

**05/18/21 Tuesday**

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Nearly 1 in 4 American Expats Eye Renouncing US Citizenship Over Tax Requirements, Survey Finds  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Similar to tax practices followed within the US, American citizens living abroad must also report their annual income to the Internal Revenue Service, meaning expats are likely to file and pay taxes in two places. Although the agency implements measures to avoid double taxation, tax-filing requirements have still proven a hurdle for expats.

Nearly one in four American expats are weighing the possibility of renouncing their US citizenship as a result of the annual tax-filing requirements they must follow, a recent survey from Greenback Expat Tax Services has found.

The [survey](#), which ran from April 15 through May 10, determined that 4% of respondents are “planning to renounce” their citizenship, as another 18% said they were “seriously considering it.” Some 42% of those polled also stated that they “wouldn’t rule it out.”

Approximately 36% of respondents indicated that they “would never consider” dumping their American citizenship.

Although 85% of polled expats acknowledged they were considering renouncing their citizenship because they felt unfairly represented by the US government, the top-listed reason (42%) stemmed from the US’ tax-filing requirements.

Other listed reasons included marriage to a non-US citizen (12%), concerns over the political climate (11%) and disappointment over the direction of the US government (10%), among others.

Approximately 7% of respondents also noted that their interest in renouncing their citizenship was because of “difficulties” they encountered when working with foreign banks as an American citizen.

“It can get very complicated, very quickly,” David McKeegan, co-founder of Greenback Expat Tax Services, [told CNBC](#).

Depending on the amount of funds an expat has accrued overseas, they may also be required to file a [Report of Foreign Bank and Financial Accounts](#) (FBAR) with the US Treasury Department or a [Form 8983](#).

An FBAR is required when the total dollar amount of an individual’s foreign accounts surpasses \$10,000 at any one point during the year, with the Form 8983 being required in instances where the dollar threshold exceeds \$200,000 at year-end for single filers.

The survey found that the majority of polled expats are between the ages of 35 and 54, and are averaging an income of anywhere from \$50,000 to just below the \$100,000 mark. Only 4% reported their income as exceeding \$200,000.

Of the more than 3,100 expats who participated in the survey, 44% indicated that they “do not plan to return to the US permanently.” Approximately 13% noted they would be heading back to the Land of the Free, whereas the remaining 42% were still “unsure” about relocating.

The responses were pulled from American expats scattered across 125 countries. Figures [provided](#) by the US Department of State indicate that an estimated 9 million US citizens live overseas.

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Signature Secret Army - Political Cartoon

The US military force, composed of the US Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Space Force, Coast Guard and National Guard, has hundreds of thousands of active-duty personnel, many of whom are stationed overseas. However, a new report indicates that the Land of the Free has a military force completely off the books.

An [exclusive report](#) by Newsweek revealed on Monday that the US is operating a 60,000-strong military force within the US and abroad that has zero congressional oversight, a revelation that would put the nation in violation of various laws if the claims are validated.

Citing a two-year investigation that saw researchers review hundreds of job postings and conduct several interviews, Newsweek reported the underwraps military program is costing the US government a minimum \$900 million a year.

Although part of operations are meant to collect intelligence and engage in cyberwarfare, some practices also allegedly include the illegal manipulation of social media, a practice that the US has long accused Russia, China and Iran of committing.

The secret troop force, which is alleged to be 10 times larger than the CIA's clandestine operations, reportedly has a footprint in Pakistan, North Korea, Iran, and Yemen, in addition to boots across West Africa.

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US Supreme Court Grants Win to Oil Companies Fighting Climate Change Lawsuit  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In 2018, the city of Baltimore filed a lawsuit against over 20 oil and gas companies claiming that they have contributed to climate change and intentionally misled the public through deceptive trade practices. The case has remained in legal limbo for three years, with defendants wanting the matter to go to a federal court, as opposed to state.

The US Supreme Court handed a win on Monday to the over 20 multinational companies being sued by the city of Baltimore after declaring that the [legal dispute](#) should be heard in federal courts.

While the [Monday ruling](#) did not address the focus of the lawsuit filed by the city of Baltimore, it did state that the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals must reconsider a plea by defendants for the suit to be heard in a federal court. The appeals court had previously remanded the case back to the state courts, where it had been initially filed.

The ruling came down 7-1, with the majority opinion written by Justice Neil Gorsuch, who declared that the federal branch was fully capable of addressing any issues that may arise from the case.

"Congress is of course free to revise its work anytime," Gorsuch wrote. "But that forum, not this one, is the proper place for such lawmaking."

The defendants, some of which include BP PLC, Chevron Corp., Exxon Mobil Corp. and Royal Dutch Shell PLC, have argued that the case needed be moved to a federal court because the central issue of fossil fuel extraction is done at the behest of the federal government.

Legal experts believe that if the case is heard in a federal court it would result in a favorable ruling for the defendants, and would result in a domino effect on similar cases working through the court system.

Alongside Gorsuch, Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Amy Coney Barret, Stephen Breyer, Elena Kagan, Brett Kavanaugh and Clarence Thomas sided with the majority. Justice Sonia Sotomayor dissented, whereas Justice Samuel Alito abstained from the decision, as he owns stock in two companies named in the lawsuit.

Supporters of the plaintiffs have condemned Coney Barrett's participation in the ruling, as her father worked as an attorney for one of the listed companies. Her vote, however, would not have affected the outcome of the ruling.

In her dissent, Sotomayor argued that the high court's ruling is creating a new avenue in the legal system for appealing and delaying much-needed decisions, underscoring that the city of Baltimore has already waited three years for the case to be heard.

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Brazil's Coffee, Orange, Corn Exports at Risk Amid Worst Drought in Two Decades  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Luiz Carlos Ciochi, director-general of Brazil's National Electric Grid Operator, revealed earlier this month that energy prices may remain high as the country's recent drought has triggered a shortage of hydroelectric generation, and increased dependence on thermal power plants.

As Brazil grapples with the aftermath of record-low rainfall, the country's water crisis may begin threatening the global supply of products like coffee, corn, and oranges.

"My irrigation reservoir is drying up now -- that usually happens in August," Mauricio Pinheiro, a 59-year-old coffee farmer [told Bloomberg](#). "I'm really concerned about running out of water in the coming months."

Pinheiro's 53-hectare (131-acre) plantation of arabica-coffee crops received less than half the water necessary in the past season, which runs from November through March.

Some 15% of Brazil's arabica coffee fields are irrigated, while some 30% of orange crop fields are irrigated, according to the outlet. Despite irrigation, Brazil's orange crop production has dropped some 31% this year.

Additionally, Brazil's second corn [crop estimates](#) dropped from 90 million tonnes to 72.8 million tonnes, according to agribusiness consultancy Céleres.

The director-general of Brazil's National Electric Grid Operator explained last week that rainfall for Brazil's traditionally rainy season was the lowest in two decades.

"The good thing is that, with the lower [seasonal] temperatures, the [demand] load drops, but we are getting as much thermal generation going as we can," Ciocchi [told Reuters](#).

Even prior to Brazil's record-low rainfall, scientists and activists in the country were sounding the alarm over the environmental dangers of deforestation.

"We have had two months with a lot of fire. It's already worse than last year," Ane Alencar, science director for Brazil's Amazon Environmental Research Institute, warned in [October 2020](#). "It could get worse if the drought continues. We are at the mercy of the rain."

[Recent analysis](#) by the Monitoring of the Andean Amazon Project details some 430,000 acres of the Amazon Rainforest have been cleared in 2021.

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who has been widely criticized for his approach to environmental concerns, stated on May 11 that Brazil has been "unlucky" when it comes to rainfall.

"Rain usually [falls] until March, and now we are already in the phase where there is no rain," he said.

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Probe Launched After Tesla in 'Autopilot' Mode Reportedly Crashes Into Parked Police Cruiser by [Evan Craighead](#)

Last year, the US' National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) determined the 2018 fatal crash of a Tesla Model X was related to both Tesla's 'Autopilot' system and the driver's inattention. As the electric vehicle company continues to grow, scrutiny about its driver-assistance system has followed.

The Snohomish County Sheriff's Office announced on Monday that a Tesla vehicle operating in 'Autopilot' mode caused "significant damage" after it struck a deputy's vehicle on the shoulder of a road in Arlington, Washington.

Authorities detailed that the Saturday incident occurred as a deputy was responding to a separate incident in which a vehicle sliced a utility pole in half.

"The deputy parked on the shoulder on the road, with his emergency lights flashing, and exited his vehicle to speak with the Fire units on scene," the sheriff's office said [via Facebook](#).

