of freedom arises, a place to speak freely and safely, straight from the desk of Donald J. Trump," Trump said in a post on his Telegram account as he unveiled the tool on Tuesday.

The website - known as "From the Desk of Donald J. Trump" - includes a feed of text posts, images and videos shared by the former US president.

Users, however, are unable to engage Trump's content with comments, but can share the posts to other social media sites.

Trump launched his communications tool one day prior to Facebook making a decision about whether to allow the former president on its platform.

The major social media platforms banned Trump after the January 6 Capitol Hill riot citing safety concerns.

The Big Tech companies' treatment of Trump and many of his supporters as well as others have raised major concerns about freedom of speech and expression in the United States and intensified calls to create alternative communications platforms to prevent censorship.

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#### US Congressmen Urge Blinken to Ensure IAEA Access to Iran Nuclear Sites

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken needs to ensure that inspectors from the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regain access to Iran's nuclear sites when Tehran's three-month withdrawal of access expires later this month, Congressmen Michael McCaul and Joe Wilson said in a letter to the top US diplomat.

"As you know, in February, Iran withdrew from the Additional Protocol, limiting IAEA inspectors' access to Iran's nuclear sites," the letter said. "At the time, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi announced a 'temporary bilateral technical understanding' that would enable the IAEA to verify Iran's nuclear activity for three months."

With that understanding due to expire in May, the lawmakers said they fear the IAEA will lose whatever visibility the agency retains to monitor Iran's nuclear activities.

The United States and other nations that negotiated the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran - Russia, China, France, Germany and the United Kingdom - are attempting to negotiate a new

deal to block Tehran from obtaining nuclear weapons. The United States withdrew from the original agreement during the Trump administration.

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Biden Admin. to Make Harder for US Companies to Move Headquarters to Tax Havens - Yellen

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration plans to make it harder for big US companies to base their headquarters in tax havens outside the United States to prevent them from not paying or paying minimal taxes back home, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Tuesday.

"We're going to make it more difficult for them to be able to deduct the payments that they make to their tax havens and that's a way of disincentivizing the move to tax havens," Yellen said in a live-streamed interview with the Wall Street Journal.

President Joe Biden sent shockwaves across business community last month when he proposed raising corporate taxes from 21 percent to 28 percent to fund his \$2.3 trillion infrastructure program.

Biden proposed last month a global minimum for corporate taxes. He has repeatedly demanded that large US companies pay their "fair share" and vowed to crack down on those that employ complicated maneuvers to reduce or eliminate their tax bills by shifting income on paper between countries.

More than a thousand big, mostly US corporations - including eBay, Google, Facebook, PayPal, Microsoft, Yahoo, AOL, Twitter, Intel, Pfizer, Boston Scientific and Johnson & Johnson - have their tax base in Ireland to take advantage of corporate taxes there that stand at 12.5 percent. Apple is having its tax base in the island of Jersey, which has zero corporate tax and is located in the English Channel between England and France.

Yellen did not specify how the Biden administration intends to plug the loopholes in US corporate taxes. However, Yellen said she expected other countries, including tax havens, to join the United States in trying to claw more revenue from the US companies operating on their shores.

"I fear that this reach to the bottom globally, with respect to corporate taxes, is depriving countries of the revenues that they really need to invest in infrastructure, education, R&D, and other things could spur growth and also impact corporate competitiveness," Yellen said. "So we're asking companies to step up and pay a little bit more to help realize fiscal priorities that are equally important in making them competitive and doing it in a context where we'll see an increase in global rates as well. I'm sensing some tax havens will go along with this themselves. If not the global minimum tax, they will retain some business but insist on higher taxes."

Biden's tax hikes have so far been vehemently opposed by American businesses. The US Chamber of Commerce has vowed to fight the hikes, with Chief Executive Suzanne Clark calling them "outrageous" and wanting "to punish people for investing in the economy."

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik)

#### US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

- \* US President Joe Biden told reporters on Tuesday that he hopes and expects to meet with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin during the upcoming trip to Europe.
- \* Biden considers it vital to be straightforward and clear with Putin and thinks the best way to do so is through an in-person meeting, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said in an interview with The Financial Times.

#### EU-RUSSIA DIPLOMATIC DISPUTE

- \* Russian Ambassador in Paris Alexey Meshkov has been summoned to the French Foreign Ministry over Moscow's entry ban on several EU officials.
- \* The French Foreign Ministry summoned the Russian ambassador in Paris as part of an EU-coordinated "demarche," the Russian embassy in France said.

#### MEXICO SUBWAY ACCIDENT

- \* The death toll from the collapse of an overpass carrying a subway train in Mexico City has gone up to 23, while the number of injured has surpassed 60, Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum said.
- \* The number of those hospitalized after the collapse of a subway overpass in Mexico City has climbed to 79, the department for civilian protection said.
- \* United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was very saddened to learn about a deadly subway overpass collapse in Mexico City and expressed condolences to the victims of the tragedy, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

#### DEATH OF SWISS DIPLOMAT IN IRAN

- \* Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs said Tuesday that it was in contact with Iran following a tragic death of a Swiss diplomat in Tehran.
- \* The United States is aware of the reports of the death of a senior Swiss embassy employee in Tehran, and offers condolences to the diplomat's family, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.
- \* The Iranian government is inquiring about the circumstances in the death of a senior Swiss embassy employee in Tehran, the Iranian Foreign Ministry said,

#### NORD STREAM 2

- \* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a meeting with his German counterpart at the London-hosted G7 Summit raised the Biden administration's opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, which is nearing completion and expected to be used to transport Russian gas to Germany, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

\* The start date of hearings on the suit filed by German climate activists against the Nord Stream 2 gas project is not expected to be set anytime soon, a Hamburg court told Sputnik.

