

05/13/21 Thursday

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UN Secretary General Calls for 'Immediate' End to Deadly Hostilities in Israel, Gaza Strip by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, reports surfaced indicating that the UN Security Council would be convening on Sunday to hold discussion regarding the ongoing clashes along the Gaza Strip between Hamas and Israeli troops.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has once again weighed in on the latest round of clashes taking place along the Gaza Strip, calling on both parties to end hostilities.

"Out of respect for the spirit of Eid, I appeal for an immediate de-escalation and cessation of hostilities in Gaza and Israel," Guterres relayed in a late [Thursday tweet](#). "Too many innocent civilians have already died."

"This conflict can only increase radicalization and extremism in the whole region," he underscored.

Guterres remarks came moments after [reports detailed](#) that Egypt's security delegation had left Tel Aviv once Israeli officials reportedly rejected the prospects of a humanitarian cease fire deal. A source told the al-Arabiya broadcaster that the Egyptian subsequently left "fearing the start of a military operation."

Over the last several days, thousands of rockets have been exchanged between Hamas and the Israel Defense Forces. Dozens have died and many have been injured as a result of the ongoing clashes.

Earlier, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu commented that defense operations would continue against Hamas as long as they are necessary.

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UN Security Council Will Convene Sunday to Address Gaza Strip Clashes

The US had reportedly blocked a proposal to convene the UN Security Council on Friday earlier in the day. Norway, China, and Tunisia had demanded the public meeting, but it will not take place "because members could not reach consensus," according to sources.

The UN Security Council will meet on May 16 to discuss the escalation between Israel and Palestine in the Gaza Strip, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said in a [statement](#).

"The UN Security Council will meet to discuss the situation in Israel and Gaza on Sunday," Thomas-Greenfield said on Thursday via Twitter on Thursday. "The US will continue to actively engage in diplomacy at the highest levels to try to de-escalate tensions."

The mission indicated that the meeting was called for by Norway, China and Tunisia "with broad support."

A meeting was initially pushed for Friday, however, the United States desired a meeting to take place on Tuesday.

Earlier, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters the US was "open to discussions," and that initial indications suggested a meeting would be held the following week.

The UNSC has previously held two meetings regarding the escalating tensions.

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Ghost of Administration Past - Political Cartoon

At the start of his administration, US President Joe Biden issued a multitude of executive orders that effectively walked back policies imposed under the Trump White House, including one that halted work on the US-Mexico border wall.

Newly surfaced reports have revealed that the Biden administration will be resuming construction of the wall established at the US southern border in an effort to curb illegal border crossings into the Land of the Free.

Fox News [reported](#) Thursday that the US Army Corps of Engineers would be restarting work on a 13.4-mile-stretch along the Rio Grande Valley, with priority repairs expected to start sometime within the next six weeks.

The initiative appears to be part of effort to repair the flood levee at the Rio Grande Valley, which was previously excavated to make space for the border wall. The agency stressed via [Twitter](#) that the effort "will not involve expanding the border barrier."

A [statement](#) further issued by the US Department of Homeland Security indicated that the repairs would "protect border communities from physical dangers" that emerged as construction on the wall was called off.

To date, the Biden administration has been repeatedly blasted over its efforts to combat illegal border crossings, as well as the booming numbers of asylum-seekers.

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US Convoy Violated Protocol as Six Vehicles Tried to Enter Northeastern Syria, Russian Military Says

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Deconfliction protocols committed in December 2019 call for US and Russian military forces to inform each other of their movements in Syria. In recent days, dozens of US military vehicles crossed into northeastern Syria via al-Tanf to join US forces stationed at Rmelan camp.

Rear Adm. Alexander Karpov, deputy head of the Russian Center for Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syria, declared in a Thursday report that US military personnel illegally staying in Syria had once again violated deconflicting protocol by failing to provide Russian military police with route details for a convoy of armored vehicles.

"In the northeastern Syrian province of Al-Hasakah, another case of violation of the deconfliction protocols by the units of the US armed forces, illegally staying in Syria, was recorded," Karpov said.

As a result, officers with Russian military police in Northeastern Syria stopped the convoy of six Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP)-type armored vehicles and directed the US military troops to turn around.

When asked about the reported violation, US Department of Defense spokesperson Jessica McNulty told Sputnik "I don't have anything to offer you on this."

The US has maintained that its troops in northeastern Syria have been deployed to the area to prevent the country's oil fields from being overrun with Daesh forces.

A US convoy of 55 armored vehicles were seen in northeastern Syria on Thursday, [SANA reported](#), citing sources based in al-Ya'rubiya. Another 27 US military vehicles were spotted on Tuesday transporting wheat and crude oil from Syria to bordering Iraqi territories.

Bassam Touma, Syria's oil minister, argued otherwise back [in March](#), when he accused the US and its allies of "targeting the Syrian oil wealth and its tankers just like pirates."

"What has happened all through the war in Syria has not happened in any country, in terms of preventing us from tapping our wealth and at the same time stopping basic commodities from reaching our country," he added, estimating that Syria's oil sector has taken a \$92 billion hit.

Earlier this week, a spokesperson for the Russian troops in Syria [announced that](#), since April 23, the Syrian government and Russia's Aerospace Forces had jointly eliminated "338 militants of terrorist groups" and detained 44 additional militants.

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Speaker Pelosi Says Greene's 'Verbal Assault' on Ocasio-Cortez May Result in Ethics Evaluation

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) has raised security concerns in Congress after Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) allegedly approached Ocasio-Cortez on Wednesday and questioned her support of "terrorist" groups. As Ocasio-Cortez reportedly remained silent, Greene told onlookers that the lawmaker was afraid to debate the Green New Deal. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) briefly commented on the reported matter during her Thursday news conference, referring to Greene's remarks as a "verbal assault" and "abuse." "It's so beyond the pale of anything that is keeping with bringing honor to the House, or not bringing dishonor to the house," Pelosi said. "It probably is a matter for the [US House of Representatives] Ethics Committee."

Two Washington Post reporters who allegedly witnessed the Wednesday incident recounted that Greene approached Ocasio-Cortez as they were exiting the House Chamber. Moments later, Greene began to question her colleague on why she chose to support "terrorist" groups such as Black Lives Matter and US anti-fascist movement Antifa, the Post's sources claim.

It's worth noting neither Black Lives Matter, nor Antifa, has been designated as a terror organization in the US. However, [Republican lawmakers](#) in the US Congress have proposed such designations be applied to Antifa.

Greene issued a swift response to Pelosi's comments, arguing that the House Speaker should instead call for the Ethics Committee to "look into" Ocasio-Cortez "for putting Trump admin staff and supporters on lists to destroy their lives and prevent future employment."

"She threatened the livelihoods of Americans for simply being Republicans," she said, adding "there was no screaming" during their recent encounter.

Greene has repeatedly claimed Ocasio-Cortez is too "chicken" to debate her on the Green New Deal. She also disparaged her colleague in a series of tweets on Thursday, including one post labeling Ocasio-Cortez "a hate-America terrorist sympathizer."

"Since you lack the courage & intelligence to debate me, I'll debate the person who really wrote it," the lawmaker tweeted to AOC on Thursday, weeks after publicly announcing plans to debate the proposed environmental legislation.

"We hope leadership and the Sergeant at Arms will take real steps to make Congress a safe, civil place for all Members and staff — especially as many offices are discussing reopening," Lauren Hitt, a spokesperson for Ocasio-Cortez's office, told the Post.

"One Member has already been forced to relocate her office due to Congresswoman Greene's attacks," the spokesperson said, referring to the recent office change of Rep. Cori Bush (D-MO), who reportedly switched offices over a [face-to-face encounter](#) with Greene.

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Videos: Iron Dome Intercepts Dozens of Retaliatory Rockets From Gaza
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The Israel Defense Force (IDF) announced early Friday morning that both ground and air troops were actively conducting strikes against targets along the Gaza Strip. The military force has warned residents within four kilometers of the border to take cover.

The Al-Quds Brigades confirmed Friday morning that it "launched a large, focused and developed missile strike against the occupied territories in response to the brutal Zionist aggression."

Local reports suggest at least 59 rockets were fired by militants toward Ashkelon, Sderot, Ashdod and Be'er Sheva.

Social media footage recorded in the city of Be'er Sheva shows the Iron Dome missile defense system intercepting several rockets.

Meanwhile, alarms were sounded in several nearby areas, including Segev Shalom and the Bedouin Diaspora.

Moments after the IDF announced its air and ground strikes, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin issued a tweet proclaiming the "operation will continue as long as necessary," according to an English language translation from Hebrew.

Video uploaded to Twitter showed IDF Tanks moving fences along the border with Gaza.

It's worth noting that the IDF's ground forces did not enter Gaza, according to an updated memo from the military force.

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US State Department Issues 'Reconsider Travel' Advisory for Israel, Gaza Amid Deadly Clashes by [Evan Craighead](#)

Gaza health officials have reported that at least 103 people - including 27 children - have been killed amid airstrikes between militants and the Israel Defense Force (IDF). The Israeli military has claimed some 1,750 rockets have been launched from the Gaza strip, resulting in the deaths of at least seven people - including one IDF serviceman.

The US Department of State on Thursday issued separate travel advisories for Israel and the West Bank, urging those in the states to reconsider potential plans to visit the embattled areas. "Exercise increased caution in Israel due to COVID-19, travel restrictions, and quarantine procedures instituted by the Government of Israel," the memo read.

As for Gaza, the department declared that Americans should not travel to the area due to "terrorism, civil unrest, and armed conflict." The State Department highlighted that the Palestinian Authority has implemented a number of COVID-19-related restrictions and quarantine procedures.

"Rockets continue to impact the Gaza periphery and areas across Southern and Central Israel, including Jerusalem," the advisory detailed.

Travelers were also warned that there has been an uptick in crime and protest-related violence in Israel, including recent acts of "vandalism, rock throwing, burning of vehicles, and attacks on passersby."

"The security environment within Gaza and on its borders is dangerous and volatile," the memo read. "Sporadic mortar and rocket fire and corresponding Israeli military responses continue to occur."

These travel advisories come at a time when US President Joe Biden, as well as his administration, have faced backlash for commentary perceived to be pro-Israel and anti-Palestine.

More than 100 progressive organizations and 25 members of Congress called on the US president to speak out against Israeli government policies that they believe amount to war crimes against the Palestinian community.

Twenty-five members of Congress have joined over a hundred organizations today in calling on the Biden administration to respond to the horrific human rights abuses we're seeing by

upholding the dignity and human rights of the Palestinian people," said Yasmine Taeb, a human rights attorney and progressive activist.

"The Biden administration has said that it's going to respect human rights around the world and Israel should be no exception," Taeb emphasized.

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Colonial Pipeline Announces System Reset Amid Reports of \$5 Million Ransom Payment to Hackers

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier Thursday, US President Joe Biden told reporters "no comment" when asked whether he was privy to Colonial Pipeline's alleged multimillion-dollar ransom payment to Eastern European hackers. The payment was reportedly valued between \$4 million and \$5 million in "difficult-to-trace cryptocurrency."

Colonial Pipeline announced on Thursday afternoon that the company is continuing to make "substantial progress" in efforts to safely restart its pipeline system and restore the product delivery supply chain.

"We can now report that we have restarted our entire pipeline system and that product delivery has commenced to all markets we serve," read the May 13 [news release](#).

The company - headquartered in Alpharetta, Georgia - warned that some customers may experience intermittent service interruptions as the company works to restart operations. Colonial Pipeline's 5,500-mile (8,850-kilometer) system is the largest pipeline for refined oil products in the US. The pipeline system generally transports over 100 million gallons of gasoline, diesel and jet fuel daily.

Bloomberg [reported](#) earlier on Thursday that Colonial Pipeline did, in fact, transfer nearly \$5 million in "difficult-to-trace cryptocurrency" to Darkside - the Eastern European hacking group believed to be behind the malware attack.

The transaction allegedly took place just hours after the ransomware hack on Friday, despite reports claiming the company would not entertain extortion fees.

Colonial Pipeline's operational update did not mention the alleged multi-million-dollar payout. However, several US agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, have been in contact with the company.