"Approximately 30 seconds later, a Tesla in "autopilot" mode, struck the deputy's vehicle causing significant damage."

Two photos were published by the sheriff's office, showing the state of the Ford Explorer patrol car after the tire on the driver's side was presumably removed.

Washington State Patrol announced in a Monday news release that the driver was ticketed for the collision. The state law enforcement agency also highlighted that it was conducting an investigation on the matter.

Aside from this incident, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) is investigating over two dozen accidents with Tesla vehicles involved. According to the [Associated Press](#), at least three people have died from accidents tied to Tesla's Autopilot feature.

The NTSB is generally tasked with investigating the causes of accidents, while the NHTSA's primary objective relates to safety regulations for cars and light trucks.

"Because NHTSA has put in place no requirements, manufacturers can operate and test vehicles virtually anywhere, even if the location exceeds the AV [autonomous vehicle] control system's limitations," NTSB Chairman Robert Sumwalt wrote in a February issuance to the US Department of Transportation.

"Although Tesla includes a disclaimer that 'currently enabled features require active driver supervision and do not make the vehicle autonomous,' NHTSA's hands-off approach to oversight of AV testing poses a potential risk to motorists and other road users."

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Vietnamese Government Opens Investigation Into Cryptocurrency Data Leak  
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

A recent online data leak revealed personal details of up to 10,000 Vietnamese citizens after an anonymous account on a hacker forum accessed data via the Pi Network, a digital currency mining platform based in California. Pi, which is also the name of its cryptocurrency, works on a pay-to-surf business model that pays users for data consumption.

Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security's cybersecurity division has launched an investigation into the newly-revealed data leak, which exposed over 17 GB worth of identifying personal information.

The information leak was originally exposed in a since-deleted forum post on RaidForums by an account named Ox1337x, who allegedly revealed the possession of a large amount of Know You Customer (KYC) data from users of the Pi Network.

The account claimed to have access to documents such as Vietnamese identity card information with faces, addresses, phone numbers and emails. The account put the information up for sale for \$9,000, asking for payment to be made through cryptocurrencies bitcoin or litecoin.

"To perform KYC verification on Pi Network, Vietnamese would need to use their passports. Only some users who used earlier versions of Pi could perform KYC verification using their driver licenses, but so far the system has yet to accept Vietnamese identity cards," Phien Vo, a moderator of the Vietnamese Pi Network group chat channel, [told VnExpress](#).

Vo maintains that it is not completely accurate to blame the leak on the Pi Network, as the platform processes its KYC data through a third-party system known as Yoti, a biometric

consumer application that [studies](#) the consumption and use of digital identification. Vo adds that while Yoti accepts identity cards from 62 countries and territories, that list does not include Vietnam.

During an earlier version of the Yoti app, it did accept these forms of identity cards, according to [reports](#).

Vietnam had been making [strides](#) against cybercrime after 2020 saw an increase in cyberattacks across some of its economic sectors. Millions of [Facebook](#) users in Vietnam had also been exposed after 3 GB worth of scrapped data was found on a cloud-based server. Since then, the Vietnamese government has been [working towards](#) establishing a more digital presence and economy. Earlier this year, the IDs of more than [300,000](#) Vietnamese were leaked on RaidForums, this time from a different anonymous account.

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UN Hopes to Release \$14Mln to Aid Palestinians in Gaza - Relief Coordinator

UNITED NATIONS, May 18 (Sputnik) - UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock said he hopes the world body will release \$14 million for emergency assistance to the Palestinian families amid the escalation of the situation in the Gaza Strip.

"We need adequate funding to enable a speedy response. The Humanitarian Coordinator, Lynn Hastings, hopes to release some US\$14 million from the OPT Humanitarian Fund," Lowcock said on Tuesday.

Lowcock added that UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will soon launch a fuller appeal as the initial funding seeks to meet only immediate needs.

Earlier on Tuesday, Palestinian Ambassador to the United Nations Riyad Mansour urged Guterres to immediately issue emergency humanitarian assistance to Gaza.

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US, UK Top Security Advisers Held Talks in Washington on Gaza, Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan met with his UK counterpart to discuss global matters of mutual interest, including the situation in Gaza and Russia, the White House said in a press release.

"Today, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan met in Washington with Stephen Lovegrove, National Security Adviser to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, to exchange views on a range of shared global challenges as part of our ongoing bilateral consultations," the release said on Tuesday. "They discussed Afghanistan, Russia, and Iran, as well as the situation in Gaza."

Sullivan and Lovegrove also discussed President Joe Biden's upcoming trip to London in June to convene with G7 leaders and meet with UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson on the margins of the summit, the release said.

In addition, the two security advisers agreed to continue coordinating on COVID-19, including global access to vaccines, the release added.

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IS Supporter Pleads Guilty to Planning Synagogue Attack in Ohio - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - A man from Ohio has admitted guilt for his attempts to aid the Islamic State terror group (IS, banned in Russia) and for planning an attack on a Jewish synagogue, the Justice Department said in a statement.

"Damon M. Joseph, aka Abdullah Ali Yusuf, 23, of Holland, Ohio, pleaded guilty today to attempting to provide material support to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, aka ISIS, and attempting to commit a hate crime, for planning an attack on a synagogue in the Toledo, Ohio area," the department said on Tuesday.

Joseph was described as a self-radicalized, online jihadist. Investigators became interested in him after they found several social media posts featuring weapons and pro-IS material. He later spoke and met with undercover agents, during which he agreed to produce what he believed to be propaganda for the group, as well as expressing his intention to commit an act of terror on synagogues in the greater Toledo area.

He is scheduled to be sentenced in September, and faces a maximum penalty of life in prison for his crimes. The FBI officials involved with the case added that this is an excellent opportunity to remind the public to remain vigilant about these sorts of homegrown threats.

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US Condemns Turkish President's Remarks About Jewish People - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's remarks against the Jewish people, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"The United States strongly condemns President Erdogan's recent anti-Semitic comments regarding the Jewish people and finds them reprehensible," Price said on Tuesday. "We urge President Erdogan and other Turkish leaders to refrain from incendiary remarks, which could incite further violence. We call on Turkey to join the United States in working to end the conflict." Earlier on Tuesday, the Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs summoned Turkish Ambassador Ozan Ceyhun after Erdogan "cursed" Vienna for raising the Israeli flag over government buildings in solidarity amid hostilities in and around Gaza.

Price said the United States is committed to fighting anti-Semitism in all of its forms and it takes seriously the violence that often accompanies anti-Semitism.

The clashes between Israel and Palestinians worshippers in the flashpoint Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in Jerusalem started during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and then gave rise to intense military confrontation on the Israeli-Gaza border.

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Emergency Humanitarian Access Needed in Gaza to Provide Aid to Children - United Nations

UNITED NATIONS, May 18 (Sputnik) - United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Executive Director Henrietta Fore said in a statement that the agency needs immediate access into Gaza to provide humanitarian access to children affected by the recent escalation in violence between Israel and Hamas.

"UNICEF is calling for the immediate cessation of hostilities on humanitarian grounds to allow the entry of staff and essential supplies, including fuel, medical items, first-aid kits and COVID-19 vaccines," Fore said on Tuesday.

The United Nations is also calling for the establishment of humanitarian corridors so that the agency can deliver supplies safely to provide humanitarian needs, she said.

Fore noted that at least 60 children have been killed and 444 others have been injured in Gaza within the last ten days and about 30,000 displaced. Approximately 325,000 Gaza residents need water and sanitation services, she said.

In addition, roughly 60 percent of electricity in Gaza is out, leaving local hospitals in need of a substantial amount of fuel to run generators to keep the medical facilities operating.

On late Tuesday, Israeli television reported that Egypt had proposed to impose a ceasefire between Israel and Palestinians beginning on Thursday, adding that Hamas had already accepted the initiative.

Recently resumed fighting in East Jerusalem has led to the worst violence between Israel and Palestinians in Gaza in recent years. Palestinian militants have launched over 3,350 rockets toward Israel, which in response has fired retaliatory strikes against the enclave.

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President Erdogan and other Turkish leaders to refrain from incendiary remarks, which could incite further violence. We call on Turkey to join the United States in working to end the conflict." Earlier on Tuesday, the Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs summoned Turkish Ambassador Ozan Ceyhun after Erdogan "cursed" Vienna for raising the Israeli flag over government buildings in solidarity amid hostilities in and around Gaza.

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#### Trudeau Says Quebec Has Right to Unilaterally Amend Canadian Constitution

TORONTO, May 18 (Sputnik) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said the French-speaking province of Quebec can modify parts of the Canadian constitution unilaterally, sparking debate and outrage online.