#### CIA HEADQUARTERS SHOOTING

\* The armed intruder who was shot by security personnel while trying to enter the CIA headquarters outside Washington, DC has succumbed to his wounds, the Federal Bureau of Investigation said on Tuesday.

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Blinken, Johnson Stress Need for US-UK Collaboration on Pandemic Recovery - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson during a meeting on Tuesday agreed on the importance of working together to recover from the pandemic and face other global challenges, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"Secretary Blinken and Prime Minister Johnson emphasized the importance of continued US-UK collaboration to lead efforts at NATO, the G7, and with other partners to recover stronger from the COVID-19 pandemic, defend the values of open societies, tackle climate change, and face other global challenges," Price said in a statement.

Blinken has arrived to London to participate in G7 Ministerial meeting. He will visit Ukraine later this week.

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UPDATE 2 - Biden, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Discuss Afghanistan, 'Threat Posed By Iran' - White House

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden in a recent telephone call with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan discussed Middle East issues of mutual interest concerning Afghanistan and Iran, among others, the White House said on Tuesday.

"President Joseph R. Biden Jr. spoke today with Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan...They discussed regional and global challenges, including Afghanistan, the nuclear and regional dimensions of the threat posed by Iran, as well as the common quest for de-escalation and peace in the Middle Peace," the release said.

Biden also emphasized to the Crown Prince the strategic importance of the normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel, adding that he fully supports strengthening and expanding the Abraham Accords peace agreement, the release said.

In addition, Biden and the Crown Prince stressed the need to work together to address the humanitarian crisis stemming from the conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, the release said.

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#### General Motors Builds US Infantry Vehicle Factory in 90 Days For \$214Mln Contract

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - A auto-assembly in the US state of North Carolina, which was constructed in just three months and opened this week, will manufacture Infantry Squad Vehicles (ISV) under a \$214.3 million Army contract, General Motors (GM) said on Tuesday. "In just over 90 days – from the start of construction to the start of vehicle production – GM Defense has demonstrated its fast-to-field capabilities by standing up a state-of-the-art tactical wheeled vehicle manufacturing center," GM said in a press release. "The Army has an acquisition objective of 2,065 vehicles for the Infantry Brigade Combat Teams."

The ISV is based on the 2020 Chevrolet Colorado ZR2 midsize truck architecture and features 90 percent commercial-off-the-shelf parts, including performance race components proven to perform under tough off-road conditions, the release said.

The expeditionary vehicle is designed to provide a 'better boot' to infantry soldiers, helping to eliminate the traditional march of wars past and providing rapid mobility to fight on nearly any battlefield, the release added.

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#### Biden, UAE Crown Prince Discuss Afghanistan, 'Threat Posed By Iran' - White House

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden in a recent telephone call with Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) discussed Middle East issues of mutual interest concerning Afghanistan and Iran, among others, the White House said on Tuesday.

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US Enlists 'Ethical Hackers' in Satellite Attack Contest to Test Defenses - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) - Defenders of US satellites will test their skills against teams of hackers, who began registering for the second annual Hack-A-Sat contest, the Defense Department said on Tuesday.

"As satellites provide the entire world with needed data transmission for capabilities like GPS and credit card transactions, the Departments of the Air & Space Force embraces the benefit of ethical hacking to advance cyber and space technology for both the military and industry," the Defense Department said in a press release.

The United States began accepting applications from hackers on Tuesday for a qualification round on June 26 with a first prize of \$10,000. Eight teams that emerge as finalists will then compete September 17-19 with the top prize of \$50,000, the release said.

In addition to hackers probing for satellite vulnerabilities, Air and Space Force service members will attempt to defend their satellites with offensive countermeasures, the release added.

Last year's inaugural Hack-A-Sat contest drew more than 2,000 teams made up of more than 6,000 individuals, including some of the world's best hackers, according to the release.

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US to Ship Overseas 10% of COVID-19 Vaccines - Biden

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States will in the coming two months share with the rest of the world around one tenth of its supply of vaccines against COVID-19, President Joe Biden announced on Thursday.

"We have already committed... to send 60 million doses of Astra Zeneca vaccines to other countries starting this month and ending in June. That means of all of the vaccines we will have produced for the United States at that time we will have given about ten percent to the rest of the world," Biden said.

He described it as "a significant humanitarian commitment" in addition to US funding of COVAX, an international mechanism of purchasing vaccines for underprivileged countries.

The US prioritizes domestic consumption with foreign commitments limited to Astra Zeneca vaccines that failed to win authorization for use inside the country. The White House admitted that it currently has no Astra Zeneca vaccines, but expects to receive soon 60 million doses.

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#### Two Additional Bombers Arrive in Qatar to Assist US Pullout From Afghanistan - Air Force

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - Two additional B-52 bombers arrived in Qatar on Tuesday to provide force protection during the US troop pullout from Afghanistan, the Air Force said.

"Two additional US Air Force B-52H Stratofortress aircraft from the 5th Bomb Wing, Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota, arrived at Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar, May 4," the Air Force said in a press release.

The United States has six B-52 bombers in Qatar that are prepared to provide any necessary force protection should US or NATO forces come under attack during the withdrawal process in Afghanistan.

On May 1, US and NATO forces began to withdraw ground forces from Afghanistan and have a deadline set to complete the full pullout by September 11.

Earlier on Tuesday, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) said the withdrawal process is between 2 percent to 6 percent complete.

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#### Biden, UAE Crown Prince Discuss Afghanistan, 'Threat Posed By Iran' - White House

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#### Biden Announces Plan to Administer at Least 1 Vaccine Shot to 70% of Americans By July 4

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Tuesday announced his plan to administer at least one coronavirus injection to 70 percent of the adults in the United States and fully inoculate 160 million residents.

"Our goal by July 4, is to have 70 percent of adult Americans for at least one shot and 160 million Americans fully vaccinated. That means giving close to a hundred million shots - some first shots or the second shots - over the next 60 days," Biden said during a briefing.

