

05/05/21 Wednesday

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US Births Hit Lowest Point in 40 Years, Falling Below Replacement Rate, CDC Says
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Family planning and changing social mores have given American women the option to delay or avoid childbirth if they so desire, resulting in motherhood beginning in later and later years and yielding fewer children. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has helped push that decline to historic lows.

According to new data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the birth rate in the United States [declined by 4%](#) in 2020, reaching its lowest point since 1979.

Just 3.6 million babies were born in the US last year, according to the data, with just 55.8 live births per 100,000 people, making 2020 the sixth straight year of rate decline and the first time the US birth rate has ever fallen below the ["replacement rate."](#) meaning more people died than were born.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its related social lockdowns, unemployment, uncertainty, and general chaos into which it threw so many people is only partly responsible for the decline, experts said, pointing to longer trends.

"The recent decline in birth rates reflects both a longer-term downward trend in birth rates that was apparent prior to the pandemic and pandemic-related reduction," Lorna Thorpe, director of epidemiology at the Department of Population Health at NYU Langone, [told Reuters](#) on Wednesday.

The CDC also [reported in February](#) that life expectancy in the US took its largest hit since World War II, as the mass death caused by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic cut the average life expectancy by an entire year.

Births declined in all age groups tracked by the CDC except for women in their late 40s and girls in their early teenage years, neither of whom represented a substantial number of total births in 2020. The birth rates for teenagers from 15 to 19 years old also hit record lows.

However, women in their early 20s have been having fewer and fewer children since 2007, when the first foreclosure-driven rumblings of the 2008 financial crash began, and today they are 40% lower than at that time. The average age at first birth was [27 in 2019](#), up considerably from 23 years old just 11 years ago.

In part, these changes have been driven by changing social mores as women don't face the expectation of their parents' generation that their lives be centered around raising children, but also because women since the 1960s women have increasingly been given the choice to become pregnant or not by both contraception and fertility services.

However, many of those rights have come under increasing attack in the United States in recent years as well. A record number of bills [greatly restricting access](#) to an abortion have been passed in a number of US states. In the first four months of 2021, 536 abortion restrictions were

introduced in 46 of the 50 US states, with 13 states passing 61 of them, according to an [April 30 report](#) by the Guttmacher Institute.

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Treasury Chief Yellen Walks Back Claim US Economy Could 'Overheat' This Summer
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As vaccination rates steadily increase in several parts of the globe, economists have made increasingly optimistic economic growth predictions, with the latest saying the US economy could grow 7.6% in 2021, the steepest pace it's seen since 1951, and similar predictions being made for China.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen was forced to walk back comments on Tuesday about the potential for interest rates to rise later this year after the stock market reacted poorly to the news.

Speaking at an event hosted by the Atlantic that morning, [Yellen said that](#) as COVID-19-related social restrictions are steadily relaxed later this year, "it may be that interest rates will have to rise somewhat to make sure that our economy doesn't overheat, even though the additional spending is relatively small relative to the size of the economy."

"It could cause some very modest increases in interest rates to get that reallocation, but these are investments our economy needs to be competitive and to be productive [and] I think that our economy will grow faster because of them," she added.

It's not just the return of more regular commerce patterns that could set the economy steaming again: the Biden administration has also spelled out [huge plans](#) for some \$4 trillion in economic spending, including [huge infrastructure projects](#) and social programs designed to mitigate or temporarily alleviate the rising poverty created or exacerbated by pandemic-related lockdowns. Yellen said she expected the programs to make a "big difference" in inequality in the country. Although the first two months of 2021 were among the most grim of the pandemic, with more than 150,000 people dying of COVID-19 in just a couple of weeks, the economy quickly began to recover, and gross domestic product had jumped by 6.4% by the end of the first quarter.

Yields on long-term Treasury bonds have also risen, as has the consumer price index.

All of these point to likely inflation on the horizon, which is when the value of currency decreases and is able to buy fewer goods for the same amount than before. The markets thus took Yellen's comments seriously, and [tech stocks suffered](#) their worst day since March as the Nasdaq Composite declined by 1.9% and Apple stocks fell by 4%. Stocks for tech firms were well-buttressed by the pandemic, as millions of people shifted to remote working, consuming, and communicating from home to avoid unnecessary spread of the virus.

That's why, later on Tuesday, the Treasury chief told the [Wall Street Journal's](#) CEO Council Summit: "I don't think there's going to be an inflationary problem, but if there is, the Fed can be counted on to address it."

Under former US President Donald Trump, the Federal Reserve [faced heavy pressure](#) to keep interest rates low as the real estate mogul-turned federal executive made stock market

performance one of his central measures of success. Yellen, who chaired the central bank prior to Trump's inauguration in 2017, told the WSJ that "if anybody appreciates the independence of the Fed, I think that person is me. It's not something I'm going to give opinions about."

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US State Department Pushes Back on Reports, Claims Biden Not Yet Decided on Western Sahara Issue

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Former senior US diplomats were outraged after the Trump administration recognized Morocco's claim to rule Western Sahara, a non-self-governing territory formerly colonized by Spain, since the UN has long promised to oversee an independence referendum there. The US State Department on Wednesday denied reports that emerged last week saying the Biden administration had quietly confirmed to Morocco its support for recognition of Morocco's claims of sovereignty over Western Sahara.

On Friday [Axios reported](#), citing "two sources familiar with the call," that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had told Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita that the Biden administration wasn't looking at this time to change the policy set down by former US President Donald Trump in December of last year. However, a readout of the call published later that day failed to mention Western Sahara at all.

A State Department spokesperson sought to correct the report on Tuesday by speaking with Alhurra, a US-based Arabic-language television channel funded by the US Agency for Global Media, the same federal agency that operates other US state media outlets like Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

"No such decision has been taken," the anonymous spokesperson said Tuesday, according to [Middle East Monitor](#). "We are currently conducting private talks with the disputing parties on the best way to push the file forward and we have nothing further to announce."

Trump's December decision reversed decades of US policy, which has long backed the United Nations-driven peace process in Western Sahara that includes holding a promised referendum on independence from Morocco. In conjunction with Trump's move, the Moroccan monarchy extended official diplomatic recognition to Israel, the last of several Arab nations to do so in 2020 at US urging.

Biden has faced pressure from both sides since taking office, with [Bourita urging him](#) not to shift policy and former US diplomats, as well as [current lawmakers](#) urging him to reverse the decision.

Rabat seized Western Sahara in 1975 after the Spanish colonial administration withdrew from the territory, but they faced a 16-year insurgency led by the [Saharawi Polisario Front](#), a liberation front fighting for a Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic it declared in the territory in 1976.

By 1991, a peace deal had been reached that would allow for Saharawis to vote on independence from Morocco, but over the 20 years that followed, no vote has taken place, even

as more and more Moroccan settlers moved into the country's valuable coastal regions. In November of last year, that [peace deal fractured](#) after Moroccan forces dispersed a Saharawi protest camp at a southern border crossing into Mauritania.

[Sputnik reported](#) last week that prior to Blinken's call, Bourita had already planned on attending an event on Thursday hosted by the American Israeli Political Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the largest pro-Israel lobby in the United States, in the interest of shoring up relations with both Jerusalem and Washington. His decision, in turn, followed an ambiguous action at [the United Nations](#) last month that failed to state an explicit position on Western Sahara and seemed to affirm support for the UN-led peace mission there, MINURSO.

Rabat was also reportedly further worried by the fact that Blinken spoke with Algeria before speaking with them, which might have been taken as a slight.

According to [Morocco World News](#), Blinken discussed regional affairs with Algerian foreign minister Sabri Boukadoum on Thursday before speaking to Bourita on Friday. Boukadoum reported afterward on his Twitter that the two had "discussed ways to revive and strengthen the strategic partnership between Algeria and the United States of America in various fields, as well as exchanging views on regional issues of common interest, especially the situations in Western Sahara, Libya and Mali."

However, like the readout on the call with Bourita, the [State Department's announcement](#) of the call with Boukadoum did not mention Western Sahara at all. Algiers has long supported the Saharawi cause, providing shelter for hundreds of thousands of Saharawi refugees and funneling obsolete military equipment to Polisario, and it has been a perennial regional rival to Morocco since independence in 1962.

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'Durable Demand': Pfizer CEO Expects \$26B COVID-19 Vaccine Profits in 2021, Plans for Boosters

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Pharmaceutical giant Pfizer is banking on COVID-19 being a major profit-driver for years to come as the company lines up vaccine delivery contracts for as far away as 2024. Corporate leaders have previously spoken of plans to dramatically increase the price of a jab once governments stop being the primary buyer.

In a first [quarter earnings statement](#) on Tuesday, Pfizer Chairman and CEO Albert Bourla said the company expects to make \$26 billion in revenue from sales this year of the COVID-19 vaccine it jointly produced with German firm BioNTech. However, he expects that vaccine manufacturing will only increase in future years, with the company preparing to make 3 billion doses in 2022.

While some of those will be two-dose treatments for first-time recipients, the company also expects COVID-19 to become endemic and is increasingly expecting to deliver annual booster shots as well, which could potentially be tweaked to protect from whichever strain is expected to be dominant that year.

“Based on what we’ve seen, we believe that a durable demand for our COVID-19 vaccine – similar to that of the flu vaccines – is a likely outcome,” Bourla said. “It is our hope that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine will continue to have a global impact by helping to get the devastating pandemic under control and helping economies around the world not only open – but stay open – creating a scenario in which Pfizer can continue to be both a leader and a beneficiary.”

Multi-Year Contracts Unveiled

Bourla spelled out that Pfizer has already reached an agreement with Canada to deliver as many as 125 million doses in 2022 and 2023, with the option of another 60 million doses in 2024.

Canada’s population is just 37.6 million. According to [government statistics](#), Ottawa has already spent more than \$1 billion procuring as many as 180 million vaccines, including up to [76 million from Pfizer](#) expected to begin shipping sometime this week, but also three others from Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, and AstraZeneca, the lattermost of which includes 2 million doses donated by the United States.

Bourla also said Pfizer has signed a deal to supply the United Kingdom with up to 60 million more doses in 2021 and to supply Israel with enough doses in 2022 “for the government to boost every eligible citizen, subject to local guidelines – with the option to purchase millions of additional doses for additional boosters.” It’s unclear if this is intended to include the millions of Palestinians who live under Israeli occupation but are not considered Israeli citizens and [have not been given](#) the same access to COVID-19 vaccines by Jerusalem.

The [Times of Israel reported](#) on Wednesday that Israel already has more than enough vaccines for its population and is expecting millions more doses to arrive, which it may give away to other nations but has also hinted may simply be thrown away. Meanwhile, [less than 1%](#) of Palestinians have been fully vaccinated, most of whom are workers who come into daily contact with Israelis because, as the paper put it, “Israel does not believe it is legally required to vaccinate the Palestinians.”

Bourla also noted that younger age cohorts were also being tested for vaccination: ages 2 to 5, 5 to 11, and 12 to 16, with another test on six-month-olds to two-year-olds expected later this year. Data from the other tests is expected before the end of the summer.

Not all of the benefits for Pfizer will come from the vaccine itself, though: the research behind the new mRNA vaccine design has yielded gains on new fronts, including flu shots and antiviral treatments, and could potentially be applied to treating other rare diseases like the autoimmune disease alopecia areata. Pfizer is also looking at creating an antiviral treatment for COVID-19 to be administered as either a shot or a pill to people who have contracted the disease, similarly to influenza antivirals.

Unequal Access for Third World

Pfizer CFO Frank D’Amelio also said in the Tuesday meeting that as a percentage of total company revenue, the COVID-19 vaccine has increased to 36% from the 25% projection made at the start of the year. He noted Pfizer expects to make 2.5 billion doses in 2021 and has contracted to deliver 1.6 billion doses this year.