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'Great Milestone': Biden Praises CDC's New Mask Guidance, Urges Public to Vaccinate
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated its mask guidelines, detailing that vaccinated people can participate in indoor and outdoor activities without the need of a mask or social distancing.

US President Joe Biden spoke to reporters outside of the White House Thursday following the CDC's announcement, to applaud vaccinated citizens and encourage those who have not yet received the jab.

"The CDC is saying they have concluded that fully vaccinated people are at a very low risk of getting COVID-19, therefore if you've been fully vaccinated, you no longer need to wear a mask," he said, but added that those who are in-between receiving shots or have not yet reached the two week mark also need to remain masked.

"I think it's a great milestone, a great day."

Biden praised vaccination efforts across the country, but emphasized that the pandemic was not complete, saying that the goal is to have 70% of adults vaccinated by July 4. Until that goal has been reached, Biden encouraged those not yet vaccinated to continue to wear a mask.

"The safest thing for the country is everyone needs to get vaccinated," Biden said during the address, encouraging individuals 12 years and above to find a place closest to them to get vaccinated, for free without an appointment.

When asked about whether or not his administration would enforce the wearing of a mask, Biden assured the public that arrests would not be made, but that it was for the protection of all that those who were not vaccinated to wear a mask.

"Get vaccinated or wear a mask until you do," Biden said. "If you're fully vaccinated and can take your mask off, you earned the right to do something Americans are known for all around the world: greeting others with a smile."

Biden wore a bare face during his briefing, as the White House made its own official announcement allowing vaccinated individuals to go maskless. However, Biden's newfound declaration in support of the CDC's new masking guidance [wasn't warmly accepted](#) by all members of the press pool.

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Space-Born Plutonium Found on Floor of Pacific Ocean
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Plutonium is a radioactive chemical element that was once synthetically produced by Glenn T. Seaborg, Edwin M. McMillan, J.W. Kennedy and A.C. Wahl in 1940. The element is proven to be a key source of nuclear energy, and has been used in several experiments from nuclear weapons to nuclear batteries.

Researchers have reported that they have found rare forms of iron and plutonium along the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, possibly left behind after a supernova rained a nuclear storm down on Earth.

According to [Science Magazine](#), the elements were found in layers of rock expected to be at least 10 million years old. The material was retrieved from the ocean by a Japanese oil

exploration company before being donated to the researchers. Since the element is so difficult to find in nature, the discovery made for a rare find.

"These are the elements where we are still in a mystery," Anton Wallner, a physicist with the Australian National University in Canberra, who led the international research team, said according to [NPR](#). "We do not know exactly where they are produced and how much is produced in different sites."

Many astronomers believe that some of Earth's heaviest elements come from extraterrestrial sources like neutron star collisions or supernovas that explode in space and rain nuclear stardust upon Earth's surface.

"Our data actually suggests that it might be that both scenarios are necessary," Wallner said. "It's both. It's supernovae explosions that produce a part of these heavy elements but also neutron star mergers or any other rare events."

For some scientists like Hendrik Schatz, a physicist at Michigan State University, the new results are amazing, but only add to the mystery that plutonium is not generated by just any supernova.

"It must be some rare event, something else," said Schatz. "There are a lot of pieces of evidence that point to multiple sources. Neutron star mergers are probably one of the more important sources, but at this point it doesn't look like they can explain all the observations."

Plutonium can be found in very low concentrations in the ore of uranium, which is located deep within the Earth away from normal human contact.

Early uses of the element include plutonium-powered [pace-makers](#), which used a tiny nuclear battery known to last a very long time.

In order to produce enough of the radioactive element to, for example, create a nuclear bomb, scientists have studied synthesis reactors.

Through the use of chemical synthesis reaction, uranium can be transformed into plutonium.

This form of chemistry has been tested in different experimentations, including the Trinity test in 1945 and the subsequent bombing of Nagasaki with "[Fat Man](#)," whose large explosion was due to its solid plutonium core.

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Google Settles Deal With Elon Musk's Starlink Project in Effort to Expand Global Internet Services

by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Elon Musk's SpaceX Company is in the process of constructing Starlink, a satellite internet constellation made of thousands of satellites launched into low earth-orbit (LEO) that communicate with terrestrial transceivers. The satellites are expected to meet the demand of low-cost global broadband capabilities and provide internet to the planet.

Google announced Thursday that it would be joining forces with Starlink satellites after the data cloud tech giant won a bid to supply computing and networking resources to SpaceX.

“The real potential of this technology became very obvious. The power of combining cloud with universal secure connectivity, it’s a very powerful combination,” Google’s head of global networking Bikash Koley said, according to [CNBC](#).

Reports state that SpaceX plans to install terrestrial stations at Google data centers already established nationally and internationally. The deal will involve data being transported between Starlink’s satellite constellation and Google’s internal networking system.

“Google Cloud’s high-capacity private network will support the delivery of Starlink’s global satellite internet service, bringing businesses and consumers seamless connectivity to the cloud and internet, and enabling the delivery of critical enterprise applications to virtually any location,” the companies stated, according to [PCmag](#).

For Google, the expectation is to boost its cloud business by giving organizations the incentive of high speed internet when using applications within the Google cloud network. Google data centers are currently located on every continent except Africa, Australia and Antarctica.

Musk has stated in the past that the goal for Starlink is to provide internet services to the entire planet. In 2020, SpaceX used its own fleet of reusable space rockets to launch thousands of satellites into LEO. The most recent mission by SpaceX included the May 9 launch of Falcon 9 Block 5, with the intent of dispatching 60 new satellites into LEO.

Last month, the Federal Communications Commission approved SpaceX’s request to launch thousands more of Starlink satellites into orbit. The approval was met with much opposition, including from competitors like [Amazon](#), whose own satellite constellation known as Project Kuiper was approved to deploy thousands of satellites into LEO with the intent of also expanding internet access.

According to [different sources](#), many fear that the Starlink constellation will negatively impact LEO’s already crowded atmosphere, as space debris and light pollution has been an ongoing existential crisis for humanity’s insatiable space endeavor. Musk has maintained that Starlink will not be easily seen or interfere with advancements in astronomy, even though the initial launch of Starlink satellites proved this to be [questionable](#).

[Microsoft](#) also announced last year that its data centers would be working with the Starlink constellation to expand its Azure cloud business, connecting the large web data pool with Google’s own ground stations.

Starlink, though still in its early stages of its potential, has met resistance from international competitors, as well. This includes [Russia](#) and [China](#), who are both also racing to keep up with America’s growing space ambitions. In the meantime, Musk has hinted on [Twitter](#) that he intends to provide services where services are not always provided, including the Middle East. Starlink satellite internet is currently undergoing beta testing and according to [Teslarati](#), SpaceX has revealed that already over 500,000 people are prepared to use Starlink’s internet services. SpaceX has plans to launch its next set of satellites into LEO from the John F. Kennedy Space Center on May 15.

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RPT - US Heart Surgeons Operate on Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon - Team Leader

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - A group of US pediatric heart surgeons from the Novick Cardiac Alliance conducted surgeries on more than a dozen Syrian refugee children in Lebanon as a part of a pilot program, the surgeon team's leader Bill Novick told Sputnik.

"We operated on 14 children with varying degrees of complexity, including 11 Syrian children," Novick said after concluding the two-week trip to Lebanon.

All Syrian children that underwent surgeries arrived from different refugee camps across Lebanon.

Novick explained that the children suffered a spectrum of defects from simple to complex in terms of their particular heart diseases.

"One child has a literally simple defect and another one was with the most complicated case," he said.

Novick explained that this was the second of three trips in the pilot program through which the US doctors try to assess whether their local colleagues and government have the capacity to build a heart surgery program for children.

"Overall, this trip was logistically and organizationally easier than the first trip. I do see progress in the Lebanese involved in this program. There are problems that are easily solvable," he said. Initially, the team of surgeons was expected to operate on 19 children during this trip, but had to change plans for a number of reasons. The parent of one child was tested positive for the novel coronavirus, so the surgery was rescheduled to occur during the surgeons' next trip.

"One child was on the list and did not show up, parents did not answer the telephone. I do not know where that kid is," Novick said.

The US surgeons plan to return to Lebanon in late summer in early fall, he added.

The Novick Cardiac Alliance comprises a group of medical specialists from different countries who usually work in various "hot spots" around the world.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - US Generals' Letter to Undermine Biden Follows 'Long Pattern' of Meddling in Politics

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The letter calling for the removal of President Joe Biden from office from 120 retired US generals and admirals follows a long pattern of interference in politics by senior officers and appears timed to force Biden reverse his plans to pull all military forces out of Afghanistan, military analysts told Sputnik.

More than 120 retired US generals and admirals published an open letter on Thursday in which they expressed concern over Biden's mental and physical condition, as well as the policy of his administration.

"The mental and physical condition of the Commander in Chief [Biden] cannot be ignored. He must be able to quickly make accurate national security decisions involving life and limb anywhere, day or night," the letter reads.

SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS

Former US Army Military Intelligence officer and ex-CIA official Phil Girdali said the call by the officers was not unprecedented, but the number of them willingly to publicly speak out on the subject was unusual.

"It is not completely unprecedented as a number of former military and intelligence officers signed on to statements regarding the inadvisability of re-electing Trump but the numbers here are significant," Girdali, a founding member of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity said on Thursday.

Girdali also expressed skepticism whether Biden's mental and physical health had deteriorated to the extent that the generals and admirals claimed.

"I am wondering about the comments about Biden's condition. He seems a bit dodderly but where is the evidence that it is more than that? I do not know," he said.

Girdali suggested that the letter was meant to pressure Biden to reverse his commitment to withdraw all US military forces from Afghanistan by September 11 this year.

"I wonder if this is appearing now in the form it is in to force a reversal of the Afghanistan decision? It smells of something like that," he said.

US MILITARY MEDDLING IN POLITICS

Veteran Pentagon analyst Pierre Sprey agreed that the generals and admirals' letter fitted into a long pattern of attempted interventions in policymaking by serving and retired senior military officers going back to the 19th century and the US Civil War.

"There is nothing unprecedented about our generals meddling in US politics. Quite the opposite: there hasn't been a period in American history when generals and admirals weren't meddling in politics, particularly during wartime and the run-up to war," he said.

Usually, the most flagrant among those many meddlers also happened to be rather poor military leaders, Sprey recalled.

Notable examples included Gen. George McClellan during the US Civil War, 19th century naval warfare theorist Adm. Thayer Mahan, World War I US military commander in Europe Gen. John Pershing, Gen. Douglas MacArthur in World War II and the Korean War, US Army Air Force commander in World War II General Henry Arnold and special forces commander General Maxwell Taylor, Sprey said.

"Among all the avenues of political meddling available to our generals - and some of those avenues have been very successful indeed (sadly) - perhaps the silliest and most useless is signing letters en masse," he said.

However, the latest letter was weak in its analytical assessments, Sprey pointed out.

"Though indeed Biden is a disaster for the country and the world, the shallow and astonishingly primitive Trumpista platitudes stitched together by these 120 military troglodytes utterly miss the mark of Biden's dangerous incompetence. Their letter will sink into historical oblivion, leaving nary a ripple," he said.

The former military officers in their letter called on all US citizens to get involved at all levels to elect politicians, who will act to save the nation and hold those currently in office to account.

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RPT - US Sheriff Says His Border Community Seeing More Crime Due to Migrant Smuggling Operations

EL PASO, Texas, May 13 (Sputnik) - Val Verde County Sheriff Joe Martinez told Sputnik his border community is seeing a substantial increase in crime due to the ongoing illegal migration crisis that is attracting human smuggling networks to the southern US border.

"Now the criminal element from Austin, San Antonio, Houston, Dallas, is coming here to smuggle the Mexicans, the Guatemalans, the El Salvadorans, [among others]... So what that causes, it brings these human smuggling organizations into our county and those human smugglers are being put in jail," Martinez said, adding that such developments are overwhelming the county jail and will likely cost US taxpayers more money to address the issue. Val Verde County is located in an area along the Texas-Mexico border identified by the federal government as the Del Rio sector, which has so far had 90,394 apprehensions of illegal migrants since October, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data revealed this week. In March and April, US immigration enforcement agents apprehended about 20,000 illegal migrants each month in this region.

