

05/26/21 Wednesday

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Chinese Paper Calls for Probe of US' Fort Detrick Biolab Amid Wuhan Lab COVID-19 Origins Fracas

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Chinese scientists sequenced the genome of SARS-CoV-2 in early January 2020 and by March of that year had “irrefutably” concluded the virus was not of human design. Since then, the goalposts have shifted repeatedly in an attempt to keep laboratory escape a viable theory, despite no evidence to support the continued supposition.

Amid a flurry of statements by US health figures suggesting a deeper probe of the Wuhan Institute of Virology is warranted as part of the hunt for the origins of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, China's state media has shot back, suggesting that the top US biolab at Fort Detrick should also be investigated.

“If they see the ‘lab leak’ theory as one of the directions of the investigation, the Wuhan Institute of Virology should not be the only one included,” the editors of the Global Times, a daily paper published by the Communist Party-owned People's Daily, [wrote on Wednesday](#).

“Since 2019, the Fort Detrick biolab has shown many signs worthy of attention, and should be included in the first group of targets for investigation. In addition, the US has also built an astonishing number of biolabs in Asia, and investigating them is an urgent project that must be added in the COVID-19 origins-tracing,” the editorial notes.

“If the efforts of virus origins-tracing focus on science rather than politics, expanding the scope of the investigation is completely logical and rational. However, the US is repeatedly using its and its allies' opinion tools to draw attention to Wuhan, especially to the lab there. It is clearly a political maneuver.”

US Biolab Has Leaked Before

Based in northern Maryland, Fort Detrick was once the center of the Pentagon's bioweapons program and today houses several agencies focused on biodefense and research into some of the world's deadliest diseases, including smallpox, anthrax, and viral hemorrhagic fevers like ebola.

Fort Detrick has been shut down several times over the years, [including in 2009](#) when the Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases was found to be storing hazardous bacteria, viruses and toxins not included in its inventory, and [again in 2019](#), when the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a “cease and desist” order after finding the lab had inadequate safety measures for waste disposal.

In addition, the FBI's prime suspect for the 2001 anthrax attacks that followed the September 11 terrorist attacks and killed five people, Bruce Ivins, was a senior biodefense researcher at Fort Detrick. The FBI never charged Ivins before his apparent suicide in 2008, but after his death the bureau [released a report](#) on their investigation showing Ivins had stolen the anthrax spores from Fort Detrick.

WHO Report Finds Lab Leak 'Extremely Unlikely'

In late March, the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) released a report on its international trip to Wuhan to share data on COVID-19 in an attempt to better pinpoint the origins of the coronavirus that has killed nearly 3.5 million people since late 2019. Of the four possible origins the team looked at, a leak from the Wuhan virology lab was judged the least likely, although the scientists did not entirely dismiss it since they couldn't disprove it. They suggested a zoonotic source was more likely, and also floated a fifth possibility: that it was brought to Wuhan by military athletes in the city for international games the October before the outbreak began.

However, their report has done little to blunt the unfounded accusations that SARS-CoV-2 escaped from the lab, either as a bioweapon created by Chinese scientists or as a virus under research that the Chinese government had kept secret.

As [Sputnik has reported](#), the theory first sprang from an uninvolved Hong Kong scientist in early 2020 whose ideas were given a platform by right-wing American ideologues with an anti-China agenda, and then-US President Donald Trump began using the "lab escape theory" to deflect blame from his own administration's response once the virus started killing tens of thousands of Americans later that spring. The angle played into other anti-Chinese rhetoric intended to demonize the socialist Asian nation, which could soon supplant the US as the world's premier economic power and which the Pentagon has identified as a "near-peer competitor" and the [US' greatest rival](#) in the 21st century.

The WHO scientists [have rejected claims](#) that they lacked adequate access to the Wuhan biolab's data, noting the [US would never allow](#) the kind of access to its own research that it has demanded of the Chinese.

US Experts Second-Guess WHO

More recently, US Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier [Becerra on Tuesday](#) called for the WHO to begin a deeper investigation of COVID-19's origins, saying it "must be launched with terms of reference that are transparent, science-based, and give international experts the independence to fully assess the source of the virus and the early days of the outbreak."

While a second phase of the investigation is certainly warranted, since an origin has not yet been found, the Global Times notes that due to his word choice, "it is quite clear that Becerra was aiming at China."

The day prior, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) at the US National Institutes for Health (NIH), told a [forum at the Poynter Institute](#) he was "not convinced" that SARS-CoV-2 has a natural origin.

"I think we should continue to investigate what went on in China until we continue to find out to the best of our ability what happened," Fauci added. "Certainly, the people who investigated it say it likely was the emergence from an animal reservoir that then infected individuals, but it could have been something else, and we need to find that out. So, you know, that's the reason why I said I'm perfectly in favor of any investigation that looks into the origin of the virus."

However, Fauci's words were not spoken in a vacuum. On Sunday, the [Wall Street Journal](#), which has long given a platform to the "lab leak" theory's proponents, published a story citing "a previously undisclosed US intelligence report" and "a State Department fact sheet, issued during the final days of the Trump administration," claiming that in November 2019, three researchers at the Wuhan virology lab checked into a hospital "with symptoms consistent with both Covid-19 and common seasonal illness."

However, the article notes that the WHO team knew about the cases, with team member Marion Koopmans, a Dutch virologist, telling [NBC back in March](#) that “it was certainly not a big thing.” “There were occasional illnesses because that’s normal,” she said. “There was nothing that stood out.”

She further noted that the Chinese researchers tested negative for COVID-19 - a point Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson [Zhao Lijian reiterated](#) in Monday comments to the press. On Wednesday, US President [Joe Biden ordered](#) an intelligence report in 90 days’ time on the origins of COVID-19. He noted that two “elements” of the intelligence community “lean” toward the virus jumping from an animal host into humans, another “element” “leans” toward its introduction into humans being a laboratory accident, with each group expressing “low or moderate confidence” in their conclusions.

“[T]he majority of elements do not believe there is sufficient information to assess one to be more likely than the other,” Biden added.

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Mali's Military Junta to Release Ousted Interim President, Prime Minister 'In Some Time', Aide Says

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Hours after the military junta in Mali announced the resignations of the prime minister and interim president, the two men are reportedly soon due to be released, according to an aide to the head of the country's military council.

The aide told reporters at a press conference the release "will take place in some time due to security concerns."

The news comes as the United Nations Security Council issued on Wednesday evening a unanimous statement that “called for the safe, immediate and unconditional release of all the officials detained and urged the Defense and Security forces elements to return to their barracks without delay.”

Their statement is just the latest from several international institutions and world powers urging the release of Malian Prime Minister Moctar Ouane, Acting President Bah Ndaw, and Defense Minister Souleymane Doucoure.

Earlier on Wednesday, the military junta led by Acting Vice President Colonel Assimi Goïta, who led the August 2020 coup that overthrew democratically-elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, [reportedly closed](#) the country's air and land borders and instituted a curfew in the West African country of 19.6 million.

On Monday, members of the [Malian Army detained](#) Ouane, Ndaw, and Doucoure, the latter of whom had been appointed just hours earlier, and whisked them away to the Kati military base outside the capital city of Bamako. Goïta said Oane and Ndaw had attempted to ["sabotage the transition"](#) with a cabinet reshuffle that removed two leading coup figures from control over the defense and security ministries without consulting him beforehand.

"The president and the prime minister violated the most important clause of the Transitional Charter during the appointment of ministers to the new government by failing to negotiate the power bloc with the Vice President," Goita said on Tuesday. "As a result, measures were taken in order to protect the basic document of the transitional period."

He said the original transition plan "would proceed as normally, and the scheduled elections will be held in 2022." However, he has not yet given an indication as to when or how a new interim president would be chosen.

Ndaw was chosen to form a civilian government in September 2020 amid international pressure on the junta to return to a democratic form of government. A former colonel who was Keita's defense minister at the time of the coup, Ndaw selected Oaune, a longtime Malian diplomat, as prime minister and the two have led a government heavily staffed by military figures under the auspices of a transitional charter intended to lead to new elections within 18 months.

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Hamas Pledges 'Not to Take a Single Cent' of Foreign Aid After Blinken Snubs Gaza-Ruling Party

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Hamas' leader in the Gaza Strip, Yahya Sinwar, said on Wednesday he would refuse international aid money in the wake of an 11-day war with Israel that destroyed thousands of Palestinian homes in the territory. However, he left the door open for construction projects by other nations.

"I affirm our commitment not to take a single cent intended for reconstruction and humanitarian efforts," [Sinwar said](#) in a Wednesday speech. "We have never taken a cent in the past."

On May 21, authorities in Gaza judged that 11 days of bombardment by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) had destroyed at least 2,000 housing units and damaged another 15,000. Naji Sarhan, deputy of Gaza's works and housing ministry, told [the Associated Press](#) that losses amounted to \$150 million.

Sinwar hasn't refused all help from other countries, though: he noted that "we welcome any international or Arab effort to rebuild the Gaza Strip."

He added that Gaza has "sufficient financial resources... a large part of which are from Iran, and another part comes from Arab and Muslim donors and free people of the world who stand in solidarity with our people and their rights."

In January, [Qatar pledged \\$360 million](#) in aid to Gaza in the year 2021, an increase in the payments it has sent to the impoverished territory since 2018. The payments help cover the costs of electricity, civil service workers' salaries, and monthly stipends to dozens of Palestinian families.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei also [urged Muslim states](#) last Friday to "support the Palestinian people, through military ... or financial support ... or in rebuilding Gaza's infrastructure."

Sinwar's comments come after US Secretary of State Antony Blinken traveled to Ramallah, seat of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in the West Bank, to pledge US support for Palestinians after the war. [Blinken said the US](#) would seek to provide \$75 million in development and economic assistance, including \$5.5 million in "immediate disaster assistance" for Gaza and about \$32 million for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

However, Blinken said the money for Gaza must not benefit Hamas, which the US considers to be a terrorist organization. Sinwar said this was a ploy intended to widen the rift between Hamas and Fatah, the party of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas that rules the West Bank. "We will never fall for this trick and lash out at each other," Sinwar said.

The PNA lost control over Gaza in 2006, when Hamas won elections there, and indecision about how to include Gaza and Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem has helped to delay another election since. The most recent attempt [was called off](#) just days before the fighting began, after Israeli authorities refused to allow Palestinian East Jerusalemites the opportunity to vote. At least 254 Palestinians were killed in the 11-day shooting war, as well as 12 Israelis. The IDF's airstrikes began after Hamas fired rockets at Jerusalem, Israel's self-proclaimed capital, in response to the [storming of Al-Aqsa](#) Mosque by Israeli police in which more than 200 Palestinian Muslim worshippers and 17 police officers were injured.