At present, Pfizer’s money from COVID-19 vaccines is derived purely from government contracts. The company offers three tiers of prices depending on the relative wealth of the buying country, D’Amelio said on the Tuesday call. It’s unclear how disparate those prices are,

but a high-wealth country paid \$19.50 per shot while Malaysia, ranked 36th in the world by gross domestic product, [paid the equivalent](#) of \$18.79 per shot.

Other nations have not been so lucky. One unnamed Latin American nation, which could not be identified due to a confidentiality agreement signed with Pfizer, had to agree to bear the costs of lawsuits against Pfizer for adverse effects of the COVID-19 vaccines, according to the [Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#). Negotiations with Brazil and Argentina fell apart, according to the report, after Pfizer demanded they put up sovereign wealth assets like embassies and military bases as collateral against future legal cases.

An official from the unnamed country told TBIJ the negotiations with Pfizer felt like “high-level bullying” and that it felt like the health of their citizens were being “held to ransom.”

Coming Price Hike Amid Anti-TRIPS Push

In a February call with Wall Street investors, D’Amelio indicated that the company’s [pricing will change](#) significantly once governments stop being their primary customer and the company can excusably increase prices to match their other vaccines. While Pfizer is presently getting \$19.50 per dose in the US, he noted that “that’s not a normal price, like we typically get for a vaccine - \$150, \$175 per dose ... Let’s go beyond a pandemic pricing environment, the environment we’re currently in: Obviously, we’re going to get more on price.”

That amounts to a nearly 900% increase over present prices. It’s no coincidence either, then, that Pfizer has [very strongly opposed](#) the movement by more than 80 Global South nations, led by India and South Africa, to convince the World Trade Organization to [waive intellectual property](#) laws with regard to COVID-19 vaccines. The Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPS) agreement put in place in 1995 globalized IP laws, making the manufacture of cheap generic versions of drugs all but impossible.

TRIPS came just as the first anti-HIV/AIDS drugs entered the market and as the virus spread across Africa, leaving the world’s poorest nations totally unable to afford life-saving drugs that were priced so high that even First World customers found them prohibitively expensive. AIDS deaths didn’t peak for another decade, reaching in 2004 [more than twice](#) the number of deaths as in 1995, with an estimated 1.7 million people dying of AIDS complications that year.

On Wednesday afternoon, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai announced that the Biden administration was coming out in support of patent waivers for COVID-19 vaccines, saying they were presently in negotiation with the WTO over the matter.

“This is a global health crisis, and the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic call for extraordinary measures,” Tai said [in a press release](#).

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South Carolina Lawmakers Vote to Allow Firing Squads as Execution Method
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US President Joe Biden has pledged to seek an end to all death sentences for federal death row inmates, though he has yet to spell out how. Forty percent of federal death row inmates are Black, compared to just 13% of the general US population.

The South Carolina House of Representatives voted Wednesday afternoon to allow execution by firing squad as a legitimate means of capital punishment.

The bill passed the House by a vote of 66 to 43, and having already been approved by the South Carolina Senate, it will now go to Governor Henry McMaster's desk. A protege of the arch-segregationist Senator Strom Thurmond (R-SC) and a former prosecutor and state attorney general, McMaster is expected to sign the bill.

McMaster's signature will make South Carolina the fourth US state to reintroduce execution by firing squad, alongside Utah, Mississippi, and Oklahoma. South Carolina also executes prisoners by electric chair and by lethal injection, although a shortage of lethal injection drugs in November [caused a delay](#) in the scheduled execution of a prisoner.

According to the [Associated Press](#), the bill is intended to "jump-start executions" in South Carolina, which hasn't executed a prisoner since 2011 and has 37 people on death row. It was once the most prolific US state in terms of killing its prisoners.

During the House debate, Democratic State Rep. Justin Bamberg invoked the legislature's previous passing in February of a [so-called "heartbeat bill"](#) banning nearly all abortions in the state, calling it "extremely ironic" that they would now vote on a new method of stopping a heartbeat.

"Three living, breathing human beings with a heartbeat that this bill is aimed at killing," Bamberg said, thumping the microphone in front of him to imitate the sound of a beating heart. "If you push the green button at the end of the day and vote to pass this bill out of this body, you may as well be throwing the switch yourself."

The treatment of South Carolina's prisoners by the prison system has also [been widely protested](#), including demanding adherence to the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, better known as the "Nelson Mandela rules." Inmates themselves mounted a [strike in 2018](#) demanding better living conditions, as well as better rehabilitation facilities and the removal of barriers to returning to a normal life once they leave prison.

After the massive nationwide protests against police brutality and anti-Black racism in the United States last summer, the US Department of Justice [revived federal executions](#) after a 17-year hiatus and executed a [record 17 people](#) before the year was out, which was more than all 50 states combined in 2020. It also [reintroduced the practices](#) of execution by firing squad and execution by inhalation of poison gas.

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White House: Biden Believes More 'Needs to Be Done' by Social Media Giants to Stop Harmful Content

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, reports surfaced detailing that the ban imposed against former US President Donald Trump by social media giant Facebook would remain in place. The announcement was made by Facebook's oversight board.

Social media platforms must implement measures that will ensure untrustworthy information is not amplified as tech companies are responsible for stopping the promotion of harmful content on their sites, the White House declared on Wednesday.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters during the daily briefing that US President Joe Biden believes that "major platforms have a responsibility related to the health and safety of all Americans to stop amplifying untrustworthy content, disinformation and misinformation, especially related to COVID-19, vaccinations and elections."

She also indicated the president's view is that tech giants must do more to curb the spread of harmful social media posts, as well as improve the methods in which they address such content. "I think we are, of course, a believer in First Amendment rights, I think what the decisions are that the social media platforms need to make is how they address disinformation, misinformation, especially related to life threatening issues, like COVID-19 and vaccinations," Psaki underscored.

The press secretary's remarks [came moments](#) after she deflected a question about the Facebook oversight board's decision to uphold the suspension of Trump's account. "This is an independent board's decision, and we're not going to have any comment on the future of the former president's social media platform," she said when asked about the development.

Trump had been banned from Facebook since January, following the storming of the US Capitol by thousands of his supporters who sought to stop the confirmation of the 2020 US election results.

While the oversight board [concluded](#) that the platform was right to ban Trump, investigators ruled that Facebook had inappropriately imposed the suspension without offering clear standards. It was also noted that Facebook needed to outline a consistent set of rules that are also applied to other users.

Trump [blasted](#) the Facebook decision earlier, opting to also condemn social media platforms who followed suit by banning him from their site. He referred to the platforms as a "total disgrace," noting that the so-called offending companies would inevitably "pay a political price." The latest developments came as Trump [announced](#) on Tuesday that he was launching a new communication site, dubbed "From the Desk of Donald J. Trump." The former president described the newly-launched platform as one that is "a place to speak freely and safely."

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Two Americans Sentenced to Life in Italian Prison Over 2019 Killing of Officer
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Americans Finnegan Lee Elder and Gabriel Natale-Hjorth made headline news in the summer of 2019 after the pair were charged with the killing of Mario Cerciello Rega, an officer with Italy's Carabinieri paramilitary force, following a botched drug deal.

An Italian jury convicted two Americans in the 2019 slaying of an Italian police officer on Wednesday, sentencing the duo to life behind bars.

After more than 12 hours' worth of deliberations, the jury bestowed Elder and Natale-Hjorth with the harshest possible sentence under Italian law. They were immediately taken out of the courtroom following the announcement.

Elder and Natale-Hjorth were both found guilty of homicide, assault, resisting a public official and extortion for stealing a backpack from a drug dealer. Elder was separately charged with carrying an attack-style knife that is prohibited in Italy.

Prosecutors argued during the trial proceedings that Elder had stabbed Rega approximately 11 times with a knife he obtained in California, and that Natale-Hjorth had helped Elder hide the murder weapon in their hotel room after the July 2019 killing.

Renato Borzone, one of Elder's defense lawyers, remarked during the 14-month-long trial that Elder had been diagnosed with mental health issues that caused him to undergo extreme paranoia. As such, Borzone argued that Elder had "short-circuited" when he was confronted by Rega.

At the time, Elder and Natale-Hjorth had met up in Rome's Trastevere nightlife district, with Natale-Hjorth later reaching out to a contact who they bought roughly \$100 worth of cocaine. However, as it later turned out to be crushed aspirin, the pair stole the dealer's backpack in frustration.

As the night went on, the pair agreed to return the backpack in exchange for either the return of their money or illicit substances. Later, rather than meeting with Elder and Natale-Hjorth, the dealer called the police. Responding to the call, Rega and his partner Andrea Varriale, who were not in uniform, met with the two Americans.

It's unclear why the two plainclothes officers did not arrest the duo on the spot. Elder and Natale-Hjorth both told the courtroom that they had believed the officers were simply thugs as they had not identified themselves as officers. Both Americans argued they acted in self-defense after the officers reportedly attacked them first.

Varriale, who suffered injuries to his back during the 2019 altercation, noted during proceedings that he and Rega identified themselves as law enforcement in Italian.

Following the fatal incident, Varriale was placed on probation after it was determined that he lied about having his service weapon and for not having relayed to dispatch their location or called for backup.

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US COVID-19 Cases, Deaths May Undergo 'Sharp Decline' in July, CDC Projects
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Latest figures released by Johns Hopkins University reveal the daily US COVID-19 case count is on the decline, as the nationwide positivity ratio - currently at 3.82% - is also experiencing a

downfall. However, reports indicate that states Florida, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Texas and California are still recording spikes in their daily case counts.

The worst of the COVID-19 pandemic's toll on the US may soon be over come the end of July, new models released Wednesday by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have revealed.

Data [released](#) by the US health agency indicates that as long as vaccinations rates keep pace and Americans continue to adhere to social distancing and masking guidelines, COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations and deaths would see a "sharp decline" by mid-July.

"High vaccination rates and compliance with public health prevention measures are essential to control the COVID-19 pandemic and to prevent surges in hospitalizations and deaths in the coming months," the report warns, adding that a "faster decline" could develop "if more people get vaccinated sooner."

The CDC models included four scenarios that projected COVID-19 cases would spike in May across the US due to the increased prevalence of the [B.1.1.7 strain](#) of the COVID-19 virus, which has become dominant in the nation after initially emerging in the UK.

The anticipated May increase was also rooted in a projected drop in both health mandates and compliance, which has already begun to unfold in Florida, where Gov. Ron DeSantis recently signed an [executive order](#) invalidating all local COVID-19 regulations.

CDC officials estimate that a peak of between 7,000 and 11,100 weekly deaths will be reported nationwide in May before sharply declining in June and July. Models suggest that by the end of July, the nationwide weekly death toll could be as low as a few hundred, whereas hospitalizations drop to fewer than 1,000 under the most optimistic scenarios.

However, in the event that vaccination rates plummet and the public falls back on maintaining preventative COVID-19 measures, projections show that weekly case counts would skyrocket in mid-May within the ballpark of hundreds of thousands, as the weekly death toll soars past 10,000.

To date, more than 107 million Americans have been fully vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, while another nearly 149 million have received at least one dose of the vaccine.

US President Joe Biden announced a goal on Tuesday to have 70% of US adults receive at least one dose of an approved COVID-19 vaccine, an initiative that would ultimately place the Land of the Free within the CDC's best-case scenario.

Biden's announcement also indicated that officials were on the verge of approving the COVID-19 vaccine for adolescents between the ages of 12 and 15, should the US Food and Drug Administration grant Pfizer's request to amend its emergency use authorization. Reports suggest the update could come as early as next week.