The province's nationalist Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government is seeking to pass Bill 96, which would amend the Canadian constitution - defining Quebec as a nation with French as its official language - and accordingly strengthen French-language requirements for businesses, governments and schools.

"Our initial analysis, in terms of the Justice Department, has highlighted that it is perfectly legitimate for a province to modify the section of the constitution that applies specifically to them," Trudeau told reporters on Tuesday.

The Prime Minister highlighted that the constitution includes safeguards that will protect Quebec's anglophone speakers but emphasized the importance of protecting the French language.

Trudeau's assertion sparked heated debate online among Canada's constitutional experts, with one professor saying that the Prime Minister's words amount to an "abdication" of his duty to uphold the country's constitution.

Canada and Quebec have endured a volatile relationship since the country's confederation in 1867. The predominantly Francophone province, which places the utmost importance on preserving its French culture and heritage, has undertaken several efforts in the past to secede from the federation, including holding independence referendums in 1980 and 1995.

Since assuming control over the province in 2018, the CAQ, led by Premier Francois Legault, has undertaken several controversial initiatives, including a ban on religious symbols at work.

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#### US House Passes Bipartisan Bill to Bolster State Department Workforce, Embassy Security

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation to recruit a diverse workforce at the State Department, strengthen security at embassies around the world and enhance anti-corruption activities within the agency.

The House on Tuesday passed the Department of State Authorization Act of 2021 in bloc with 20 other bills in a 350-75 vote.

The measure will now head to the US Senate for consideration.

The legislation seeks to enhance the State Department's operations by recruiting and retaining a more diverse workforce; bolstering embassy and information security; improving flexibility and training policies for employees; and enhancing the agency's anti-corruption activities.

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US State Dept. Confirms Blinken, Lavrov to Meet Tomorrow Night at Arctic Council Gathering

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - US State Department spokesperson Ned Price confirmed that Secretary of State Antony Blinken will meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov tomorrow night on the margins of the Arctic Council in Iceland.

"Secretary Blinken will have an opportunity to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov tomorrow night on the margins of the Arctic Council," Price said in a statement on Tuesday.

Price said the meeting will indicate whether the United States can achieve a relationship with Russia that is more stable and predictable.

The bilateral meeting will take place after the final Arctic Council event tomorrow evening, Price noted.

Lavrov said in earlier remarks that he plans to discuss the current Israeli-Palestinian tensions during the bilateral meeting in Reykjavik.

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Hundreds Rally in New York to Decry Israeli Attacks Against Palestinians in Gaza

NEW YORK, May 18 (Sputnik) - New York City residents took to the streets in midtown Manhattan to protest the Israeli airstrikes in Gaza, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the scene.

Hundreds of demonstrators, many of whom were waving Palestinian flags and wearing checkered "keffiyeh" scarves, gathered on Tuesday afternoon in front of the Consulate General of Israel in New York.

"From the river to the sea - Palestine will be free," one of the protest leaders could be heard shouting in a megaphone supported by a large crowd of people carrying placards in support of the Palestinians in Gaza. The placards read "Stop bombing innocent children," "Free Palestine," "Palestine will never die," among others.

Many of those participating in the protest also carried placards pointing to the US military support for Israel in the renewed escalation. Signs with messages such as "Your tax dollars are funding a genocide" and "End all US aid to Israel" could also be seen carried by protesters.

Some protesters wearing Palestinian insignia climbed on lamp posts, while others made their way onto the scaffolding of nearby buildings, producing loud cheers from the crowd. Heavy police presence was seen around the United Nations headquarters located a couple of streets away from the site of the protest.

A UN security guard told Sputnik the heightened security was related to fears that the demonstrators might come close to the organization's premises.

The UN Security Council has been criticized, including by Palestinian Ambassador to the United Nations Riyad Mansour, for its failure to call in one voice for a ceasefire in the Middle East.

After holding three meetings on the issue over the course of one week, the UN security Council remained intact on the issue as the United States continued to block statements decrying violence in Gaza.

The current episode of the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict broke out last week after civil unrest in East Jerusalem, prompting hostilities on the border of Israel and the Gaza Strip, with Palestinian militants having launched approximately 3,700 rockets against Israel and the latter retaliating with airstrikes.

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#### **N. Carolina Deputies Involved in Death of Andrew Brown to Keep Their Jobs, Be Disciplined**

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The Pasquotank County, North Carolina, sheriff's deputies involved in the shooting death of Andrew Brown Jr. will remain employed after the District Attorney announced no charges will be filed against them, Pasquotank County Sheriff Tommy Wooten II said.

"The three deputies involved will keep their jobs. They will be disciplined and retrained," Wooten said in a statement on Tuesday.

Brown was shot and killed in April after attempting to flee from deputies who were executing a warrant for his arrest. Brown attempted to use his car as a deadly weapon while trying to evade capture.

Wooten acknowledged the deputies could have done a better job throughout the incident, mentioning in particular that two did not turn on their body cameras and will be disciplined for their omission.

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#### **Washington Governor Signs 12 Bills to Improve Law Enforcement Accountability**

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - Washington Governor Jay Inslee has signed 12 bills that are expected to heighten law enforcement accountability, including legislation to prohibit use of force

and create an Office of Independent Investigations reporting to the head of the state, the governor's office said.

"Gov. Jay Inslee signed a dozen bills today that will improve accountability for law enforcement in Washington state, and will create the nation's strongest police accountability system," the office said in a release on Tuesday. "The governor signed legislation that will create an Office of Independent Investigations that reports to the governor, prohibit certain uses of force and will require more thorough oversight requirements for hiring and for reporting misconduct."

One of the bills signed is supposed to increase transparency and accountability of the law enforcement by changing certification and background requirements for police officers as well as more thorough internal reviews in case of a misconduct by an officer, and also by making the results of internal investigations publicly available, the release said.

Another bill prohibits a number of use-of-force tactics by law enforcement officers, including chokeholds and neck restraints, restricts vehicular pursuits, and limits the use of tear gas, the release added.

The governor linked the creation of a new police accountability system in the state with the killing of George Floyd in Minnesota and the killing of Manny Ellis in Tacoma.

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US 7th Fleet Warship Transits Taiwan Strait - Indo-Pacific Command

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) – The United States has sent the Arleigh Burke class guided missile destroyer Curtis Wilbur through the Taiwan Strait to demonstrate its commitment to free navigation in the region, the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) said.

"The ship's transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the US commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. The United States military will continue to fly, sail, and operate anywhere international law allows," a command press release said on Tuesday.

In 2020, the United States operationally challenged 28 different excessive maritime claims by 19 different nations, the Defense Department said in a recent report.

Many of the challenges target Chinese claims, especially in the South China Sea, the northern portion consisting of a 100-mile-wide Taiwan Strait.

China considers Taiwan a rebel province and routinely protests whenever US warships transits the strait, as in April, following a similar voyage by the destroyer John S. McCain.

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#### US House Adopts Senate-Passed Measure to Address Rise in Anti-Asian Hate Crimes

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The House of Representatives has adopted a Senate-passed bill to address the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States amid the novel coronavirus pandemic.

The House on Tuesday passed the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act by a vote of 364-62, sending it to President Joe Biden to be signed into law.

The Senate passed the bill in April with a 94-1 vote.

The legislation would require the Justice Department to facilitate an expedited review of hate crimes in the United States. The measure would also provide grants to states to establish state-run hate crimes reporting hotlines and to boost efforts to gather more data on reported hate crimes.

Moreover, the bill would also require any individuals convicted of a hate crime to participate in educational classes or community service.

This congressional action comes on the heels of a shooting in Atlanta that left eight people dead, including six women of Asian descent. The Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis said the shooting was a hate crime and her office would seek the death penalty against the alleged gunman Robert Aaron Long.

Earlier in May, two older Asian women were stabbed while waiting for a bus in downtown San Francisco. In late March, an older Asian woman was brutally beat by a man near New York City's Times Square.

Reports of hate crimes against Asian Americans have soared during the coronavirus pandemic.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) -

#### MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS

\* The Israeli military has struck 12 houses of senior Hamas commanders in the Gaza Strip over the past 24 hours, the Israel Defense Forces said.

\* UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo on Tuesday called on international actors to scale up diplomatic efforts to deescalate the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

\* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday that his country had received more information on the Israeli airstrike that tore down a high-rise housing the offices of the Associated Press, Al Jazeera and other outlets in the city of Gaza.

\* The Red Crescent branch in the Gaza Strip was bombed by Israel without warning, Faisal Al-Emadi, the executive director of international relief and development sector of Qatar Red Crescent Society told Sputnik on Tuesday.