Biden said the potential success in reaching this goal would represents a "serious step" toward returning to normal life.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Biden administration also announced a number of measures to make vaccination more convenient and accessible, including increasing walk-in vaccinations at local pharmacies, shipping vaccine allocations to rural areas across the country and \$250 million in funding to hire workers to increase vaccine access.

More than 105 million or 32 percent of adults in the United States have been fully vaccinated, according to the data compiled by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention.

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**Biden Says It's His Hope, Expectation to Meet with Putin in June**

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters on Tuesday that he hopes and expects to meet with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin during his upcoming trip to Europe.

"That is my hope and expectation. We are working on it," Biden replied when asked if he is planning to meet Russia's president during the trip, scheduled for June.

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**Global Air Travel Stays 88% Below Pre-Pandemic Level Despite Domestic Rebound - Report**

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - International airline passenger demand in March remained depressed at 87.8 percent of pre-pandemic March 2019 levels, even as domestic air travel pulled to within 32 percent of volumes prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said in a report on Tuesday.

"The positive momentum we saw in some key domestic markets in March is an indication of the strong recovery we are anticipating in international markets as travel restrictions are lifted.

People want and need to fly. And we can be optimistic that they will do so when restrictions are removed," IATA Director-General Willie Walsh said in the report.

Total domestic demand was down 32.3 percent versus pre-crisis levels (March 2019), greatly improved over February 2021, when domestic traffic was down 51.2 percent versus the 2019 period. All markets except Brazil and India showed improvement compared to February 2021, with China being the key contributor. The 87.7 percent decline in international travel in March represented a tiny improvement from the 89.0% decline recorded a month earlier, the report said.

The IATA said it was encouraged by the European Union's decision to begin admitting vaccinated Americans, as well as announcements by 24 nations they will also welcome vaccinated travelers.

The report warned governments against relying on vaccinations alone and urged an increase in COVID-19 tests as an alternative to vaccines to avoid discriminating against those unable to receive inoculations for medical reasons.

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#### Trudeau Says All Canada-Approved Vaccines Safe for Use Amid Inconsistent Messaging

TORONTO, May 4 (Sputnik) - All vaccines approved by Canada's health regulator are safe for use, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday, a day after the country's vaccine advisory panel emphasized that mRNA vaccines are its preferred choice.

On Monday, Canada's independent National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) reaffirmed its support for mRNA vaccines, namely the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna shots, which touched off a firestorm with pundits calling for the advisory panel's disbandment, accusing the committee of undermining the government's vaccination campaign and stoking fears of increased vaccine hesitancy.

"Remember: All vaccines in Canada have been approved by Health Canada. Our advice to provinces and territories, and to Canadians – has not changed... make sure you get your shot when it's your turn," Trudeau, who has repeatedly urged the public to receive the first shot offered to them, told reporters. "Every single vaccine available in Canada has been approved by Health Canada as being both safe and effective."

However, throughout the press briefing neither of Canada's top medical officials, Dr. Theresa Tam or Dr. Howard Njoo explicitly said that the best vaccine is the first you can get despite being asked repeatedly, with Tam limiting herself to saying, "if you're asked [to get vaccinated], please do so."

Canada's vaccination regime has faced repeated setbacks, with the country experiencing a shortage of doses, despite the Trudeau government lauding deals with numerous vaccine manufacturers.

The vaccination program has also been undermined by mixed messaging with Canadian health officials suspending the use the Oxford-AstraZeneca and the Johnson & Johnson vaccines because of safety issues, despite assurances about safety and calls from top officials for Canadians to be vaccinated with the first vaccine offered.

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#### Trudeau Accuses Opposition of 'Extremely Aggressive' Politicking Amid Military Sex Scandal

TORONTO, May 4 (Sputnik) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Tuesday accused the country's official opposition Conservative Party of playing antagonistic political games with the ongoing sexual scandal plaguing the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and the federal government.

A day earlier, Conservative Party Leader Erin O'Toole called for Trudeau to dismiss his top aide, Katie Telford, following months of political turmoil after multiple allegations of sexual misconduct were leveled at the country's former Chief of Defense Staff Gen. Jonathan Vance and his successor, Adm. Art McDonald.

The prime minister, who refers to himself as a "feminist" has vowed to take a zero-tolerance approach for sexual conduct allegation. He has repeatedly stated that his office was aware of the complaints but not of the nature of the allegations. However, media reports suggest that Telford was privy to the allegations against Vance since 2018.

"Unfortunate, but not surprising, to see Conservatives playing extremely aggressive partisan games with this issue," Trudeau told reporters.

Trudeau, who was asked whether he would give into the opposition's demands to allow Telford to testify before the country's parliamentary defense committee, sidestepped the question and emphasized that his prerogative remains rooting a pervasive culture of sexual misconduct in the CAF.

Canada's main opposition parties – Conservatives, Bloc Quebecois and the New Democrats – are pressing to have Telford to testify before the Defense committee but the governing Liberals are stonewalling the attempts.

The political firestorm has forced the government to launch an independent review of sexual misconduct in the Canada's armed forces.

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US Charges 6 Bogus Religious Officials in \$9M In Theft of Virus Relief Aid - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – Six conspirators who posed as pastors or leaders of bogus faith-based organizations face criminal charges for defrauding the US Small Business Administration (SBA) of \$9 million in COVID-19 aid, the Justice Department said on Tuesday. "From on or about March 31, 2020, through on or about Dec. 17, 2020, the six Defendants, and others known and unknown to the Grand Jury, are accused of devising a scheme to defraud the SBA and other financial institutions by obtaining Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL) and Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans under false pretenses," the department said in a press release.

The indictment charges Terrence L. POUNDS, 44, and five co-defendants that he recruited, with multiple counts of conspiracy, wire fraud and money laundering, the release said.