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Video: SpaceX's Starship Prototype Successfully Lands After Past Tests Ended in Flames
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

SpaceX's ongoing Starship initiative is meant to one day be used as a means to transport astronauts for future manned missions to the Earth's moon and - possibly - to Mars. Elon Musk, the company's founder, previously indicated that the Starship prototype will reach orbit sometime in 2022.

The latest prototype of SpaceX's Starship project managed to successfully touch back down in one piece on its designated landing pad on Wednesday, handing the Musk-headed company a much-wanted win after past test flights ended in massive explosions.

The Wednesday test proved to be the fifth high-altitude flight attempt for the initiative in April, and saw the stainless steel SN15 prototype reach roughly 33,000 feet in altitude before touching back down six minutes after its scheduled launch.

Although SN15 marked the very first Starship prototype that SpaceX was able to successfully launch and land without seeing the vessel explode, either during or after landing, the test did see a small fire briefly break out at the base of the rocket moments after touching down.

John Insprucker, a SpaceX engineer, [later explained](#) to the New York Times that the fire was the result of fuel used by the rocket.

Musk announced the success of the test via Twitter, sending out a [post](#) that read "Starship landing nominal!"

While SpaceX's past four flight tests did manage to demonstrate a controlled belly-flop back to the launch pad in Boca Chica, Texas, they all managed to undergo technical problems that resulted in severe explosions.

In fact, SpaceX's attempt in late March saw the SN10 prototype go [airborne twice](#) after an explosion broke out, whereas the [SN11 vehicle](#) didn't even manage to make it back to the ground. The SN11 prototype also prompted outrage from conservationists after pieces of the rocket littered an ecological reserve near the Boca Chica facility.

SpaceX officials noted in a description of the Wednesday flight that SN15's inner workings were somewhat adjusted based on information obtained from the previous flight attempts, noting that the vehicle had been fitted with "new enhanced avionics suite, updated propellant architecture in the aft skirt, and a new Raptor engine design and configuration."

SpaceX's success came on the heels of the US Federal Aviation Administration granting the company clearance to conduct its next three Starship tests flights, the first of which took place with the SN15 prototype.

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GOP Heavyweights Slam Big Tech Over Trump Facebook Ban, Fueling 2024 Campaign Rumors

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Facebook's independent Oversight Board on Wednesday upheld the social media platform's decision to restrict then-US President Donald Trump's posting privileges on January 7 - one day after the Capitol riot. Facebook has six months to review the suspension and put forward a response consistent with rules applied to other users of the platform.

In the wake of the Oversight [Board's decision](#), several GOP lawmakers and heavyweights have come out in support of the US president, and against Facebook and other big tech companies. Mark Meadows, Trump's former White House Chief of Staff, told Fox News that it is a "sad for America," as well as a "sad day for Facebook." "I can tell you, a number of members of Congress are looking at, do they break up Facebook? Do they make sure that they don't have a monopoly?" he said, responding to the decision during a live news broadcast.

Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO), also accused Facebook of acting as a monopoly, [tweeting](#) that a "fake Facebook court decides Facebook can do whatever Facebook wants, in this case, suspending Donald Trump w/o [sic] process or standards."

Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) panned the Oversight Board's decision as "disgraceful."

"For every liberal celebrating Trump's social media ban, if the Big Tech oligarchs can muzzle the former President, what's to stop them from silencing you?" [he asked](#) via Twitter.

At the same time, Democratic lawmakers, such as Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) have argued that Facebook did not go far enough.

"Facebook is a disinformation-for-profit machine that won't accept responsibility for its role in the safety of our democracy and people," [she tweeted](#). "Trump should be banned for good, but Facebook will continue to fumble with its power until Congress and antitrust regulators rein in Big Tech."

Trump made loose reference to the board's decision in a Wednesday post for his [new blog](#).

"Free Speech has been taken away from the President of the United States because the Radical Left Lunatics are afraid of the truth, but the truth will come out anyway, bigger and stronger than ever before," [he wrote](#). "These corrupt social media companies must pay a political price, and must never again be allowed to destroy and decimate our Electoral Process." Being that many US politicians use Facebook and other social media platforms as key campaign tools, the ongoing debate over Trump's suspension from Facebook, as well as his permanent suspension from Twitter, has fueled speculation about the former US president's 2024 campaign run.

According to Facebook [advertising data](#), Trump and US President Joe Biden respectively spent \$107 million and \$94.2 million on Facebook ads for the 2020 US presidential election.

Earlier this week, Trump teased to talk show host Candace Owens that he is looking forward to making an announcement about a 2024 run "at the right time."

"As you know, it's very early. But I think people are going to be very, very happy when I make a certain announcement," he added, emphasizing that he cannot "do it too early" because of "campaign finance reasons."

While a concrete date has yet to be set for Trump's political re-emergence, several sources within the former US president's circle have claimed that the 74-year-old may begin holding campaign rallies as early as this month.

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Not Lovin' It: McDonald's Says US Woman's Claims of Feces-Wrapped Burger Are 'Unsubstantiated'

by [Evan Craighead](#)

A lawsuit filed by a woman from Millville, New Jersey, claimed that she and her daughter "continue to suffer severe emotional distress, shock and mental anguish" after discovering "a brown substance all over the wrapper of the burger" from McDonald's. The substance was alleged to be human feces.

John Durante of JDKD Enterprises of Sewell, the owner and operator of the McDonald's franchise in question, has since issued a statement regarding the lawsuit filed last week in New Jersey's Cumberland County Superior Court.

"We have taken the appropriate steps to investigate this matter and have been unable to substantiate the claim," Durante said in a McDonald's USA [statement](#) issued to the Vineland Daily Journal.

The alleged incident occurred after Millville resident Amanda Bordois purchased food for herself and her daughter on January 13, according to the complaint observed by the outlet.

Bordois and her daughter had allegedly begun eating french fries out of the McDonald's to-go bag when her child pulled out a burger and "noticed a brown substance all over the wrapper of the burger and on [her] right hand."

The complaint states that the two allegedly threw out the rest of their food because they were "nauseous, disgusted and sick that she and her child just consumed french fries touching the burger wrapper covered in feces and in the same bag as the fries they had eaten."

The plaintiff alleged the wrapper had a "horrible stench" and Millville Police Department Officer Kevin Gandy detailed in his police report that he "observed what appeared to be feces on the wrapper of a burger in the bag."

An on-site inspection conducted by the Cumberland County Health Department on January 15 detailed that one employee, in particular, was observed putting on gloves without first washing their hands.

After correcting the issue on-site, the McDonald's was able to maintain its satisfactory rating. The plaintiff claimed that she kept the "evidence." However, no health official has come to collect the substance-smear wrapper.

Bordois' complaint alleges that she and her daughter suffered anguish, nausea, stomach pain and loss of appetite. She is seeking an unspecified amount in compensatory and punitive damages.

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Graphic Video: Peloton Issues Voluntary Recall for Treadmills Linked to Child Injury, Death
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The US Consumer Product Safety Commission (SPSC) issued a memo in April urging individuals with kids and pets to stop using the Peloton's Tread+ treadmill. The safety commission's warning cited dozens of incidents in which children were injured - or in one case, killed - by the machine.

Peloton announced on Wednesday that voluntary recalls have been issued for Peloton's Tread+ and Tread treadmills that have been previously linked to dozens of known safety incidents. According to Acting CPSC Chairman Robert S. Adler, the agreement between the commission and Peloton calls for the company to immediately halt sales and offer a full refund.

"The agreement between CPSC and Peloton is the result of weeks of intense negotiation and effort, culminating in a cooperative agreement that I believe serves the best interests of Peloton and of consumers," Adler said in a quoted statement.

The commission first addressed their concerns regarding the Tread+ treadmill in an April [news release](#) that cited dozens of alleged incidents that resulted in injuries, and at least one that ended in death.

At least 23 of the 39 incidents listed involved children, and one incident reportedly included a pet.

The CPSC also released a graphic video showing a child getting pulled under a Peloton treadmill while playing with a ball. The toddler is eventually able to pull themselves from under the machine.

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

Peloton CEO John Foley expressed in a quoted statement that his company "made a mistake" in how it initially responded to the CPSC's request for recall. [Peloton previously](#) characterized the CPSC's April news release as "inaccurate and misleading."

"We should have engaged more productively with them from the outset. For that, I apologize," he said. "Today's announcement reflects our recognition that, by working closely with the CPSC, we can increase safety awareness for our Members."

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Photos: HBO Offers Peek at New GOT Prequel Series 'House of the Dragon'
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

It's fair to say that at the ending of the "Game of Thrones" series, viewers were left wanting more from the storyline, as show creators appeared to cram in details and rush character development, among other issues. While the audience won't get a redo for that show, they may get better results with an upcoming prequel series.

American cable company HBO released a series of photos on Wednesday, offering fans of the highly-watched "Game of Thrones" action-filled drama a sneak peek at the show's upcoming prequel series, "House of the Dragon."

The photos capture actors Emma D'Arcy, Olivia Cooke, Matt Smith, Steve Toussaint and Rhys Ifans in full costume, presumably at filming locations as the series is reportedly early on in its production.

A release issued by HBO notes that D'Arcy will portray Princess Rhaenyra Targaryen and Smith will take on the role of Prince Daemon Targaryen, the younger brother of King Viserys.

Welsh actor Ifans will play Otto Hightower, a loyal and faithful aide to the king who just so happens to see Daemon as the “greatest threat to the realm.” Olivia Cooke will carry out the role of Otto’s daughter, Alicent.

And then there’s British actor Steve Toussaint, who will serve viewers with the force of Lord Corlys Velaryon, also known as “The Sea Snake.” Incidentally, this character is said to be richer than the Lannister family, which played a central role in the original series.

The show, which will take place some 300 years before the “Game of Thrones” timeline, has been given a 10-episode order, and is scheduled to debut in 2022. It will be based off of writer George R.R. Martin’s book “Fire & Blood.”

Martin will serve as the show’s co-creator, alongside screenwriter Ryan Condal.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Dip Below 500,000, Lowest in 14 Months - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Some 498,000 Americans filed for jobless claims last week, the lowest since March 2020 and the first below the 500,000 mark since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic last year, the US Labor Department said Thursday.

“In the week ending May 1, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 498,000, a decrease of 92,000 from the previous week’s revised level,” the department said in a statement. “This is the lowest level for initial claims since March 14, 2020 when it was 256,000.” Economists polled by US media had anticipated 538,000 filings for unemployment benefits last week.

It was the fourth week in a row that filings had fallen, signaling a rapid recovery from the COVID-19 marked by other bullish macroeconomic data and falling infection rates versus vaccinations for the virus.

The Labor Department will publish on Friday jobs numbers for all of April, with economists projecting a growth of 978,000 for last month, to build onto the March gains of 916,000.

In its latest weekly report, the department said continuing claims for the week ended May 1 — reported with a one-week lag — rose, however, to 3.69 million, from 3.65 million during the week to April 24.

That kept the weekly reading for unemployment unchanged at 2.6 percent.

More than a year into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring job growth remains one of the biggest challenges of US policymakers.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. More than 8 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, although first quarter data for 2021, released last week by the Commerce Department, showed a dynamic rebound of 6.4 percent.

The Federal Reserve has forecast an economic growth of 6.5 percent for all of 2021 although Jerome Powell, chairman of the central bank, said he did not expect “full employment” —

defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower — to return before 2023. The unemployment rate stood at 6 percent at the end of March.

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Blinken Urges Members of Ukraine's Parliament to Combat Corruption - State Dept

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has urged members of Ukraine's parliament to adopt legislation to fight corruption and promote the rule of law, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout after the top diplomat's meeting with members of the Verkhovna Rada in Kiev on Thursday.