Hamas called the operation "Sword of Jerusalem" and said it was [defending Palestinians](#) in the city. The Temple Mount showdown was the [culmination of weeks](#) of increasing violence between Israeli settlers and police on the one side, and Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank on the other.

Sinwar referred to the rocket barrage as "but a drill for what will come is Israel violates the Al-Aqsa Mosque" again. "The occupation must know - Al-Aqsa has men who will defend it."

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Egypt, Kenya Sign Military Agreement as Dispute With Ethiopia Over Blue Nile Dam Heats Up by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Amid a continued impasse over a controversial Ethiopian dam on the Blue Nile, Egypt has signed a defense cooperation agreement with Kenya - the fourth defense agreement with East African nations this year and the second with a nation on Ethiopia's borders.

On Wednesday, an Egyptian military delegation to Nairobi signed a Technical Agreement on Defence Cooperation "aimed at deepening partnership in matters of mutual benefit," the [Kenyan Ministry of Defense](#) announced.

The deal is Egypt's fourth with an East Africa nation this year. In March, Cairo penned a new defense agreement with Sudan to its south that Egyptian Armed Forces Chief of Staff Mohamed Farid described as "unprecedented level of military cooperation," according to [Daily News Egypt](#). Earlier this month, they began joint military drills titled "Guardians of the Nile," intended to "[strengthen] bilateral relations and [unify] methods of dealing with threats that both countries are expected to face," [according to Sudanese](#) state news service SUNA.

In April, Egypt also signed a memorandum of understanding on intelligence sharing with Uganda and a defense cooperation agreement with Burundi.

The move comes as [Sudan accused Ethiopia](#) of beginning the second phase of filling the reservoir behind the huge Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), a hydroelectric dam on the Blue Nile. Sudan and Egypt, which sit downstream from the dam and are heavily dependent on the river for fresh water and irrigation, are afraid the dam could threaten their water supply and have attempted to stop its construction with diplomatic and legal pressure for years. Ethiopian Water Minister Seleshi Bekele has denied the claims, saying on Wednesday that they are “deliberately misleading statements targeted to confuse everyone,” [according to Bloomberg](#). Addis Ababa says the 6,000-megawatt dam, being [built with Chinese help](#), is necessary to alleviate its acute electricity shortages and that it is asserting its rights over water resources long governed by colonial-era agreements, when the British Empire ruled both Egypt and Sudan. When completed, it will be the largest hydroelectric dam in Africa and the seventh-largest in the world.

The day before signing the agreement with Kenya, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry hosted Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammad bin Abdulrahman Al Thani in Cairo. The meeting was intended to [patch up relations](#) in the wake of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates agreeing to drop their boycott of Qatar in January, but at the meeting, the two also discussed the Renaissance Dam, according to the Doha-funded outlet [Al Jazeera](#).

Before heading to Egypt, however, Al Thani spent the weekend in Khartoum to “review the bilateral relations and the spheres of joint cooperation,” [according to SUNA](#). He also reportedly affirmed Doha’s willingness to support Sudan in diplomatic issues, including the GERD dispute and its longstanding border demarcation dispute with Ethiopia.

As [Sputnik has reported](#), Africa’s Sahel region has become an area of intense political competition for Qatar and the UAE, with both countries sinking billions of dollars of investment into infrastructure and economic restructuring projects in recent years.

On Monday, the day after Thani left Khartoum, the [UAE suddenly dropped](#) its role as a mediator in the Sudan-Ethiopia border dispute, but said it would continue to respect Khartoum’s position. Kenya, too, has its reasons for wanting friends against Ethiopia.

Another [controversial hydroelectric dam](#), the Gilgel Gibe III dam on the Omo River, was completed in 2015 and threatens the water supply to Lake Turkana, which sits on the arid border region between the two states and is the primary fresh water source for many local tribes. In July 2020, [Kenyan fishermen](#) on Lake Turkana reported the lake’s fish stocks were rapidly dwindling and blamed the dam for their shrinking numbers.

Both nations also share a border with Somalia, and are deeply embedded in Somali politics. In 2006, Ethiopian troops joined forces from the US and African Union to drive out the Islamic Courts Union and restore the power of the Transitional Federal Government. However, their presence, the collapse of the ICU and the rise of Al-Shabaab helped create a destructive new phase of the civil war, and Ethiopian forces only withdrew in 2008.

Kenya, which sits across the border from Somalia’s Jubaland state where al-Shabaab has been most active and from which it has [even staged attacks](#) into Kenya, has been [accused of meddling](#) in Somali internal affairs by now-Acting Somali President Farmaajo, who has [his own centralizing](#) agenda aligned against the regional power of the country’s five states.

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Bezos, Amazon to Acquire Tapes from Trump's Reality Show in Tentative \$8.45 Billion Deal for MGM
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Amazon announced on Wednesday that it entered into a definitive merger agreement to acquire US-based media company Metro Goldwyn Mayer (MGM) for \$8.45 billion. The deal would give the company access to MGM's expansive catalog, which includes some 17,000 TV shows and 4,000 films.

"The Apprentice," an NBC reality show produced by former US President Donald Trump, is one of the thousands of television shows that will be acquired by billionaire Jeff Bezos' Amazon in a tentative, [multi-billion dollar deal](#) for MGM.

The show, which premiered in January 2004, starred Donald Trump, as well as his eldest children: Ivanka Trump, Donald Trump Jr. and Eric Trump. The 18 contestants on the business show competed in a number of tasks to test their business skills, with the hopes of securing a one-year contract to promote one of Trump's properties.

During Trump's tenure in the White House, "The Apprentice" was repeatedly referenced around the time of Omarosa Manigault Newman's termination from the White House.

Manigault Newman, popularly known as Omarosa, was thrust into the public spotlight when she appeared as a contestant on the business competition show's first season.

Omarosa also starred in "The Celebrity Apprentice" and "The Ultimate Merger" - her Trump-produced dating show - before becoming Trump's director of communications for the Office of Public Liaison.

In the aftermath of her widely reported termination, [Omarosa claimed](#) in her book "Unhinged" that Trump could be heard uttering racist and sexist things on tapes from the reality show. However, those tapes in question did not make it to air, she detailed.

Reality TV producer Bill Pruitt, who was hired to work on the first two seasons of "The Apprentice," also hinted that there is unaired footage that is "worse" than the public presumes. Pruitt's comments came shortly after footage emerged in which Trump was heard having a vulgar conversation with "Access Hollywood" host Billy Bush. Despite the incident taking place over a decade prior to its surfacing, Bush was terminated from NBC's "Today."

It is possible that this tentative multi-billion-dollar deal may reignite conversations about NBC's "The Apprentice," as well as its cast and host.

Mike Hopkins, senior vice president of Prime Video and Amazon Studios, emphasized on Wednesday that the true "financial value" behind the tentative deal is in MGM's "treasure trove" of intellectual property.

"[W]e plan to reimagine and develop together with MGM's talented team," he said in a quoted statement. "It's very exciting and provides so many opportunities for high-quality storytelling." Interestingly enough, the administration of US President Joe Biden, Trump's 2020 presidential election rival, will have authority over the deal, as regulatory approval is needed.

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San Jose Shooting: Details Emerge on Suspect Who Killed at Least 8 at California Railyard
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Eight people are dead after a gunman opened fire at a public transit railyard in San Jose, California. The Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office has confirmed that the suspect, who was employed by Santa Clara's Valley Transportation Authority (VTA), took his own life before law enforcement officials were able to react to the scene.

- The now-deceased suspect in the San Jose shooting has been identified as Samuel James Cassidy, a 57-year-old California resident who worked for the VTA.
- Authorities have linked the deceased suspect to two fires that occurred around the same time as the shooting. One of the fires occurred at his home, which is approximately 8 miles from the crime scene.
- The [mass shooting](#), first reported at 6:34 a.m. local time, occurred at 101 W. Younger Avenue - not far from the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office and San Jose Police Department.
- The suspected gunman, as well as eight others, are dead. Several individuals were injured.
- A California woman who divorced the now-deceased suspect in 2004 told the San Francisco Chronicle that Cassidy historically complained about other individuals receiving easier assignments at work, including those at the site of the mass shooting.
- Court records obtained by the SF Chronicle also alleged that the 57-year-old man would abuse, and also rape her while experiencing "mood swings" during their time together.
- US President Joe Biden [has called](#) on members of Congress to "take immediate action" to combat the rise in gun violence and mass shootings in the US. He also ordered flags to be flown at half-staff in remembrance of the victims.
- Agents with the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) are assisting with the investigation, and have declared there is a "sizable crime scene" to process.
- Investigators found hundreds of round of ammunition in the suspect's home, after the premises was swept by an FBI bomb squad.
- The shooter's motive has not been identified by law enforcement.
- The crime is the deadliest mass shooting to occur in California's Bay Area since 1993, when a 55-year-old gunman killed nine people - including himself - after opening fire in an office building in San Francisco, California.
- This year alone, the San Jose shooting is the 232nd mass shooting to occur in the US, according to the [Gun Violence Archive](#).

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'Not Worth an iPhone': Netizens Mock Illinois McDonald's Locale Over New Hire Incentive
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US economy took a massive hit and saw unemployment rates skyrocket, as many businesses were forced to let staffers go. Figures recently released by the US' Congressional Research Service indicate the US active workforce rate declined by 60% in April 2020, a level not seen since the 1970s.

A photo circulating across social media recently revealed that a McDonald's restaurant in Illinois is offering a "free iPhone" as an incentive for new hires, a move that has prompted netizens to lash out at the global company.

The promotional advertisement states that new hires must be employed by the McDonald's franchisee for a period of at least six months and "meet employment criteria" in order to be eligible for the iPhone.

It's presently unclear what "employment criteria" the new hires are required to reach.

The sign has been confirmed as belonging to a McDonald's location in Altamont, Illinois, according to a staffer who spoke with [Business Insider](#).

As for the "free iPhone" being offered, it's anyone's guess as details are scarce at the moment. But some netizens have speculated that workers may end up with an iPhone 5, which [initially debuted](#) in late 2012.

Others, however, believed the highly-coveted device could even be the [iPhone 4](#), which was unveiled in 2010. More updated versions of the iPhone 4 later saw the introduction of Siri, Apple's digital personal assistant.

Apple is currently on its 12th iPhone generation.