\* At least two people killed were killed as a result of the recent rocket attack from the Gaza Strip on Eshkol Regional Council located in southern Israel, the daily newspaper Israel Hayom reported.

#### PUTIN-BIDEN MEETING

\* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday expressed hope the meeting between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin would take place "in the weeks ahead" as well as more stable and predictable relations.

\* There is no final agreement yet on the venue of the potential meeting of Putin and Biden, an announcement will be made as soon as there is some clarity, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

\* If an agreement is eventually reached on the potential meeting between Putin and Biden, it could be held in a European diplomatic capital, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

#### NORD STREAM 2

\* The Biden administration will waive sanctions against the corporate entity and top executive managing the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, Axios reported on Tuesday.

\* The completion of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline for carrying Russian natural gas to Europe now depends on construction firms, since German and European regulators have issued all the necessary permits, German Energy Minister Peter Altmaier said.

#### AFGHANISTAN PEACEPROCESS

\* Russia and China are on the same page with the United States with respect to encouraging negotiations between the Taliban and Afghan government, US Special Representative on Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad said in a congressional hearing on Tuesday.

#### RUSSIA BANKING SYSTEM DEVELOPMENTS

\* The prototype of the digital ruble will be created by the Bank of Russia at the end of this year, further stages will be worked out in contact with the market, the bank's first deputy governor, Olga Skorobogatova, said on Tuesday.

\* The Bank of Russia does not see the risks of disconnecting the country from interbank payment system SWIFT, but if such a scenario is implemented, it will be possible to transfer internal Russian traffic to the Financial Messaging System of the Bank of Russia (SPFS), Olga Skorobogatova said.

#### ANDREW BROWN CASE IN US

\* The police shooting of Andrew Brown Jr. was tragic but ultimately justified due to the danger he posed to officers and the public at the time of the shooting, District Attorney Andrew Womble said during a Tuesday press conference.

\* The law enforcement officers involved in the shooting death of Andrew Brown Jr. in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, last month will be charged because they acted within their rights to defend themselves and the public, Womble announced.

#### MACEDONIA EXPELS RUSSIAN DIPLOMAT

\* Macedonia's Foreign Ministry announced on Tuesday that it will expel a Russian diplomat who must leave the country within seven days beginning on May 14.

\* Macedonia will expel one Russian diplomat and Moscow is already considering a potential response, the Russian Embassy in Skopje confirmed to Sputnik.

\* Skopje will certainly regret its decision to expel the Russian diplomat given that this step is likely to affect bilateral relations, Vladimir Dzhubarov, the first deputy head of the Russian upper house's international affairs committee, told Sputnik.

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#### Toyota Invests \$36Mln to Develop New Battery Materials Needed for Carbon-Neutral Future

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) – Research for new materials needed to make batteries for electric vehicles more efficient will benefit from a four-year, \$36 million investment announced by Toyota's Research Institute on Tuesday.

"Toyota Research Institute (TRI) announced today that it is committing another \$36 million to its Accelerated Materials Design and Discovery (AMDD) collaborative university research program over the next four years," a Toyota press release said.

Key research topics for the program include accelerating the testing of battery lifetime, developing methods for the AI-driven discovery of new fuel cell materials, creating a novel robotic platform for rapid design of new polymer formulations for batteries, and launching autonomous systems that can discover materials in simulation with no human intervention, the statement added.

The \$36 million comes in addition to \$35 million invested in the project beginning in 2017, the release said.

The investment over the next four years is earmarked for 11 US universities and laboratories, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and Stanford University, the release added.

A switch from gasoline to electric-powered vehicles is considered a key to creating a carbon-neutral economy by mid-century, analysts say.

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**Blinken Emphasizes to Germany's Maas US Opposition to Nord Stream 2 Pipeline - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke over the telephone with Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and expressed the United States' opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"Secretary Blinken underscored the US commitment to work with Allies and partners to counter Russian efforts to undermine our collective security, and in that vein, emphasized US opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline," Price said.

Axios reported earlier on Tuesday that the Biden administration will waive sanctions against the corporate entity and the top executive managing the construction of the Nord Stream 2. The State Department, in its Nord Stream 2 sanctions list prepared for Congress, will waive those sanctions proposed against the Nord Stream 2 AG and its CEO, Matthias Warnig, using US national interests as justification, the publication reported, citing two sources briefed on the decision.

Both Blinken and Maas discussed the importance of transatlantic cooperation in order to managed challenges posed by Russia and China, Price said. They also spoke of deescalation in the Middle East and troops withdrawal from Afghanistan, he added.

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**US Orders Upgraded Vertical Launch System Design for Ship-Deployed Missiles - BAE Systems**

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has ordered a new \$164 million Vertical Launch System (VLS) for its ship-deployed missiles, BAE Systems said on Tuesday.

"BAE Systems wins \$164 Million US Navy design contract for Vertical Launch System," the company said in a press release. "BAE Systems has won a US Navy competition to serve as the design agent for the mechanical portion of the Mark 41 VLS."

The contract calls for BAE Systems to provide design, development, test, product improvement, and sustaining support for current and legacy VLS systems. The company will also continue to design and support canisters used to store, transport, and launch the missiles from the VLS, the release said.

"The Mark-41 VLS is capable of launching a broad range of missiles, including the Standard Missile SM-2, SM-3, and SM-6 variants; the Tomahawk Land Attack Cruise Missile; the NATO Seasparrow and Evolved Seasparrow; and the Vertical Launch Anti-Submarine Rocket," BAE Systems added.

The Mark 41 VLS is also deployed with the navies of Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, South Korea, Spain, and Turkey, according to the release.

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**Governor Abbott Issues Order Prohibiting Mask Mandates Across Texas - Statement**

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued an executive order prohibiting cities, school districts and other entities across the state from enforcing a mask mandate, the governor's office said on Tuesday.

"Governor Greg Abbott today issued an Executive Order prohibiting governmental entities in Texas - including counties, cities, school districts, public health authorities, or government officials - from requiring or mandating mask wearing," the governor's office said in a press release on Tuesday.

The executive order will go into effect on Friday, so any local governments or officials that attempt to impose a mask mandate may face a fine of up to \$1,000, the release said.

On Monday, Abbott announced he will terminate the \$300 in weekly federal pandemic-related unemployment payments for jobless Texans, effective on June 26.

Abbott said the Texas economy is soaring and there are many good-paying jobs available in the state. The decision to end the federal unemployment benefits for jobless Texans is to end a high-level of fraudulent unemployment claims in the state, Abbott added.

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**US Extends Period to Buy and Sell Chinese Military Linked Securities - Treasury Dept.**

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has extended the window allowing citizens to trade securities in companies that the US believes to be linked to the Chinese military, the Treasury Department said on Tuesday.

All public trading of securities in companies linked to the Chinese military "are authorized through 9:30 a.m. eastern daylight time [13:30 GMT], June 11, 2021," the notice from the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control stated.

Executive Order 13959, on which this action is based, was originally signed back in November under the Trump administration. The initial order only authorized the trading up until May 27 of this year.

The goal of the order is to address the threat from securities investments that finance Chinese military companies. The companies affected by the order include those in various military-adjacent tech sectors such as aerospace, shipbuilding, and communications.

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Israel Not Requesting US Military Support in Gaza Operation - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) – Israel has not asked the US for any additional support for its operations against Palestinians amid the ongoing military conflict, the Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"They [Israel] have not asked for any additional support. We continue to stand by Israel's right to defend itself and its citizens. As you know, we have a strong bilateral military relationship with Israel and that has not changed as a result," Kirby told reporters during a briefing.

Kirby also underscored that during the telephone conversation with his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Gantz earlier in the day, the US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was clear that Washington did not want to see any additional innocent civilian lives lost on either side of the clash while supporting Israel's right to defend itself.

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Lockheed Martin Opens F-16 Combat Fighter Production Line for Foreign Sales - US Air Force

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin has opened a production line in the state of South Carolina to build new F-16 combat fighter jets to meet a renewed demand from United States' allies, the US Air Force announced on Tuesday.

"To support the growing demand for new F-16 Fighting Falcon from partner nations, the US Air Force has teamed with Lockheed Martin Corp. to open a new production line to build the F-16 Block 70/72 fighter aircraft at the company's facility in Greenville, South Carolina," the Air Force News Service said in a report.

Launched in 2019, the operation is now the only production facility for F-16s in the world, opening three years after Lockheed Martin's long-time F-16 line in Fort Worth, Texas, ceased production, the report said.

"Recently, and on behalf of five foreign military partners, the Air Force awarded Lockheed Martin Corp. approximately \$14 billion, to build 128 F-16s at the facility through 2026," the report added.