"Secretary Blinken underscored our commitment to democratic principles and institutions as well as the United States' unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence," Price said. "Secretary Blinken and Rada members discussed the importance of passing key legislation to advance rule of law, anti-corruption, and economic reforms that will strengthen Ukraine's democracy and economy, and further Euro-Atlantic integration."

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RPT - Russian Church Abroad to Mark Centennial by Publishing Spiritual Guidance of Archpastors

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The Russian Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) is preparing to publish an anthology of spiritual guidance from its reposed archpastors to commemorate the 100th anniversary of its founding, the book's compilers, protopriest Seraphim Gan and historian Nicholas Ganson, told Sputnik.

"The purpose of the book is to mark the 100th anniversary of the Russian Church Abroad, provide a lasting memorial of the jubilee, and help preserve the rich spiritual legacy of the church," Ganson said.

The book, entitled "Grains of Wisdom and Piety," will be released in late May in both Russian and English, he added.

The publication will consist of 100 excerpts from the sermons, interviews, and writings of the archpastors, together with historical portraits and photographs.

"Contemporary Orthodox and Christian readers in general, not just members of the Church Abroad, are likely to find the bishops' thoughts and instructions edifying," Ganson noted. "This spiritual treasury is also intended for the younger generation in the church, which did not have the opportunity to see these bishops face to face and hear them preach."

Both compilers said they personally knew many of these archpastors, namely those who lived and served from the 1970s and beyond.

"There is a bit of a living connection, and we want to make sure the connection is not sundered, that it continues to the next generation and that the spiritual treasures are received by the younger people," they said.

"I would say that the book offers practical spiritual advice on how to maintain a Christian way of life," father Seraphim noted.

This guidance reflects the rich spiritual experience of the ROCOR and its shepherds, who lived through many trials during the turbulent 20th century, he added.

The Russian Church Abroad was founded in 1920-1921, after the last part of the White emigres left Russia following the Russian Civil War. Since 2007, ROCOR has been united with the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and currently has over 400 parishes and over 20 monasteries in more than 30 countries, mostly in the United States.

"Grains of Wisdom" will be the first in a series of ROCOR centennial publications and will be distributed by St. Innocent Press.

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Two-Thirds of Americans Support Removing US Troops From Afghanistan by September - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Two-thirds of Americans support the Biden administration's decision to pull US troops from Afghanistan by September, a new Charles Koch Institute poll revealed on Wednesday.

When civilian respondents were asked whether they support or oppose the US government's decision to bring all the troops back from Afghanistan by September, 66 percent answered that they either strongly or somewhat support the idea.

Thirty-eight percent of military members and veterans say they strongly support the troop withdrawal and 30 percent percent say that they somewhat support it.

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan began last week, following the original May 1 deadline agreed upon by the United States and the Taliban. A full withdrawal from the country would mark an end to the longest war in US history.

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UPDATE 2 - Biden Admin. Supports Waiving Intellectual Property Rights for COVID-19 Vaccines

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration supports the waiving of intellectual property protection for coronavirus vaccines due to the global emergency triggered by the pandemic, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said.

"This is a global health crisis, and the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic call for extraordinary measures. The administration believes strongly in intellectual property protections, but in service of ending this pandemic, supports the waiver of those protections for COVID-19 vaccines," Tai said in a statement on Wednesday.

Tai said the Biden administration's priority had been to first immunize Americans and then extend to other countries in need.

"The administration's aim is to get as many safe and effective vaccines to as many people as fast as possible," Tai said. "As our vaccine supply for the American people is secured, the Administration will continue to ramp up its efforts - working with the private sector and all possible partners - to expand vaccine manufacturing and distribution. It will also work to increase the raw materials needed to produce those vaccines."

To expedite the global availability of vaccines, the United States will actively participate in text-based negotiations at the World Trade Organization, Tai said.

"Those negotiations will take time given the consensus-based nature of the institution and the complexity of the issues involved," she added.

The United States has administered 248 million coronavirus vaccines to date, with 106 million Americans or 32.3 percent of the population being fully immunized from the virus.

Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), the largest industry lobbying group, slammed the move.

"In the midst of a deadly pandemic, the Biden Administration has taken an unprecedented step that will undermine our global response to the pandemic and compromise safety. This decision will sow confusion between public and private partners, further weaken already strained supply chains and foster the proliferation of counterfeit vaccines," PhRMA CEO Stephen Uhl said in a statement.

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RPT - US Shale Unlikely to Make America Top Oil Producer Again Soon - Industry Executives

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The prolific US shale oil industry that turned the United States into the world's largest crude producer before the coronavirus pandemic is unlikely to regain its supremacy anytime soon as constant price downturns make companies in the business averse to raising output, industry executives said.

"For shale, I don't think we'll ever again turn out at an additional million barrels a day for a year," Scott Sheffield, President of Pioneer Natural Resources Company, one of the leading drillers in shale oil, told a live-streamed discussion on the industry hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies on Wednesday.

US oil production reached a world high of 13.1 million barrels per day in early March 2020, just before the global outbreak of COVID-19. The demand destruction that followed has kept the output at just below 11 million barrels daily now.

While the benchmarked price of US crude was back above the \$65 per barrel level it traded at before the pandemic, industry executives said it was hard to erase the memories of the minus \$40 low hit in April 2020 - a first-ever negative pricing in the modern history of oil trading that began in the early 1980s.

The dark memories of that price decimation remain with the industry despite data showing US crude exports having reached record highs above 4 million barrels per day last week.

"I had three downturns in my first 30 years in the industry and I've had three in the last 11 years alone," Sheffield said. "We need price stability, less volatility to bring investment back into our industry."

More than 200 North American oil and gas producers, owing over \$130 billion in debt, filed for bankruptcy since the beginning of 2015, with at least half of them going under from the price plunge triggered by last year's coronavirus outbreak.

Sheffield said crude drillers might be willing to add meaningfully to production if US prices got to above \$70 per barrel on the average.

"I do expect next year that we get past \$70 and move into the \$80 range. Even so, I've made a commitment for Pioneer that we will not grow more than 5 percent a year so we will not increase our capex," he said, referring to capital expenditures. "Right now a couple companies have come out and said they're going to grow 10 percent and 22 percent and they were punished by their shareholders for that."

The state of the US oil industry is well reflected by the Permian basin, the country's largest oilfield, which appears unable, at least for now, to catch up with the demand seen for US crude exports.

Nearly half of all oil pipelines from the Permian basin are expected to be empty by the end of the year, US media reported last month.

The national US oil rig count, a measure of future production, stood at 343 last week versus a mid-August low of 172.

Rebecca Fitz, senior director and founding member of the Boston Consulting Group's Center for Energy Impact, concurred with Sheffield, saying she had doubts about US production growing significantly above 11 million barrels per day in the near future.

"The conversation has shifted from a focus on whether we have seen peak demand for oil to whether we have seen peak investments in oil and gas," Fitz said.

Gretchen Watkins, executive vice president of global shales at Shell Oil Company said that US oil drillers have been boosting dividends to shareholders and keeping capital expenditure down over the last six months "and they still have flat stock prices."

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Russian Church Abroad to Mark Centennial by Publishing Spiritual Guidance of Archpastors

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commemorate the 100th anniversary of its founding, the book's compilers, protopriest Seraphim Gan and historian Nicholas Ganson, told Sputnik.

"The purpose of the book is to mark the 100th anniversary of the Russian Church Abroad, provide a lasting memorial of the jubilee, and help preserve the rich spiritual legacy of the church," Ganson said.

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Blinken Arrives in Kiev for First Visit to Ukraine by Biden Administration Official

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev on Thursday, marking the first time that an official from the Biden administration has visited the country.

"Wheels down in Kyiv as we look to strengthen the #USUkrainePartnership," Blinken said in a tweet after landing.

The top US diplomat also said the visit will be an important opportunity to discuss with America's Ukrainian partners Russia's alleged aggression and to underscore the need for maintaining both the pace of and focus on reforms in Kiev.

Blinken on Thursday is set to meet President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, and local lawmakers and representatives of Ukrainian civil society, according to the State Department.

Blinken arrived in Ukraine directly from the UK where he attended the G7 Foreign and Development Ministers' Meeting while also engaging in bilateral talks with foreign colleagues. The visit comes as Russia continues to withdraw troops from around the Ukrainian border following a buildup associated with a snap readiness check that unsettled Kiev and Western onlookers alike.

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Biden Admin. Targets Homeless Shelters, Federal Health Clinics for COVID-19 Vaccinations

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The US government seeks to boost availability of coronavirus vaccines to the nation's homeless population, community health clinics and subsidized housing in a joint effort announced by Biden administration Housing and Health secretaries.

"Many of the people that HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development] serves are among the most vulnerable in our society. They're seniors, they're people with disabilities, they're people of color from households of modest means, and they're people who are experiencing homelessness. This partnership between HHS [Health Department] and HUD is about saving lives by expanding access to comprehensive COVID care for those in need. It's about meeting people where they are - and about bringing health care home," Housing Secretary Marcia Fudge said in a press release on Wednesday.

The effort will expand the COVID-19 Vaccine Program at nearly 800 federally supported community health centers, with the goal of reaching over 6,000 multifamily housing properties, 6,700 homeless shelters, and approximately 7,500 public housing projects throughout the United States, the release said.

Fudge and Health Secretary Xavier Becerra unveiled the program during a visit to the Washington, DC Community of Hope charity as part of a Biden administration push to expand access to coronavirus vaccines and tests in vulnerable communities, according to the release.

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US Vice President Says She Will Visit Guatemala, Mexico June 7-8

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) – US Vice President Kamala Harris said on that she she is scheduled to travel to Guatemala and Mexico at the beginning of June.

"Currently, the plan is for me to travel to Mexico and Guatemala June 7 and 8," Harris told reporters during roundtable discussion in Providence, Rhode Island on Wednesday.

President Joe Biden recently tasked Harris with handling the surge of migrants to the United States passing through the US border with Mexico.

Since Biden assumed office in January, migrants predominantly from the North Triangle countries - Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras - have flocked to the United States hopeful for relaxed entry and immigration procedures in stark contrast to the practices by the Trump administration.

US Customs and Border Protection data revealed that US border apprehensions soared by more than 70 percent in March. The 172,331 migrant encounters recorded represents the highest monthly total in more than two decades, with the Biden administration on pace to top the previous annual record set in 2019 of over 977,000 apprehensions.

Biden and other administration officials have emphasized that the surge is just a seasonal fluctuation.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) -

G7 MINISTERIAL MEETING

* The G7 Foreign and Development Ministers on Wednesday urged China to work together with the group on the solutions to global challenges, including those related to security, climate and the pandemic.

* The ministers said they considered the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to be crucial for the resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis, and welcomed contacts between the signatories of the nuclear deal.

* The ministers called on Belarus to release all of its political prisoners and hold new elections and urged Russia to "de-escalate" the situation on the border with Ukraine and be transparent about its military activities.

* The ministers also called on North Korea to avoid escalation of tension on the Korean Peninsula and solve the nuclear issues through dialogue and diplomacy.

CHINA ROCKET LAUNCH

* White House spokesperson Jen Psaki on Wednesday said US Space Command is tracking China's Long March 5B (Chang Zheng 5B, or CZ-5B) rocket.

* The core stage of China's Long March 5B (Chang Zheng 5B, or CZ-5B) rocket that launched with the first module for the country's orbital station last month is expected to crash down in the Pacific Ocean on May 8-9, according to predictions from the US Air Force.

PUTIN-ERDOGAN TALKS

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, discussed in a phone call on Wednesday the situation in Syria and the efforts of their respective states to resolve the crisis in the Arab country, the Kremlin said.
- * Putin and Erdogan discussed the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, including the operation of the Russian-Turkish center for monitoring ceasefire in the region, the Kremlin said.
- * Putin has discussed possible production of the coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V at facilities in Turkey with Erdogan, the Kremlin said.