Elsewhere on the Twitterverse, netizens warned that the "free iPhone" was not at all worth putting in the time or effort of working at a McDonald's eatery. "I worked at McDonald's for one year. Working there [for] six months is not worth an iPhone," [wrote](#) one user.

Another user chimed in, [adding](#), "I'm sorry, no McDonald's job is worth [an] iPhone."

Instead of offering a free iPhone, other users blasted the company and urged them instead to offer adequate wages for employers. "Maybe if McDonald's offered a livable wage, they wouldn't have to offer a f**king iPhone 7 as a hiring incentive," one person [commented](#) on the development.

A spokesperson for the McDonald's franchise told Business Insider that the Illinois restaurant is not the only franchisee that has tapped similar measures, with other locations offering new hires pay incentives, as well as paid time off opportunities.

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Biden Calls on US Congress to Help End 'Epidemic of Gun Violence' After San Jose Shooting

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, law enforcement authorities in San Jose, California, confirmed that a shooting at the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) facility claimed the lives of at least eight people, and left several others injured. The suspected shooter is deceased.

US President Joe Biden addressed the deadly San Jose shooting on Wednesday and took the opportunity to urge congressional lawmakers to implement measures that would effectively combat the nation's growing gun violence.

Biden noted in a White House-released [statement](#) that he would be ordering for the American flag to be lowered at half-staff, just as he had done after several recent shootings, including those that took place in [Atlanta, Georgia](#), and [Boulder, Colorado](#).

"I urge Congress to take immediate action and heed the call of the American people, including the vast majority of gun owners, to help end this epidemic of gun violence in America," Biden said. "Every life that is taken by a bullet pierces the soul of our nation."

"We can, and we must, do more," he underscored.

Biden order will see flags lowered half-staff at all US military posts, naval stations, embassies, legations and consular offices. The order will remain in effect until May 30.

"We are still awaiting many of the details of this latest mass shooting, but there are some things we know for sure. There are at least eight families who will never be whole again," Biden highlighted. "There are children, parents, and spouses who are waiting to hear whether someone they love is ever going to come home."

"There are union brothers and sisters - good, honest, hardworking people - who are mourning their own."

Biden's calls echoed previous statements he made during his first joint address to Congress in April, when he [told lawmakers](#) it was "time" for officials "to act" and provide the American public with comprehensive gun legislation.

The shooting in San Jose unfolded after 6 a.m. local time at the VTA control center and rail yard. Brandi Childress, the spokesperson for the VTA, has [stated](#) that the building is not open to the public, and that the shooter - identified as 57-year-old Samuel Cassidy - either broke into the private area or gained entry after obtaining employee access.

Reports indicate that an employee meeting was taking place when the shooting incident occurred. By the time local police arrived, the scene was still active. However, it's worth noting that preliminary findings suggest the shooter died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound as police did not discharge their department-issued firearms at the time.

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'I'm Very Sorry': 'Fast & Furious' Star John Cena Apologizes to China After Taiwan Blip

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The Chinese authorities oppose any reference to the island as an independent state, a matter which has been repeatedly rejected by Taiwan. Beijing traditionally promotes the "One China"

principle, which entails that both Taiwan and mainland China are part of a single sovereign state.

Professional wrestler-turned-actor John Cena recently issued an apology to China and its millions of citizens after he prompted an international fiasco upon describing Taiwan as a country during a recent interview.

Cena issued his public apology in Mandarin during a video message that was later released on his Sina Weibo channel. The message initially begins with Cena explaining that he'd been given a lot of information by his team, and that he essentially got disoriented during his interview with Taiwanese broadcasting network TVBS when he remarked that Taiwan was the "first country" that would be able to see the latest "Fast & Furious" movie.

"Hi China, I'm John Cena. I'm in the middle of 'Fast and Furious 9' promotions. I'm doing a lot of interviews. I made a mistake in one of my interviews," Cena confessed, without providing clear specifics of the remarks in question. "[Movie] staff gave me a lot of information, so there [were] a lot of interviews and information."

"I made one mistake. I have to say something very, very, very important now. I love and respect China and Chinese people. I'm very, very sorry about my mistake. I apologise, I apologise, I'm very sorry. You must understand that I really love, really respect China and the Chinese people. My apologies. See you."

However heartfelt the apology may have been, it has drawn additional backlash from critics within China and abroad, and shed light on China's power as the world's biggest movie market. In fact, the latest installment of the film franchise recently took in over [\\$135 million](#) in China alone.

With Cena's Weibo post racking up hundreds of comments since going live, the video message has received a mixed response from the microblogging platform's Chinese-speaking users.

"Please say in Chinese that Taiwan is part of China. Otherwise, we won't accept it," read one comment, which had gained thousands of likes, according to the [South China Morning Post](#). Another response called on Cena's explanation "nonsense" and urged the former wrestler to say outright that "Taiwan is China's." The same user added that Cena "can't take benefits from China, but in the meantime, do things to harm China's interests."

While some Weibo users did simply urge Cena to watch his words, the "Fast & Furious" star was also dealt a blow from the American public, including some political figures. US Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AK) described Cena's apology as "[pathetic](#)," whereas commentator Keith Olbermann deemed it "[shameful](#)."

Incidentally, the US' National Basketball Association underwent similar backlash in 2019 when Daryl Morey, who was serving as the general manager for the Houston Rockets at the time, expressed support for pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong.

The supportive tweet for the movement, however, quickly prompted an [international outcry](#) that saw Chinese sponsors cut off ties with both the Rockets and the league. Additionally, Morey and the NBA issued an apology as a result. Morey stepped away from the Rockets team a year after the scandal.

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NBA Players Union Invest \$360,000 Into Renovating Harlem's Historic Rucker Park by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

New York City was once the mecca of basketball in the US, and Harlem's Rucker Park can be considered the heart of not only the sport, but the community it has been instilled into. The National Basketball Association's top players, including Wilt "The Stilt" Chamberlain and Julius "Dr. J" Erving, have played at the park.

The NBA union recently invested \$360,000 in funds towards renovating the legendary Rucker Park this summer. The project is set to install a new court surface, backboard and hoops, bleachers, benches, park gates and a new scoreboard.

On May 12, the Community Board 10 Parks and Recreation [spoke with](#) the NBA on the court's refurbishment, outlining the plans of what the finished versions of the court would look like, as well as the significance the work would provide to the Harlem community.

The park, located on 155th Street and 8th Avenue across from the Polo Grounds, was named after Holcombe Rucker, a World War II veteran who founded the Rucker League basketball tournament in the 1950s. The league itself was aimed at providing basketball scholarships to help finance the education of its youth players. The tournament was moved to what is now known as Rucker Park in 1954.

Prominent Harlem figure Greg Marius founded his own tournament in the early 1980s known as the Entertainer's Basketball Classic (EBC), which was moved to Rucker Park in 1987. Since then, there has been an influx of [elite players](#) including 1999 And1 Mixtape tour legend Rafer Alston, NBA legends Kobe Bryant and LeBron James, as well as street legends like Earl "The Goat" Manigault.

Rucker Park helped to fuse Harlem's love of hip-hop and basketball, as many famous New York artists also began to take notice of the significance the park had in bringing people together. Harlem rapper Sean "Diddy" Combs recruited many famous players for his Bad Boy squad team, and Bronx rapper Fat Joe has spent years recruiting new players to join his Terror Squad team in annual tournaments at Rucker Park. As the notoriety of the park grew, so did the profile of some of its visitors, which include former US President Bill Clinton.

"When I coached at the Rucker, Bill Clinton was in the stands. David Stern was in the stands," Fat Joe said in an interview with [Complex](#). "White people before gentrification. That was the beginning of gentrification of the Rucker."

While gentrification continues to be an increasingly growing topic in the renovation and expansion of Harlem's community, the NBA union maintains that its efforts will be a move meant to benefit the area. The union's initiative will also see plans to fund a three-year staff position charged with running youth programs, such as "Each One, Teach One" summer outreach program.

"At a very young age, [I] learned to appreciate how the Rucker is essentially holy ground," Michele Roberts, the executive director of the player's union, told Community Board 10, according to [Patch.com](#).

The timeline for the project is set to begin August 16, and is expected to be completed by October.

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Exxon Mobil, Chevron Executive Board Members Vote Towards Climate Goals, Cutting Oil Emissions
by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

The International Emergency Agency has argued that the development of oil, gas and coal needed to stop in order to combat global warming. Many shareholders have come forward in order to put pressure on other stockholders into approving resolutions that call for emissions cuts.

US oil giants Exxon Mobil Corp and the Chevron Corporation have failed to defend their boards against rebellions from investors concerned over the lack of attention put towards meeting low-carbon demands.

Exxon lost two of its executive seats on Wednesday to candidates nominated by investors in favor of a strategy built towards meeting the goals of the 2015 Paris Agreement for climate change. The US officially rejoined the Paris agreement in February after the Trump administration withdrew the nation from the accords in late 2020 over allegations that the deal posed an "unfair" financial burden to the US.

"Faced with Exxon's repeated failure to address concerns about climate strategy and governance, investors have voted against management in large numbers," Edward Mason, head of responsible investment at the Church Commissioners for England, said according to [GreenBiz](#).

"The results are clear evidence of shareholders' desire for change. Exxon needs to join its peers and set out a strategy for transition to net-zero emissions. Investors will not tolerate a board that is not capable of steering a course consistent with the goals of the Paris Agreement."

Exxon's top shareholders include investment companies Vanguard and Fidelity, as well as BlackRock, the world's largest asset manager and Exxon's second-largest shareholder. Laurence D. Fink, Black Rock's CEO, [told](#) The New York Times that the COVID-19 pandemic was a large drive behind the move "to confront the global threat of climate change more forcefully."

The efforts also represent a culmination of years of investors fighting towards climate change goals. Engine No. 1, the hedge firm leading the campaign which also owns less than 1% of Exxon's stock, began its push in December 2020 toward investments in wind, solar and other new energy sources like hydrogen fuel cells.

The latest development came as a majority of shareholders at Chevron voted in favor of an initiative meant to cut carbon emissions. The policy shift was part of a coordinated effort by Dutch group Follow This.

"Institutional investors understand that no investment is safe in a global economy wracked by devastating climate change," Mark van Baal, founder of Follow This, said in a statement, The Guardian [reported](#).

The Chevron vote marks the third successful board rebellion coordinated by Follow This against executives at other US companies. The group previously successfully pushed votes to cut

emissions at Indonesian-based oil company ConocoPhillips and US energy company Phillips 66.