The first F-16s are expected to roll off the production line in 2022, and production is expected to increase after the first year. The aircraft will then be delivered to US military partner nations, including Bahrain, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Taiwan, and others, according to the report.

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#### DarkSide Gets Over \$90Mln in Ransom From Cyber Attacks - Elliptic Monitoring Group

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - DarkSide, the hacker group responsible for the ransomware attack on the US Colonial Pipeline, has netted more than \$90 million from a series of similar attacks, the cyber monitoring group Elliptic said on Tuesday.

"Elliptic was first to identify the Bitcoin wallet used by the DarkSide ransomware group to receive a 75 Bitcoin ransom payment [about \$5 million] from Colonial Pipeline," Elliptic said. "In this new report we expand our original analysis to examine all of the wallets used by DarkSide to receive Bitcoin ransoms from victims over the past nine months."

In total, just over \$90 million in Bitcoin ransom payments were made to DarkSide, originating from 47 distinct wallets. Of 99 organizations infected with DarkSide malware, nearly half of the victims paid a ransom, with the average payment of \$1.9 million, the report said.

After receiving ransom from Colonial Pipeline, which allowed the company to resume operations, DarkSide announced it was disbanding. However, analysts said the hacking group would most likely re-emerge using a different name.

The May 7 attack on Colonial Pipeline, which supplies about half of the gasoline to the Eastern United States, resumed operations within a week, but many stations that ran out of fuel as a result have yet to receive fresh supplies.

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#### Colonial Pipeline Experiences Disruption to Shipping Communications System - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - Colonial Pipeline experienced a short disruption to its shipping communications system due to the process of restoring services following the unauthorized breach more than a week ago, the company said on Tuesday.

"Our internal server that runs our nomination system experienced intermittent disruptions this morning due to some of the hardening efforts that are ongoing and part of our restoration process," Colonial Pipeline said via Twitter. "These issues were not related to the ransomware or any type of reinfection."

Colonial Pipeline said in a later statement that the shipping communications service have been restored.

A ransomware attack prompted Colonial Pipeline to shut down operations on May 7 with the system not resuming normal operations until May 15.

The pipeline, stretching more than 5,000 miles from refineries on the Gulf of Mexico coast, supplies nearly half the gasoline on the US East Coast, along with jet fuel and heating oil. Short supplies combined with panic buying caused many stations to run out of gas.

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US Renews 'Do Not Travel' Advisory For Colombia Due to Unrest - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) – The nationwide unrest underway in Colombia prompted the US to renew its most severe travel advisory for the South American nation, the State Department said on Tuesday.

“Colombia is experiencing continuing demonstrations, unrest, and disruptions throughout the country. The nationwide events can cause the shutdown of local roads and major highways, often without prior notice or estimated reopening timelines. Road closures may significantly reduce access to public transportation and airports and may disrupt travel both within and between cities,” a department press release said.

The announcement renews a Level-4, 'Do Not Travel' advisory issued by the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the State Department's Level-4 advisory due to crime, terrorism and the threat of kidnapping, the release said.

Workers' strikes and public protests started in Colombia last month, with people walking out against the so-called Sustainable Solidarity Law, a now-shelved tax reform bill that trade unions warned would lead to at least 1.5 million workers having to pay new taxes.

According to Colombia's human rights officials, about 50 people have died amid the protests, including one police officer, while nearly 600 have been injured. Hundreds have been detained. Demonstrators, as well as international institutions, have been drawing attention to the disproportionate use of force by the Colombian police.

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US Posts \$5Mln Reward For Info. on Aid Worker Kidnapped in Afghanistan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) – The US will pay \$5 million for information leading to the location, recovery and return of aid worker Cydney Mizell, who went missing in Afghanistan in 2008, the State Department said on Tuesday.

“The U.S. Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service, through its Rewards for Justice (RFJ) office, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation are advertising a reward of up to \$5 million

for information concerning the kidnapping of Cydney Mizell, a humanitarian aid worker who went missing in Afghanistan in 2008," a department press release said.

Mizell was abducted along with her driver, Muhammad Hadi, by unidentified gunmen in the city of Kandahar, Afghanistan on January 26, 2008. At the time of her disappearance, Mizell taught English at Kandahar University and embroidery at a school for girls. She also helped Afghan women develop projects to generate income for their families, the release added.

Mizell had lived in Kandahar for three years and spoke fluent Pashto, according to the release.

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Biden Admin. to Waive Sanctions on Entity, CEO Managing Nord Stream 2 – Reports

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration will waive sanctions against the corporate entity and top executive managing the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, Axios reported on Tuesday.

The State Department, in its Nord Stream 2 sanctions list prepared for Congress, will waive those sanctions proposed against the Nord Stream 2 AG and its CEO, Matthias Warnig, using US national interests as justification, the publication reported, citing two sources briefed on the decision.

Those familiar with the report added that it calls for sanctions against several Russian ships involved in the pipeline project. Entities included on this list, however, have yet to be officially sanctioned.

The list is part of a report that the State Department must submit to Congress identifying targets for sanctions, as required under the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act. Administration officials also clarified that even if the proposed sanctions are waived at the present moment, those waivers are liable to be revoked at any time.

This decision comes in the late stages of the pipeline's construction, with 95 percent of the project already completed. Without a major intervention such as the sanctioning of those involved with the pipeline's construction or the German end-users of the gas, the Nord Stream 2 project could be completed as soon as this summer

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US House Speaker Pelosi Calls for Diplomatic Boycott of 2022 Olympics in China

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The United States should lead a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing due to China's human rights abuses, US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Tuesday.

"Here's what I propose, and join those who are proposing, is a diplomatic boycott," Pelosi told a hearing on "China, Genocide and the Olympics" jointly hosted by the Human Rights Commission and the Congressional-Executive Commission on China.

Pelosi's call for a boycott of the 2022 Winter Games comes after a group of human rights organizations published an open letter on Monday, urging the world to stay away from the event to send a strong message to Beijing over its rights record.

Pelosi, a Democrat, had previously asked Republican President George Bush to skip the 2008 Olympic opening ceremony in Beijing on similar grounds of right abuses. Bush ignored the call and went on to attend the opening ceremony.

Ignoring China's abuses this time was not an option, Pelosi said in her latest plea, aimed at Democrat President Joe Biden and other world leaders. "Silence on this issue is unacceptable," the US House Speaker told Tuesday's hearing. "It enables China's abuses."

Numerous human rights groups have publicized human rights issues in mainland China that they consider the government to be mishandling that included the death penalty, the political and legal status of Tibet, and neglect of freedom of the press in mainland China and the treatment of Muslim Uyghurs.

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#### Hacked US Pipeline Drives Gasoline Prices Over \$3 Per Gallon For First Time Since 2014

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) – The hack attack earlier this month that shuttered a key US pipeline causing gas stations to run out of fuel in the southeastern US caused gasoline prices to spike above \$3 a gallon for the first time since 2014, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said on Tuesday.

"Disruptions to Colonial Pipeline operations prompted an increase in the average U.S. retail price for regular grade gasoline to \$3.03 per gallon on May 17, the first time retail gasoline prices averaged more than \$3.00/gal since October 27, 2014," an EIA report said.

A ransomware attack forced Colonial Pipeline to shut down on May 7 with the system not resuming normal operations until May 15.

The pipeline, stretching more than 5,000 miles from refineries on the Gulf of Mexico coast, supplies nearly half the gasoline on the US East Coast, along with jet fuel and heating oil. Short supplies combined with panic buying caused many stations to run out of gas.

Although deliveries have begun returning to normal, many stations remain empty in the Southeastern United States, with Washington, DC among the hardest hit. According to the gas information platform GasBuddy, more than half of the closed stations in the US capital had yet to receive fresh supplies as of Tuesday.

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### US Vaccines Partially, Probably 'Quite Protective' Against India COVID-19 Strain - Fauci

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - Current vaccines in use in the United States have proven "partially and probably protective" against the B.1.617 coronavirus variant raging in India, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Anthony Fauci said on Tuesday. "If you look at a number of studies, again, that have come out literally within the last few days, on each of them, the neutralization resistance to the 617 antibody suggests that the current vaccines that we are all using - that we've been speaking about - would be at least partially and probably quite protective," Fauci, who is member of the White House COVID-19 Response Team, said.

The B.1.617 coronavirus variant has become the dominant strain across India and has spread to about 40 nations, including the United Kingdom and Singapore. India is the second-worst coronavirus-infected country after the United States, with more than 25 million cases and over 258,000 virus-related deaths.