TRUMP-FACEBOOK FREE SPEECH DISPUTE

- * Facebook's Oversight Board on Wednesday said it would uphold a decision to ban the account of former US President Donald Trump from the platform but urged the company to re-evaluate its decision after six months.
- * Trump said "corrupt social media" firms must pay a political price for limiting free speech after Facebook's Oversight Board announced that it would uphold a ban on his account.
- * US President Joe Biden has no comment on Facebook's decision to uphold its ban of Trump, but believes that social media platforms are responsible for stopping damaging content and should do more to protect Americans, the White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters.

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PREVIEW - Blinken Visits Ukraine to Show Support, Press for Reforms

WASHINGTON, May 5 Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visits Ukraine on Thursday where he is expected to press for reforms and reaffirm American support to the country amid its tensions with Russia.

Ukrainian officials have hailed Blinken's trip as his "first full-fledged bilateral visit to the European capital."

In Kiev Blinken will meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, local lawmakers and representatives of the civil society, the State Department said.

According to the State Department, Blinken will reaffirm "unwavering US support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russia's ongoing aggression."

The visit comes as Russia is pulling troops back from Ukrainian borders after a massive buildup for a snap readiness check that scared Kiev and its Western patrons.

Ukrainian Deputy Foreign Minister Yevhenii Yenin said in an interview to a local broadcaster Ukraina24 that Blinken's visit sends "a signal of extremely strong support" and may result in increased political and defense assistance from the US.

Relations between Moscow and Kiev have deteriorated in the wake of the conflict in eastern Ukraine and Crimea's reunification with Russia in 2014. Ukraine has since repeatedly accused Russia of meddling in its affairs. Moscow denies any role in the internal Ukrainian conflict and slams the accusations as unacceptable.

Blinken also plans to encourage "continued progress on Ukraine's institutional reform agenda, particularly anti-corruption action." The State Department described reforms as key to "securing Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic future."

The US has recently lashed out at Ukraine for the management reshuffle in Naftogaz, the country's major energy company. Blinken is expected to call again for "the respect for good, transparent corporate governance, especially in the state-run entities."

"We will talk about enhancing cooperation in trade and investments; we will talk about increasing the potential for mutual cooperation within international organizations; and we will talk about the mechanisms of technical assistance that the Ukrainian economy, including the energy sector, needs so much today," Yenin told *Ukraina24*.

Blinken comes to Ukraine from the UK where he attended the G7 Foreign and Development Ministers' Meeting and had a series of bilateral engagements with foreign colleagues.

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Dow Hits Record Highs as US Industrial, Leisure Stocks Rebound

NEW YORK, May 5 (Sputnik) - The Dow Jones Industrial Average, Wall Street's broadest equity barometer, hit record highs on Wednesday as industrial and leisure stocks battered during the height of the coronavirus outbreak in the United States rebounded amid a huge vaccination drive against the virus and falling infections.

The Dow closed up 0.3 percent, or 97 points, at 34,230, after a record high at 34,331. For the year, the index was up almost 12 percent.

"The Dow Jones (is) catching some cyclical rotation and keeping its head above water" despite a flat-to-weaker performance of the broader US stock market, said Jeffrey Halley, analyst at online stocks trading platform OANDA.

The Dow's record performance came after data on Wednesday showed the US private sector added 742,000 jobs in April, its most in seven months, as the economy continued to recover rapidly from the ravages of the COVID-19.

Data also showed the United States has administered 248 million COVID shots to date, with 106 million Americans or 32.3 percent of the population being fully immunized from the virus. The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, rose less than 3 points, or 0.1 percent, to settle at 4,168.

Tech stocks, measured by the Nasdaq Composite index, fell for a fourth day in a row as investors rotated out of the so-called growth stocks into "value stocks" that included industrial and leisure names.

The Nasdaq, which includes Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft and Google, lost 51 points, or 0.4 percent, to close at 13,582 on Wednesday. It has lost 500 points, or 3.6 percent, over the past four days.

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Ukraine's President Briefed US Senator on Russia's Military Buildup - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US Senator Rob Portman said he had a phone conversation on Wednesday Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy who briefed him on Russia's military presence at the border.

They talked ahead of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to Ukraine.

"Today I had an excellent call with Ukraine President Zelensky. We reaffirmed our commitment to our strategic security partnership and he expressed his appreciation for the bipartisan support in Congress for Ukraine's security interests," Portman said in a statement.

Zelenskyy briefed the senator on the number of Russian troops and their equipment remaining near Ukraine's borders. Portman expressed his support for a NATO Membership Action Plan for Ukraine and "continued robust security assistance" from the United States.

Since 2014, the US has provided Ukraine more than \$4.6 billion in total assistance, including security and non-security assistance, according to the State Department's fact sheet released prior to Blinken's visit.

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Canada to Send Medical Supplies to Coronavirus-Stricken India - Statement

TORONTO, May 5 (Sputnik) – Canada will be sending medical supplies to India in the coming days to help the country deal with an overwhelming wave of novel coronavirus case, Global Affairs Canada said on Wednesday.

"Today, Marc Garneau, Minister of Foreign Affairs... announced that Canada is sending up to 25,000 vials of the antiviral remdesivir (brand name Veklury) and up to 350 ventilators from its National Emergency Strategic Stockpile to help respond to the critical situation across India," Canada's foreign ministry said in a statement.

Canada will also provide 1,450 oxygen concentrators to India – Due to the record increase in the number of new COVID-19 cases, hospitals in the country are experiencing a lack of liquid oxygen – through the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, the statement said.

The aid package will be airlifted to India by the Canadian Armed Forces.

India comes second in terms of the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases following the United States and registers more than 300,000 new ones per day over the past week.

The dire situation in India has spurred an international assistance effort, with countries including Russia and the United States providing support for the response.

Russian provided India with more than 22 tonnes of humanitarian aid, including medicines, lung ventilators and oxygen generation equipment, last week.

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Gorlovka Shelling Survivor Urges Int'l. Community to Help End Violence in Donbas

UNITED NATIONS, May 5 (Sputnik) - Anna Tuv, a survivor of systematic bombardment by the Ukrainian military in the town of Gorlovka in the Donbas region, told the UN Security Council on Wednesday the international community has been reluctant to help investigate and bring to justice perpetrators of war crimes against the civilian population there.

On Wednesday, Russia organized an informal meeting of the UN Security Council dubbed "Odessa Seven Years After: Neo-Nazism and Violent Nationalism as Drivers of Conflict in Ukraine."

On May 26, 2015, the house in the city of Horlovka, where Tuv lived with her husband and three children, was bombed by the artillery of Kiev's armed forces. As a result, Tuv's husband and her 11-year-old daughter died in the shelling.

Tuv herself lost her hand in the shelling and two of her children were injured: her two-year-old son sustained multiple wounds, while her newborn baby suffered a concussion. In 2019, she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

"I would like to address to reasonable European organization and explain that without their help people will continue perishing, children will continue dying," she said.

Tuv said the Ukrainian military is perpetrating "a mass genocide" by ethnically cleansing the Russian population in the Donbas region.

"When I am invited to speak at federal channels, and I ask questions to the Ukrainian authorities on how many more victims should there be for them to stop, they tell me that we are genetic trash... that ethnic Russians must leave, liberate the territory, otherwise we will be eliminated," she said.

Tuv noted she had testified before international organizations about the tragedy that happened to her family; however, she did not receive any reaction.

"Unfortunately, today, there are 8,000 claims like this in the Donetsk Republic alone. Of these, 2,600 were sent to the International Criminal Court and 5,500 to the European Court of Human Rights. No reaction," she said.

Tuv emphasized the most troubling aspect for her is that the Ukrainian authorities do not investigate crimes committed by the military in the Donbas region.

"We are all listed on the 'Mirotvorets' website, where the Ukrainian government introduced me as an accomplice of the occupiers and terrorists. We are all dubbed 'separatists,'" Tuv said.

The conflict in southeastern Ukraine, where the Ukrainian military launched a special operation against the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics in 2014, has resulted in the killing of thousands of people.

The Normandy Four format, which includes Russia, France, Germany, and Ukraine, was established in June 2014 to mediate the conflict after the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, known together as Donbas, proclaimed independence following what they considered to be a

coup in Kiev in February of that year. Despite several ceasefire agreements reached under the Normandy format, the Donbas conflict continues.

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Deportations of Illegal Aliens From US Fell in April to Lowest Level Ever - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Deportations of illegal immigrants from the United States fell by more than 50 percent to their lowest monthly level ever recorded in April, enforcement data collected by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) revealed on Wednesday.

Arrests of illegal aliens in the United States by ICE officials have declined by more than half under the Biden administration's new rules restricting terms of enforcement, according to records, The Washington Post said.

Customs and Border Protection data revealed that US border apprehensions soared by more than 70 percent in March. The 172,331 migrant encounters recorded represents the highest monthly total in more than two decades, with the Biden administration on pace to top the previous annual record set in 2019 of over 977,000 apprehensions.

President Joe Biden and other administration officials have said the surge is just a seasonal fluctuation.

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US Shale Unlike to Make America Top Oil Producer Again Soon - Industry Executives

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The prolific US shale oil industry that turned the United States into the world's largest crude producer before the coronavirus pandemic is unlikely to regain its supremacy anytime soon as constant price downturns make companies in the business averse to raising output, industry executives said on Wednesday.

"For shale, I don't think we'll ever again turn out at an additional million barrels a day for a year," President of Pioneer Natural Resources Company, one of the leading drillers in shale oil, told a live-streamed discussion on the industry hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

US oil production reached a world high of 13.1 million barrels per day in early March 2020, just before the global outbreak of COVID-19. The demand destruction that followed has kept the output at just below 11 million barrels daily now.

While the benchmarked price of US crude was back above the \$65 per barrel level it traded at before the pandemic, industry executives said it was hard to erase the memories of the minus \$40 low hit in April 2020 - a first-ever negative pricing in the modern history of oil trading that began in the early 1980s.

The dark memories of that price decimation remain with the industry despite data showing US crude exports having reached record highs above 4 million barrels per day last week.

"I had three downturns in my first 30 years in the industry and I've had three in the last 11 years alone," Sheffield said. "We need price stability, less volatility to bring investment back into our industry."

More than 200 North American oil and gas producers, owing over \$130 billion in debt, filed for bankruptcy since the beginning of 2015, with at least half of them going under from the price plunge triggered by last year's coronavirus outbreak.

Sheffield said crude drillers might be willing to add meaningfully to production if US prices got to above \$70 per barrel on the average.

"I do expect next year that we get past \$70 and move into the \$80 range. Even so, I've made a commitment for Pioneer that we will not grow more than 5 percent a year so we will not increase our capex," he said, referring to capital expenditures. "Right now a couple companies have come out and said they're going to grow 10 percent and 22 percent and they were punished by their shareholders for that."

The state of the US oil industry is well reflected by the Permian basin, the country's largest oilfield, which appears unable, at least for now, to catch up with the demand seen for US crude exports.

Nearly half of all oil pipelines from the Permian basin are expected to be empty by the end of the year, US media reported last month.

The national US oil rig count, a measure of future production, stood at 343 last week versus a mid-August low of 172.

Rebecca Fitz, senior director and founding member of the Boston Consulting Group's Center for Energy Impact, concurred with Sheffield, saying she had doubts about US production growing significantly above 11 million barrels per day in the near future.

"The conversation has shifted from a focus on whether we have seen peak demand for oil to whether we have seen peak investments in oil and gas," Fitz said.

Gretchen Watkins, executive vice president of global shales at Shell Oil Company said that US oil drillers have been boosting dividends to shareholders and keeping capital expenditure down over the last six months "and they still have flat stock prices."