The so-called "rebellions" are viewed as the first major move for US oil companies to shift away from fossil fuels. However, it remains to be seen what effect the shareholder move will have on other large oil companies.

"Investors have sent a shot across the bow of Exxon, but its impact will ricochet across the boards of every major fossil fuel company," Mark Campanale, founder and executive chair of the Carbon Tracker Initiative, said in a statement, CNN [reported](#).

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RPT - State Dept. Says US Stands By New START Conversion Procedures Amid Russian Concerns

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The State Department is prepared to explain to Russia that US conversion procedures comply with the New START treaty, a department spokesperson told Sputnik.

Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in earlier remarks that the United States equipped a number of strategic offensive weapons in such a way that it does not allow Russia to make sure that these carriers have lost the ability to be used for the use of nuclear weapons, which is a requirement in the treaty.

"The United States has explained many times why US conversion procedures are in full compliance with its treaty obligations within the treaty's Bilateral Consultative Commission and is prepared to do so again as we continue to implement the treaty for an additional five years as Russia agreed to in February," the spokesperson said on Wednesday.

In February, Russia and the United States agreed to extend the New START treaty for five more years without renegotiating any of its terms. The treaty, now set to expire on February 5, 2026, is the only arms control agreement between two countries that is still in force.

The treaty limits each party's nuclear arsenal to 1,550 deployed warheads, 800 launchers, and 700 missiles. Both the United States and Russia met the central limits of the New START Treaty in 2018, and have stayed at or below them ever since.

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RPT - Pushkin Online Birthday Celebration to Attract Worldwide Audience - Project Director

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - An online marathon celebrating the iconic Russian poet Alexander Pushkin's 222nd birthday will attract admirers of his work from around the world, Project Director Julian Henry Lowenfeld told Sputnik.

"The project is called Pushkin for the Whole World. It is like an online flash mob. People around the world are sharing their love for Pushkin with video links, which we are putting together," Lowenfeld, an American-Russian poet, playwright and translator, said.

The Pushkin online marathon will kick off on June 6 at 1:00 p.m. MSK (11:00 GMT).

THE WORLD CELEBRATES PUSHKIN

The project will gather many celebrities - including opera singers, actors and writers - along with everyday people from different countries.

"People from Ireland, Britain, Canada, all over Europe, and of course we are getting emails and videos from all over Russia - from Vladivostok to Kaliningrad," Lowenfeld said.

A famous Russian clown and cat tamer Yuri Kuklachev will present his performance the "Learned Cat," referring to one of the characters of Pushkin's tales.

Speaking of his own country, Lowenfeld noted that people from many US states will pay tribute to the famous Russian poet.

"I will be reading my translations, I will be talking with people from all over the world about Pushkin and his significance, and what he means to them," he said.

MOST DEMOCRATIC POET

Lowenfeld called Pushkin the most positive and democratic of the great Russian writers.

"I would say he is the most Western of all Russian writers, even though he was never out of Russia," Lowenfeld said. "He spoke perfect French, English, German, and he read European literature intensively. He was imbued with the ideas of the French enlightenment, and he believed in liberal values."

Pushkin's legacy is that his literature motivates people to improve their lives, to practice introspection and to steer clear of vices, the marathon organizer noted. He expressed confidence that even reading Pushkin's lyrics daily helps to improve the world.

"It is just like if you play a little bit of Bach per day - it is good for your soul. Same thing with Pushkin: if you read a little bit of Pushkin - it is good for your soul, good for the spirit," he said. Lowenfeld expressed disagreement with those who think that Pushkin's lyrics are impossible to translate to other languages.

"I know that myth is wrong, because I have devoted my life to translating him and seen the results" he noted, citing famous Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva, who said Pushkin's poems are already a translation from what is beyond words to ordinary speech.

PUSHKIN AND THE DIASPORA

The popularity of Pushkin's lyrics in the US is growing, with more and more Americans coming to revere him, his translator said.

In the meantime, Lowenfeld called for Russia to do more to popularize one of its most famous figures. Germany, China, Italy, Spain and many other countries have international projects dedicated to their renowned figures, such as Goethe, Confucius, Dante and Cervantes, he noted.

"Yes, there is Rossotrudnichestvo, which is kindly assisting me in this project, but there has never been a concerted national effort to do for Pushkin what other countries do for their national writers," he said. "Britain has the Royal Shakespeare Company. There is no such thing as the Russian National Pushkin Company in Russia. There are no Russian equivalents to Germany's Goethe Haus, Spain's Instituto Cervantes, China's Confucius Institute, Italy's Casa Dante, and so on."

Lowenfeld lamented that Russia does not even fund the publishing of bilingual editions of Pushkin and other great Russian poets for its diaspora,

"I have been working a lot with the Russian diaspora, and it breaks my heart to see grandparents and their grandchildren when they are basically unable to communicate with each other because the older generation has not really learned English yet, and the younger generation has not really learned Russian," he said.

Young people can speak a few words on a basic level, but cannot read Pushkin, Lowenfeld noted, adding that similar situations exist in Europe as well.

"That is why I like these bilingual books that we are publishing - Pushkin's tales, Eugene Onegin, his lyric poems, his prose. They bring not just countries together, but they bring families and generations together," he said. "That is what our project is about."

In addition to Pushkin, Lowenfeld has translated into English the verses of Mikhail Lermontov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Alexander Blok, Osip Mandelshtam, and other Russian poets.

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Biden Says Deeply Concerned Over Violence in Ethiopia, US Envoy to Return to Region

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said he is deeply concerned about violence in Ethiopia so US Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman will return to the region for consultations with government officials in the region.

"I am deeply concerned by the escalating violence and the hardening of regional and ethnic divisions in multiple parts of Ethiopia," Biden said in a press release on Wednesday. "The large-scale human rights abuses taking place in Tigray, including widespread sexual violence, are unacceptable and must end."

Feltman will return to Ethiopia to lead a renewed diplomatic effort to help restore order in the Tigray, and to help resolve regional concerns over water rights and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

Biden called for a ceasefire between the warring parties and urged Eritrean and Amhara forces to withdraw from the Tigray region. Ethiopian and Eritrean forces must allow immediate humanitarian access to the region in order to prevent widespread famine, Biden added.

The Tigray Region in the north of Ethiopia has been experiencing severe food insecurity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, a locust outbreak, and the ongoing regional conflict.

Fighting in the province of Tigray broke out in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party — Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) — of attacking a regional military base to hijack weapons and arm the anti-government militia. In late 2020, TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael said that Eritrea, which was technically at war with Ethiopia until 2018, had sent troops across the border in support of Ethiopian government forces.

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Vast Majority of Republicans Prefer Trump-Aligned Candidates in 2022 Midterms - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - Republicans greatly prefer candidates who agree with former US President Donald Trump, with 85 percent indicating that preference in the lead-up to the 2022 midterm elections, a new poll conducted by Quinnipiac University revealed.

"As candidates begin to enter races for the 2022 mid-term elections, more than eight in 10 Republicans (85 percent) say they would prefer to see candidates running for elected office that mostly agree with Donald Trump," the statement accompanying the poll said on Wednesday.

As a whole, a razor thin majority of Americans say they prefer candidates who somewhat disagree with Trump, with 53 percent indicating such a preference.

In addition, 66 percent of Republicans say they would like to see Trump run for president again in 2024.

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UPDATE 2 - Biden Urges Congress to Act After California Rail Yard Shooting Leaves 9 Dead

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden called on Congress to take immediate action to end the epidemic of gun violence in the wake of the deadly mass shooting at a San Jose rail yard that left nine dead, including the shooter.

"Vice President Harris and I have been briefed on the horrific tragedy that took place this morning in San Jose, where a lone gunman murdered at least eight people and wounded several others at a county rail yard," Biden said in a statement on Wednesday. "Once again, I urge Congress to take immediate action and heed the call of the American people, including the vast majority of gun owners, to help end this epidemic of gun violence in America."

Biden has ordered flags at federal facilities in the United States to be lowered at half-staff for the mass shooting in the US city of San Jose, California, that left nine people dead, including the gunman.

Early Wednesday morning, a gunman killed eight people at the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) Light Rail facility where both the shooter and the victims worked, according to the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office spokesperson.

Police officers did not exchange gunfire with the gunman and the assumption is he died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, the spokesperson said.

According to local Fox affiliate, KTVU, citing multiple unnamed sources, Sam James Cassidy, 57, a technician, has been identified as the suspect. Cassidy's home was the site of a suspicious fire that broke out shortly before the mass shooting, the report said.

This year, mass shootings have taken place at spas in and around Atlanta; in a grocery store in Boulder, Colorado; at a home in Rock Hill, South Carolina; and at a FedEx facility in Indianapolis, Indiana.

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Total, Chevron Suspend Payments to Shareholders in Myanmar Energy Company - Statements

*WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The energy companies Total and Chevron said in separate statements that they have decided to suspend dividend payments to the shareholders of the Myanmar state-owned MGTC company to prevent alleged cash flows into the hands of the country's military junta.

"In light of the unstable context in Myanmar, following a joint proposal by Total and Chevron at the occasion of a shareholders' meeting of MGTC (Moattama Gas Transportation Company Limited) held on 12th May 2021, cash distributions to the shareholders of the company have been suspended," Total said on Wednesday.

The decision to suspend the payments seeks to preclude the country's military to get any funds from the state-owned Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), which owns 15 percent of MGTC shares.

Chevron explained in the statement that gas produced by the Yadana Project, where it holds interest, is used to supply electricity for Yangon, Myanmar's largest city with 5 million inhabitants, as well as for people in Western Thailand and turning off the power would create even more hardship for the people.

Both Total and Chevron condemned the ongoing violence in Myanmar and pledged to comply with the US sanctions regime, according to their statements.

Last week, the US Treasury imposed terror-related sanctions on three individuals and one entity located in Turkey, Syria and Iraq for their alleged connection to the military government of Myanmar.

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US Launches Latest Batch of 60 Starlink Communications Satellites Into Orbit - SpaceX

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The US Space Force successfully launched its latest batch of 60 Starlink communications satellites into Low Earth Orbit (LEO) on a SpaceX Falcon 9 booster from Cape Canaveral Space Base, the company announced.

The launch took place on schedule at 2:59 pm Eastern Daylight Time on Wednesday and was podcast live from Space Launch Complex 40 (SLC-40) at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in Florida. It was the second launch and landing of the Falcon 9 first stage booster, which previously launched the Sentinel-6A mission.

The Starlink communications system delivers high-speed, low latency broadband internet and initial beta service both domestically and internationally, and will continue expansion to near global coverage of the populated world in 2021, the company said.