POUNDS allegedly claimed in SBA loan applications that his co-defendants each operated a non-profit faith-based organization or a church with at least \$1 million in revenue and 15 employees, the release added.

Together, they submitted at least 60 fraudulent loan applications seeking a total of about \$9million, of which the SBA approved about \$3.3 million, according to the release.

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**US Should Take Decisive Action Against Myanmar's Military - Envoy to UN**

UNITED NATIONS, May 4 (Sputnik) - Myanmar Ambassador to the United Nations Kyaw Moe Tun on Tuesday urged the United States to take a decisive role in resolving the political crisis in the Southeast Asian country following the February 1 military coup.

"The situation in Myanmar is indeed an unfolding tragedy that continues to escalate. Over time, the people of Myanmar are seriously suffering from the military brutality and inhumane acts day and night," Kyaw Moe Tun said during his testimony at the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Relations.

"We need the United States to take a decisive leadership role in helping resolve the Myanmar crisis," he said.

The ambassador said the United States should immediately extend protection to civilians in Myanmar by providing humanitarian assistance and sheltering those seeking refuge in neighboring countries.

In addition, Kyaw Moe Tu urged to apply targeted sanctions against the military and freeze all accounts associated with the junta and its members. At the same time, he said, all financial flow to the military must be immediately cut off, he said.

Speaking at a UN Security Council meeting last month, Kyaw Moe Tu also called for establishing a no-fly zone over "living areas" to prevent the military from conducting airstrikes to kill civilians.

Kyaw Moe Tun was fired by the military in February, following his statement in opposition of the coup. However, the United Nations said the envoy remained in his post.

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**US Aware of Reports of Swiss Diplomat's Death in Iran, Offers Condolences - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is aware of the reports of the death of a senior Swiss embassy employee in Tehran, and offers condolences to the diplomat's family, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, Iranian media said that the First Secretary of the Swiss embassy died in a fall from a high-rise in the Iranian capital. The 51-year-old reportedly represented US diplomatic interests in Iran. The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs said it was in contact with Iran on the matter.

"We have seen the reports of the tragic passing of a member of the Swiss Embassy in Tehran," the spokesperson said. "We extend our heartfelt condolences to the officer's family and colleagues."

The Iranian Foreign Ministry said on Tuesday that the Iranian government is inquiring about the circumstances in the death of a senior Swiss embassy employee in Tehran.

Tehran also expressed its condolences regarding the incident.

Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs said Tuesday that it was in contact with Iran following a tragic death of a Swiss diplomat in Tehran.

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**US Wants Taiwan Chipmakers to Prioritize US Automakers' Orders - Commerce Sec Raimondo**

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is trying to get Taiwanese chip companies to prioritize orders from American automakers struggling to keep up with demand for cars in an economy recovering from the coronavirus pandemic while facing shortages of such semiconductors, US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said Tuesday.

"We're working hard to see if we can get the Taiwanese and TSMC, which is a big company there, to, you know, prioritize the needs of our auto companies since there's so many American jobs on the line," Raimondo said in response to a question from a General Motors executive during a discussion on the Washington Conference on the Americas. "As I said there's not a day that goes by that we don't push on that."

Semiconductors are key components used in the infotainment, power steering and braking systems, among other things.

General Motors said it was temporarily idling or extending shutdowns at several automaking plants due to a chip shortage. The US automaking giant has said it expects the problem will reduce its operating profit by \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion this year.

One reason for the shortage of chips affecting US automakers is that local manufacturers such as Intel were busy fulfilling orders for the consumer electronics industry, which has seen a quadrupling of demand for devices meant for both work and leisure as people spent more time at home during the pandemic.

A closure of multiple US auto assembly plants last year during the height of COVID-related shutdowns also prompted local chip manufacturers to redirect supplies to other industries, creating a shortage when demand for cars snapped back stronger than expected.

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**Canadian Government Allots \$4.87Bln for Indigenous Infrastructure Projects - Trudeau**

TORONTO, May 4 (Sputnik) – Canada's federal government is allotting \$4.87 billion towards projects in indigenous communities, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday.

"We are investing C\$6 billion [\$4.87 billion USD] for indigenous infrastructure projects," Trudeau told reporters.

The new investment will go towards the construction of roads, schools and other critical infrastructure for indigenous communities, Trudeau said.

The prime minister also highlighted the progress made by his government in ensuring clean water supply in indigenous communities, in spite of missing on a promise to ensure access in all communities by March 2021.

During his first election campaign in 2015, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau vowed to end all boil water advisories in indigenous communities, which in many instances have been in place for decades, by March 2021.

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US Working to Send \$20Mn Worth of COVID-19 Medications to Brazil - White House

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is working to send \$20 million worth of novel coronavirus medications to Brazil to help fulfill hospital shortages of supplies in the Latin American country, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"We are working to partner with the government of Brazil and the Pan American Health Organization to finalize access to \$20 million worth of intubation medications needed to save Brazilian lives," Psaki said in a press briefing.

Moreover, Psaki said the US administration hopes to have 10 million doses of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine available for global supply in the coming weeks, as well as an additional 50 million more available in the coming months.

Brazil comes second in terms of global death toll following the United States with more than 575,000 fatalities, and third in terms of the number of confirmed cases after the US and India.

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Biden Strongly Believes in Need to Be Direct With Putin in Face-to-Face Talks - Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden considers it vital to be straightforward and clear with Russian President Vladimir Putin and thinks the best way to do so is through an in-person meeting, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said in an interview published on Tuesday.

"President Biden believes very strongly that it's important to be clear and direct, and one of the best ways to do that is actually meeting face to face," Blinken told The Financial Times.

Blinken said diplomacy is all about actually engaging directly.

"And I've always been struck; as a diplomat, people sometimes seem to think that's a problematic thing or some sign of weakness," he said.