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US Federal Judge Overturns CDC National Eviction Ban - Ruling

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - A judge at the US Federal District Court for the District of Columbia on Wednesday overturned the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) coronavirus pandemic-related moratorium on residential evictions.

"It is the role of the political branches, and not the courts, to assess the merits of policy measures designed to combat the spread of disease, even during a global pandemic. The question for the Court is a narrow one: Does the Public Health Service Act grant the CDC the

legal authority to impose a nationwide eviction moratorium? It does not," Judge Dabney Friedrich said in a ruling.

The US Justice Department announced that they plan on immediately filing an appeal in the case - Alabama Association of Realtors v. US Department of Health and Human Services. Such a move would take the case in question to a federal circuit court, after which it would need to be appealed to the US Supreme Court.

Congress originally enacted a 120-day eviction ban that applied to rental properties receiving federal assistance. The CDC then issued, and twice extended, a broader eviction moratorium that applied to all rental properties nationwide, citing concerns that evictions could be detrimental to public health control measures. The moratorium was most recently extended until June 30.

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URGENT - US Vice President Harris Says She Will Go to Guatemala, Mexico June 7-8

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) – US Vice President Kamala Harris on Wednesday she would travel to Guatemala and Mexico at the beginning of June.

The trip is set for June 7 and 8, Harris said during a visit to Rhode Island, according to a White House pool report. President Joe Biden recently tasked Harris with handling a surge of migration at the southern US border.

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Yemeni Conjoined Twins Arrive in Saudi Arabia for Possible Separation Surgery

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Yemeni conjoined twins, along with their parents, have been brought to Saudi Arabia by specialized medical air transport to be assessed for possible separation surgery, the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center announced in a release Wednesday.

"Following a directive from the Custodian of the two holy mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz, Yemeni conjoined twins 'Yusuf and Yassin,' accompanied by their parents, arrived at King Salman Air Base in Riyadh today to be evaluated for possible separation surgery," the Center said in a release.

The family traveled from Yemen's city of Mukalla in by medical evacuation air transport, the release said.

"Upon landing, the craniopagus twins, who are conjoined at the head, were immediately transported to the King Abdullah Specialist Children's Hospital at the Ministry of National Guard Health Affairs to begin the medical investigations necessary to determine if they are good candidates for separation," the release said.

All costs for transportation, medical care and accommodation for the twins and their parents will be covered by Saudi Arabia, the release said, adding that the gesture reflects the leading global humanitarian role played by the country in alleviating the suffering of people in need around the world.

"Yusuf and Yassin represent the 116th case of conjoined to be evaluated for separation by the Saudi National Conjoined Twins Team," the release said.

Since the program was launched in 1990, a total of 48 pairs of twins from 21 countries have been successfully separated, the release noted.

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US Sees No COVID-19 Risk for Its Delegation at G7 Meeting Amid Reports of 2 Cases

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The United States does not believe the members of its delegation at the G7 summit are at risk because Indian delegation representatives have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, US State Department deputy spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Wednesday.

"We certainly understand that there are members of the Indian delegation to the G7 that have tested positive for COVID-19," Porter told reporters during a press briefing. "At this time, we don't have reason to believe that any of our delegation is at risk."

Earlier on Wednesday, several media outlets reported that two members of the Indian delegation have tested positive for the novel coronavirus and the as a result the Indian delegation will participate in meetings virtually.

The G7 meeting this week is supposed to be the first in-person meeting of the member states' foreign ministers since April 2019. Last year, the meetings were held by video because of the coronavirus pandemic. The meeting will also be attended by the representatives from Australia, South Korea, South Africa and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

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US Delegation Will Return to Vienna for JCPOA Talks Later This Week - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The United States delegation, led by US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley, will travel to Vienna this week to continue discussions on the return to the compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement, Department of State Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said in a press briefing on Wednesday. "The US delegation will be returning to Vienna this week for the next phase of multi-round negotiations," Porter said.

Iran, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United Kingdom in late April met for a third round of negotiations in Vienna to discuss the steps needed to revive the JCPOA agreement. In 2018, then US President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the nuclear agreement. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said that the parties started to draw up the future agreement at the latest meeting. The next meeting is planned for May 7.

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US Homeland Security Starts Record Hiring Spree to Face Cybersecurity Threats - Secretary

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The US Homeland Security Department is launching the biggest hiring initiative in the agency's history amid a significant rise in cybersecurity threats including ransomware attacks, Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said on Wednesday.

"We intend to execute the most significant hiring initiative that the Department of Homeland Security has undertaken in its history," Mayorkas said at a virtual discussion hosted by the US Chamber of Commerce.

The recruitment effort, he added, is taking place amid a marked rise in cybersecurity attacks, particularly in the ransomware sphere. Mayorkas said ransomware attacks increased by 300% over the last year, with small businesses being the victim of between half and two-thirds of them.

The homeland security chief said the department will be recruiting talent that is already developed in addition to developing talent that is just about to bloom. The department will invest in the seeds to grow the talent of the future at all levels, he added.

Mayorkas also said the agency plays a vital role in the cybersecurity of the nation, hence needs to ensure expertise is lasting and growing in the years ahead.

The threat of ransomware and other cybersecurity attacks is not only an issue for small businesses, but for the government as well. In April, the Washington DC Police Department was the victim of a ransomware attack in which the hackers threatened to leak sensitive documents. In April, US Homeland Security said it was establishing a task force to counter ransomware while the Justice Department launched an extensive review to examine the issue along with the SolarWinds and Microsoft Exchange attacks.

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Biden Admin Supports Waiving Intellectual Property Rights For COVID Vaccines - Trade Rep

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration supports waiving intellectual property protections for COVID-19 vaccines due to the global emergency triggered by the pandemic, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said Wednesday.

"This is a global health crisis, and the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic call for extraordinary measures. The Administration believes strongly in intellectual property protections, but in service of ending this pandemic, supports the waiver of those protections for COVID-19 vaccines," Tai said in a statement.

She added that the United States would actively participate in text-based negotiations at the World Trade Organization to make the waiver happen. "Those negotiations will take time given the consensus-based nature of the institution and the complexity of the issues involved."

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COVID-19 Deaths, Hospitalizations Soar Among Youth in Americas - WHO Regional Director

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Hospitalizations and deaths of younger people are surging as the COVID-19 pandemic accelerates across Latin America and the Caribbean, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Director Carissa Etienne said on Wednesday.

"Adults of all ages - including young people - are becoming seriously ill. Many of them are dying," Etienne said at her daily press briefing as quoted in a PAHO release.

In Brazil, mortality rates doubled among those younger than 39, quadrupled among those in their 40s, and tripled for those in their 50s, between December 2020 and March 2021, she said. "For much of the pandemic, our hospitals were filled with elderly COVID patients, many of whom had pre-existing conditions that made them more susceptible to severe disease," Etienne said. "But look around intensive care units across our region today. You'll see they're filled not only with elderly patients, but also with younger people."

Etienne urged hospitals in the region to increase the size of intensive care units (ICU) in anticipation that the trend will continue, while warning that expansion of ICUs cannot continue indefinitely.

As a result, she urged nations to double down on prevention measures such as lockdowns and facemasks.

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Atlanta Officer Who Fatally Shot Black Man Rayshard Brooks Gets Job Back - Police

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The Atlanta officer who fatally shot Black man Rayshard Brooks last June got his job back but will remain on administrative leave, the city's police department said on Wednesday.

"The Civil Service Board (CSB) has reversed the termination of officer Garrett Rolfe only on the basis that they were not done in accordance with the Atlanta City Code," the Atlanta Police Department (APD) said in a statement.

The 27-year-old Brooks was shot and killed outside a Wendy's fast-food restaurant on June 12, 2020 following a scuffle with police officers who were attempting to arrest him after he fell asleep in his car. During the scuffle, Brooks took Rolfe's stun-gun and attempted to fire it at him after which he ran and was shot.

Rolfe faces 11 charges, including felony murder, in connection with Brooks' death.

The police department will conduct an assessment to determine if additional investigative actions are needed, the statement noted.

In the meantime, Rolfe will remain on administrative leave until criminal charges he currently faces are resolved, it added.

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UN Chief Follows Protests in Colombia With 'Serious Concern,' Urges Restraint - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, May 5 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is concerned about the violence amid ongoing protests in Colombia and is urging the authorities to exercise restraint, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"The Secretary-General is following the situation in Colombia with serious concern, including the violence we have seen, the reported violations of human rights within the context of these of the protests," Dujarric said. "It's very important that the Colombian authorities exercise restraint, ensure full respect for human rights."

Guterres also called on all actors to refrain from violence and vandalism and urgently pursue a peaceful solution to the challenges facing the country, according to Dujarric.

"Only through a peaceful and inclusive dialogue, can you avoid violence, can you avoid the violation of human rights," the spokesman said.

Residents of the Colombian city of Cali have been protesting since 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.

On Tuesday, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said it was deeply alarmed by police firing at protesters 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.

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Biden Extends Condolences to Mexico Over Deadly Collapse of Rail Overpass - White House

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday offered condolences to the people of Mexico over the recent tragic subway overpass incident in Mexico City.

"The United States joins the people of Mexico in mourning the loss of life due to the collapse of a rail overpass in Mexico City," Biden said. "We send our deepest condolences to all those who lost a loved one and offer our best wishes for the recovery of all those who were injured."

Biden emphasized that the United States stands ready to assist Mexico as it rebuilds from this tragedy.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador declared a three-day mourning period for those killed in the subway overpass collapse in Mexico City.

The death toll from the overpass collapse has increased to 25, according to the Mexico City prosecutor's office.

Line 12 of the Mexico City subway was opened in October 2012 and its construction cost \$1.8 billion. About 450,000 people commute through this route on a daily basis. Local residents say the overpass was often out of order almost from the moment of its opening.

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US Air Force Gives First Airworthiness Approval for Manned, Electric Plane

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - The Alia electric powered airplane developed by BETA Technology won the first ever airworthiness certification for human flight, the US Air Force said on Wednesday.

"This enables BETA to begin flying its ALIA aircraft in the Agility Prime program. The airworthiness award from the Air Force is the latest milestone in BETA's test program after recently entering its next phase of flight testing," the Air Force said in a press release.

Under a new contract to be signed in June, the Air Force will have access to the aircraft, as well as a first-of-its kind vertical takeoff and landing simulators for pilots to learn how to fly the new machine, the release said.

In March, the ALIA flew its first interstate unmanned flight, setting a new record for range and altitude of 130 nautical miles and 8,000 feet respectively, the release added.

Although the electric plane was developed in a partnership with the Air Force, the company said it also plans to eventually sell the aircraft to civilian pilots.

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White House Says US Space Command Tracking Chinese Rocket

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Jen Psaki on Wednesday said that the US Space Command is tracking China's Long March 5B (Chang Zheng 5B, or CZ-5B) rocket.

"The US Space Command is aware of and tracking the location of Chinese Long March 5B in space," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Psaki emphasized that the United States is committed to addressing the risks of congestion due to space debris and growing activity in space.

"We want to work with the international community to promote leadership and responsible space behaviors," she said. "It's the shared interests of all nations to act responsibly in space to ensure the safety, stability, security and long-term sustainability about outer activity."

Psaki said cooperation is a hallmark of the United States' approach and Washington will work with international partners to address these issues.

The core stage of the CZ-5B spacecraft is expected to re-enter the Earth's atmosphere between 01:11 GMT on May 8 and 19:11 GMT on May 9, over the southern part of the Pacific Ocean not far from New Zealand, according to reports.

China launched the Long March 5B carrier rocket with the main module for its future orbital station at the end of April. Tianhe will be the control hub for the Tiangong ("Heavenly Palace") orbital station.