During beta, users can expect to see data speeds vary from 50Mb/s to 150Mb/s and latency from 20ms to 40ms in most locations over the next several months as the company enhanced the Starlink system, the company added.

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Biden Urges Congress to Take Action to End Gun Violence After San Jose Shooting

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Canada Plans to Land Rover on Moon By 2026 - Space Agency

TORONTO, May 26 (Sputnik) - Canada is planning to land a rover on the Moon's surface within the next five years, the Canadian Space Agency (CSA) said, following an announcement of nearly \$2.5 billion appropriated for the agency.

"In partnership with NASA, a Canadian rover will land on the Moon within the next five years. As a first step, the CSA will select two Canadian companies to develop concepts for the rover and science instrument(s) for this mission," the CSA said in a statement on Wednesday.

The announcement coincides with the federal government's investment of \$2.47 billion dollars in CSA's lunar exploration initiatives.

In his announcement, Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry Francois-Philippe Champagne said the funding will allow Canada to continue to play an important role in the emerging and highly competitive space economy.

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UNSC Adopts Joint Statement Calling for Immediate Release of Mali Officials - Source

UNITED NATIONS, May 26 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council issued a joint statement called for the immediate and unconditional release of Mali's president, prime minister and defense minister detained by military officers earlier this week, a diplomatic source told Sputnik.

"No one at the UN Security Council broke the silence procedure, and the statement was adopted," the source said on Wednesday.

The UN Security Council, in the statement which was put under the silence procedure until 5:00 p.m. EDT, "called for the safe, immediate and unconditional release of all the officials detained and urged the Defence and Security forces elements to return to their barracks without delay."

The council members also called for the immediate resumption to the civilian-led transition in Mali, leading to the election and constitutional order within the 18-month timeline.

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UPDATE 2 - US Lacks Information to Assess if COVID-19 Came From Infected Animal, Lab Accident

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said the US Intelligence Community has determined there is insufficient information to assess whether COVID-19 came from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory leak.

"I had my National Security Advisor task the Intelligence Community to prepare a report on their most up-to-date analysis of the origins of COVID-19, including whether it emerged from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory accident," Biden said in a press release Wednesday. "Here is their current position: 'while two elements in the IC leans toward the former scenario and one leans more toward the latter - each with low or moderate confidence - the majority of elements do not believe there is sufficient information to assess one to be more likely than the other.'"

Biden said he directed the US Intelligence Community to redouble efforts to investigate the matter and to report their findings to him in 90 days.

The US Intelligence Community is expected to reach out to China with specific questions about the origins of COVID-19, Biden said.

Biden said the intelligence community will work with US national labs and other federal agencies to enhance efforts to get closer to a definitive conclusion of the origins of the disease.

In addition, Biden said, the United States will continue to work with the international community to press China to participate in a full and transparent investigation.

The Wall Street Journal reported on Sunday, citing intelligence data, that three lab employees in Wuhan, China, became sick in November 2019 with symptoms similar to COVID-19, which, according to the newspaper, should support the hypothesis that the virus could have originated in China.

The first COVID-19 case was reported in December 2019 in Wuhan, located in eastern Chinese province of Hubei. Former US President Donald Trump blamed the outbreak on China and suspected it originated in a virology lab in Wuhan.

The World Health Organization (WHO) sent several fact-finding missions to Wuhan and released a full report in March which concluded that the leak from the lab was "extremely unlikely." WHO experts further concluded that the virus was transmitted to humans from animals which may have consumed bats.

The United States and 13 other countries issued a joint statement casting doubt on the accuracy of WHO report and called for a "transparent and independent" investigation into the origins of COVID-19.

US House Intelligence Committee chairman Adam Schiff warned against drawing conclusions too hastily.

"It is critical that we allow the IC, and other scientific and medical experts, to objectively weigh and assess all available facts, and to avoid any premature or politically-motivated conclusions," Schiff said in a statement.

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Officers Responding to San Jose Shooting Did Not Kill Gunman - Police

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The officers who first responded to the active shooter situation at a train yard in San Jose, California, did not exchange gunfire with the gunman and the assumption is he died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office spokesperson Russell Davis said.

"We also have one suspect who is deceased as well from this morning's incident. I can confirm with you that deputies did not exchange gunfire, and right now, we're going to go with the assumption that it was a self-inflicted wound from the suspect," Davis said on Wednesday.

The gunman shot dead eight individuals, who were all employees of the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) Light Rail facility where the incident occurred.

Officers who responded to calls for an active shooter situation arrived on the scene a little after 6:30 a.m. local time. The shooting prompted an interagency response that included members of the San Jose Police Department, the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office and federal law enforcement officials from the FBI.

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Biden Orders Flags Lowered in Light of Mass Shooting in California Rail Yard - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has ordered flags at federal facilities in the United States to be lowered at half-staff for the mass shooting in the US city of San Jose that left nine people dead.

"Vice President Harris and I have been briefed on the horrific tragedy that took place this morning in San Jose, where a lone gunman murdered at least eight people and wounded several others at a county rail yard... I have the solemn duty of yet again of ordering the flag to be lowered at half-staff, just weeks after doing so following the mass shootings at spas in and around Atlanta; in a grocery store in Boulder, Colorado; at a home in Rock Hill, South Carolina; and at a FedEx facility in Indianapolis, Indiana," Biden said in a press release on Wednesday. Early Wednesday morning, a gunman killed eight people at a rail yard where both the shooter and the victims worked. There is currently no known motive for the shooting.

It is currently unknown whether the shooter was shot and killed by responding officers or whether the gunshot wound was self-inflicted. An investigation into the shooting is ongoing.

Biden detailed where flags would be lowered in a proclamation released later.

"I hereby order that the flag of the United States shall be flown at half-staff at the White House and upon all public buildings and grounds, at all military posts and naval stations, and on all naval vessels of the Federal Government in the District of Columbia and throughout the United States and its Territories and possessions until sunset, May 30, 2021. I also direct that the flag shall be flown at half-staff for the same length of time at all United States embassies, legations, consular offices, and other facilities abroad, including all military facilities and naval vessels and stations," Biden said.

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Biden Urges Congress to Take Action to End Gun Violence After San Jose Shooting

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US Charges Former Bolivian Minister, 4 Others With Money Laundering - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - Two Bolivian nationals, including a former government minister, plus three US citizens face money laundering charges related to bribes paid to the Bolivian Defense Ministry, the Justice Department said.

"The former Minister of Government of Bolivia and another former Bolivian official are accused of receiving bribes paid by a US company and individuals to secure a Bolivian government contract, and then using the US financial system to launder those bribes," the Justice Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

Arturo Murillo, the former minister, fellow Bolivian and former senior government employee Sergio Mendez, plus Americans Luis Berkman, Bryan Berkman, and Philip Lichtenfeld were arrested last week, Justice said.

Between November 2019 and April 2020, the three Americans paid \$602,000 in bribes to the Bolivian government. Most of the money went to Murillo and Mendez, according to court documents cited by the Justice Department.

In exchange, Berkman's company obtained business from the Bolivian Ministry of Defense, including a \$5.6 million contract to supply the ministry with tear gas and other non-lethal equipment, the Justice Department said.

The Americans then laundered the payments through bank accounts in the US state of Florida and Bolivia, the Justice Department added.

All five individuals are charged with one count of conspiracy to commit money laundering, according to the Justice Department.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik)

RYANAIR GROUNDING IN BELARUS

* Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said Vilnius, Warsaw, Lviv and Kiev did not agree to accept the Ryanair plane following the bomb threat report.

* The current and former European member states on the UN Security Council and the United States on Wednesday decried the grounding of the Ryanair airplane in Minsk as well as the detention of journalist Roman Protasevich, Estonia's envoy to the United Nations Sven Jurgenson said in a joint statement.

* European Council President Charles Michel said that he called Dzmitry Protasevich, the father of the detained journalist, to expresses the European Union's full solidarity with the family of the journalist.

* The attempts to accuse Russia of being involved in the emergency landing of a Ryanair plane in Minsk are speculations, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* NATO allies call for an urgent international investigation of the incident related to the emergency landing of a Ryanair plane in Minsk and the release of Protasevich and Russian citizen Sofia Sapega, the alliance said.

MASS SHOOTING IN CALIFORNIA

* A shooting at a rail yard in San Jose, California left nine people dead, including the gunman himself, Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office spokesperson Russell Davis confirmed on Wednesday.

* The White House is monitoring developments in the mass shooting that occurred in San Jose, California, White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said.

* Jean-Pierre said that the United States is suffering from a gun violence epidemic.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN SYRIA

* Incumbent Syrian President Bashar Assad voted in the presidential election on Wednesday, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

* Several activists brandishing Syrian flags are protesting the Syrian presidential election near the country's embassy in Berlin, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

* In the light of the high turnout in Syria's ongoing presidential election the polling stations may extend their working hours until midnight to allow more people to express their will, Judge Sami Zarmik, the head of the Higher Judicial Committee for Elections, told Sputnik.

* The presidential elections in Syria are illegitimate and do not reflect Syrians' free will, the Turkish Foreign Ministry said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINE

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Wednesday that introducing compulsory COVID-19 vaccination in the country is impractical and impossible.
- * President Joe Biden said that he has asked the US Intelligence Community to redouble efforts in investigating the origins of the COVID-19 disease and expects to receive information within 90 days.
- * Biden said the US intelligence community has determined there is insufficient information to assess whether COVID-19 came from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory leak.
- * The European Medicines Agency (EMA) is aware of the death of a woman who died in Belgium when she developed blood clots after receiving Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine, a member of the agency's press service confirmed to Sputnik on Wednesday, adding that EMA has instructed the developer to carry out additional reviews of the vaccine's safety.

MALI DEVELOPMENTS

- * Mali Vice-President Assimi Goita on Wednesday notified the mediating delegation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) that the military council will take over the administration of the country, a source told Sputnik.
- * The Biden administration condemns the recent detention of the civilian leaders in Mali, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.
- * Russia is concerned about the situation in Mali, calls for the release of transitional authorities and peaceful settlement of all disputes, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.
- * Mali's interim President Bah Ndaw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane tendered resignation, Agence France-Presse reported citing military and diplomatic sources.