Blinken said Washington does not seek to escalate with Russia, but wants to have a more predictable relationship.

"And if Russia continues to take reckless and aggressive actions, it can be sure we will respond again," he added. "I think it's beneficial also to – for the two presidents to be able to speak directly face to face."

Blinken also pointed out that there are areas where the two nations have mutual interest to cooperate.

"We've already seen one of them, and that was the extension of the New START Treaty," he noted. "There are other areas of the so-called strategic stability realm where maybe progress can be made."

The Biden administration recently expelled 10 Russian diplomats from the United States and imposed sanctions on 32 Russian entities and individuals as part of a new round of sanctions over Moscow's alleged cyberattacks and other hostile acts against US interests.

Moscow has denied the allegations and said the latest US sanctions run contrary to the US administration's rhetoric that it seeks a stable relationship with Russia.

Moscow has provided the United States a list of reciprocal actions it will impose on the US Mission to Russia, which is currently being reviewed by the Biden administration.

The United States and Russia are currently working on possibly holding a summit between President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin in the early summer.

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US Jails Neo-Nazi for 41 Months for Harassing Journalists, Minorities - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - A former leader of the neo-Nazi Atomwaffen Division in Texas will spend three and a half months in prison for participating in so-called swatting events targeting journalists and minorities throughout the US, the Justice Department said on Tuesday. Swatting is a harassment tactic that involves deceiving emergency dispatchers into believing that a person or persons are in imminent danger of death or bodily harm and causing the dispatchers to send police and emergency services to an unwitting third party's address. "According to court documents, John Cameron Denton, 27, of Montgomery, Texas, participated in a conspiracy that conducted swatting attacks on at least 134 different locations across the United States between October 2018 and February 2019," the department said in a press release.

Denton and other conspirators chose targets because they were motivated by racial animus, the release said.

The neo-Nazi and co-conspirators targeted multiple locations in the state of Virginia, including a sitting US Cabinet official, Old Dominion University, and the predominantly African-American Alfred Street Baptist Church. In each instance, conspirators selected the targets and called emergency dispatchers with false claims of pipe bombs, hostage takings, or other violent activity occurring at the targeted locations, the release said.

Other targets included the New York City office of ProPublica, a non-profit newsroom that produces investigative journalism, an investigative journalist who produced materials for ProPublica and an Islamic center in the state of Texas, the release added.

Denton was given a 41-month sentence by US District Judge Liam O'Grady in the state of Virginia.

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**Biden Administration to Make USMCA More 'Worker-Centered' - Trade Chief**

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration fully supports the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement struck in the Trump-era but wants to make that pact and trade agreements in the Americas more worker-centric and beneficial to all countries in the hemisphere, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said Tuesday.

"For far too long, we have overlooked the effect of our trade policies on individual workers, who are human beings, living in a community trying to survive and thrive," Tai said at the Washington Conference on the Americas. "USTR's worker-centered trade policy that will foster broad-based, equitable growth, increase innovation, and give workers a seat at the table."

Tai acknowledged that free trade agreements in the past involving the United States have fallen short of promised gains and benefits and hoped there would be a better future for the USMCA, which was signed in 2019 with bilateral support from lawmakers in the Republican party led by Trump, and Democrats now led by Biden.

"These agreements show our close economic ties, and I am committed to using every tool available to make them work well for trade and to have a positive impact on real people," she added.

The principle of revisiting existing trade programs to make them better was particularly important with the cross-border challenges faced by the United States, Tai said, citing the crisis at the US southern border which had seen an influx of illegal migrants in recent months. Vice President Kamala Harris is coordinating US efforts to address the root causes of crisis, and has an additional \$310 million in humanitarian relief for Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador — the countries where some of the migrants have come from.

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US, Allies to Pressure Caracas Until Venezuela 'Returns to Democracy' - Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies will continue to pressure the Venezuelan government to return the country to democracy, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"We will continue to work with our partners across the region, both to alleviate the suffering of the Venezuelan people, and to exert pressure on the regime so the country can peacefully return to democracy," Blinken said at the 51st Conference on the Americas.

Blinken alleged that Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro's government has mismanaged the health crisis in the country.

The secretary added that the US will also continue advocating for the human rights of the Cuban people, including the right to freedom of expression and assembly, and condemn the repression of human rights.

Blinken called on the US partners in the region to urge the government of Haiti to organize free and fair elections by the end of this year as well as the government of Nicaragua to reform its electoral system.

Maduro has repeatedly denied US allegations and accuses Washington of attempting to overthrow the Venezuelan government to seize the country's natural resources. According to a 2019 study co-authored by renowned economist Jeffrey Sachs, US sanctions have killed tens of thousands of Venezuelans.

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Biden Strongly Believes in Need to Be Direct With Putin in Face-to-Face Talks - Blinken

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"President Biden believes very strongly that it's important to be clear and direct, and one of the best ways to do that is actually meeting face to face," Blinken said.

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#### Trudeau Slams Anti-Lockdown Protests for 'Prolonging' Health Measures, Pandemic

TORONTO, May 4 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Tuesday said anti-lockdown protests are prolonging the duration of the restrictive public health measures and the coronavirus pandemic itself.

Canadian anti-lockdown activists have taken to the streets in cities including, Toronto, Montreal and Calgary most weekends since the summer of 2020, to protest against restrictions that organizers say are crippling businesses and undermining civil liberties.

"Unfortunately, some people are still choosing to join large gatherings or even go out of their way to protest public health measures and disrupt vaccine appointments," Trudeau told reporters. "These protests are supposed to be about getting back to normal but by spreading the virus, they do just the opposite and prolong lockdowns."

The prime minister used the opportunity to again urge Canadians to follow public health guidelines.

Trudeau's statement is a reversal of the longstanding policy by top officials and mainstream media outlets to largely ignore the protests.