The United States has approved three coronavirus vaccines: a two-shot Moderna vaccine for individuals aged 18 and above, a two-shot Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for individuals aged 12 and above and a single-shot Johnson & Johnson-Janssen for individuals ages 18 and above. Some 274 million coronavirus vaccines have been administered to Americans to date, with about 124 million, or 37.7 percent of the population, being "fully vaccinated" with two doses each.

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### Palestine Urges ICC to Start Probe Into War Crimes in Gaza - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, May 18 (Sputnik) - Palestinian Ambassador to the United Nations Riyad Mansour on Tuesday called on the International Criminal Court (ICC) to launch an investigation into alleged war crimes committed in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

"We urge the ICC to begin the investigation of these war crimes of settlements and the attacks against the children, against the civilians, against the infrastructures, schools, properties, everything in the Gaza Strip and in other parts of the occupied territory," Mansour said in a press briefing on the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Mansour warned against interfering in the work of the ICC and said the court must be allowed establish responsibility for the war crimes allegedly committed by Israel.

In early March, an ICC prosecutor said that the tribunal would investigate crimes that were allegedly committed by the Israel Defense Forces in Palestine, including Gaza and the West Bank territories, since June 13, 2014. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has dismissed the move as "undiluted antisemitism" and vowed to fight until this "injustice" is reversed.

Earlier on Tuesday, Palestinian Ambassador to Russia Abdel Hafiz Nofal told Sputnik Palestine intended to appeal to the ICC over the recent Israeli attacks on media agencies' offices in the Gaza Strip that housed the Associated Press and Al Jazeera.

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US Launches Space Force Infrared Reconnaissance Satellite - United Launch Alliance

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The US Space Force launched the fifth of a constellation of six planned Infrared System Geosynchronous Earth Orbit (SBIRS GEO) missile detection and early warning satellites on Tuesday.

"An Atlas V 421 rocket carried the fifth Space Based Infrared System Geosynchronous Earth Orbit (SBIRS GEO Flight 5) missile detection and early warning satellite for the US Space Force Space and Missile Systems Center from Space Launch Complex-41 at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station, Florida," the United Launch Alliance (ULA) said.

Lift off occurred successfully at 1:31 pm Eastern Time and the flight was the 144th mission for the ULA, the 87th Atlas V launch and the eighth Atlas V launch in the 421 configuration, the alliance said.

Atlas V successfully launched the first four SBIRS GEO satellites between 2011 and 2018, the ULA said.

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UN Experts Call for End to Violence in Mideast to Address Denial of Palestinian Rights

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - Human rights experts working for the United Nations have called for an end to the violence in Israel and the Gaza Strip in order to address the denial of the rights of Palestinians, UN Special Rapporteurs said on Tuesday.

"UN human rights experts called on the international community to demand an immediate end to the violence in Gaza and Israel, and to act decisively to address the underlying source of the conflict: the denial of collective and individual rights of the Palestinian people," the Special Rapporteurs said.

The call comes amid rocket exchanges and other forms of clashes between Israelis and Palestinians that have resulted in the death of at least ten Israelis and 220 Palestinians. The Special Rapporteurs - who include experts on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, peaceful assembly and protection of human rights - also said the United States has failed to leverage its special relationship with Israel to help enforce an immediate ceasefire.

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Canada Investing Over \$165Mln in Domestic Vaccine Manufacturing Facility - Statement

TORONTO, May 18 (Sputnik) - Canada is investing \$165.17 million in a Toronto-area biotechnology company to help grow its vaccine manufacturing capability, Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada said on Tuesday.

"Today... the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry, announced an investment of \$199.16 million [US\$165.17 million] in Resilience Biotechnologies Inc," the department said in a statement. "This investment will help Resilience... increase its manufacturing and fill-finish capacity for a number of vaccines and therapeutics, including for those that use novel technology such as mRNA and that are now being deployed to fight COVID-19."

Once the manufacturing facility in Mississauga, Ontario has been retooled, the company expects to be able to manufacture between 112 and 640 million doses of messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccines per year, the statement said.

Innovation Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne said during a press briefing that deal will help reverse over four decades of decline in Canada's biotechnology sector, which caused most major global biotechnology companies to turn their backs on Ottawa's outreach efforts to secure coronavirus vaccine manufacturing in the country.

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US Winning 'War' on Coronavirus' as Number of Cases, Deaths Decrease - White House

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is seeing signs of victory in the "war" against the novel coronavirus, with significant decrease in cases and deaths in all 50 states, officials from the White House COVID-19 Response Team said on Tuesday.

"For the first time since the pandemic began, COVID-19 cases are down in all 50 states. We are winning the war on the virus," Andy Slavitt, acting administrator of the team, said. "More than one in three COVID-19 hospitalizations are people younger than age 50. We need you to help us finish the job."

Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), said 17,724 new cases were reported on Monday - the lowest daily caseload since June 2020. The seven-day average for COVID-19-related hospital admissions was 3,500, which represents a positive sign with another back-to-back decrease of almost 18 percent from the prior seven-day period, she said.

Walensky also said the seven-day average for daily deaths has also declined to 546 - a new low since March 2020 when the coronavirus pandemic began in large parts of the United States.

"The past week has been a big week, with progress and milestones that set us on a path out of this pandemic," Walensky said. "Hospital admissions are down, deaths are down and we are vaccinating between 1.5 million and 2 million people per day."

Some 274 million coronavirus vaccines have been administered to Americans to date, with about 124 million, or 37.7 percent of the population, being "fully vaccinated" with two doses each, according to most recent data

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US House Rules Committee Advances Bill to Set Up Probe on June 6 Capitol Incident

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The US House Committee on Rules has approved a bill setting up a September 11 style commission to probe the January 6 Capitol riot by a vote of nine to four on Tuesday, sending the bill to the full House for what is expected to be a rapid approval. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer has said the bill will go before the full house tomorrow.

Earlier on Tuesday, the White House supports a "full and fair" accounting of the incident and has set aside nearly \$2 billion to upgrade security at the Capitol.

"The [Biden] administration supports HR 3233, a bill to establish a National Commission to investigate the January 6, 2021 attack on the United States Capitol Complex," it said.

The Biden administration has also proposed a \$1.9 billion bill to reimburse direct costs incurred by the attack on the Capitol, improve facility security, protect Members of Congress, employees, and visitors, and provide judicial security, the White House added.

The bill sent to the House floor proposes an independent ten-member commission to advise measures to prevent any future such attack on the Capitol with a deadline for its report of December 31. However, the legislation may not pass the US Senate, which is evenly divided between Democrats and their supporters and Republicans.

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UN to Support Reconstruction of Gaza After Reaching Ceasefire - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, May 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations stands ready to render support to the Palestinians in Gaza as much as it can after a ceasefire is achieved, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"There will be a great need for reconstruction of the infrastructure that was destroyed in Gaza," Dujarric said. "The Palestinian people will need the help of the international community, the financial help of the international community. We will get involved in as much as we can." Dujarric said that for the time being, the United Nations is focused on seeking the cessation of hostilities in the Middle East.

Earlier on Tuesday, Palestinian Ambassador to the United Nations Riyad Mansour urged the UN Secretary-General to immediately issue emergency assistance to the Palestinian families affected by the ongoing armed escalation in Gaza.

According to the United Nations, more than 58,000 Palestinians have already been displaced due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Recently resumed fighting in East Jerusalem has led to the worst violence between Israel and Palestinians in Gaza in recent years. Palestinian militants have launched over 3,350 rockets toward Israel, which in response has fired retaliatory strikes against the enclave.

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US Rural Counties Face Increased COVID-19 Risk Due to 'Vaccine Hesitancy' - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - Resistance to coronavirus vaccinations in rural communities in the United States threatens to delay an end to the pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said in a report on Tuesday.

"Vaccine hesitancy in rural areas is a major barrier that public health practitioners, health care providers, and local partners need to address to achieve vaccination equity," the report said.

The report analyzed county-level coronavirus vaccine administration data among adults aged 18 and over, who received their first dose of either the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine, or a single dose of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, in a five month period ending April 10.

Adult vaccination coverage was lower in rural counties (38.9 percent) than in urban counties (45.7 percent) overall and among adults aged 18–64 years (29.1 percent rural, 37.7 percent urban) when the report was compiled.

The report also cited a March 2021 a poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation showing that that vaccine hesitancy was highest in rural communities, with 21 percent of rural residents stating that they would "definitely not" get a vaccine compared with 10 percent of urban residents. As of Tuesday morning, the CDC reported that nearly 60 percent of the US population at least 18 years of age had received at least one jab of a coronavirus vaccine.