REPLACEMENT OF RUSSIAN FLAG IN RIGA

- * Replacing a Russian flag in Riga is not an unfriendly move or an act of disrespect, Edgars Kaktins, a spokesman for the Latvian embassy in Moscow, told Sputnik on Wednesday.
- * The decision of the Riga authorities to remove the Russian flag is an unworthy manipulation, Latvia must understand the harmfulness of such provocative steps, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

PUTIN-BIDEN MEETING

- * Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Wednesday cautioned against high expectations regarding the first meeting of Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart Joe Biden.
- * Experts will make final decisions regarding the epidemiological requirements for the delegations at the upcoming US-Russia summit, since the safety of the heads of state is top priority, Peskov said.
- * The Kremlin believes that the crucial point of the upcoming meeting between Putin and Biden, is that the leaders of the countries will have an opportunity to exchange views on various issues, including stability and arms control, Peskov said.
- * There are currently no plans to sign any documents at the upcoming meeting of Putin and Biden, Peskov said.

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Federal Reserve Not to Hike US Rate Yet But Should Review of Bond Buying - Vice Chair

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve is still far from executing a US interest rate hike but it needs to start reviewing the \$120 billion worth of assets it is buying each month to support the economy, Vice Chair for Supervision Randal Quarles said on Wednesday.

"It will become important for the FOMC to begin discussing our plans to adjust the pace of asset purchases at upcoming meetings," Quarles said, referring to the Federal Reserve's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee in a speech on the economy.

Right after the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in March 2020, the Federal Reserve dropped interest rates to between zero and a quarter percentage point and has maintained that range to stimulate growth. The central bank has also been buying \$80 billion of bonds each month and \$40 billion of other assets.

With the economy making steady recovery this year, registering an annualized growth of 6.4 percent in the first quarter after a 3.5 percent contraction in 2020, some Federal Reserve officials have been floating the idea of reviewing, even reducing, the central bank's asset purchases.

Quarles was one of them on Wednesday, saying the Federal Reserve's asset buying needed to be in line with its other mandate of ensuring maximum employment for Americans.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. At least eight million of those jobs have not returned, the Labor Department said.

"We may need additional public communications about the conditions that constitute substantial further progress ... toward our broad and inclusive definition of maximum employment," Quarles said. "This standard presents inherent communications challenges because it cannot be summarized by a single labor market indicator, such as the unemployment rate thresholds used in the Committee's interest rate forward guidance between late 2012 and late 2013."

Quarles noted the underlying strength in employment hours and wages despite the less than favorable employment picture with a disappointing addition of just 266,000 jobs to the economy in April versus expectations for growth of one million jobs.

"I expect employment to rise significantly in coming months," Quarles said, adding that the picture was likely to be mixed.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell has been saying for months that he did not expect full employment - denoted by an unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower - before 2023. The unemployment rate was at 6.1 percent in April. Powell also said he did not expect a rate hike at least until the end of next year.

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American Rescue Plan Impact Payments Total \$3.5 billion in Past 2 Weeks – Treasury

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) – The US distributed 1.8 million Economic Impact Payments under the COVID-19 American Rescue plan totaling \$3.5 billion in the past two weeks, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

"Today's announcement... brings the total disbursed so far to nearly 167 million payments. They represent a total value of approximately \$391 billion since these payments began rolling out to Americans in batches on March 12," a Treasury press release said. "... this includes more than 1.8 million payments with a value of more than \$3.5 billion."

Treasury's Internal Revenue Service will continue to make payments under the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan on a weekly basis, using information from 2020 tax returns, the release added.

Treasury urged individuals who do not normally file tax returns to file one for 2020 to ensure they get all the benefits they're entitled to under the law.

The rescue plan provides payments of \$1,400 for individuals, \$2,800 for married couples filing joint tax returns plus an additional \$1,400 for each dependent. The payments are limited to individuals earning less than \$75,000 a year and \$150,000 for couples.

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Biden Briefed on San Jose, California Shooting Situation - White House

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has been briefed on the active shooting situation that left the shooter and eight others dead earlier in the day in San Jose, California, the White House said on Wednesday.

"The President has been briefed on the mass shooting and the tragic loss of life in San Jose by his Homeland Security Advisor, Liz Sherwood-Randall. The White House continues to monitor the situation and remains in close contact with local officials to offer any assistance as needed," the White House said in a statement.

The shooting took place early Wednesday morning in a rail yard where both the shooter and the victims worked. There is currently no known motive for the shooting.

Investigators are still processing the scene. It is currently unknown whether the shooter was shot and killed by responding officers or whether the gunshot wound was self-inflicted. A nearby house fire is believed to be connected to the shooting, having purportedly been started by the suspected shooter prior to the incident at the rail yard. Officials are currently investigating that location as well.

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US, EU States at UNSC Will Ensure Belarus Bears Responsibility for Plane Grounding

UNITED NATIONS, May 26 (Sputnik) - Current and former European member states at the UN Security Council - Belgium, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland, Norway, the United Kingdom - and the United States said on Wednesday they will ensure that Belarus is held responsible for the forced landing of the Ryanair commercial aircraft in Minsk.

"We will enhance our efforts, including through coordination of our sanctions policies to ensure that the Belarusian authorities bear responsibility for their actions," the countries said in a statement.

The statement strongly condemned the diversion of the flight with 132 people on board to Minsk National Airport and the arrest of two passengers - opposition journalist Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend, Sofia Sapega.

"We fully condemn this as yet another blatant attempt by the Belarusian authorities to silence all opposition voices," the statement said.

It called on the International Civil Aviation Organization to urgently probe the incident and promote full accountability for those responsible.

In the statement, the six countries also demanded the immediate release of Protasevich and Sapega.

On Sunday, a Vilnius-bound Ryanair plane traveling from Athens was grounded in Minsk over a bomb threat which later turned out to be false. Among the passengers was Protasevich, a co-founder of a Telegram channel that Minsk designated as extremist, who was detained during the stopover.

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White House Believes China Has Not Been Fully Cooperative With Probe Into COVID Origins

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) – The United States does not believe China has been fully cooperative with the probe into the origins of the novel coronavirus disease, White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

US President Joe Biden said earlier on Wednesday that the US Intelligence Community (IC) has determined there was insufficient information to assess whether COVID-19 came from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory leak and ordered the IC to redouble efforts to investigate the matter and to report their findings to him in 90 days.

"China wasn't transparent enough, we've been saying that for a very long time, that China needed to provide more access to the lab, cooperate more fully with the scientific investigators," Jean-Pierre said during the White House press briefing.

The deputy White House spokesperson summarized, saying that China didn't meet the "standard" for transparency during the investigation.

The Wall Street Journal reported on Sunday, citing intelligence data, that three lab employees in Wuhan, China, became sick in November 2019 with symptoms similar to COVID-19, which, according to the newspaper, should support the hypothesis that the virus could have originated in China.

The first COVID-19 case was reported in December 2019 in Wuhan, located in the central Chinese province of Hubei. Former US President Donald Trump blamed the outbreak on China and suspected it originated in a virology lab in Wuhan.

The World Health Organization (WHO) sent several fact-finding missions to Wuhan and released a full report in March which concluded that the leak from the lab was "extremely unlikely." WHO experts further concluded that the virus was transmitted to humans from animals that may have consumed bats.

The United States and 13 other countries issued a joint statement casting doubt on the accuracy of WHO report and called for a "transparent and independent" investigation into the origins of COVID-19.

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Top US Doctor Fauci's Popularity Erodes Amid Concerns Over Political Influence – Poll

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) – US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease Director Anthony Fauci remains the trust of a majority of Americans, albeit with his reputation diminished due to the influence of politics, a Rasmussen Reports poll said on Wednesday.

"The... survey finds that 54% of Likely U.S. Voters have a favorable opinion of Fauci, including 34% who have a Very Favorable view," a press release explaining the poll said.

Fauci's approval fell from 68 percent in May a year ago, when 42 percent also said their view of the nation's top COVID-19 doctor was "very favorable," the release said.

Politics provides a likely reason for the shift in public opinion, the release added.

Nearly two-thirds of voters (65 percent) believe political considerations have influenced Fauci's decisions and public statements about the COVID-19 pandemic, including 40 percent who think political considerations have had a lot of influence on him, according to the release.

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US Trade Chief Prods WTO to Crack Down on Forced Labor on Fishing Vessels

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said Wednesday she has called on the World Trade Organization to act against forced labor on fishing vessels, which like any worker abuse undermines the global economy.

"Forced labor harms the lives and well-being of fishers and workers around the world and it must be eliminated," Tai said in a statement that called for WTO's attention on the matter. "The Biden-Harris Administration is committed to fighting forced labor wherever it occurs. We will continue to work closely with our partners and allies to promote a fair international trading system that addresses the sustainability of fisheries resources, and benefits workers and citizens around the world."

In a proposal submitted to the WTO on Wednesday, the Office of the US Trade Representative urged the world body to step up negotiations to curb harmful subsidies to fishing activities that may be associated with the use of forced labor such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing.

Tai said in addition to the human cost, forced labor on fishing vessels presented an unfair cost advantage to those who exploit the system.

"It exacerbates overfishing and the depletion of the world's oceans," she said. "Recognizing the link between forced labor and the harmful subsidies that may also go to these vessels is an important step in tackling this pervasive problem. The WTO has an opportunity to address this issue with a meaningful agreement that positively affects the lives and well-being of working people, and increases transparency and accountability in global supply chains."

WTO has been engaged for years in multilateral negotiations to prohibit harmful fisheries subsidies, including subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing and subsidies to vessels engaged in unregulated fishing.

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US Aircraft Carrier Leaving Asia-Pacific This Summer to Support Afghan Pullout - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The United States is mobilizing its only aircraft carrier in the Asia-Pacific to the Middle East this summer to support the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Wall Street Journal reported citing defense officials on Wednesday.

The report said the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft will be deployed in the Middle East for up to four months.

The report said US Central Command (CENTCOM) Chief Gen. Frank McKenzie requested a carrier to replace the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier that is currently in the Persian Gulf but scheduled to return to its homeport in the United States by July. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin approved McKenzie's request but is expected to review the matter again in the coming days, the report added.

The US Navy declined to comment on the situation, the report said.

On Tuesday, CENTCOM said the United States was at least 16 to 25 percent complete with its withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan.

On May 1, the United States began withdrawing troops from Afghanistan after 20 years of war that resulted in the deaths of over 2,300 US servicemen and hundreds of thousands of Afghan casualties. US President Joe Biden vowed to complete the pullout by the 20th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks against the United States that sparked the so-called War on Terror by then-President George W. Bush.

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US Extends Travel Warning to Avoid Belarus

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) – The United States has renewed on Wednesday its travel warning advising its citizens to avoid traveling to Belarus, State Department said in a notice.