The Del Rio Sector is one of the busiest sections of the US southern border dealing with an influx of asylum-seeking migrants arriving at the border this year, a 377 percent increase compared to the same period last year, according to CBP data.

Martinez said the Val Verde County Sheriff's Office has 48 deputies working with Texas state police officers and CBP agents to address the migration surge in the Del Rio region.

In March, deputies were involved in two chases to catch human smugglers that ended in crashes and resulted in the deaths of eight Mexican migrants in one incident and the death of another Mexican migrant in the other incident, he said.

"We want to keep our communities safe, we want to keep our citizens' fear down because there's a lot of unknowns, people are afraid, people are concerned," Martinez said.

BIDEN HALT TO BORDER WALL CONSTRUCTION HURTING COMMUNITY

President Joe Biden's decision to immediately halt construction of the new border wall has hurt the Val Verde County community by leaving it with a barrier that is 10 percent complete and useless in stopping illegal border crossings in the region, Martinez said.

"We have parts of the original structure and then we have parts of the Trump structure that was going up replacing the original structure and then we have pieces that are basically compromised because they've taken the old fence down - original fence down - and tried to replace it with the new structure but all the construction on that job stopped," Martinez said. Shortly after taking office in January, Biden eliminated many of former President Donald Trump's immigration measures, including terminating the Migrant Protection Protocols program and halting construction of a wall along the 2,000-mile US border with Mexico. The Trump administration was able to construct 400 miles of the large steel wall structure despite lengthy court battles and opposition from Congress.

Martinez urged the Biden administration to complete unfinished border wall projects instead of leaving communities like Val Verde County exposed to the current migration crisis.

"We're in this for the long haul," Martinez said. "They [Biden administration] need to set more funds so that we can put more manpower at the border to help our federal partners who are overwhelmed. At the end of the day, the biggest thing is we need to go back to the rule of law,

enforce the laws that are on the books... If nothing changes, this problem is going to continue and it's bad as it is now."

BIDEN'S LAX BORDER POLICY DRIVING MASS MIGRATION

Biden's lax immigration policy is likely causing the record-breaking number of migrants arriving at the southern border this year, Martinez said.

"The message that has been initially set by this administration: that they're going to be more lax on enforcing that," Martinez said about Biden's immigration policy. "So people started to come and now those people that are here, they've called back home and they say, 'You know what, you can make it, you can do it,' so word travels back that they were successful in getting here so they're encouraging other family members, other friends to take the journey."

Most of the migrants apprehended in the Del Rio sector are Venezuelan nationals who say they are fleeing Venezuela due to corruption, Martinez said.

CBP released data on Tuesday that showed a total of 178,622 migrants were apprehended at the US southern border in April, the highest monthly total since early 2000.

Most of the migrants arriving at the US southern border continue to be single adults and migrant family units, mostly from Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala. So far, 749,613 migrants have been apprehended on the US-Mexico border since October.

"More funds would allow to put more deputies on the street, more overtime funds, but at the end of the day those overtime funds have nothing to show for other than having an individual who has been on the ground - it's the same pair of boots on the ground, it's not a new pair, so those individuals get tired also and the way things are going right now, it doesn't look like this is going to go away any time soon if something doesn't change," Martinez said.

The United States has apprehended more than 1.5 million illegal migrants at the southern border with Mexico in 1986, 1996, 1998-2000, according to CBP data.

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US Sheriff Says His Border Community Seeing More Crime Due to Migrant Smuggling Operations

EL PASO, Texas, May 13 (Sputnik) - Val Verde County Sheriff Joe Martinez told Sputnik his border community is seeing a substantial increase in crime due to the ongoing illegal migration crisis that is attracting human smuggling networks to the southern US border.

"Now the criminal element from Austin, San Antonio, Houston, Dallas, is coming here to smuggle the Mexicans, the Guatemalans, the El Salvadorans, [among others]... So what that causes, it brings these human smuggling organizations into our county and those human smugglers are being put in jail," Martinez said, adding that such developments are overwhelming the county jail and will likely cost US taxpayers more money to address the issue. Val Verde County is located in an area along the Texas-Mexico border identified by the federal government as the Del Rio sector, which has so far had 90,394 apprehensions of illegal migrants since October, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data revealed this week. In

March and April, US immigration enforcement agents apprehended about 20,000 illegal migrants each month in this region.

The Del Rio Sector is one of the busiest sections of the US southern border dealing with an influx of asylum-seeking migrants arriving at the border this year, a 377 percent increase compared to the same period last year, according to CBP data.

Martinez said the Val Verde County Sheriff's Office has 48 deputies working with Texas state police officers and CBP agents to address the migration surge in the Del Rio region.

In March, deputies were involved in two chases to catch human smugglers that ended in crashes and resulted in the deaths of eight Mexican migrants in one incident and the death of another Mexican migrant in the other incident, he said.

"We want to keep our communities safe, we want to keep our citizens' fear down because there's a lot of unknowns, people are afraid, people are concerned," Martinez said.

BIDEN HALT TO BORDER WALL CONSTRUCTION HURTING COMMUNITY

President Joe Biden's decision to immediately halt construction of the new border wall has hurt the Val Verde County community by leaving it with a barrier that is 10 percent complete and useless in stopping illegal border crossings in the region, Martinez said.

"We have parts of the original structure and then we have parts of the Trump structure that was going up replacing the original structure and then we have pieces that are basically compromised because they've taken the old fence down - original fence down - and tried to replace it with the new structure but all the construction on that job stopped," Martinez said.

Shortly after taking office in January, Biden eliminated many of former President Donald Trump's immigration measures, including terminating the Migrant Protection Protocols program and halting construction of a wall along the 2,000-mile US border with Mexico. The Trump administration was able to construct 400 miles of the large steel wall structure despite lengthy court battles and opposition from Congress.

Martinez urged the Biden administration to complete unfinished border wall projects instead of leaving communities like Val Verde County exposed to the current migration crisis.

"We're in this for the long haul," Martinez said. "They [Biden administration] need to set more funds so that we can put more manpower at the border to help our federal partners who are overwhelmed. At the end of the day, the biggest thing is we need to go back to the rule of law, enforce the laws that are on the books... If nothing changes, this problem is going to continue and it's bad as it is now."

BIDEN'S LAX BORDER POLICY DRIVING MASS MIGRATION

Biden's lax immigration policy is likely causing the record-breaking number of migrants arriving at the southern border this year, Martinez said.

"The message that has been initially set by this administration: that they're going to be more lax on enforcing that," Martinez said about Biden's immigration policy. "So people started to come and now those people that are here, they've called back home and they say, 'You know what, you can make it, you can do it,' so word travels back that they were successful in getting here so they're encouraging other family members, other friends to take the journey."

Most of the migrants apprehended in the Del Rio sector are Venezuelan nationals who say they are fleeing Venezuela due to corruption, Martinez said.

CBP released data on Tuesday that showed a total of 178,622 migrants were apprehended at the US southern border in April, the highest monthly total since early 2000.

Most of the migrants arriving at the US southern border continue to be single adults and migrant family units, mostly from Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala. So far, 749,613 migrants have been apprehended on the US-Mexico border since October.

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UN Chief Calls for Immediate Cessation of Hostilities in Gaza, Israel

UNITED NATIONS, May 13 (Sputnik) - United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in a statement called for an immediate end to hostilities between warring parties in Israel and Gaza. "Out of respect for the spirit of Eid, I appeal for an immediate de-escalation and cessation of hostilities in Gaza and Israel," Guterres said via Twitter on Thursday. "Too many innocent civilians have already died. This conflict can only increase radicalization and extremism in the whole region."

On late Thursday, the Israeli Defense Forces said that its air and ground units were attacking the Gaza Strip, following several days of intensive rocket fire from the Palestinian enclave. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that the military operation against Hamas in the Gaza Strip would continue as long as necessary.

However, a source in the Israeli security forces later told Sputnik the IDF is currently not conducting a ground operation in the Gaza Strip.

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ANALYSIS - US Generals' Letter to Undermine Biden Follows 'Long Pattern' of Meddling in Politics

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The letter calling for the removal of President Joe Biden from office from 120 retired US generals and admirals follows a long pattern of interference in politics by senior officers and appears timed to force Biden reverse his plans to pull all military forces out of Afghanistan, military analysts told Sputnik.

More than 120 retired US generals and admirals published an open letter on Thursday in which they expressed concern over Biden's mental and physical condition, as well as the policy of his administration.

"The mental and physical condition of the Commander in Chief [Biden] cannot be ignored. He must be able to quickly make accurate national security decisions involving life and limb anywhere, day or night," the letter reads.

SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS

Former US Army Military Intelligence officer and ex-CIA official Phil Giraldi said the call by the officers was not unprecedented, but the number of them willingly to publicly speak out on the subject was unusual.

"It is not completely unprecedented as a number of former military and intelligence officers signed on to statements regarding the inadvisability of re-electing Trump but the numbers here are significant," Giraldi, a founding member of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity said on Thursday.

Giraldi also expressed skepticism whether Biden's mental and physical health had deteriorated to the extent that the generals and admirals claimed.

"I am wondering about the comments about Biden's condition. He seems a bit dodderly but where is the evidence that it is more than that? I do not know," he said.

Giraldi suggested that the letter was meant to pressure Biden to reverse his commitment to withdraw all US military forces from Afghanistan by September 11 this year.

"I wonder if this is appearing now in the form it is in to force a reversal of the Afghanistan decision? It smells of something like that," he said.

US MILITARY MEDDLING IN POLITICS

Veteran Pentagon analyst Pierre Sprey agreed that the generals and admirals' letter fitted into a long pattern of attempted interventions in policymaking by serving and retired senior military officers going back to the 19th century and the US Civil War.

"There is nothing unprecedented about our generals meddling in US politics. Quite the opposite: there hasn't been a period in American history when generals and admirals weren't meddling in politics, particularly during wartime and the run-up to war," he said.

Usually, the most flagrant among those many meddlers also happened to be rather poor military leaders, Sprey recalled.

Notable examples included Gen. George McClellan during the US Civil War, 19th century naval warfare theorist Adm. Thayer Mahan, World War I US military commander in Europe Gen. John Pershing, Gen. Douglas MacArthur in World War II and the Korean War, US Army Air Force commander in World War II General Henry Arnold and special forces commander General Maxwell Taylor, Sprey said.

"Among all the avenues of political meddling available to our generals - and some of those avenues have been very successful indeed (sadly) - perhaps the silliest and most useless is signing letters en masse," he said.

However, the latest letter was weak in its analytical assessments, Sprey pointed out.

"Though indeed Biden is a disaster for the country and the world, the shallow and astonishingly primitive Trumpista platitudes stitched together by these 120 military troglodytes utterly miss the mark of Biden's dangerous incompetence. Their letter will sink into historical oblivion, leaving nary a ripple," he said.

The former military officers in their letter called on all US citizens to get involved at all levels to elect politicians, who will act to save the nation and hold those currently in office to account.

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UPDATE - Canadian Federal Judge Throws Out State Broadcaster's Lawsuit Against Opposition Party

TORONTO, May 13 (Sputnik) – Canadian Federal Court Judge Michael Phelan dismissed state broadcaster CBC's lawsuit against the country's conservative opposition to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal government.

The CBC launched legal action against the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) during the heat of the 2019 federal election campaign, alleging the opposition party violated copyright laws by using CBC material in its campaign ads.

"The Court concludes that the Respondents' use of the CBC Works was, on these facts, fair," Phelan ruled on Thursday. "Given the Court's findings that the Respondents' use of CBC copyrighted material was for an allowable purpose and was 'fair dealing', this matter must be dismissed with costs at the usual scale."

The CBC, including its top personality Rosemary Barton, who was a party to the lawsuit, has often been accused by critics of being surrogates for Trudeau and the Liberal Party of Canada. The CPC and many in the conservative community saw the lawsuit as confirmation of their suspicions and pointed out that Liberal candidates engaged in a similar activity without facing the same consequences.