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#### White House Says Reports About US Prisoner Exchange With Iran 'Not True'

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki on Tuesday said reports about the US administration reaching a deal with Iran for a prisoner exchange are not true.

"Reports over the weekend that an agreement had been reached to exchange prisoners was not true," Psaki said in a press briefing.

Psaki added that the administration raises the issue with Iran through indirect or direct channels at the highest-level but these negotiations are not part of the ongoing talks in Vienna to revive the Iran nuclear deal.

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#### UN Chief 'Very Saddened' By Mexico City Train Crash - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, May 4 (Sputnik) - United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was very saddened to learn about a deadly subway overpass collapse in Mexico City and expressed condolences to the victims of the tragedy, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"We were very saddened to hear the news and see the horrific images," Dujarric said in a press briefing. "We send our condolences to the families of the victims and wish all those who were injured a speedy recovery."

A subway overpass and train collapsed onto a road between the Olivos and Tezonco stations at 10:00 p.m. local time on Monday (3:00 GMT on Tuesday).

According to Mexico City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum, the disaster killed at least 23 people and injured 79 individuals who were hospitalized.

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Nearly Half of Americans Want Facemasks Worn by All, Even The Vaccinated - Poll

WASHINGTON, April 4 (Sputnik) -A near majority, 49 percent of US Adults, believe those fully vaccinated against COVID-19 should continue wearing masks in public, a Rasmussen Reports poll said on Tuesday.

"The good news is that half of Americans now believe we are winning the war against COVID-19. The bad news is, nearly half still want you to keep wearing a mask, even if you're vaccinated against the virus," a press release explaining the poll said.

In addition to the 49 percent who want the faces of vaccinated Americans' faces covered in public, 54 percent say masks should be worn by those who have contracted COVID-19 and recovered, the release said.

Many US states have ended facemask requirements for fully vaccinated people when outdoors and away from crowds, although mask rules in most cases remain in places for shoppers inside stores and at other indoor locations.

The poll also revealed 50 percent now believe the US is winning the war against COVID-19, up from just 28 percent in January. Another 26 percent say the nation is losing the war while 25 percent are not sure.

Despite the optimism, 58 percent of Americans expect they'll be required to wear masks in public places for at least another six months, including 25 percent who expect mask mandates to last 18 months or longer, according to the release.

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US Interest Rates Might Have to Rise to Prevent Economic Overheating - Yellen

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US interest rates might have to rise from the near zero levels they are at to prevent overheating of an economy rebounding from the coronavirus pandemic, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Tuesday.

"It may be that interest rates will have to rise somewhat to make sure that our economy doesn't overheat," Yellen said in a live-streamed interview with The Atlantic publication.

The Federal Reserve has kept interest rates at between zero and 0.25 percent since March 2020 to aid recovery from the COVID-19 outbreak.

Fed Chairman Jerome Powell reiterated last week that he had no plans of raising rates for now despite the central bank's projections that the economy will rebound 6.5 percent this year from a 3.5 percent decline in 2020.

First quarter growth was at an annual rate of 6.4 percent, the Commerce Department said, keeping in line with the Fed's forecasts.

The problem for policymakers though is that consumer prices, the key gauge for US inflation, rose 0.6 percent in March for its highest growth in nearly a decade, data showed.

An inflation surge from commodity prices ramping up as the pandemic abates could complicate efforts to balance growth and costs, and a rate hike, as suggested by Yellen could cool price pressures.

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US Budgets \$15.5Mln to Expand Solar Power in Underserved Communities – Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – The US launched a series of initiatives, including \$15.5 million in new funding, to develop solar power in communities that have yet to benefit from the growing power source, the Energy Department said on Tuesday.

"Solar energy is one of the fastest, easiest, and cheapest paths to President [Joe] Biden's goal of 100% clean electricity by 2035—and now, it's time to double down on our efforts to make those benefits available to communities in every pocket of the country," Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a press release.

The package includes funding of \$10 million over the next five years for SolSmart, a US agency that provides no-cost technical assistance to state and local governments to speed deployment of solar energy, the release said.

The new funding will allow the agency to expand its focus to include rural and low- and moderate-income communities, the release added.

An additional \$5.5 million will focus on a program to connect utilities, state and local governments, community-based organizations, and system operators to technical experts at Energy Department National Laboratories, according to the release.

The Energy Department has set a goal of expanding the nation's present 100 gigawatts (GW) of solar capacity to as much as 500 to 600 GW over the next 10 years.

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#### G7 Foreign Ministers Reaffirm Commitment to Political Solution in Syria - Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday that he and his G7 counterparts reaffirmed the group's commitment to back a political solution in Syria and the United Nations' cross-border aid mechanism.

"My G7 counterparts and I reaffirmed our commitment to a political resolution for ending the conflict in Syria and support to the reauthorization of the UN cross-border aid mechanism," Blinken said in a statement via Twitter.

The G7 member states will continue to work to advance all aspects of UN Security Council resolution 2254 to facilitate a political solution in Syria to end the ongoing conflict, Blinken said. In a bid to reconcile the Syrian government and the opposition, the United Nations launched in 2019 the 150-member Syrian constitutional committee with equal representation of the government, opposition and civil society.

The latest and fifth round of the Syrian Constitutional Committee talks was held in Geneva in late January. UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen called the talks a "disappointment," as nothing was achieved on specific agenda issues the diplomat had defined before the session. The G7 ministerial summit in London will conclude on Wednesday. In addition to G7 ministers, the summit is attended by representatives of Australia, India, South Africa, South Korea, as well as Brunei in its capacity as the ASEAN chair country.

The G7 ministerial meeting lays the ground work for the summit among world leaders in June.

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#### Suspect Dies after Shooting at CIA Headquarters - FBI

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - A armed person who was shot by security personnel while trying to enter the CIA headquarters outside Washington, DC has succumbed to his wounds, the Federal Bureau of Investigation said on Tuesday.