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**Biden Administration Acting to Make Up for Lost Time in Carbon Emissions Fight - Yellen**

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is pursuing an aggressive agenda to reduce carbon emissions in order to make up for lost time caused by the Trump administration's jettisoning of US commitments to the environment, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a speech to the US Chamber of Commerce on Tuesday.

"Unfortunately, in recent years the federal government largely ignored the problem, while ceding economic leadership to other countries," Yellen said. "We are now less prepared than we ought to be for the increasingly frequent and deadly impacts of climate-related weather events and less equipped to lead the global economic transformation underway. This administration is acting and will make up for lost time."

US commitments to carbon reduction were greatly reduced over the past four years after former President Donald Trump pulled the country out of the 2015 Paris Accord to focus on economic development that included increased production of fossil fuels.

The Biden administration rejoined the pact after President Joe Biden came to office in January and has since ramped up its goals under the pledge, targeting a reduction of US greenhouse gas emissions by half and achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.

Yellen said the lack of US focus on reimagining the alternative energy market was what allowed China to take the lead in solar and wind, the faster-growing segments of the global market for renewable energy, and also race ahead in developing battery storage technologies.

"Our disadvantage deepened over the last four years with our exit from the Paris Agreement, the removal of dozens of important environmental protections, and our underinvestment in technologies of the future," she said.

The US Department of Energy said earlier this week it managed to cut nearly \$14 billion in energy costs as well as greenhouse gases equivalent to the emissions of nearly 30 million vehicles in just a year despite a minimal focus on carbon targets. This made the Biden administration's target for cleaner energy goals over the next three decades possible, it said.

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### Taliban Delivering on Doha Deal Commitment to Cut Ties With Terror Groups - Khalilzad

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The Taliban has advanced on fulfilling its commitments under their agreement with the US to cut ties with terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda (banned in Russia), but Washington would like to see more progress, Zalmay Khalilzad, Special Representative on Afghanistan Reconciliation said at a hearing on Tuesday.

"The agreement specifies that the Taliban will not host, will not allow training, will not allow fundraising, will not allow recruitment of terrorists, including Al Qaeda, that will threaten the security of the United States and our allies," Khalilzad said. "They have made substantial progress in delivering on those commitments but we would like to see more."

The US invaded Afghanistan after the ruling Taliban government in 2001 refused to give up Al Qaeda operatives it had been hosting in the country and where they had purportedly planned the September 11 attacks.

The United States and the Taliban signed a peace agreement last February. Among other things, the deal stipulated the withdrawal of foreign armed forces from Afghanistan in exchange for the Taliban abating violence and guaranteeing that the country will not turn into a safe haven for terrorists.

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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### US Authorities Not to Charge Officers Involved in Andrew Brown Shooting- District Attorney

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The law enforcement officers involved in the shooting death of Andrew Brown Jr. in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, last month will be charged because they acted within their rights to defend themselves and the public, District Attorney Andrew Womble announced on Tuesday.

"No officer will be criminally charged. The officers' actions were consistent with their training and fully supported under the law, in protecting their lives and this community," Womble said.

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Majority of Americans Support Biden Administration Middle East Policy - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - A majority of Americans approve of the Biden administration's approach to the conflict in the Middle East amid the recent clashes between Israelis and Palestinians, a new The Hill-HarrisX poll revealed on Tuesday.

Fifty-six percent of registered voters in the United States support the Biden administration's stance and efforts undertaken to mitigate tensions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while 44 percent said they disapprove, according to the poll results.

The Biden administration won support of 79 percent of Democrats and more than two-thirds of independent voters, the poll results show. Three quarters of Republicans have criticized the policy of the Biden administration.

The poll was conducted online on May 14-15 among 932 registered voters and has a margin of error of 3.2 percentage points.

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Police Shooting of Andrew Brown Jr. 'Tragic' But 'Justified' - District Attorney

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The police shooting of Andrew Brown Jr. was tragic but ultimately justified due to the danger he posed to officers and the public at the time of the shooting, District Attorney Andrew Womble said during a Tuesday press conference.

"Mr. Brown's death, while tragic, was justified because Mr. Brown's actions caused three deputies of the Pasquotank County Sheriff's Office to reasonably believe it was necessary to use deadly force to protect themselves and others," Womble, of the Pasquotank County District Attorney's Office, said.

Brown was shot and killed by police while trying to drive away from officers who had arrived to serve a warrant. The officers, who had surrounded his vehicle after he attempted to flee from the scene, feared for their safety after almost being run over by Brown. After this, they began firing rounds towards Brown, with the first shots entering through the front of his vehicle, contrary to earlier claims that he had initially been shot at from behind.

Police involvement with Brown began after a confidential informant told an investigator that Brown was distributing cocaine and heroin, which was laced with fentanyl, in the community. This was confirmed by investigators through undercover purchases prior to the issuing of the warrants which lead to the shooting.

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### Khalilzad Says Russia, China on Same Page With US Regarding Afghanistan Peace Process

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - Russia and China are on the same page with the United States with respect to encouraging negotiations between the Taliban and Afghan government, US Special Representative on Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad said in a congressional hearing on Tuesday.

"With regard to the Chinese, Russian policies in Afghanistan. They have been on the peace process ... encouraging negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, were precluding a military takeover by the Taliban restoration and precluding the restoration of the emirate that governed Afghanistan during the Taliban. They were on the same page with us," Khalilzad told the US House Foreign Affairs Committee.

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### US Airline Cargo Loads Surge 9% in March From Prior Year - Transportation Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - US airlines carried 9 percent more cargo by weight in March 2021 than in March 2020, the first full month of the coronavirus pandemic, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) said on Tuesday.

"The rise was fueled by gains of nearly 4 percent in domestic cargo and 24percent% in international cargo, according to data filed... by 12 of the leading US cargo airlines. March 2020 was the first month in which the pandemic started affecting air cargo totals," the BTS said in a press release.

The 12 airlines carry 95 percent of the total cargo by weight transported on US airlines. Cargo data consists of freight and mail carried within the United States and between the United States and foreign points, the release said.

The latest cargo data coincides with a fledgling turnaround for US airlines, which have begun recalling pilots and other furloughed employees, while scheduling hundreds of additional flights amid an anticipated surge in leisure travel this summer due to pent up demand after a year of coronavirus lockdowns, according to media reports.

The BTS is a component of the US Department of Transportation.

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### US Deserves 'Full and Fair' Accounting on January 6 Capitol Incident - White House

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration supports a "full and fair" accounting of the January 6 riot at the US Capitol and has set aside nearly \$2 billion to upgrade

security at the building housing the nation's legislative assembly, the White House said on Tuesday.

"The attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, was an unprecedented assault on our democracy, an effort to undo the will of the American people and threaten the peaceful transition of power," the White House said in a statement. "The nation deserves such a full and fair accounting to prevent future violence and strengthen the security and resilience of our democratic institutions."

The White House statement comes after a bipartisan effort was proposed to study and investigate the January 6 incident.

The Biden administration has also proposed a \$1.9 billion bill to "reimburse direct costs incurred by the attack on the Capitol, improve facility security, protect Members of Congress, employees, and visitors, (and) provide judicial security," the White House said.

A group of Trump supporters entered the US Capitol in an attempt to protest lawmakers formalizing the results of the 2020 presidential election that saw the loss of then President Donald Trump to his challenger Joe Biden. Trump claims that the election was stolen and lawmakers from several US states should not certify the election results.

The US authorities have undertaken more than 170 investigation cases in connection with the January 6 riot.

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Austin Tells Israeli Counterpart US Supports De-Escalation of Mideast Conflict - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke over the telephone with his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Gantz and reiterated the United States' position

in support of the right of Israel to defend itself, but also expressed support for de-escalation of the conflict in the region, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday. "Secretary Austin reiterated the United States' unwavering support for Israel's right to defend itself and to protect Israeli civilians, and lamented the loss of innocent Israeli and Palestinian lives," Kirby said. "He expressed his support for de-escalation of the conflict and the restoration of calm."

The call took place amid growing tensions in the region between Israelis and Palestinians that have resulted in the exchange of rockets between Israeli security forces and the Palestinians as well as other forms of fighting.

Earlier on Tuesday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed the ongoing escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with his Bahraini and Moroccan counterparts, Abdullatif bin Rashid al-Zayani and Nasser Bourita, the progress of their outreach to halt the fighting.

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Sides to Afghanistan Conflict Must Agree on Istanbul Meeting Date - Khalilzad

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The sides to the Afghanistan conflict must decide on a date to meet in Istanbul and arrive with specific proposals, Zalmay Khalilzad, US Special Representative on Afghanistan Reconciliation said in a hearing on Tuesday.