The broadcaster told Sputnik it is reviewing the decision to "protect the trust Canadians have in the independence" of the CBC.

"We are reviewing the court's decision," Leon Mar, CBC's Director of Media Relations and Issues Management, said. "We believe that misusing journalistic content and footage out of context in partisan political videos undermines that trust."

Canada's Conservative Party did not directly address the ruling, however, throughout the day some of the party's parliamentarians slammed the CBC for biased coverage via Twitter and included the hashtag #DefundTheCBC, something the official opposition has vowed to do if elected.

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US Raises Travel Advisory Level for Israel, Gaza - State Department

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is warning people to reconsider travel to Israel and Gaza due to the escalation of violence in the region, the State Department said in a travel advisory.

"The Department of State raised the Travel Advisory Level for Israel and the West Bank and Gaza to a Level 3 - Reconsider Travel on May 13, 2021," the travel advisory said on Thursday.

On late Thursday, the IDF said that its air and ground units were attacking the Gaza Strip, following several days of intensive rocket fire from the Palestinian enclave. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that the military operation against Hamas in the Gaza Strip would continue as long as necessary.

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UN Security Council Will Meet to Discuss Gaza Escalation May 16 - US Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, May 13 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will meet on May 16 to discuss the escalation between Israel and Palestine in the Gaza Strip, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said in a statement.

"The UN Security Council will meet to discuss the situation in Israel and Gaza on Sunday," Thomas-Greenfield said on Thursday via Twitter on Thursday. "The US will continue to actively engage in diplomacy at the highest levels to try to de-escalate tensions."

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US Sheriff Says His Border Community Seeing More Crime Due to Migrant Smuggling Operations

EL PASO, Texas, May 14 (Sputnik) - Val Verde County Sheriff Joe Martinez told Sputnik his border community is seeing a substantial increase in crime due to the ongoing illegal migration crisis that is attracting human smuggling networks to the southern US border.

"Now the criminal element from Austin, San Antonio, Houston, Dallas, is coming here to smuggle the Mexicans, the Guatemalans, the El Salvadorans, [among others]... So what that causes, it brings these human smuggling organizations into our county and those human smugglers are being put in jail," Martinez said, adding that such developments are overwhelming the county jail and will likely cost US taxpayers more money to address the issue. Val Verde County is located in an area along the Texas-Mexico border identified by the federal government as the Del Rio sector, which has so far had 90,394 apprehensions of illegal migrants since October, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data revealed this week. In March and April, US immigration enforcement agents apprehended about 20,000 illegal migrants each month in this region.

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President Joe Biden's decision to immediately halt construction of the new border wall has hurt the Val Verde County community by leaving it with a barrier that is 10 percent complete and useless in stopping illegal border crossings in the region, Martinez said.

"We have parts of the original structure and then we have parts of the Trump structure that was going up replacing the original structure and then we have pieces that are basically compromised because they've taken the old fence down - original fence down - and tried to replace it with the new structure but all the construction on that job stopped," Martinez said. Shortly after taking office in January, Biden eliminated many of former President Donald Trump's immigration measures, including terminating the Migrant Protection Protocols program and halting construction of a wall along the 2,000-mile US border with Mexico. The Trump administration was able to construct 400 miles of the large steel wall structure despite lengthy court battles and opposition from Congress.

Martinez urged the Biden administration to complete unfinished border wall projects instead of leaving communities like Val Verde County exposed to the current migration crisis.

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Canada Still Probes J&J Vaccine From US Production Facility Under Investigation - Official

TORONTO, May 13 (Sputnik) - Canadian health officials are still probing the shipment of vaccine doses produced by Johnson & Johnson subsidiary Janssen Pharmaceuticals amid a US investigation into quality control issues at a vaccine manufacturing plant in the US state of Maryland, Deputy Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Howard Njoo said.

Last month, Johnson & Johnson admitted to having produced a faulty batch of coronavirus vaccines at an East Baltimore facility, reportedly due to a mix-up of two ingredients that led to the ruining of about 15 million doses.

Canada received its first shipment of 300,000 Johnson & Johnson vaccine doses - manufactured at the same East Baltimore Emergent BioSolutions facility currently under investigation - at the end of April.

"At this point it's still a question of waiting for Health Canada determining that the doses are good or not good to go," Njoo said on Thursday in response to a question about the 300,000 Johnson & Johnson vaccine doses.

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US Senator Calls on Biden to Back Armenian Sovereignty Regarding Karabakh - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US Senator Bob Menendez has called on the Biden administration to engage on the issue of Armenian sovereignty in light of the country's war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

"When Azerbaijan attacked the Armenian people last fall, the previous [Trump] administration failed to engage and left the door open for dictators like Aliyev, Erdogan and Putin to decide the fate of the Armenian people. That cannot happen again. I urge the Biden administration to engage on this issue at the highest levels to make clear that Azerbaijan must respect Armenia's sovereignty and that further threats and aggressions are simply unacceptable," Menendez said in a statement on Thursday.

The senator from New Jersey also said that the Armenian people continue to face the sustained threat of violence after the Azeri troops violated the Nagorno-Karabakh territory that constitutes an illegal act of aggression.

Menendez called on the Biden administration as well as on the international community to respond strongly to make Azerbaijan understand that it will face serious consequences for its actions.

On Wednesday, Armenia accused Azerbaijan of engaging in an incursion into Syunik province. Tensions between the two countries remain high following the military conflict that ended in November with the signing of a ceasefire.

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Coal Shipments to US Power Plants Fall 22% in 2020 Partly Due to COVID-19 - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - Coal delivered to US electric utilities fell 22 percent in 2020, continuing a long term decline in the use of the fossil fuel to generate power, as well as a reduction in demand due to the coronavirus pandemic, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in a report.

"US coal shipments were down 22% in 2020 from 2019 levels, driven by lower overall electricity demand due to responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the continued decline in US coal-fired capacity and generation," the report said on Thursday.

The US electric power sector received 428 million short tons of coal in 2020, the lowest annual level for that sector since EIA began publishing the data in 2007, the release said.

More than two-thirds (67 percent) of the coal in 2020 was shipped either completely or in part by rail; the remainder was shipped by river barge, truck, or other methods, the report added.

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US Forces Departed Kandahar Airfield This Week, Turned Base Over to Afghan Army - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - American forces have departed one of the biggest US bases in Afghanistan, Kandahar Airfield, NBC News reported citing three Defense Department officials. The report said on Thursday that Kandahar Airfield was turned over to the Afghan National Defense Security Forces earlier this week.

US Central Command said on Monday that it estimated that between 6 percent and 12 percent of the entire retrograde process had been completed. The United States earlier this month handed over the US base Camp Antonik in Helmand, Afghanistan, to the Afghan National Army. Taliban attacks in Afghanistan have increased as US and NATO forces begin their exit from Afghanistan. The Pentagon has continued to claim that small, harassing attacks by the Taliban in Afghanistan have not had a significant impact on the withdrawal of US forces.

Biden administration officials have also said there have been no attacks against US forces during the pullout process.

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

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NASA Invests \$105Mln in Small Business Technology Development - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - Awards totaling \$105 million to 127 small technology firms will help bring projects useful for space exploration to market, NASA said.

"These small businesses received Phase I awards towards the onset of the global pandemic and persevered through it to evolve promising up-and-coming technology solutions," Associate NASA Administrator Jim Reuter said in a press release on Thursday. "New Phase II awards to 127 US small businesses that will help them move their innovations to market."

Recipients of grants from the \$105 million disbursement include InnoSys Inc., a woman-owned small business in the state of Utah that developed a concept for a camera that can operate in extremely high temperatures – perhaps even on Venus where surface temperature can reach 900 degrees Fahrenheit, the release said.

The program by NASA's Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program offers additional funding opportunities for small businesses if their Phase II work proves successful, helping them find customers outside the agency, according to the release.

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Colonial Pipeline Says Fully Restarted Operations after Cyberattack

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The Colonial Pipeline company announced that it has fully restored operations after a shutdown caused by a ransomware attack and is supplying the markets it serves.

"Colonial Pipeline can now report that we have restarted our entire pipeline system and that product delivery has commenced to all markets we serve," the company said on Thursday afternoon.

Colonial Pipeline, which supplies roughly half of the fuel to the East Coast of the United States, suspended operations after being hit with a ransomware attack by the DarkSide hacking group allegedly based in Russia.

The shutdown has caused fuel shortages and panic-buying in 12 US states and the District of Columbia.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik)

COLONIAL PIPELINE

- * US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he expects the recent cyber attack on Colonial Pipeline to be part of the possible future talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin.
- * Biden said that the Colonial Pipeline has begun to flow oil to recipients along the country's East Coast, and warned that there may be "some hiccups" along the way as it returns to normal operation.
- * Biden said that the US administration believes that the Russian government was not involved in the recent attack against the Colonial pipeline.
- * The White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Thursday that Russia bears "some responsibility" for the hackers, allegedly on Russian territory, who attacked Colonial Pipeline and caused fuel shortages along the US East Coast.

MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS

- * The United States has withdrawn around 120 military personnel from Israel amid escalating violence in the region, a US European Command (EUCOM) spokesman Charles Prichard told Sputnik on Thursday.
- * UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland remains in contact with representatives of the Middle East Quartet to arrange a meeting to resolve the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but no date for a potential gathering has been set so far, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told Sputnik.
- * The US anticipates that other regional players such as Egypt and Tunisia can help communicate the reasons for de-escalating the rising conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.
- * President Joe Biden said he does not see overreaction in the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine that resurged this week.
- * Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz has approved plans to call up 9,000 more reservists as tensions with the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip continue, the Defense Ministry said.
- * The number of Palestinians killed in three days as a result of Israeli airstrikes in the Gaza Strip exceeded 100, about 580 people were injured, health ministry spokesman Ashraf Qidra said.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN BORDER DISPUTE

- * Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Azerbaijani counterpart, Jeyhun Bayramov, on Thursday discussed the escalation of tensions on the Azerbaijan-Armenia border during a phone conversation, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
- * Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan instructed the foreign and defense ministers, as well as the secretary of the Security Council, to begin the process of consultations within the CSTO due to the situation in the Syunik region on border with Azerbaijan.
- * The Azerbaijani military made an attempt to move their posts deeper inside the Armenian territory near the cities of Syunik and Vardenis, the Armenian Defense Ministry said, adding that Yerevan demanded Azerbaijani troops to move back to their previous places of deployment.
- * The Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry stated that Baku was surprised and considered it inadmissible for Yerevan to use the situation on the border with Armenia for political purposes, adding that work is underway to normalize the situation.

PUTIN-GUTERRES TALKS

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres discussed issues of resolving the situation in Libya and Yemen, as well as the state of affairs in Afghanistan, the Kremlin said on Thursday.
- * Putin and Guterres discussed the humanitarian situation in Syria and expressed concern over the tightening of sanctions against Damascus, the Kremlin said.
- * Putin and Guterres discussed the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and called for an end to violent actions on both sides, the Kremlin said.
- * Putin and Guterres discussed building up collective efforts to combat the coronavirus pandemic, the Kremlin said.

CORONAVIRUS EPIDEMIC

- * An analysis of the genome sequences of COVID-19 fragments found in students from Russia's Ulyanovsk does not allow attributing them to the Indian coronavirus strain, the Central Research Institute of Epidemiology of Russia's watchdog Rospotrebnadzor said on Thursday.
- * The Republic of Maldives became the 65th country in the world to approve Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) said.
- * Foreign coronavirus vaccine producers have already launched trials involving children, while Russia starts to lag behind, Alexander Gintsburg, the director of Russia's Gamaleya research institute that developed the Sputnik V vaccine, told Sputnik.

PUTIN'S REMARKS ON SHOOTING IN KAZAN

- * The recent mass school shooting in Kazan is a barbaric crime, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday.
- * Putin asked the cabinet to consider an initiative to issue government awards for teachers and other staffers of the school in Kazan where a deadly shooting attack took place earlier this week.
- * Putin tasked the government with introducing a unified approach to ensuring security and protection against terrorism in educational facilities across the country, following the deadly shooting incident in a school in Kazan.