China expects to finish assembling its first space station in lower Earth orbit by 2022. Beijing has planned several missions, both cargo ship and crewed ones, across 2021 and 2022 to complete the complex and plans to officially launch the space station in 2023.

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CAR to Form Commission of Inquiry to Probe War Crimes - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, May 5 (Sputnik) - The Central African Republic (CAR) will set up a Special Commission of Inquiry to probe serious human rights crimes allegedly committed by national security forces during the operations against the country's largest armed group, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"The minister of justice and human rights in the country had issued an order establishing a Special Commission of Inquiry to investigate serious crimes, violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, allegedly committed by national security forces and their allies," Dujarric said. "They will investigate alleged violations that occurred during the operations against the CPC [Coalition of Patriots for Change] armed group that took place between December of last year and the end of April of this year."

Dujarric said the order to form such a commission was issued following the UN mission's (MINUSCA) submission to the country's authorities of a list of human rights violations allegedly committed by the national forces and its allies.

The conflict between the CAR's government and the forces backing former President Francois Bozize, including the CPC, erupted after the December 27 presidential elections that allowed President Faustin Archange Touadera to stay in office for the second term.

On January 4, the CPC rebels took control of the city of Bangassou, some 750 kilometers away from the capital Bangui, which was their target. According to the UN Refugee Agency, more than 30,000 people were forced to flee the CAR due to election-related violence.

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Bezos' Blue Origin Opens Bidding for Seat on First Space Tourism Flight

WASHINGTON, April 5 (Sputnik) - Civilians hoping to join astronauts on the July 20 inaugural flight of the New Shepard rocket system have the next two weeks to bid for a single open seat in the spacecraft, US aerospace company Blue Origin said on Wednesday.

"We are offering one seat on this first flight to the winning bidder of Blue Origin's online auction. Starting today, anyone can place an opening bid by going to BlueOrigin.com," the company, owned by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, said in a press release.

From May 5 through May 19, the company is accepting bids, with the release saying, "you can bid any amount you want on the auction website (no bids are visible)."

In June, a subsequent live auction for the empty seat will accept bids higher than the top amount offered in the initial round, the release said.

New Shepard is a vertical-takeoff, vertical-landing system created by Blue Origin for suborbital space tourism. The rocket booster is designed to jettison a crew capsule – designed for up to six people - which reaches a height of more than 60 miles and lingers in zero-gravity space for several minutes before returning to Earth for a parachute-enabled landing.

July 20 will mark the first flight of New Shepard with humans, although the system has previously flown in multiple uncrewed tests, according to Blue Origin.

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Biden Extends Condolences to Mexico Over Deadly Collapse of Rail Overpass - White House

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday offered condolences to the people of Mexico over the recent tragic subway overpass incident in Mexico City.

"The United States joins the people of Mexico in mourning the loss of life due to the collapse of a rail overpass in Mexico City," Biden said. "We send our deepest condolences to all those who lost a loved one and offer our best wishes for the recovery of all those who were injured."

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UN Chief 'Strongly Condemns' Deadly Terrorist Attack in Niger - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, May 5 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres deplored a deadly armed attack in the northwestern part of Niger and called on the country's authorities to

do utmost to investigate it, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"The Secretary-General strongly condemns the terrorist attack by an unidentified gunman that took place yesterday in the Tillaberi region of Niger, which reportedly resulted in 20 deaths, including civilians," Dujarric said. "The Secretary-General urges the authorities Niger to spare no effort in bringing the perpetrators to justice."

Guterres also expressed his deepest condolences to the victims' families and wished a speedy recovery to the injured, Dujarric said.

At least 16 Nigerian soldiers and four civilians were killed in the attack in Banibangou located near the border with Mali.

The attack comes just a few days after another 16 soldiers were killed and two more were kidnapped when their military unit was targeted in Tahoua region on Saturday.

The Sahel is one of the most problematic regions in Africa, plagued by terrorist activities and illegal migration. Since 2014, France has been leading a 5,000-strong Operation Barkhane to curb the Islamist threat in the area. The armies of the so-called G5 Sahel bloc, including Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger and Mauritania, also participate in the operation.

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White House Says US Space Command Tracking Chinese Rocket

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Jen Psaki on Wednesday said US Space Command is tracking China's Long March 5B (Chang Zheng 5B, or CZ-5B) rocket. "US Space Command is aware of and tracking the location of Chinese Long March 5B in space," Psaki said at a press briefing.

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Biden Believes Social Media Should Do More to Stop Harmful Content - Psaki

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has no comment on Facebook's decision to uphold its ban of former President Donald Trump, but believes that social media platforms are responsible for stopping damaging content and should do more to protect Americans, the White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday. "The President's view is that the major platforms have a responsibility related to the health and safety of all Americans to stop amplifying untrustworthy content, disinformation and misinformation, especially related to COVID-19, vaccinations and elections," Psaki said during a briefing.

"His view is that there more that needs to be done to ensure that this type of misinformation, disinformation, damaging, sometimes life-threatening information is going out to the American public," Psaki said.

Earlier on Wednesday, Facebook's Oversight Board ruled that the platform can keep blocking Trump's account.

"This is an independent board's decision and we are not going to have any comment on the future of the former President's social media platforms," Psaki said.

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Vaccinated People With Prior COVID-19 Infection Show Higher Antibody Response - Fauci

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - People who have been both previously infected and fully vaccinated against the coronavirus show a higher antibody response and an increased protection against variants, National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci said on Wednesday.

"Antibody response from people who were previously infected, and then boosted with two doses of an mRNA [messenger RNA vaccine], you're in interesting increased protection against the variants of concern," Fauci said. "People who were previously infected, recovered, and then at some time later got vaccinated, you can see they're protected not only against the wild type, but against the 351 from South Africa [B.1.351], and the P.1."

Fauci underscored that vaccines are better in providing an antibody response compared to the natural infection with COVID-19.

As of Wednesday, over 106 million Americans have been fully vaccinated and nearly 148 million have received at least one vaccine shot.

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Extraordinary Measures to Keep US Govt. Open if Congress Fails to Raise Budget - Treasury

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The Treasury Department said on Wednesday that it is preparing "extraordinary measures" to keep the US government running if Congress does not raise or suspend the national debt limit by July.

The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2019 suspended the debt limit through July 31 to accommodate the trillions of dollars of deficit expected from the coronavirus pandemic, but if Congress does not ratify the action, "Treasury, as it has in the past, may take certain extraordinary measures to continue to finance the government on a temporary basis," the statement said.

In light of the uncertainty expected from substantial COVID-19-related receipts and outlays in the coming months, the Treasury Department said it was "very difficult" to predict how long the extraordinary measures might last.

"Treasury is evaluating a range of potential scenarios, including some in which extraordinary measures could be exhausted much more quickly than in prior debt limit episodes," the Treasury Department said.

The US budget deficit for the first six months of fiscal 2021 was a record \$1.7 trillion, compared with the \$743 billion deficit for the comparable year-earlier period. In March alone, the deficit ballooned by \$660 billion, the highest for a month in US history, as COVID-19 relief payments to Americans were distributed under the \$1.9 trillion stimulus.

Separately, the Biden administration is planning a \$2.3 trillion infrastructure development bill, which it plans to fund mostly through tax hikes on corporations and wealthy Americans.

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US Seeks Russia Climate Science Partnership as Moscow Leads Arctic Council - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Russia's two-year term as chair of the eight-nation Arctic Council offers an opportunity to expand international climate science in the High North, State Department coordinator for the Arctic James DeHart said on Wednesday.

"The level of cooperation internationally on science is the gold standard and... and we will absolutely make space for that in this administration," DeHart told guests at the Brookings Institution. "A Lot of this takes place through the Arctic Council and we can continue that in the Russian chairmanship and we see potential for cooperation under the Russian chairmanship on the science related to climate."

Russia is slated to begin a two year term as chair of the eight nation council later this month.

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US Health Agency Reports New Low of 400 Daily COVID-19-Related Deaths as Cases Decline

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reported a new low of 400 deaths per day associated with the novel coronavirus as the daily cases of infection continue to fall, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said on Wednesday.

"Yesterday, CDC reported just over 32,000 new cases of COVID-19. Our seven-day average is about 48,000 cases per day. This represents yet another decrease of about 12 percent from the prior seven-day average," Walensky said in a press briefing. "Seven day average daily deaths has also declined to a new low of 400 per day."

Walensky noted that the number of hospital admissions has also decreased by almost 10 percent as the seven-day average is over 3,900 admissions per day.

As of Wednesday, the United States has reported more than 32 million cases and nearly 575,000 of virus-related deaths, according to the data compiled by the CDC.

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Trump Says 'Corrupt' Social Media Companies Must Pay Price After Facebook Upholds Ban

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump on Wednesday said "corrupt social media" firms must pay a political price for limiting free speech after Facebook's Oversight Board announced that it would uphold a ban on his account.

"The People of our Country will not stand for it! These corrupt social media companies must pay a political price, and must never again be allowed to destroy and decimate our Electoral Process," Trump said.

Facebook's Oversight Board said in a statement on Wednesday that it would uphold the decision to ban Trump's account from its platform, but urged the company to re-evaluate its decision after six months.

"What Facebook, Twitter and Google have done is a total disgrace and an embarrassment to our Country," Trump said. "Free Speech has been taken away from the President of the United States because the Radical Left Lunatics are afraid of the truth, but the truth will come out anyway, bigger and stronger than ever before."

Facebook suspended Trump's account in the aftermath of the January 6 riot at the US Capitol and later asked its independent Oversight Board to evaluate the decision.

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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Canada Approves Use of Pfizer Vaccine For Children Aged 12 to 15 - Health Agency

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The Ottawa federal government has approved the use of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine to immunize children between the ages of 12 and 15, Health Canada announced on Wednesday.

"Today, Health Canada authorized the use of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine in children 12 to 15 years of age," the Canadian national health agency said in a statement. "This is the first COVID-19 vaccine authorized in Canada for use in children and marks a significant milestone in Canada's fight against the COVID-19 pandemic."

Health Canada received an application to expand the indication of Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine on April 16, 2021. The vaccine was initially authorized for use in people 16 years of age and older on December 9, 2020, the statement noted.

"After completing a thorough and independent scientific review of the evidence, the Department has determined that this vaccine is safe and effective at preventing COVID-19 when used in children between 12 and 15 years of age," Health Canada said.

Health Canada said it had placed terms and conditions requiring Pfizer-BioNTech to continue providing information on the safety, efficacy and quality of the vaccine in the 12-to-15 age group to ensure its benefits continued to be demonstrated once it was on the market.

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Artillery Drills in Europe Aim to Provide Deterrence Against NATO Adversaries - US General

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The upcoming artillery drills in Europe are aimed to send deterrence message to NATO's adversaries in the Balkans and the Black Sea region, US Brig. Gen. Christopher Norrie told reporters on Tuesday.

"Fires Shock" is a series of field artillery exercises undertaken from May 5-June 19 in Europe and Africa in conjunction with DEFENDER-Europe 21 exercise.

"Our presence and commitment to defend our allies in the Balkans and Black Sea regions are important symbols of assurance and provide deterrence against potential adversaries," Norrie said.

Norrie emphasized the key importance of the Black Sea for US and NATO maritime and military operations.

"The security of NATO's eastern flank, as well as of sovereign nations in the region is contingent upon our ability to deter potential adversaries," the he said.

With respect to the Balkans, Norrie underscored continued partnership between the United States and regional states to increase the scale capability and readiness of their land forces to deter potential threats.

In mid-March, the US Army launched its annual "Defender Europe" exercises with NATO allies across the European continent. The exercise aims to utilize key ground and maritime routes

bridging Europe, Asia and Africa and incorporate new or high-end capabilities, according to the Defense Department.