"The subject involved in the shooting incident outside CIA Headquarters at approximately 6 p.m. on Monday, May 3, 2021, died from his injuries after being transported to the hospital," the FBI Washington field office tweeted a day after the incident.

On Monday, the motorist attempted to enter the heavily guarded compound and was "engaged by law enforcement officers" once he left his vehicle with a weapon, according to earlier releases.

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**CORRECTION - US Attorney General Requests Budget Increase to Combat Domestic Terrorism, Gun Violence**

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – US Attorney General Merrick Garland in congressional testimony on Tuesday urged lawmakers to increase of the Department of Justice budget to \$35.2 billion in 2022 to combat domestic terrorism and gun violence, among other goals. "It [the proposed budget] includes increases of \$45 million for the FBI domestic terrorism investigations and \$40 million for the US Attorneys to manage increasing domestic terrorism cases," Garland said. "We are seeking to increase our support to combat gun violence by \$232 million for FY [financial year] 2022 supporting both DoJ federal law enforcement resources as well as grant funding for community violence intervention programs including background checks."

The budget increase will also support hiring 100 new immigration judges to reduce the backlog of nearly 1.3 million immigration cases pending in courts, the attorney general added. The DoJ also seeks to increase the Department's Civil Rights funding by \$33 million, in order to provide a total of \$209 million for the Civil Rights Division, Community Relation Service and related civil right work for protecting voting rights to prosecuting hate crimes, Garland noted. The department's budget for the 2021 fiscal year was \$31.7 billion and \$32.4. billion in 2020.

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**Blinken Raised US Opposition to Nord Stream 2 to German Counterpart - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a meeting with his German counterpart at the London-hosted G7 Summit raised the Biden administration's opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, which is nearing completion and expected to be used to transport Russian gas to Germany, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met today with German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas on the margins of the G7 Ministerial in London... The Secretary also raised the Administration's strong opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline," Price said in a press release.

Nord Stream 2 is a joint venture of the Russian energy company Gazprom and five European partners to construct a twin pipeline that will deliver up to 2 trillion cubic feet of Russian gas to Germany annually under the Baltic Sea. The United States is opposed to the project, seeking to export more of its liquefied natural gas to Europe.

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## US Withdrawal From Afghanistan Between 2%-6% Complete - CENTCOM

(Updates with details in paras 3-5; background in paras 6,7)

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The US withdrawal from Afghanistan is up to 6 percent complete after beginning the drawdown of American ground forces this past weekend, Central Command (CENTCOM) said on Tuesday.

"US Central Command estimates that we have completed between 2-6% of the entire retrograde process," CENTCOM said in a press release.

The United States, as of Tuesday, has pulled out about 60 C-17 plane loads of equipment from Afghanistan and marked more than 1,300 pieces of equipment that will be destroyed, the release said.

Moreover, the United States has formally handed over the US base Camp Antonik in Helmand, Afghanistan, to the Afghan National Army, the release said.

The United States will provide a weekly update on the status of withdrawal process, according to the release.

Taliban attacks in Afghanistan have increased as US and NATO forces begin their exit from Afghanistan. On Monday, however, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said small, harassing attacks by the Taliban in Afghanistan have not had a significant impact on the withdrawal of US forces.

The Taliban have accused the United States of violating the 2020 Doha agreement, according to which the US was set to withdraw its forces by May 1, and threatened to abandon inter-Afghan peace talks until all foreign troops are withdrawn from Afghanistan. The movement also issued a warning that the non-aggression clause against US forces will become null starting May 1.

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## US Attorney General Requests Budget Increase to Combat Domestic Terrorism, Gun Violence

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – US Attorney General Merrick Garland in congressional testimony on Tuesday urged lawmakers to increase of the Department of Justice budget to \$35.2 billion in 2022 to combat domestic terrorism and gun violence, among other goals.

"It [the proposed budget] includes increases of \$45 billion for the FBI domestic terrorism investigations and \$40 million for the US Attorneys to manage increasing domestic terrorism cases," Garland said. "We are seeking to increase our support to combat gun violence by \$232 million for FY [financial year] 2022 supporting both DoJ federal law enforcement resources as well as grant funding for community violence intervention programs including background checks."

The budget increase will also support hiring 100 new immigration judges to reduce the backlog of nearly 1.3 million immigration cases pending in courts, the attorney general added.

The DoJ also seeks to increase the Department's Civil Rights funding by \$33 million, in order to provide a total of \$209 million for the Civil Rights Division, Community Relation Service and related civil right work for protecting voting rights to prosecuting hate crimes, Garland noted.

The department's budget for the 2021 fiscal year was \$31.7 billion and \$32.4 billion in 2020.

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S&P Jumps Onto Crypto Bandwagon by Launching Indices for Bitcoin, Ethereum

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The S&P Dow Jones Indices has launched a series of digital asset benchmarks to track Bitcoin and the Ethereum cryptocurrencies, the index provider said in a statement on Tuesday.

"These new S&P-branded indices will measure the performance of digital assets listed on recognized open cryptocurrency exchanges," the statement said.

The new indices were the S&P Bitcoin Index that measures the performance of Bitcoin, the oldest and largest digital coin by market capitalization; the S&P Ethereum Index, which tracks Ethereum, the second most-used cryptocurrency; and the S&P Cryptocurrency MegaCap Index, which measures the performance of both Bitcoin and Ethereum.

Cryptocurrencies, in general, are volatile because they have no intrinsic value and some associated with funding for illicit activity.

Bitcoin, the granddaddy of digital coins, is completely banned by India and heavily restricted by China's government. US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has called it an "inefficient" payment system that was too volatile for the average user or investor and could be misused for illicit finance.