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US Navy Takes Stennis Aircraft Carrier Out of Commission Next 4 Years for Overhaul

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The John C. Stennis aircraft carrier will be off-line for the next four years during a major overhaul and upgrade, the Navy said on Thursday. "The overhaul of the ship from the keel up is a massive combined effort between the ship's crew, Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS) and other contractors. Their collective work will prepare the ship for the second half of its 50 year service life," a Navy press release said.

The 4-year Refueling Complex Overhaul (RCOH) maintenance period began last month with the ship's consignment to NNS, the release said.

The RCOH procedure typically takes place at the 25-year mark – the halfway point in a carrier's life span, the release added.

The process involves disassembly and replacement of surfaces and structures, and replacement of, or repairs to, complex machinery and systems. Essentially, the ship is gutted, rebuilt, and modernized, according to the release.

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US, Israeli Defense Officials Discuss Gaza Rocket Attacks Against Israel - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl and his Israeli counterpart Zohar Palti discussed the recent rocket attacks from Gaza as well as the United States' support for Israel to defend itself, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"This morning the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Dr. Colin Kahl met with Israeli Minister of Defense Director of Policy and Political Military Affairs Zohar Palti here at the Pentagon," Kirby said during a press briefing. "The two leaders discussed the US-Israel defense partnership and opportunities for strengthening our bilateral cooperation. They also discussed, of course, the rocket attacks emanating from Gaza."

Kahl condemned the rocket attacks and underscored the United States' support for Israel's right to defend itself, Kirby said. Kahl and Palti agreed to maintain close discussions on the current unrest and to work together to strengthen regional security, Kirby added.

Moreover, Kirby said Israel has not asked the United States for additional support in light of the recent rocket attacks from Gaza.

Earlier on Thursday, Israeli army spokesman Jonathan Conricus said that the army was preparing for a ground operation in Gaza, but no orders to begin have yet been given.

The largest confrontation in recent years at the Gaza border began on Monday evening.

Palestinian militants have since launched over 1,600 rockets from Gaza toward Israel, leaving six Israeli civilians and one serviceman dead. Israel has fired retaliatory strikes against Gaza.

The enclave's health ministry put the death toll among Palestinians at 83.

The violence was sparked by multiple days of clashes in East Jerusalem and an Israeli court's decision to side with Jewish settlers requesting the eviction of several Palestinian families from their homes in the disputed city.

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FBI Warns of Identity Theft Threat From Online Images of COVID Vaccine Cards

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) – Vaccinated Americans should avoid posting images of their vaccination cards online due to the threat of identity theft, the FBI said on Thursday.

“Do not post pictures of your vaccination cards online. These cards may contain your name, date of birth, insurance information, or more and may be used to steal your identity or commit fraud,” an FBI press release said. “If you have already posted a picture of your vaccination card to social media, remove it immediately.”

The release also warned of severe penalties for anyone who buys, sells or otherwise uses fake or stolen cards.

“The unauthorized use of an official government agency’s seal on such cards is a crime that may be punishable under Title 18, United States Code [government seals wrongfully used], Section 1017 [discharge of indebtedness], and other federal laws. Penalties may include hefty fines and prison time,” the release said.

While the release did not mention any known attempts to market fake or stolen vaccine certificates, it urged people to contact the FBI with any information regarding the fraudulent creation or sale of the cards.

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Pentagon Refuses to Comment on Violation of Deconfliction Mechanism in Syria

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Defense refused on Thursday to comment on the incident with its military violating deconfliction protocol in Syria by failing to notify the movement of their convoy.

“I don’t have anything to offer you on this,” Defense Department spokesperson Jessica McNulty told Sputnik on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, Rear Adm. Alexander Karpov, deputy head of the Russian Center for Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syria, said that a convoy of US military equipment, consisting of six armored MRAP-type vehicles was moving along the M-4 highway in the western direction along an uncoordinated route and without prior notice.

The convoy was stopped by a Russian military police patrol and returned in the opposite direction, Karpov said.

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Fear of Contracting COVID-19 Hits New Low for US Adults - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - Just three in ten Americans say they are worried about catching the novel coronavirus, the lowest level of fear in the past year, a Gallup poll said on Thursday.

"This includes 5 percent of US adults who say they are "very worried" and 25 percent "somewhat worried," a Gallup press release explaining the poll said.

The latest guidance from the Centers for Disease Control issued on Thursday said fully vaccinated people can resume the same activities as prior to the pandemic, although still subject to rules such as facemask and social distancing requirements by most businesses and many state and local governments.

This latest finding is five percentage points lower than in March a 19 points lower than in February, the release said.

Still, one-third of those who are fully or partially vaccinated say they still worry about catching COVID-19 as do 44 percent of those who plan to get the vaccine but have not done so, the release added.

Yet just 13 percent of US adults who have no plans to be vaccinated express worry, according to the release.

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US Center For Disease Control Releases \$7.4Bln in Funding to Hire, Train Health Workers

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) – The US will spend \$7.4 billion to hire, train and support public health workers as well as to prepare some jurisdictions for future pandemics, the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Rochelle Walensky said on Thursday. "Today, we are announcing the upcoming release of \$7.4 billion in funding from the American Rescue Plan to hire, train, and support public health workers across the country, reflective of the diversity within the communities they serve," Walensky said during a briefing.

About \$4.4 billion will go to support states and localities, creating tens of thousands of new jobs across the US while another \$3 billion will be focused on preparing jurisdictions for future pandemics, and to build a public health workforce for the future, Walensky explained.

The measure is expected to immediately add more staff and health departments across the country as well as add school nurses to K–12 schools to support safe reopening since the US public health workforce has become smaller in recent years, Walensky explained.

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US Supports Ongoing Investigation of COVID-19 Origins – Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) – The US is not satisfied with the initial investigation of COVID-19 origins and supports the ongoing probe into the causes of coronavirus pandemic, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"[US is] not satisfied with the original investigation. Yes, [US] supports an ongoing investigation to get to the bottom of what happened with COVID-19," Blinken said during a briefing. "This is

so important because we need to understand what happened, if we are going to have the best possible opportunity to prevent it from happening again.”

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US Open to UN Discussion of Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Early Next Week - Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is open to a discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the United Nations Security Council early next week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters on Thursday.

“We are open to and supportive of a discussion, an open discussion at the United Nations. I think we are looking at early next week. This, I hope, will give some time for the diplomacy to have some effect and to see if indeed we get a real de-escalation and can then pursue this at the United Nations in that context,” Blinken said at a press conference.

Earlier in the day, Sputnik learned that the US blocked a request to convene the UN Security Council on Friday.

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Blinken Says US Has Been Clear Rocket Attacks on Israel Must Cease

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday said Washington has been clear that the rocket attacks on Israel must stop and that the country has the right to defend itself.

“We've been very clear that rocket attacks must cease. We've been very clear about Israel's right to defend itself. We are also engaging our regional partners with urgency to see that calm prevails,” Blinken said during a briefing.

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Correspondents' Association Says White House Mask Requirement Lifted Effective Immediately

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The White House has officially lifted its mask-wearing requirement effective immediately for individuals who have been fully vaccinated, the White House Correspondents' Association (WHCA) said on Thursday.

“Effective immediately, pursuant to the new CDC guidance, mask-wearing requirements are lifted at the White House complex for those who are 14 days after their last required dose of one of the COVID-19 shots,” the WHCA said in a statement.

Earlier, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated its COVID-19 guidance for fully vaccinated people, allowing indoor and outdoor activities of any size without wearing a face mask.

The change comes amid ongoing mass vaccination efforts in the country. Earlier in the week, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci said that the US is reaching a turning point in its fight against COVID with its rapidly expanding vaccination rates.

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US Airlines Record Pandemic's First Yearly Passenger Increase in March - Transport Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US airlines carried almost 10 percent more passengers in March 2021 compared to March a year earlier, the first increase since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics said on Thursday. "The reporting airlines carried 42.6 million passengers in March 2021 (preliminary), compared to 38.9 million passengers in March 2020. The systemwide increase was driven by a 14% increase in the number of domestic passengers (39.2M). Over the same period, the number of international passengers (3.4M) declined by 26%, the smallest year-over-year decline since February 2020," a press release from the bureau read.

March 2020 marked the first month in which airline travel was reduced by COVID-19, with total passengers – domestic and international - falling 47 percent from pre-pandemic March 2019, the release added.

The US airlines have reported noticeable increases in leisure travel, although business travel remains depressed as well as international travel, due to COVID-19 restrictions blocking entry into some countries with other nations requiring quarantine periods for arriving travelers.

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US Distributes \$742Mln in COVID-19-Related Aid to Homeowners in 42 states – Treasury

WASHINGTON, April 13 (Sputnik) – The US government has provided nearly \$750 million in aid to homeowners in 42 states and five territories as part of the COVID-19 American Rescue Plan, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

The plan's Homeowner Assistance Fund "was designed to prevent mortgage delinquencies and defaults, foreclosures, loss of utilities or home energy services, and displacement of homeowners experiencing financial hardship due to the COVID-19 public health crisis," a Treasury press release said.

The fund provided a minimum of \$50 million for each of 42 states, Washington, DC, which is not a state, and the territory of Puerto Rico, the release said.

The territories of Guam, American Samoa, the US Virgin Islands, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, each received \$30 million, the release added. In addition, the fund provided \$498 million for Native American tribes or tribally designated housing entities and the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands, according to the release. Treasury earlier released \$21.6 billion in emergency aid for renters to help prevent evictions due to the pandemic.

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Pentagon Withdraws 120 Military Personnel from Israel - EUCOM to Sputnik

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) – The United States has withdrawn around 120 military personnel from Israel amid escalating violence in the region, a US European Command (EUCOM) spokesman Charles Prichard told Sputnik on Thursday.

“Approximately 120 DoD personnel arrived in Germany from Israel today via a C17 aircraft based out of Ramstein Air Base. We made the decision in coordination with Israel,” Prichard said.

The group was in Israel for a routine planning event, which was scheduled to wrap up this week, he added.

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US Lifts Indoor, Outdoor Mask Mandate for Fully Vaccinated People – CDC

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has updated its COVID-19 guidance for fully vaccinated people, allowing indoor and outdoor activities of any size without wearing a face mask, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said on Thursday.

“Today [on Thursday], CDC is updating our guidance for fully vaccinated people. Anyone who is fully vaccinated can participate in indoor and outdoor activities, large or small, without wearing a mask or physically distancing. If you are fully vaccinated, you can start doing the things that you had stopped doing because of the pandemic,” Walensky said during a briefing.

Walensky noted that the guidance has not changed with respect to public transportation setting where the requirement to wear masks while traveling on buses trains, and other forms of public transportation is still in place.

The seven-day average of COVID-19 cases in the US has dropped by 23 percent from the previous seven-day period and is now 36,800 cases per day with deaths and hospitalizations continuing to fall as well, Walensky added.

CDC Director underscored that if a person develops COVID-19 symptoms, one should resume wearing a face mask and get tested right away.

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US Marine Major Charged With Assault on Federal Officer in Capitol Riot - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US federal authorities have charged an active duty Marine Corps major with assault on a law enforcement officer during the riot that breached security at the US Capitol on January 7, the Department of Justice announced on Thursday.

"An active duty US Marine Corps commissioned officer stationed at the Marine Corps Base Quantico was arrested today in Virginia and charged with crimes related to the breach of the US Capitol on January 6, which disrupted a joint session of the US Congress," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Major Christopher Warnagiris, 40, has been charged with federal offenses that include assaulting, resisting or impeding certain officers; obstruction of law enforcement during civil disorder; and obstruction of justice and was due to make his initial court appearance at 2:00 pm on Thursday in the Eastern District of Virginia, the release said.

"According to court documents and security camera footage, Warnagiris violently entered the Capitol on Jan. 6, after pushing through a line of police officers guarding the East Rotunda doors. Once inside, Warnagiris positioned himself in the corner of the doorway, using his body to keep the door open and pull others inside," the release said.