"The Department of State renewed its Travel Advisory for Belarus on May 26, 2021," the notice read. "The Department continues to advise travelers not to travel to Belarus."

US authorities warned Americans against traveling to Belarus due to the arbitrary enforcement of laws, risk of detention, and COVID-19, the State Department said.

"Belarusian authorities have detained tens of thousands of individuals, including U.S. citizens, for alleged affiliations with opposition parties and alleged participation in political demonstrations," the notice added.

On Sunday, a Vilnius-bound Ryanair plane, traveling from Athens, was grounded in Minsk over a bomb threat which later turned out to be false. Among the passengers was Roman Protasevich, a co-founder of a Telegram channel that Minsk designated as extremist. He was detained during the stopover at the Minsk airport and may face up to 15 years in prison.

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Antibiotic Use in US Drops 33% During Pandemic as Patients Avoid Doctors' Offices – Study

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) – Efforts by US health officials to fight a growing threat from antibiotic-resistant bacteria by writing fewer prescriptions received an unexpected boost from the coronavirus pandemic, with prescriptions from doctors' offices falling by one-third from January to May 2020, the Centers For Disease Control (CDC) said on Wednesday.

"Studies show a 33% decrease in antibiotic prescribing in outpatient settings during the COVID-19 pandemic and an overall decrease in antibiotic use among nursing home residents. However, prescribing of specific antibiotics, including azithromycin, was higher than expected," a CDC press release said.

Antibiotics do not treat the virus that causes COVID-19 and one reason cited by the CDC for the overall decrease in antibiotic use is a growing awareness antibiotics don't treat viruses, the release said.

The CDC also cited a decrease in the spread of non-COVID-19 respiratory diseases such as flu and the common cold – two illnesses also caused by viruses. In the past, the CDC has urged doctors to avoid using antibiotics for patients with cold or flu symptoms - even when patients insist. Both diseases are caused by viruses.

In nursing homes, a similar decrease in antibiotic use occurred from May-October 2020 – a decline attributed to increased infection prevention and control measures along with fewer admissions of new residents during the period, the release said.

The one exception to the trend - an increase in prescriptions of the antibiotic azithromycin - stemmed from the medication's promotion as a potential therapy early in the pandemic as a possible treatment with COVID-19, typically when combined with the antimalarial drug hydroxychloroquine, according to the CDC.

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Japan to Keep US Updated on Developing Plans to Host Olympics Amid Pandemic - White House

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - Japan has assured the United States it will remain in close contact as they develop plans to host the summer Olympics in Tokyo amid the novel coronavirus pandemic, White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

"The government of Japan has stressed that public health remains the central priority as they plan to host the games," Jean-Pierre said in a press briefing. "Tokyo has assured us that they will keep in close contact with Washington as their plans develop."

Tokyo Olympics President Seiko Hashimoto in earlier remarks on Wednesday promised that Japan would organize safe games despite mounting pressure for them to be canceled due to the pandemic.

The Tokyo Games are due to take place from July 23 to August 8.

About 15,000 athletes and 78,000 non-athletes, including members of sports committees and foreign media, are expected to be on the ground at the Tokyo Olympics. As many as 2,500 members of the Olympic and Paralympics delegations are estimated to need COVID-19 vaccines.

Around 20,000 vaccines from Pfizer will be delivered for free to Japanese athletes and staff members participating in the events. Contact tracing is also expected to get a boost, with an app using GPS to notify the owner of contact with people who may have tested positive for the coronavirus.

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US to Consult With Gulf States on Reduction of Israel-Palestine Tensions - Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will consult with Gulf Arab states to contribute to the reduction of tensions between Israel and Palestine, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said at a press conference in Amman, Jordan at the last leg of his quickfire Middle East tour.

"In the coming days I will be consulting broadly with Gulf countries and other partners to ensure we all contribute to recovery, stability and the reduction of tensions," Blinken said told reporters. Blinken had met with Israeli and Palestinian leadership the previous day in Jerusalem and Ramallah, where he pledged over \$100 million in aid to Palestinian organizations. Earlier in the day, Blinken had a stopover in Cairo where he met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

Clashes in East Jerusalem in early May led to the worst violence between Israel and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip in recent years. Palestinian militants launched several thousand rockets toward Israel. In response, Israel fired retaliatory strikes against Gaza. In Israel, 12 people were killed and over 50 were seriously wounded during the hostilities. The death toll among Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, Jerusalem and the West Bank topped 270.

Israel and the Hamas Islamist movement on Thursday agreed to an Egypt-brokered ceasefire.

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US, EU States at UN Security Council Strongly Condemn Forced Grounding of Plane in Minsk

UNITED NATIONS, May 26 (Sputnik) - Current and former European member states at the UN Security Council and the United States on Wednesday decried the grounding of the Ryanair plane in the Belarusian capital of Minsk and the following detention of journalist Roman Protasevich, Estonia's envoy to the United Nations, Sven Jurgenson, said in a joint statement on behalf of the countries.

"[Estonia, France, Ireland and former UN Security Council members Belgium and Germany, as well as Norway, United Kingdom and the United States] strongly condemn the forced landing of Ryanair flight in Minsk, Belarus, on the 23rd of May, 2021, endangering aviation safety, and the detention by Belarusian authorities of journalist Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega," Jurgenson said.

"These acts are a blatant attack on international civilian aviation safety and on European security and show flagrant disregard of international laws," he added.

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Eight People Dead Including Gunman in Shooting in San Jose, California - Police

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - A shooting at a rail yard in San Jose, California left nine people dead, including the gunman himself, Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office spokesperson Russell Davis confirmed on Wednesday.

"There are eight casualties from victims and then one suspect casualty at this point as well," Davis said.

The shooting took place early Wednesday morning at a VTA (Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority) train yard where the suspect was employed.

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Hague Court Orders Shell Cut CO2 Emissions by Half Within Decade - Advocacy Group

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The Hague district court on Wednesday ordered Royal Dutch Shell to cut its carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions by 45 percent within the next decade, the environmental advocacy group Friends of the Earth International said on Wednesday.

"For the first time in history, a judge has held a corporation liable for causing dangerous climate change. Today, as a result of legal action brought by Friends of the Earth Netherlands together with 17,000 co-plaintiffs and six other organizations, the court in The Hague ruled that Shell must reduce its CO2 emissions by 45 percent within ten years. This historic verdict has enormous consequences for Shell and other big polluters globally," the advocacy group said in a press release.

The Hague court found that the carbon dioxide emissions by Royal Dutch Shell violate the right to life and undisturbed family life legal provisions and should be reduced by the end of 2030, the release said.

"This is a turning point in history. This case is unique because it is the first time a judge has ordered a large polluting company to comply with the Paris Climate Agreement. This ruling may also have major consequences for other big polluters," the release added.

Royal Dutch Shell is obliged to comply with the judgment immediately since the company's climate policy is not concrete enough, the release added.

In April, the company presented its Energy Transition Strategy, which was supported by shareholders on May 18. According to CEO Ben van Beurden, the strategy is designed to bring the company activities in line with the Paris Climate Agreement that set the goal of net-zero emissions by 2050.

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US Suffering From Gun Violence Epidemic - White House

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday that the United States is suffering from a gun violence epidemic.

"We are suffering from an epidemic of gun violence in this country, both in mass shootings and the lives that are being taken in daily gun violence that doesn't make national headlines," Jean-Pierre said in light of the mass shooting that took place in the US city of San Jose earlier in the day.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Santa Clara Sheriff's Office said there were multiple fatalities in the shooting in San Jose, including the gunman.

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White House Monitoring Mass Shooting in US City of San Jose - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The White House is monitoring developments in the mass shooting that occurred in San Jose, California, White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

"The White House is monitoring the situation," Jean-Pierre said when asked if President Joe Biden has been briefed on the shooting.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Santa Clara Sheriff's Office said there were multiple fatalities in the shooting in San Jose, including the gunman.

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UN Calls for Urgent Resolution of Political Crisis in Mali - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, May 26 (Sputnik) - The United Nations called for an urgent resolution to the political crisis in Mali as the situation may undermine the implementation of the peace agreement, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"The Mission [in Mali] Continues to support the efforts of ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States] and calls on all actors concerned to cooperate fully with a rapid resumption of the normal course of the transition within the framework provided by the Charter," Dujarric said. "It is crucial that this crisis be resolved urgently, as it constitutes an additional challenge that would negatively affect the implementation of the peace agreement."

Dujarric said UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres continues to follow the situation with concern and held talks on Tuesday with African Union Commission chairperson Moussa Faki and the Chair of ECOWAS, Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo regarding the crisis.

Later on Wednesday, the UN Security Council will convene closed consultations on the situation in the West African country.

Earlier in the week, a Sputnik source said the military arrested interim President Ba Ndau and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane and transported them to the Kati army base near the capital of Bamako. According to the source, the presidential guard refused to protect the president, allowing the military to take him away. Mali's vice-president, Col. Assimi Goita, said he had dismissed the president and prime minister for violating the Transitional Charter.

In 2015, the government of Mali, pro-government armed group and rebels signed the Algiers peace agreement in Bamako. The agreement, which still has not been fully implemented, seeks to restore peace in the country through decentralization, integration of rebels into a national army and boosting the economy.

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US to Stay 'Deeply Engaged' in Afghanistan During Pullout - National Security Advisor

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan has assured his opposite number in Kabul the United States will continue to support the Afghan government and security forces during the US military withdrawal to be completed by September 11, National Security Council (NSC) spokesperson Emily Horne said on Wednesday.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke today with Afghan National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib," Horne said in a readout. "Mr. Sullivan emphasized that the United States will remain deeply engaged with the government of Afghanistan and the Afghan people, as US troops depart the country.

Sullivan and Mohib reaffirmed the enduring strength of the bilateral partnership and committed to continue to consult closely while Sullivan also outlined US plans to continue security assistance to Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, as well as civilian assistance to help the Afghan people, Horne said.

"The National Security Advisors agreed on the importance of the two governments continuing to work closely together in support of common objectives, including a negotiated political settlement that ends the war in Afghanistan. Mr. Sullivan underscored that the United States will stand firmly with the Afghan people as they seek to achieve a durable and inclusive peace," Horne said.

Earlier in the day, the Taliban said they would consider the establishment of US military bases elsewhere in Central Asia after withdrawal from Afghanistan as "provocative acts" and urged the neighboring countries not to allow using their territory against the security of others.

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US Lacks Information to Assess if COVID-19 Came From Infected Animal, Lab Accident

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday the US Intelligence Community has determined there is insufficient information to assess whether COVID-19 came from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory leak.