"We welcome the United Nations, Turkey's and Qatar's willingness to co-convene high-level negotiations in Istanbul," Khalilzad said to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. "The parties need to agree to a date as soon as possible and we expect them to come prepared with concrete proposals."

Istanbul was scheduled to host a conference with the participation of the Afghan government and the Taliban from April 24-May 4 at the initiative of the US. The conference was postponed days before the scheduled kickoff due to the Taliban's refusal to attend. The movement has said that it is reluctant to participate in any conference until all foreign troops are withdrawn.

The Afghan government and Taliban have been engaged in peace talks in Qatar's capital Doha since September last year, but have yet to reach any substantial breakthroughs. The talks were ongoing against a background of relentless violence in Afghanistan, with regular attacks against civilians and clashes between the Taliban and government forces leaving scores dead and injured.

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Palestine Urges Guterres to Immediately Issue Humanitarian Aid to Gaza - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, May 18 (Sputnik) - Palestinian Ambassador to the United Nations Riyad Mansour on Tuesday called on UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to immediately issue emergency humanitarian assistance to Gaza.

"We want from the Secretary-General to issue immediately an emergency humanitarian assistance to the tragedy that exists in the Gaza Strip," Mansour said during the UN Forum on the Question of Palestine.

Mansour said the assistance is urgent for more than 50,000 Palestinians who have already been displaced due to the ongoing violence.

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US Wants Tax Reform to Stop Global 'Race to Bottom' in Corporate Taxes - Yellen

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - The United States wants to fundamentally reform its corporate tax policy and stop a worldwide "race to the bottom," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Tuesday.

In a speech to the US Chamber of Commerce, which represents more than 3 million US business owners, Yellen said the Treasury wanted to "eliminate incentives that reward corporations for moving their operations overseas and shifting profits to low-tax countries." She added: "As part of this effort, we are working with our international partners on a global minimum corporate tax to stop the race-to-the-bottom."

Under what will likely be the first major federal tax overhaul in almost 30 years, President Joe Biden plans to raise corporate taxes from 21 percent to 28 percent to pay for US development plans running into trillions of dollars in the post-pandemic era.

The president has also proposed a global minimum for corporate taxes and vowed to crack down on large US companies that have long employed complicated maneuvers to reduce or eliminate their tax bills by shifting income on paper between countries.

More than 1,000 large, mostly American corporations — including eBay, Google, Facebook, PayPal, Microsoft, Yahoo, AOL, Twitter, Intel, Pfizer, Boston Scientific and Johnson & Johnson — have their tax base in Ireland, which has a corporate tax of just 12.5 percent compared to the US rate of 21 percent.

Apple parks its profits in the island of Jersey, which is located in the English Channel, between England and France and has no corporate taxes.

Yellen said US corporate taxes were at a historical low of one percent of gross domestic product, or GDP.

"We believe the corporate sector can contribute to this effort by bearing its fair share: we propose simply to return the corporate tax toward historical norms," Yellen said.

Many US corporations and business groups oppose the Biden administration's tax hikes. US Chamber of Commerce CEO Suzanne Clark has called the idea "outrageous," saying it will put US corporate taxes at the highest among developed countries and "punish people for investing in the economy."

"Wrong policies from the government could stop the US economic recovery in its tracks," Clark said in a statement on Tuesday issued after Yellen's speech. "That's why the Chamber is fighting back against proposals such as raising corporate tax rates to the highest in the developed world, which would disincentivize inbound investment."

The US economy shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, but rebounded by a dynamic 6.4 percent in the first quarter. Federal Reserve Vice Chairman Richard Clarida predicted on Monday that GDP growth for all 2021 could be as much as 7.0 percent, the highest in 35 years.

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#### UN Political Chief Urges Int'l Actors to Scale Up Israel-Palestine Deescalation Efforts

UNITED NATIONS, May 18 (Sputnik) - UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo on Tuesday called on international actors to scale up diplomatic efforts to deescalate the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"The international community must do all it can to deescalate the situation immediately," DiCarlo said at the UN Forum on the Question of Palestine.

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#### US Withdrawal From Afghanistan Up to 20% Complete – CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) – The United States' military withdrawal from Afghanistan is up to 20 percent complete, US Central Command (CENTCOM) said on Monday.

"US Central Command estimates that we have completed between 13-20% of the entire retrograde process," the combatant command responsible for the Middle East and parts of Central Asia said in a statement.

CENTCOM added that the military has removed the equivalent of 115 C-17 military transport planes of material out of the war-torn country and has designated over 5,000 pieces of equipment for demolition.

The US has also handed over control of five military facilities to Afghan counterparts, the statement said.

The United States invaded Afghanistan ostensibly to destroy the al Qaeda terror group (banned in Russia), which planned the 2001 attacks on New York and Washington from Afghan soil. But the effort morphed into an extended attempt to establish a democracy.

During the intervening years, the Taliban regrouped and gained control of large parts of the nation in what has become America's longest war.

US President Joe Biden announced the decision to end the Afghan campaign in April following an extensive policy review, which began upon assuming office earlier this year.

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Senior US Diplomats Visit Libya to Show Support For Upcoming Elections – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) – Acting Assistant Secretary of State Joey Hood has paid the highest-level US diplomatic visit to Libya in seven years to express US support for upcoming elections there in December, the Department of State said on Tuesday.

“Acting Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Joey Hood and Special Envoy for Libya Richard Norland visited Libya May 18 and underscored US support for Libya’s December 2021 elections,” the State Department said in a media note. “This is the highest level diplomatic visit to Tripoli since 2014.”

Hood and Norland met with Libyan interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dabaiba, Foreign Minister Najla Mangoush, Head of the Presidential Council Mohamed Menfi, and President of the High National Electoral Commission Emad al-Sayah, the State Department said.

The US officials also discussed areas of mutual interest with the national leaders, including a Libyan-led, inclusive, and negotiated political solution to the conflict, facilitated through the UN and full implementation of the October 23 Libyan ceasefire agreement, the State Department noted.

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US Republican Senators Introduce Resolution Reaffirming US Support for Israel

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - US Senator Marco Rubio, alongside 17 fellow Senate Republicans, introduced a resolution that reaffirms the US' support for the state of Israel amid escalating tensions in the region, Rubio's office stated on Tuesday.

“U.S. Senator Marco Rubio joined [his Senate colleagues]... in introducing a resolution condemning the attacks against Israel by Hamas, an Iranian-backed and funded terrorist organization, and reaffirming the United States’ unwavering commitment to our ally Israel and its right to take whatever means are necessary to stop the murder of its citizens and foreign nationals residing in Israel,” Rubio's office said.

The resolution is nonbinding; if passed, it would postulate that the Senate, on paper, opposes the escalating rocket attacks by Hamas against Israel and mourns the loss of innocent life caused by them, urges continued and steadfast support for Israel, and affirms its unwavering commitment to Israel and its right to defend itself.

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US Announces Nearly \$155Mln in New Humanitarian Aid for Rohingya Crisis - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) – The US has announced nearly \$155 million in assistance to support 900,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

“The United States announced nearly \$155 million in new assistance to sustain critical efforts to support Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh and internally displaced Rohingya and other affected people in Burma. Our assistance will help meet the immediate needs of the nearly 900,000 refugees in Bangladesh who fled from horrific violence in Burma’s Rakhine State, including women and children,” Blinken said in a statement.

Blinken also noted that the total amount of US humanitarian aid for the affected by the Myanmar crisis people is over \$1.3 billion, including over \$1.1 billion for programs inside Bangladesh.

The US recognizes that the February 1 military coup leaders in many cases are the same individuals responsible for previous human rights abuses and atrocities against Rohingya, and will continue to seek justice and accountability for those responsible, the statement added.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, some 860,000 Rohingya refugees are currently based in camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh district after fleeing violence and persecution in Myanmar.

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Blinken Discusses Israel-Palestine Conflict With Bahraini, Moroccan Counterparts

WASHINGTON, May 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has discussed the ongoing escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with his Bahraini and Moroccan counterparts, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in two separate readouts on Tuesday.

“Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Bahraini Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid al-Zayani,” Price said. “The Secretary and Foreign Minister discussed their outreach to halt the conflict in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza.”

Price said in another press release that Blinken and Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita discussed their concerns about the violence in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza.

“The Secretary highlighted the importance of the strong bilateral partnership and Morocco's key role in fostering stability in the region,” he added.

The two kingdoms are part of the Arab states that normalized relations with Israel in last year's detente, alongside the United Arab Emirates and Sudan.

The Israel Defense Forces and the Palestinian militants in Gaza have exchanged fire for more than a week. The increase in violence, the worst in years, has killed 10 people in Israel and 220 in Gaza, almost a quarter of them children.

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