In the four months since the January 6 events, about 440 individuals have been arrested on charges related to the Capitol breach, including over 125 individuals charged with assaulting or impeding law enforcement as investigations remain ongoing, the Justice Department said.

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Migrant Families Voluntarily Separate For Children to Enter US Alone – Security Chief

WASHINGTON, April 13 (Sputnik) – US border officials are receiving anecdotal reports that parents in migrant families are voluntarily separating from children, who then cross the borders as unaccompanied minors, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas told Congress on Thursday.

"We are certainly hearing anecdotally that some families self-separate to allow their children to enter the United States voluntarily. That speaks to the trauma that these families have endured in their desperation to give their children a better life," Mayorkas said in testimony to the Senate Homeland Security Committee.

The issue revolves around an order from the Centers For Disease Control (CDC) at the outset of the pandemic in March 2020 invoking a health provision known as Title 42, which the Trump administration used to prevent illegal immigrants from carrying COVID-19 infections across the Mexican and Canadian borders.

A recent Human Rights Watch report said Title 42 restrictions remain largely in place, blocking entry for single adults and some families, with a Biden administration exception requiring border agents to admit unaccompanied children.

The Customs and Border Protection (CBP) said it expelled 111,714 individuals under Title 42 in April and that the agency continues to use the provision to block entry of single adults and some family units.

Of 178,622 migrants stopped at the border in April alone, 62.5 percent were turned away under Title 42. During the month, agents encountered 13,962 unaccompanied minors crossing the border, CPB said.

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Biden Says Will Talk to Putin About Colonial Pipeline Cyber Attack

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he expects the recent cyber attack on Colonial Pipeline to be part of the possible future talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"We are working to try to get to the place where we have sort of an international standard that governments, knowing that criminal activities happen from their territory, that we all move on those criminal enterprises," Biden said in a televised address from the White House. "I expect that's one of the topics I'll be talking about with President Putin."

Biden emphasized that his administration believes the Russian government was not involved in the recent cyberattack against Colonial Pipeline.

"We do not believe the Russian government was involved in this attack, but we do have strong reason to believe that the criminals who did the attack are living in Russia, that's where it came from - Russia," Biden said. "We have been in direct communications with Moscow about the imperative for responsible countries to take decisive action against these ransomware networks. We are also going to pursue a measure to disrupt their ability to operate."

When asked whether he was confident that Putin was not involved, Biden stated, "I am confident that I read the report of the FBI accurately and they say they were not, he was not, the government was not."

Following the statement by Biden, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in a press briefing that Russia bears "some responsibility" for the hackers who operating from Russian territory attacked Colonial Pipeline and caused fuel shortages along the US East Coast.

Psaki said it is still premature to discuss possible reprisals against Russia or the hacking group allegedly based in the country.

Colonial Pipeline System announced earlier that the oil pipeline running down the East Coast of the United States will be operating fully again by midday Thursday.

Earlier in the day, US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said the delivery of fuel through the pipeline will resume normal operation by the week's end.

According to the FBI, Colonial Pipeline was attacked with ransomware allegedly developed by the Russian hacking collective DarkSide.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia had nothing to do with the hacker group's attacks.

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UPDATE - Biden Says Administration's New Measures to Provide Fuel for 5Mln Vehicles

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that the recent measures implemented by his administration to mitigate the consequences of the Colonial Pipeline shutdown will provide enough fuel for about 5 million vehicles while a portion of the pipeline in the US states of North Carolina and Maryland operate under manual control.

"Over the weekend, we reviewed and worked with the company to get a portion of the pipeline system from North Carolina to Maryland to operate under manual control," Biden said during a briefing. "The extraordinary measures the administration has taken, we estimate, sent enough gas to stations to fill the tanks of over 5 million vehicles in the last few days."

Biden pointed out that the return to normal fuel deliveries will begin this weekend region by region and take "some time" since the 5,500-mile-long pipeline has never been fully shut down. On Wednesday, the Biden administration also granted a waiver of the Jones Act to fuel suppliers that now allows non-US-flagged vessels to transport refined fuel products from the Gulf of Mexico to affected areas in order to boost fuel supplies to the affected states, the President added.

Earlier on Thursday, the US Internal Revenue Service announced that it has lifted penalties for those who either sell or use dyed diesel fuel on US highways in states experiencing fuel shortages due to the Colonial Pipeline shutdown.

The cyberattack on the Colonial Pipeline last week led to fuel shortages across several US states. On Wednesday, the fuel transportation company announced it resumed operation but it will take a few days to get things back on track.

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UN Envoy in Touch with Mideast Quartet on Possible Meeting, No Date Set Yet - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, May 13 (Sputnik) - UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland remains in contact with representatives of the Middle East Quartet to arrange a meeting to resolve the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but no date for a potential gathering has been set so far, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told Sputnik on Thursday.

"No date set, [but] the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Process, Tor Wennesland, remains in touch with his fellow Quartet envoys," Dujarric said.

Earlier, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said he was ready to resume the work of the Quartet, comprised of the United Nations, the United States, the European Union and Russia, to settle the conflict in the region.

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US Auto Association Says Expects More Average Gas Price Fluctuation Due to Colonial Hack

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The American Automobile Association (AAA) expects further fluctuation in average gas price in the United States caused by the recent cyberattack on Colonial Pipeline, an AAA spokesperson told Sputnik on Thursday.

"The national average is likely to continue to see fluctuation in the coming days and states where prices have spiked will see some relief as the pipeline becomes fully operational," the spokesperson said.

The cyberattack on the Colonial Pipeline last week led to fuel shortages across several US states. On Wednesday, Colonial Pipeline announced it would resume operations, but it will take a few days to get things back on track.

"From the time the pipeline was taken offline on Friday until Thursday morning, the national gas price average increased 7 cents," the AAA spokesperson said.

The spokesperson added that the disruption pushed the average price to \$3.02 this week - the highest since October 2014.

Motorists in affected areas, including in the US states of Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee, can expect to see few more days of limited fuel supply, the spokesperson said.

"For Memorial Day and summer travel, it is important to know there is ample gas supply in the United States," the spokesperson added.

US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said earlier that delivery of fuel through the pipeline will resume normal operations by the week's end.

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Transportation Giant Greyhound Permanently Shuts Down Canadian Routes

TORONTO, May 13 (Sputnik) – North American bus carrier, Greyhound, is permanently shutting down its Canadian operations, effective immediately, the company said on Thursday.

"Greyhound Canada has made the difficult decision to discontinue all operations on its remaining routes in Ontario and Quebec, and will permanently close all services in Canada effective today," the company said in a statement.

The decision follows a year without revenue that made it impossible to continue operations, Stuart Kendrick, Senior Vice President, Greyhound Canada said.

When the company temporarily shut down last May, the company laid off 400 workers. The motorcoach operator will continue to service cross-border routes between Canada and the United States through its US operations. The announcement does not impact US operations, the statement said.

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US House Must Address Supplemental Funding for Capitol Riot Probe Next Week - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The House of Representatives will address supplemental funding next week to launch a full security probe into the riot at the US Capitol on January 6, Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Thursday.

"[The] security supplemental is coming up next week: It is overdue," Pelosi told a weekly news conference on Capitol Hill. "It is urgently needed now about how to secure the Capitol and return to visitors."

The supplemental funding will be part of a \$2 billion security proposal to be presented by the Democratic majority in the House week, Axios reported earlier. It will include provisions to protect the Capitol, the White House and the vice president's residence, the report said.

The details were provided during a weekly conference call for members of the House Democratic Caucus by members of the House Appropriations Committee led by Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro, who was working with Republicans in the House on a bipartisan proposal, the report also said.

The proposal will include a one-time fund to pay "unknown costs" involving the physical security of the Capitol complex that will harden the building's windows and doors, the report added.

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Russia Has 'Some Responsibility' For Pipeline Attack Even if Gov't Wasn't Involved - Psaki

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Thursday that Russia bears "some responsibility" for the hackers, allegedly on Russian territory, who attacked Colonial Pipeline and caused fuel shortages along the US East Coast.

"Certainly, the host, the country, where individuals are located, even as a criminal network, even, as he [President Joe Biden] confirmed that we don't have information from our review process that suggests the [Russian] government was involved, there is still some responsibility," Psaki told reporters during a daily briefing.

She said that it is still premature to discuss possible reprisals against Russia or the hacking group allegedly based in the country.

"There is still an ongoing investigation. The president was speaking to what we know now. But in terms of the conclusion of that we have pointed to the FBI and in terms of what steps could

be taken that would likely be recommended by Cyber Command. We are just not quite there yet," Psaki said.

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Biden Says Administration's New Measures to Provide Fuel for 5Mln Vehicles

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday that the recent measures implemented by his administration to mitigate the consequences of the Colonial Pipeline shutdown will provide enough fuel for about 5 million vehicles while a portion of the pipeline in the US states of North Carolina and Maryland operate under manual control. "Over the weekend, we reviewed and work with a company to get a portion of the pipeline system from North Carolina to Maryland to operate under manual control," Biden said during a briefing. "The extraordinary measures the administration has taken, we estimate, sent enough gas to stations to fill the tanks of over 5 million vehicles in the last few days."

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US Heart Surgeons Operate on Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon - Team Leader

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - A group of US pediatric heart surgeons from the Novick Cardiac Alliance conducted surgeries on more than a dozen Syrian refugee children in Lebanon as a part of a pilot program, the surgeon team's leader Bill Novick told Sputnik.

"We operated on 14 children with varying degrees of complexity, including 11 Syrian children," Novick said after concluding the two-week trip to Lebanon.

All Syrian children that underwent surgeries arrived from different refugee camps across Lebanon.

Novick explained that the children suffered a spectrum of defects from simple to complex in terms of their particular heart diseases.

"One child has a literally simple defect and another one was with the most complicated case," he said.

Novick explained that this was the second of three trips in the pilot program through which the US doctors try to assess whether their local colleagues and government have the capacity to build a heart surgery program for children.

"Overall, this trip was logistically and organizationally easier than the first trip. I do see progress in the Lebanese involved in this program. There are problems that are easily solvable," he said. Initially, the team of surgeons was expected to operate on 19 children during this trip, but had to change plans for a number of reasons. The parent of one child was tested positive for the novel coronavirus, so the surgery was rescheduled to occur during the surgeons' next trip.

"One child was on the list and did not show up, parents did not answer the telephone. I do not know where that kid is," Novick said.

The US surgeons plan to return to Lebanon in late summer in early fall, he added.

The Novick Cardiac Alliance comprises a group of medical specialists from different countries who usually work in various "hot spots" around the world.

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Quebec Latest Canadian Province to Halt Use of AstraZeneca Vaccine's First Dose – Minister

TORONTO, May 13 (Sputnik) – Quebec has become the latest Canadian province to halt the first-dose vaccination with the AstraZeneca shot, citing the dangerous complications to human health if it is administered, the provincial health ministry said on Thursday.

"As of today, the AstraZeneca vaccine will no longer be offered as a first dose," Ministere de la Sante et des Services sociaux said in a statement. "This decision is based on the recommendations of the Quebec Immunization Committee (CIQ), in an update of its opinion on the use of AstraZeneca's vaccine against COVID-19."

To date, Canadian authorities have reported at least 15 instances of Vaccine-Induced Immune Thrombotic Thrombocytopenia (VITT) following inoculation with the AstraZeneca vaccine and at least three deaths.

Quebec joins Ontario, Alberta and Nova Scotia in halting first dose vaccination with the UK drugmaker's vaccine and other provinces have also taken steps to limit its use in the past few days.

Like other provinces, Quebec's health ministry said that current stock and any future supplies would be used to administer second doses.

Quebec's health minister in a statement via Twitter assured residents, who received the AstraZeneca shot for their first dose, that the effectiveness of the UK drugmaker's vaccine is "high and lasting."

Despite provinces slowly moving away from the AstraZeneca vaccine, Canada is still set for 655,000 AstraZeneca doses next week.