Separately, New York's Attorney General Letitia James shut down a digital currency trading platform in March that she called a fraud, warning investors from falling prey to similar schemes. Despite such caution, the cryptocurrency trade has thrived, with even endowments of top universities like Harvard and Yale adding the 12-year-old Bitcoin to their portfolio of assets. To counter the threat of an underworld of cryptocurrencies taking over legitimate financial systems, governments and central banks, including the US Federal Reserve, are discussing ways to form their digital coins if possible.

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UN Praises Biden for Raising US Refugee Cap to 62,500 - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi praised US President Joe Biden for his decision to raise the admissions cap on refugees to 62,500 for this fiscal year, a UNHCR statement said on Tuesday.

"I praise President Biden's move to restore the US' leadership on refugee resettlement. The decision to increase this year's resettlement admissions ceiling and admit up to 62,500 refugees is a measure that will save lives and protect some of the world's most vulnerable," Grandi said in the statement.

Biden announced on Monday that he would raise the refugee admissions cap from its historic lows during the Trump administration after receiving pushback from fellow Democrats for keeping the Trump-era caps in place.

Grandi noted in his statement that in 2020, only 23,000 refugees were officially resettled around the world – the lowest resettlement numbers in almost 20 years.

He also offered continued support from the UN in scaling up the refugee program and expressed hoped that the US move would help encourage other countries to do the same.

As part of his announcement on Monday, Biden said the US was unlikely to meet the higher goal of admitting 62,500 refugees due to the need to hire new staff to process the admission. But he said such steps would allow the administration to increase the admissions cap again next fiscal year to 125,000.

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US Stock Indexes Down Almost 2% on Fears of 'Sell in May and Go Away'

NEW YORK, May 4 (Sputnik) - US stocks tumbled on Tuesday, with the Nasdaq Composite index for technology leading declines for its worst day since March, on fears that equities will exhibit their traditional character of correcting this month in line with the adage "Sell in May and go away."

The Nasdaq fell 1.9 percent, or 266 points, to 13,629 by 10:00 AM ET (14:00 GMT), hitting a bump after April's upward trajectory, despite strong quarterly earnings at Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft and Google. Tuesday's drop was the sharpest in a day for the Nasdaq since March 24, when it fell just over 2 percent.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, Wall Street's broadest stock indicator comprising mostly industrial stocks, was down 0.8 percent, or 271 points, to 33,843.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, was the only one bucking the broader trend, rising 0.3 percent, or rising 12 points, to 4,193.

"Sell in May and go away" in a time-honored saying in financial markets as traders tend to liquidate their holdings in that May just before embarking on summer vacations. It will be interesting to see if that trend bears out this year as the US and European economies show promising recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and travel reopens between the two regions. "Whether it's May or not, after a strong six-month run, a period of lacklustre trading could be expected," said Sophie Griffiths, head of UK research at online brokerage OANDA. Despite Tuesday's slide, the Nasdaq index remained up about 6 percent on the year while the Dow showed a 11 percent gain and the S&P a 11.6 percent advance.

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#### No Casualties as Rockets Hit Iraqi Base Housing US Troops – Coalition

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – Two rockets have landed at Ain Al-Asad Air Base hosting US troops in Iraq with no casualties or material losses reported, the US-led coalition said on Tuesday.

"Initial report: @SecMedCell [Iraqi security media cell] reports two Katyusha rockets landed in an empty square at Ain Al-Asad Air Base AAAB in Anbar Governorate. No casualties or material losses," Spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) Colonel Wayne Marotto said via Twitter.

The spokesman said operations targeting the Islamic State (banned in Russia) in the country remain critical to the Iraqi Security forces to achieve peace and ensure the terrorist organization never re-emerges.

The Iraqi National Security Service located a cache of ammunition containing high explosives belonging to the Islamic State (banned in Russia) in Baghdad, Col. Marotto added.

On Monday, another base hosting US troops in Iraq, the Balad Air Base, came under attack by a rocket with neither US nor coalition troops injured.

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US Transfers Remaining Prisoners Out of Secretive 'Camp 7' at Guantanamo - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – The United States has transferred all of the remaining detainees out of the notorious Camp 7 at Guantanamo Bay and consolidated the 40 remaining prisoners in two units at the prison camp on the eastern edge of Cuba, the Defense Department said on Tuesday.

“This transfer consolidated all 40 detainees from three to two detention facilities,” the department said in a press release. “This fiscally responsible decision will reduce the detention facility’s footprint and will eliminate maintenance requirements and costs incurred by Camp VII.” While the release gave few details, Camp 7 has been used to house some of the most dangerous terrorists captured following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and several others accused of masterminding the 2001 terrorist strikes on New York and Washington.

Many of the detainees at Camp 7 were tortured with waterboarding and other techniques in secret CIA prisons overseas before being transferred to GITMO.

In February, shortly after taking office, President Joe Biden launched a formal review of the Guantanamo Bay detention facility, also known as Gitmo, with the White House claiming the president intends to close prison before leaving office.

The Trump administration blocked a planned closure of Gitmo sought by former President Barack Obama.

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US Trade Deficit Rises to Record High of \$74.4Bln in March - Commerce Department

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The US trade deficit in goods and services rose by 5.6 percent to reach a record high of \$74.4 billion in March, the Commerce Department's Census Bureau said on Tuesday.

“The US Census Bureau and the US Bureau of Economic Analysis announced today that the goods and services deficit was \$74.4 billion in March, up \$3.9 billion from \$70.5 billion in February, revised,” the bureau said in a press release.

The bureau noted that the trade gap was the highest on record, with exports rising by 6.6 percent to reach \$200 billion and imports increasing by 6.3 percent to \$274.5 billion.

The trade deficit with China rose by 11.6 percent or \$6.7 billion to reach \$36.9 billion in March.

Meanwhile, the deficit with Mexico rose by \$1.6 billion to \$8.4 billion, and the gap with the EU decreased by \$2.1 billion to \$16.9 billion.