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Managing US Inflation 'Difficult' as Economy Rebounds From COVID-19 - Fed's Evans

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Managing inflation will be one of the toughest challenges for US policymakers in coming months as price pressures grow from an economy rebounding rapidly from the coronavirus pandemic, Charles Evans, president of the Chicago Federal Reserve said on Wednesday.

"Needless to say, it has been a very challenging year in so many respects," Evans said in a speech on the economy distributed by the Chicago chapter of the US central bank. "But I am very optimistic about our economy's growth prospects, and am hopeful that our employment goal will be in sight before too long. Yet, despite some recent price increases, achieving our inflation goal may prove more difficult."

The Fed has the dual task of ensuring maximum employment for Americans and keeping inflation growth at an average of 2 percent a year.

Evans' comments came after US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Tuesday that US interest rates might have to rise from their current near-zero levels to prevent overheating of an economy reopening from pandemic lockdowns.

Yellen also said the Biden administration's spending plans in the coming months would involve some reallocation of resources within the economy that "could cause some very modest increase in interest rates."

President Joe Biden, who managed to get Congress to approve a COVID-19 relief bill of \$1.9 trillion in March, is planning a \$2.3 trillion infrastructure bill next under his so-called American Jobs Plan.

US interest rates have been held at between zero and 0.25 percent since March 2020 to aid recovery from the pandemic.

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

Powell acknowledged the surge in prices of commodities and other materials with the recovery in the economy but called such inflationary pressure "transitory."

Evans said core inflation excluding food and energy prices rose by 1.8 percent in March from a 1.4 percent decline in February.

"I was not surprised to see such an increase, and I expect to see some further pickup in inflation in the coming months," he said. "Part of the increase will be purely mechanical as the low inflation reading from April of last year falls out of the 12-month calculation — a factor that boosted year-over-year inflation in March as well. In addition, as the virus subsides and people resume normal activities, demand should pick up further for those goods and services that are most affected by the pandemic, pulling their prices up to more typical levels."

He said supply chain bottlenecks were also developing as demand exceeded supply for steel, computer chips, construction materials, appliances and other items.

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Facebook Oversight Board Upholds Ban on Former President Trump's Account - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Facebook's Oversight Board said in a statement on Wednesday that it would uphold the decision to ban the account of former US President Donald Trump from its platform, but urged the company to re-evaluate its decision after six months.

"The Board has upheld Facebook's decision on January 7, 2021, to restrict then-President Donald Trump's access to posting content on his Facebook page and Instagram account," the statement said. "However, it was not appropriate for Facebook to impose the indeterminate and standardless penalty of indefinite suspension. Facebook's normal penalties include removing the violating content, imposing a time-bound period of suspension, or permanently disabling the page and account."

Facebook's Oversight Board said the company must complete a review of the ban within six months and decide whether to permanently disable Trump's account or suspend it for a specific period of time.

"This penalty must be based on the gravity of the violation and the prospect of future harm," the statement said. "It must also be consistent with Facebook's rules for severe violations, which must, in turn, be clear, necessary and proportionate."

Facebook explained that the Oversight Board determined that Trump's two posts on January 6 were in violation of its community standards and Instagram's community guidelines.

The company said Trump's content "We love you. You're very special" in the first post and "great patriots" and "remember this day forever" in the second post violated Facebook's rules prohibiting praise or support of people engaged in violence.

"The Board found that, in maintaining an unfounded narrative of electoral fraud and persistent calls to action, Mr. Trump created an environment where a serious risk of violence was possible," the statement said.

The Oversight Board underscored in the statement that its role is to make sure Facebook's rules and processes are consistent with its content policies, its values and its human rights commitments.

"In applying a vague, standardless penalty and then referring this case to the Board to resolve, Facebook seeks to avoid its responsibilities," it said. "The Board declines Facebook's request and insists that Facebook apply and justify a defined penalty."

The Board said in a statement, it made policy recommendations for Facebook aimed at developing proportionate policies that both advance public safety and respect freedom of expression.

"In a policy advisory statement, the Board made a number of recommendations to guide Facebook's policies in regard to serious risks of harm posed by political leaders and other influential figures," the statement said. "The Board stated that it is not always useful to draw a

firm distinction between political leaders and other influential users, recognizing that other users with large audiences can also contribute to serious risks of harm. While the same rules should apply to all users, context matters when assessing the probability and imminence of harm."

The Oversight Board pointed out that considerations of newsworthiness should not take priority when urgent action is needed to prevent significant harm.

"Facebook should publicly explain the rules that it uses when it imposes account-level sanctions against influential users," it said.

In addition, countries' leaders can have more power to cause harm and suspension of their accounts for a period is needed to protect against imminent harm in case they repeatedly posts messages posing a risk of harm under international human rights norms, the Oversight Board said.

"Suspension periods should be long enough to deter misconduct and may, in appropriate cases, include account or page deletion," it said.

Following the Oversight Board's statement, Facebook issued a reaction.

"However, while the Board has not required Facebook to immediately restore Mr. Trump's accounts, it has not specified the appropriate duration of the penalty," Facebook said. "Instead, the board criticized the open-ended nature of the suspension, calling it an "indeterminate and standardless penalty," and insisted we review our response. We will now consider the board's decision and determine an action that is clear and proportionate. In the meantime, Mr. Trump's accounts remain suspended."

However, Facebook emphasized that it will review the Oversight Board's recommendations.

"While these recommendations are not binding, we actively sought the board's views on our policies around political figures and will carefully review its recommendations," Facebook said. Facebook suspended Trump's account in the aftermath of the January 6 riot at the US Capitol and later asked its independent Oversight Board to evaluate the decision.

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 Labor Department Rescinds Trump-Era 'Independent Contractor' Rule

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The Trump-era rule limiting independent contractors' rights, including the right to a minimum wage and overtime compensation, has been rescinded, the US Department of Labor said in a release on Wednesday.

"The US Department of Labor today announced the withdrawal - effective May 6 - of the "Independent Contractor Rule," to maintain workers' rights to the minimum wage and overtime compensation protections of the Fair Labor Standards Act [FLSA]," the release said.

US Labor Secretary Marty Walsh also pointed out in the release that the withdrawal of the Independent Contractor rule will allow recognizing contractors as employees and ensure they receive all FLSA protections.

The Labor Department also anticipates that this decision will help avoid a reduction in worker's access to employer-provided benefits such as health insurance, retirement plans, unemployment insurance and workers compensation coverage.

Trump's Independent Contractor rule was enacted two weeks before the current US President Joe Biden's inauguration and legalized a simpler path for employers to classify their employees as independent contractors.

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Blinken, S. Africa Foreign Minister Discuss Expanding Global COVID-19 Vaccine Production

WASHINGTON, May 5(Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and South African Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor discussed increasing global COVID-19 vaccine production, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation after the meeting between the two leaders on Wednesday.

"Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Pandor underscored the need to expand global COVID-19 vaccine production and to cooperate on climate ambition and regional security issues such as the ongoing violence by ISIS-Mozambique [Islamic State terror group, banned in Russia]," Price said. "Secretary Blinken conveyed the importance of multilateral organizations in addressing humanitarian and human rights crises, including in Ethiopia's Tigray region." Price said that Blinken and Pandor also committed to advance planning for a bilateral Strategic Dialogue.

On Monday, South African Health Minister Zweli Mkhize said that a plane carrying the first batch of the Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine has arrived in South Africa.

Mkhize said earlier samples of the Pfizer vaccine would be sent to the National Control Laboratory for quality assurance, after which the doses would be distributed to the country's provinces.

With respect to the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, Mkhize said the doses were awaiting to be dispatched at Aspen's Gqeberha factory in the Eastern Cape Province and are expected to be released in mid-May. South Africa stopped administering this vaccine after the US Food and Drug Administration said six women developed a severe type of blood clots.

South Africa is expecting approximately 325,260 doses of Pfizer to arrive on a weekly basis, to reach a total of more than 1.3 million by the end of May. The batches will then increase to an average of 636,480 doses weekly from May 31, for a total of 4.5 million by the end of June.

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US Voters Split Nearly 50-50 on Whether Trump Facebook Ban Should Last Forever - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Americans came close to a perfect 50-50 split on whether they support or oppose former President Donald Trump's permanent removal from Facebook and other social media platforms, a new PEW Research Center poll revealed on Wednesday. "Some 49 percent of US adults say Trump's accounts should be permanently banned from social media, while half say they should not be. But views are deeply divided along partisan lines," a PEW Research Center press release explaining the poll said.

Just 11 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents say Trump's accounts should be permanently banned, while 88 percent say they should not be, the release said.

By comparison, 81 percent of Democrats and Democratic leaners say Trump's accounts should be banned permanently. Roughly one-in-five Democrats (18 percent) do not support a forever ban on the former president, the release added.

The April 12-18 survey took place before Facebook's independent oversight board announced on Wednesday it had upheld Trump's suspension.

Trump was banned from Facebook and other social-media platforms following the violent January 6 storming of the US Capitol, an outburst triggered by a Trump rally on the same day in which the president repeated unsubstantiated claims that the presidential election had been stolen with massive fraud.

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Apple Invests \$410M In Optical Tech Firm That Supports Face Recognition

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - A US tech company named II-VI, a leading developer of optical technology, received a \$410 million award from Apple Computer's Advanced Manufacturing Fund to develop new components for the iPhone, Apple said on Wednesday. "The expansion of the company's long-standing relationship with II-VI will create additional capacity and accelerate delivery of future components for iPhone, with 700 jobs," Apple said in a press release.

II-VI manufactures vertical-cavity surface-emitting lasers (VCSELs) that help power Face ID, Memoji, Animoji and Portrait mode selfies. Apple also works with II-VI to manufacture lasers used in the LiDAR Scanner technology that helps deliver faster, more realistic augmented reality experiences and improves autofocus in low-light scenes in photos and videos, the release said. Today's award follows an Apple's initial \$390 investment in II-VI in 2017, the release added. The partnership with II-VI is part of Apple's plans to invest \$430 billion and add 20,000 new jobs across the United States over the next five years, according to the release.

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US Private Sector Adds 742,000 Jobs in April, Most in 7 Months - ADP Payrolls Data

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The US private sector added 742,000 jobs in April, its most in seven months, as the economy continued to recover rapidly from the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic, private payrolls surveyor ADP said Wednesday.

"The labor market continues an upward trend of acceleration and growth, posting the strongest reading since September 2020," ADP Chief Economist Nela Richardson said in a news release that compared the 742,000 jobs added last month with the 565,000 in March and 821,000 in September.

Economists polled by US media had expected private payrolls to expand by 850,000 in April. "Ultimately, I think this is in the sweet spot for risk trades," economist Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive. "It shows an economy that's improving rapidly but not so fast that it will prompt a Fed rethink."

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

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. More than 8 million of those jobs have not returned, officials say.

Richardson said service providers had the most to gain as the economy resumed normal activities abandoned during the pandemic.

"While payrolls are still more than 8 million jobs short of pre-COVID-19 levels, job gains have totaled 1.3 million in the last two months after adding only about 1 million jobs over the course of the previous five months," she added.

The US government will publish on Friday the non-farms payrolls for April, covering employment in all sectors. Economists are projecting an all-round jobs growth of 978,000 for last month, building onto the March addition of 916,000.

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US Launch of Minuteman III Ballistic Missile Fails, Cause Under Investigation – Air Force

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) – A test launch of an unarmed intercontinental ballistic missile Minuteman III failed and the cause is unknown and being investigated, the US Air Force Global Strike Command (AFGSC) said on Wednesday.

"An unarmed Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile test launch from Vandenberg Air Force Base, California, experienced a ground abort prior to launch. The cause of the ground abort is currently under investigation, and Air Force Global Strike Command is assessing the potential to reschedule the launch," AFGSC said in a press release.