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

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Biden Says Will Talk to Putin About Colonial Pipeline Cyber Attack

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he expects the recent cyber attack on the Colonial Pipeline to be part of the possible talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"We are working to try to get to the place where we have sort of an international standard that governments, knowing that criminal activities happen from their territory, that we all move on those criminal enterprises," Biden said. "I expect that's one of the topics I'll be talking about with President Putin."

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US Looking to Egypt, Tunisia to Communicate Reasons for Hamas to De-Escalate - White House

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The US anticipates that other regional players such as Egypt and Tunisia can help communicate the reasons for de-escalating the rising conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday. "Our objective, in the short-term, is that Egypt, Tunisia, other important countries in the region, certainly can play a role in conveying to Hamas and leader of Hamas the reasons for de-escalation and how that could be beneficial, and that's a role they have played historically at moments in time," Psaki said.

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Canada's Ontario Extends COVID-19 Stay-at-Home Order 'At Least' Until June 2 - Premier

TORONTO, May 13 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Ontario is extending the province-wide stay-at-home order until June 2, at the earliest, Premier Doug Ford announced on Thursday.

"We need to maintain the stay-at-home order and all public health measures until, at least, June 2," Ford said during a press briefing.

While Ontario's public health officials have seen declining numbers of new COVID-19 infections since the stay-at-home order was introduced more than a month ago, provincial hospitals remain at capacity and resources are stretched to the limit.

Extended public health measures will allow the province's vaccine rollout to make additional headway, Ford noted.

Ontario's public health authorities are recording an average of 2,500 new cases daily since the introduction of a third province-wide lockdown since the onset of the pandemic. Experts estimate that variants - particularly the B.1.1.7 one first identified in the United Kingdom - now make up the vast majority of all new cases.

To date, Ontario has reported 502,171 cases and 8,405 virus-related deaths since the onset of the pandemic a year ago.

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Biden Says Colonial Pipeline Has Begun to Flow, May Experience 'Hiccups' Along The Way

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that the Colonial Pipeline has begun to flow oil to recipients along the country's East Coast, and warned that there may be "some hiccups" along the way as it returns to normal operation.

"As of yesterday evening the Colonial has begun restarting the flow of refined products in the pipeline," Biden said. "This morning the Colonial reported that fuel is beginning to flow to majority of the markets that they service and they should be reaching full operational capacity as we speak."

Biden stressed that the effects of the normalization of supply will not be felt immediately.

"This pipeline is 5,500 miles long, it had never been fully shut down in its entire history. Now they have to safely and fully return to normal operations, and it's going to take some time. And there may be some hiccups... along the way here. Still we expect to see a region by region return to normalcy beginning this week and continuing into next week."

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USSC to Hold Open Meeting on Israel, Palestinians Early Next Week - Diplomatic Source

UNITED NATIONS, May 13 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council is currently discussing plans to hold an open meeting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict early next week, a diplomatic source told Sputnik on Friday.

The United States earlier in the day refused to agree to hold a meeting on Friday among UN Security Council members to address the escalating violence between Israel and the Palestinians.

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Biden Sees No 'Significant Overreaction' in Ongoing Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) – President Joe Biden said on Thursday he doesn't see overreaction in the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine that resurged this week.

"I had a brief conversation with him [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] yesterday [on Wednesday], and I have my intelligence community, the Defense Department, as well as the State Department, have been in contact with all of their counterparts, and not only in Israel but in the region. And one of the things that I have seen thus far is that there has not been a significant overreaction," Biden said during a briefing.

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Biden Says Russian Government Not Involved in Pipeline Hacking Attack

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that the US administration believes that the Russian government was not involved in the recent attack against the Colonial pipeline.

"We do not believe the Russian government was involved in this attack but we do have strong reason to believe that the criminals who did the attack are living in Russia, that's where it came from Russia," Biden said in a televised address from the White House. "We have been in direct communications with Moscow about the imperative for responsible countries to take decisive action against these ransomware networks. We are also going to pursue a measure to disrupt their ability to operate."

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US Objected to UN Security Council Meeting on Israeli-Palestinian Conflict - Source

UNITED NATIONS, May 13 (Sputnik) - The United States objected to convening on Friday a UN Security Council meeting to discuss the violence between Israel and the Palestinians, a UN source told Sputnik.

"The US objected to the meeting on Friday on the situation in the area of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict," the source said.

The public meeting was requested by Norway, China and Tunisia, but will not be held "because members could not reach consensus," the press office of China's mission to the UN told Sputnik earlier.

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UNSC Not to Hold Meeting on Israel-Palestinian Crisis Friday for Lack of Consensus- Source

UNITED NATIONS, May 13 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will not hold an emergency meeting on Friday to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because members could not reach a consensus, the press office of China's mission to the United Nations said in a statement to Sputnik.

"There will be no SC [Security Council] meeting tomorrow... Members of the SC cannot reach a consensus," the China's press office said on Thursday.

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biden says us has been in direct contact with russia over pipeline attack

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Trudeau Absolved of Wrongdoing in His Third Ethics Probe Over Charity Scandal - Watchdog

TORONTO, May 13 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was cleared of wrongdoing in the third Conflict of Interest probe against him stemming from the charity scandal that has plagued his government for nearly a year, Ethics Commissioner Mario Dion ruled on Thursday.

Trudeau as well as current and former members of his cabinet incurred heavy criticism last summer after media revealed close ties between the officials' families and the WE Charity, in light of a government decision to award the charity a \$670-million sole-source contract to administer a government-sponsored student volunteer program.

WE Charity co-founders Craig and Marc Kielburgers have testified before the parliamentary finance committee that the charity has paid members of Trudeau's family \$342,955.72 in speaking and expense fees over 42 events.

"During the examination, I determined there was no friendship between Mr. Trudeau and the Kielburgers, nor was Mr. Trudeau involved in any discussions with them leading to the decision," Dion said in a statement following the release of the report.

Dion made the determination despite Craig Kielburger, who along with his brother have found themselves at the heart of the scandal, calling Trudeau a friend and someone he has known for more than a decade in an interview with the Ottawa Citizen in 2015.

However, despite Trudeau walking away from the investigation legally unscathed, his former finance minister, Bill Morneau, was found guilty of contravening three sections of the Conflict of Interest Act, including making a decision that would further his private interests and giving preferential treatment to WE Charity.

"As soon as Mr. Morneau was advised that WE would likely play an important role in the student relief initiative, he should have recused himself from that point onwards from Cabinet discussions and decision making," Dion said, noting that the evidence "suggested the existence of a relationship" between Morneau and Craig Kielburger.

The former finance minister, who resigned from his post in August in the wake of the scandal, had faced intense backlash following his admissions that he accepted expense paid trips and that both of his daughters have relationships with the charity.

While Thursday's rulings mark the end of the individual ethics investigations, there are currently multiple ongoing parliamentary probes of the Trudeau government's actions in awarding the multi-million-dollar contract.

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Some 11,000 Migrants Fled US Detention Program Alternatives in Fiscal Year 2020 - Official

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - Some 11,000 of the immigrants that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detained during Fiscal Year 2020 fled from officials after being enrolled in the agency's Alternatives to Detention (ATD) programs, ICE Acting Director Tae Johnson said during a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"Based on the number of individuals that we enrolled in alternatives to detention in FY20, we had about 11,000 individual abscond from the program, and so far in [Fiscal Year] 2021 we've had about 3,000 or 2,700, this is through March, abscond from the ATD program," Johnson told the US House Subcommittee on Homeland Security.

ATD programs provide supervised release and enhanced monitoring for a subset of immigrants who are not considered threats to public safety or national security, and have been released pending a decision on whether they should be deported, he said.

Johnson added in his statement that there are 95,160 participants enrolled in ATD programs as of April, up nearly 12 percent from the beginning of the year. The program is designed as a flight-mitigation tool that helps increase compliance with release conditions, he added.

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Biden Abolishes Trump Rule Limiting Clean Air Regulation - Environmental Protection Agency

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has canceled a Trump-era ruling that limited the use of Clean Air Act regulations to prevent undue atmospheric pollution, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced on Thursday.

"Today, the EPA issued an interim final rule to rescind the previous administration's rule entitled "Increasing Consistency and Transparency in Considering Benefits and Costs in the Clean Air Act Rulemaking Process," also known as the Benefit-Cost Rule," the EPA said in a news release.

The EPA reviewed the Benefit-Cost Rule and found that it imposed procedural restrictions and requirements that would have limited EPA's ability to use the best available science in developing Clean Air Act regulations, and would be inconsistent with economic best practices, the release said.

"EPA has critical authority under the Clean Air Act to protect the public from harmful air pollution, among other threats to our health. Revoking this unnecessary and misguided rule is proof

positive of this administration's commitment to science," Administrator Michael Regan said in the release.

On January 20, President Joe Biden signed Executive Order 13990 directing the EPA to review all regulations and policies undertaken by the Trump administration, and rescind any that did not protect public health and the environment, the release said.

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Minnesota Trial of 3 Officers Over Floyd's Death Delayed Until March of 2022 - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The Minnesota state trial of three former police officers charged in the death of George Floyd has been postponed from this August to March of 2022, a CBS local affiliate reported on Thursday.

The delay until next March is to ensure the federal trial of J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane and Tou Thao takes place first.

On Friday, a federal grand jury charged the three former officers with violating Floyd's constitutional rights through actions that led to the death of the African American man shortly after his arrest.

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US-EU Aircraft Subsidies, Steel Tariffs Disputes 'Within Reach' of Being Settled- Official

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The trade dispute between the United States and European Union on subsidies for aircraft manufacturers Boeing and Airbus as well as on steel and aluminum tariffs are close to potentially being resolved, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said during a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"We are also working to resolve the ongoing Boeing-Airbus dispute, and address the real problem of overcapacity in the steel and aluminum sectors," Tai told the US House Ways and Means Committee on a hearing about the Biden administration's trade policy. "Solutions to both are within reach."

Tai said the Biden administration will work with the World Trade Organization (WTO) and like-minded countries to push for reform of the organization's rules and procedures.

The trade war between the United States and the 27-nation bloc broke out in 2018 under then-President Donald Trump as part of his strategy to impose tariffs to change US trade policy and reduce the trade deficit.

The new duties largely affected a set of steel, aluminum and other European goods, to which the European Union responded with its tariffs on various US items. The tense trade relations between Brussels and Washington are also affected by a long-term subsidy row over the US aircraft maker Boeing and the European Union's Airbus passenger aircraft makers.

Last October, the WTO ruled that the European Union had the right to impose tariffs on \$4 billion worth of US goods in response for state subsidies that had been allocated to Boeing. However, this decision came just over a year after the WTO made a similar ruling in favor of the United States over EU aid given to Airbus. At that time, the WTO said that the United States had the right to impose tariffs on goods worth up to \$7.5 billion from the bloc.

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Israel Not Interested in Escalation, But Has Right to Defend Itself - Israeli Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, May 13 (Sputnik) - Israel does not seek escalation with Palestine but has the right and duty to defend itself, Israeli Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Gilad Erdan, said in a letter to the UN Security Council seen by Sputnik.

"The State of Israel is not interested in an escalation. However, Israel has the right and duty to defend its people and sovereignty and will continue to do so vigorously," Erdan said in a letter dated May 12.

The ambassador said since Monday morning, more than 1,500 rockets had been fired from the Gaza Strip towards Israeli communities, resulting in seven fatalities and hundreds of more people being injured.

"As of today, millions of Israeli civilians are under relentless attacks by these terrorist organizations and are forced to remain in shelters," he said.

Erdan also pointed out Israel continued to ensure freedom of worship for Muslims on the Temple Mount. According to him, hundreds of thousands of Muslims visit the site every year, and this status quo will not change.

Large-scale clashes broke out from May 7-10 between Palestinians and the Israeli police, leading to the sharpest escalation in the Gaza Strip in recent years. Riots began in two areas of East Jerusalem at once - near the Temple Mount and in the Sheikh Jarrah quarter, where several Arab families are being evicted by an Israeli court decision.

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Canadian Federal Judge Throws Out State Broadcaster's Lawsuit Against Opposition Party

TORONTO, May 13 (Sputnik) – Canadian Federal Court Judge Michael Phelan on Thursday dismissed state broadcaster CBC's lawsuit against the country's conservative opposition to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal government.

The CBC launched legal action against the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) during the heat of the 2019 federal election campaign, alleging the opposition party violated copyright laws by using CBC material in its campaign ads.

"The Court concludes that the Respondents' use of the CBC Works was, on these facts, fair," Phelan ruled. "Given the Court's findings that the Respondents' use of CBC copyrighted material was for an allowable purpose and was 'fair dealing', this matter must be dismissed with costs at the usual scale."

The CBC, including its top personality Rosemary Barton, who was a party to the lawsuit, has often been accused by critics of being surrogates for Trudeau and the Liberal Party of Canada. The CPC and many in the conservative community saw the lawsuit as confirmation of their suspicions and pointed out that Liberal candidates engaged in a similar activity without facing the same consequences.

Neither the Conservative Party of Canada nor the CBC have publicly commented on the decision.

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IRS Suspends Penalties for Dyed Diesel Use on US Highways to Boost Fuel Supply - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) on Thursday announced that it will not penalize those who either sell or use dyed diesel fuel on US highways in states experiencing fuel shortages due to the Colonial Pipeline shutdown.

"The Internal Revenue Service, in response to disruptions of the fuel supply chain, will not impose a penalty when dyed diesel fuel is sold for use or used on the highway in the states of Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and the District of Columbia," IRS said in a release.

The penalty relief is retroactive to May 7 and will remain in effect till May 21, the release said. IRS explained in the release that as a rule, dyed diesel fuel is not taxed in case it is used for farming and home heating purposes and not on US highways.

Dyed diesel fuel is ordinary diesel with an addition of red dye in it to make it easier for tax law-enforcement to identify a fuel as non-taxed.

The cyberattack on the Colonial Pipeline last week led to fuel shortages across several US states. On Wednesday, the fuel transporting company announced it resumed operation but it will take a few days to get things back on track.

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US Producer Price Index Up Most in Decade, Reinforcing Inflation Story - Labor Dept

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The US Producer Price Index, a measure of what wholesalers pay for goods, jumped its most in a decade during the year leading up to April, the

Labor Department reported on Thursday as it revealed another indicator of runaway inflation in an economy rebounding rapidly from the coronavirus crisis.

"The Producer Price Index for final demand increased 0.6 percent in April, seasonally adjusted," the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a unit of the Labor Department, said in a statement. "The final demand index moved up 6.2 percent for the 12 months ended in April, the largest advance since 12-month data were first calculated in November 2010."

On Wednesday, the department reported that the US Consumer Price Index grew by 4.2 percent in the year to April for its largest increase in almost 13 years.

The two datasets, published back-to-back, confirm a large uptick in inflation after months of commodity price increases in an economy making strides on reopening from COVID-19 lockdowns.

The Producer Price Index showed that companies paid at least six percent more in wholesale prices to producers in April compared to a year ago to acquire everything from steel to meat. Economists polled by US media were expecting a 0.3 percent monthly increase in April and 3.8 percent year on year.

The Federal Reserve, entrusted to protect the economy from excessive inflation, says the rising costs are an aberration due to supply chain disruptions in the way of demand breaking out after months of being depressed by the pandemic. Fed Vice Chairman Richard Clarida said Wednesday the central bank had no immediate plans to raise interest rates to curb rising costs, unless there were signs of US employment growing apace with inflation.

The Fed has kept interest rates at near zero over the past year to stimulate economic recovery. The US economy shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, although first quarter data for 2021 showed a dynamic rebound of 6.4 percent.

The Fed has forecast a 6.5 percent economic growth 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 — before 2023. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 6.1 percent in April.

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 eight million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

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Colonial Pipeline Paid Eastern European Hackers Nearly \$5Mln in Ransom - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - Colonial Pipeline has paid about \$5 million to Eastern European hackers last week after earlier reports that the company had no plans to pay the ransom to decrypt their hacked data during a cyber attack that forced the company to shut down operations, Bloomberg reported on Thursday.

Colonial Pipeline paid the ransom in untraceable cryptocurrency just hours after the cyber attack, the report said citing two people familiar with the transaction.

The report said the hackers gave the pipeline operator a decrypting tool to restore its disabled network once they received the money.

Colonial Pipeline System announced that the pipeline, which supplies oil to the East Coast of the United States, will be operating fully again by mid-Thursday.

On Wednesday, Colonial Pipeline said it had initiated the restart of operations after halting them due to a ransomware cyberattack, but would need several days to return to normal.

The East Coast of the United States has been experiencing fuel shortages since the shutdown and citizens rushed to stock up on fuel out of fear of future shortages.

Earlier in the day, US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said delivery of fuel through the pipeline will resume normal operations by the week's end.

According to the FBI, the company was attacked with ransomware allegedly developed by the Russian hacking collective DarkSide. President Joe Biden cited intelligence data as saying that there was no evidence Russia was behind the attack.

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UPDATE - Anti-Trump Republicans Launch Intra-Party Reform Effort With Call For 'American Renewal'

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - A manifesto signed by 150 prominent US Republicans and published on Thursday launched a reform movement targeting Donald Trump's continued influence in the party.

The document published by Utah newspaper Deseret News does not mention Trump by name, but targets many of the former president's behaviors while calling on Republicans to focus on traditional conservative principles such as free markets and free speech.

"We oppose the employment of fear-mongering, conspiracism, and falsehoods and instead support evidence-based policymaking and honest discourse," the manifesto said in one of several apparent references to Trump's behavior. "We demand that public officials and aspiring leaders — regardless of party — act with integrity and honor, the absence of which is a harbinger for abuses of power."

Trump critics Evan McMullin and Miles Taylor created the manifesto signed by 150 prominent conservatives.

The document it also restates core principles of mainstream conservatives such as a call for "open, market-based economies as consistent with our natural liberty," and respect for the Constitution's guarantee of free speech and freedom of the press.

Signers of the manifesto titled, "A call for American renewal," include former state governors William Weld, Mark Sanford and Christine Todd Whitman, more than two dozen former members of the House of Representatives and former Senator David Durenberger.

Other names include former Trump administration officials such as Anthony Scaramucci, and high-profile officials who served other Republican presidents such as the George W. Bush administration's Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff.

Notably, the list of signatures was devoid of any sitting Republican Congresspeople, including Utah representative and outspoken Trump critic Mitt Romney.

The letter was published after Liz Cheney was ousted from Republican House leadership over her refusal to support Trump's claims of election fraud.

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Anti-Trump Republicans Launch Intra-Party Reform Effort With Call For 'American Renewal'

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"We oppose the employment of fear-mongering, conspiracism, and falsehoods and instead support evidence-based policymaking and honest discourse," the manifesto said in one of several apparent references to Trump's behavior. "We demand that public officials and aspiring leaders — regardless of party — act with integrity and honor, the absence of which is a harbinger for abuses of power."

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UPDATE - US Weekly Jobless Benefits Down 7% in Continued Progress From COVID- Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The weekly filing for jobless benefits in the United States fell by about 7 percent last week as some 473,000 people filed for unemployment claims, the lowest number since March 2020 that marked the start of the coronavirus pandemic, the Labor Department said Thursday.

"In the week ending May 8, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 473,000, a decrease of 34,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a statement. "This is the lowest level for this average since March 14, 2020 when it was 256,500." The department revised upward by 9,000 the previous week's claims numbers from 498,000 to 507,000.

Economists polled by US media had anticipated 490,000 filings for unemployment benefits in the week to May 8, putting the reported number not far from their target but not too low either to cause inordinate excitement.

"The claims are the lowest since March 14, 2020 when it was at 256K," economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on ForexLive, acknowledging what the Labor Department said.

"Nevertheless, the number is still at relatively high levels historically."

It was the fifth week in a row that filings had fallen, signaling a recovery from the COVID-19 marked by other bullish macroeconomic trends and falling infection rates.

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

The Labor Department reported last week that there were only 26,000 job additions for all of April, versus March gains of 916,000. Economists had expected as many as 1.0 million new jobs last month.

Elaborating on the weekly unemployment filings, the department said continuing claims for the week ended May 8 — reported with a one-week lag — fell slightly to 3.66 million, from 3.7 million during the week to May 1.

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

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. 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 showed a dynamic rebound of 6.4 percent.

The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent economic growth 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 monthly unemployment rate stood at 6.1 percent in April.

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US Town of Palm Beach Actively Preparing for Possible Trump Indictment - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The US town of Palm Beach in Florida is actively getting ready for a possible indictment of former President Donald Trump, US media reported on Thursday.

During planning sessions, the town's law enforcement officials particularly discussed handling extradition issues, according to Politico.

The newspaper noted that a clause in Florida's statute on interstate extradition allows Governor Ron DeSantis to intervene and even probe whether an indicted person should be surrendered to another state.

"The statute leaves room for interpretation that the governor has the power to order a review and potentially not comply with the extradition notice," said Joe Abruzzo, clerk of the Circuit Court of Palm Beach County, as cited by Politico.

The newspaper said that Abruzzo, who was once a close associate of US President Joe Biden's brother Frank, would be in charge of opening a potential fugitive-at-large case.

The newspaper went on to say that if an indictment finds Trump in New Jersey, it can turn out differently.

The media outlet explained that while New Jersey's extradition statute is similar to Florida's, the state's Democratic governor Phil Murphy would unlikely to intervene to stop an extradition. Manhattan's district attorney has been conducting an investigation into possible bank insurance and tax fraud at the Trump Organization. In February, the district attorney gained control of the former president's tax records following a Supreme Court decision that rejected his efforts to keep them private.

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East Coast Oil Pipeline To Be Fully Operating Again by Noon on Thursday - Colonial

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The oil pipeline running down the East Coast of the United States will be operating fully again by midday, Colonial Pipeline System announced on Thursday.

"Colonial Pipeline has made substantial progress in safely restarting our pipeline system and can report that product delivery has commenced in a majority of the markets we service," the company said in a media statement. "By midday today, we project that each market we service will be receiving product from our system."

Colonial Pipeline announced on Wednesday that it had initiated the restart of operations after halting them due to a ransomware cyberattack, but would need several days to return to normal. The East Coast has been experiencing fuel shortages since the shutdown and citizens rushed to stock up on fuel out of fear of future shortages.

"[S]ubstantial progress is safely restarting our pipeline system and [we] can report that product delivery has commenced in a majority of the markets we service," the Thursday statement said. Earlier in the day, US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said in a tweet that delivery of fuel through the pipeline will resume normal operation by the week's end.

According to the FBI, the company was attacked with ransomware allegedly developed by the Russian hacking collective DarkSide. President Joe Biden cited intelligence data as saying that there was no evidence Russia was behind the attack.

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US Weekly Jobless Benefits Down 7% in Continued Rebound From COVID-19 - Labor Dept.

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"In the week ending May 8, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 473,000, a decrease of 34,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a statement. "This is the lowest level for this average since March 14, 2020 when it was 256,500." The department revised upward by 9,000 the previous week's claims numbers from 498,000 to 507,000.

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Colonial Pipeline Restart Went Well, Supply to Normalize by Weekend - US Energy Secretary

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The resumption of Colonial Pipeline's operations went well, and things should get back to normal by the end of the week, Jennifer Granholm, United States Secretary of Energy, announced via Twitter on Thursday.

Colonial Pipeline announced Wednesday that it has initiated the restart of operations after halting them due to a ransomware cyberattack, but will need several days to return to normal.

"Colonial Pipeline reports this morning that the restart of the pipeline went well overnight," Granholm said. "This should mean things will return to normal by the end of the weekend. Will keep you posted."

Colonial Pipeline warned that some markets may experience "intermittent service interruptions" during the start-up period.

The US East Coast has been experiencing fuel shortages after the Colonial Pipeline firm shut down its pipeline in wake of the attack and citizens rushed to stock up on fuel out of fear of future shortages.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the company was attacked with ransomware allegedly developed by the Russian hacking collective DarkSide. Biden cited intelligence data as saying that there was no evidence Russia was behind the attack.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded to the incident by saying that Russia had nothing to do with those hacker attacks.

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