"I had my National Security Advisor task the Intelligence Community to prepare a report on their most up-to-date analysis of the origins of COVID-19, including whether it emerged from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory accident," Biden said in a press release.

"Here is their current position: 'while two elements in the IC leans toward the former scenario and one leans more toward the latter - each with low or moderate confidence - the majority of elements do not believe there is sufficient information to assess one to be more likely than the other,'"

Biden said he directed the US Intelligence Community to redouble efforts to investigate the matter and to report their findings to him in 90 days.

The US Intelligence Community is expected to reach out to China with specific questions about the origins of COVID-19, Biden said.

Biden said the intelligence community will work with US national labs and other federal agencies to enhance efforts to get closer to a definitive conclusion of the origins of the disease.

In addition, Biden said, the United States will continue to work with the international community to press China to participate in a full and transparent investigation.

The Wall Street Journal reported on Sunday, citing intelligence data, that three lab employees in Wuhan, China, became sick in November 2019 with symptoms similar to COVID-19, which, according to the newspaper, should support the hypothesis that the virus could have originated in China.

The first COVID-19 case was reported in December 2019 in Wuhan, located in eastern Chinese province of Hubei. Former US President Donald Trump blamed the outbreak on China and suspected it originated in a virology lab in Wuhan.

The World Health Organization (WHO) sent several fact-finding missions to Wuhan and released a full report in March which concluded that the leak from the lab was "extremely unlikely." WHO experts further concluded that the virus was transmitted to humans from animals which may have consumed bats.

The United States and 13 other countries issued a joint statement casting doubt on the accuracy of WHO report and called for a "transparent and independent" investigation into the origins of COVID-19.

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Gunman Kills 8, Injures Many More in San Jose, California Shooting - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - A gunman took the lives of eight people during a shooting at a train yard in San Jose, California, the Los Angeles Times reported on Wednesday citing law enforcement sources.

Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office spokesperson Russell Davis said there were "multiple" injuries and fatalities, but would not confirm the precise number. These new reports, however, place the number of individuals killed in the incident at eight.

The shooting started at around 6:34 a.m. local time at the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) Light Rail train yard. The victims include employees at the facility.

The gunman is also dead although it is unclear at present whether he committed suicide or was killed by police.

The updated reports say the suspect set his house on fire before driving to the train yard, where he began shooting.

Law enforcement officials said they plan to continue providing updates as more information becomes available throughout the day.

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Biden Asks US Intelligence to Redouble Efforts on Finding COVID-19 Origins - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he has asked the US Intelligence Community to redouble efforts in investigating the origins of the COVID-19 disease and expects to receive information within 90 days.

"I have now asked the Intelligence Community to redouble their efforts to collect and analyze information that could bring us closer to a definitive conclusion, and to report back to me in 90

days," Biden said in a statement. "As part of that report, I have asked for areas of further inquiry that may be required, including specific questions for China."

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US Not to Support Benefits for Syria Until It Demonstrates Political Reforms - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, May 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will not support nor normalize benefits to the Syrian government until it demonstrates willingness and progress in political reforms, US Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Richard Mills said on Wednesday.

"The United States will not normalize, nor support, any other benefits to the regime - not until the regime demonstrates willingness and progress in achieving the political reforms that are called for in Resolution 2254," Mills told a UN Security Council meeting. "That resolution remains the agreed and established path for a political solution to the conflict in Syria."

On Wednesday, Syria is holding its second presidential election since the onset of the decade-long war, with incumbent Bashar Assad running against two challengers.

Mills said the election in Syria is not held pursuant to the new constitution and under UN supervision as per Resolution 2254, and as such represents an "insult to democracy."

"The people of Syria don't need sham elections. They need food, humanitarian support, and - most of all - peace," Mills said.

The diplomat added the United States fully supports the efforts led by UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen to pursue a peaceful solution in Syria which begins with adhering to a nationwide ceasefire.

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US Lacks Information to Assess if COVID-19 Came from Infected Animal, Lab Accident - Biden

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday the US intelligence community has determined there is insufficient information to assess whether COVID-19 came from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory leak.

"I had my National Security Advisor task the Intelligence Community to prepare a report on their most up-to-date analysis of the origins of COVID-19, including whether it emerged from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory accident," Biden said in a press release.

"Here is their current position: 'while two elements in the IC leans toward the former scenario and one leans more toward the latter – each with low or moderate confidence – the majority of elements do not believe there is sufficient information to assess one to be more likely than the other,'"

Biden said he directed the US intelligence community to redouble efforts to investigate the matter and to report their findings to him in 90 days.

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Lockheed Martin, General Motors Team-up to Develop Astronauts-Driven Lunar Rover

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) – A lunar terrain vehicle (LTV) for astronauts to travel on the surface of the moon will be developed in a joint venture announced by Lockheed Martin and General Motors (GM) on Wednesday.

"This alliance brings together powerhouse innovation from both companies to make a transformative class of vehicles," Lockheed Martin Executive Vice President Rick Ambrose said in a press release. "Surface mobility is critical to enable and sustain long-term exploration of the lunar surface."

NASA sought industry approaches to develop a Lunar Terrain Vehicle (LTV) that will enable astronauts in the agency's Artemis Program to explore the lunar surface. The LTV will be the first of many types of surface mobility vehicles needed, the release said.

Lockheed Martin, the lead contractor for NASA's Orion spacecraft, will lead the team, the release added.

GM offers the joint venture battery-electric technologies, propulsion systems and autonomous vehicle technology, according to the release.

Like Lockheed Martin, GM has a long history of working with NASA. The company developed navigation systems for the Apollo Moon program, including the Apollo 11 landing of the first humans on the lunar surface in 1969. GM also helped develop the electric Apollo Lunar Roving Vehicle (LRV) for the Apollo 15-17 missions, the release said.

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US Man Exonerated of Murder, Freed After 32 Years in Prison - Attorney General

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - A man who was wrongfully convicted of murder based on faulty evidence has been exonerated of the crime after spending almost 32 years in prison, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The Oakland County conviction of Gilbert Lee Poole, Jr. has been vacated after collaboration between the Michigan Department of Attorney General's Conviction Integrity Unit (CIU) and the Western Michigan University Cooley Law School Innocence Project (Cooley Innocence Project). Poole was wrongly convicted of murder in 1989. DNA evidence from the scene exonerates him after nearly 32 years in prison," Nessel said.

Poole was falsely implicated in the murder by his then-girlfriend, which led to his arrest and conviction alongside testimony from an expert who claimed that Poole's teeth matched the bite mark found on the victim's body. Such bite marks are now considered unreliable evidence.

He was exonerated of the crime after modern DNA testing revealed that he was not a match to the blood found around the scene of the crime. As an exonerated prisoner, Poole is eligible for

up to a year of reentry housing and two years of job placement assistance, job training, transportation assistance, work clothing or tools, and vital documents assistance from the Michigan Offender Success Program.

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US Strongly Condemns Detention of Civilian Leaders in Mali - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration condemns the recent detention of the civilian leaders in Mali, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday. "The United States strongly condemns the detention of civilian leaders of Mali's transition government," Price said.

The United States seeks an "immediate and unconditional" release of the detained and calls for restoring the civilian-led transition in Mali, Price added.

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US Crude Oil, Fuel Consumption Surges Ahead of Summer Driving Season - EIA Data

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - US crude oil and fuel stockpiles fell sharply last week on accelerated demand from refiners ahead of the start of the peak summer driving in an economy rebounding rapidly from COVID-19 suppression, data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed Wednesday.

Crude oil inventories fell 1.66 million barrels during the week ended May 21, versus the 1 million barrel drawdown forecast by US media, the EIA's Weekly Petroleum Status Report showed. Stockpiles of gasoline, the main fuel for cars, fell by 1.75 million barrels against expectations for a slide of 1.1 million.

Inventories of distillates, which include the diesel crucial for trucks and other heavy vehicles, were down by 3 million barrels versus forecasts for a 2 million barrel drop.

Refiners typically turn out more fuels such as gasoline and diesel ahead of the Memorial Day holiday, which unofficially marks the start of the peak summer driving season.

The American Automobile Association says it expects as many as 37 million road travelers during the three-day break leading to this year's Memorial Day, which falls on May 31. That would be 60 higher than the pandemic-suppressed number of 23 million travelers seen during Memorial Day 2020, the AAA said.

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US, EU Officials Discuss Russia, Hold First High-Level Dialogue on China - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and European External Action Service Secretary-General Stefano Sannino discussed Russia, Belarus and Ukraine during their meeting in Brussels, and also held the first high-level meeting

of the US-EU dialogue on China, the State Department and the European External Action Service said a joint press release on Wednesday.

"They discussed a range of foreign policy issues of mutual concern, such as Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, and the recent violence in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza," the release said.

"They exchanged views on the Eastern Mediterranean, Western Balkans, Afghanistan, Syria, Myanmar, the Indo-Pacific, Ethiopia and Venezuela."

Sherman and Shannino and Sherman welcomed the upcoming EU-US Summit scheduled for June 15 and stressed the shared interest in enhancing cooperation, the release said.

"They also underscored a shared interest in improving connectivity by supporting partners in setting up regulatory environments that are conducive to sustainable connectivity, as well as through quality infrastructure development and projects consistent with the highest transparency, digital and green standards as part of their respective approaches to the Indo-Pacific region," the release said.

In addition, Sherman and Sannino held the first high-level meeting of the US-EU dialogue on China, the release said.

"The two sides reiterated that the United States' and EU's relations with China are multifaceted and comprise elements of cooperation, competition, and systemic rivalry," it said. "They highlighted issues of shared concern, including ongoing human rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet, the erosion of autonomy and democratic processes in Hong Kong, economic coercion, disinformation campaigns, and regional security issues, in particular the situation in the South China Sea."

The two sides also spoke about the need of Taiwan's participation in the work of international organizations, including World Health Organization forums and the World Health Assembly, the release said.

"They also discussed pursuing constructive engagement with China on issues such as climate change and non-proliferation, and on certain regional issues," it added. "The two sides decided to continue meetings in this dialogue at senior official and expert levels to discuss reciprocity, including economic issues; resilience; human rights; security; multilateralism; and engagement." The next high-level meeting will be held in winter of 2021-22, according to the release.

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Biden Nominates Organizer of 2028 Olympics in US for Key Intelligence Post - White House

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden plans to nominate Brian Nelson, chief legal officer for the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles (LA28) organizing committee, as Undersecretary of Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, the White House said on Wednesday.

"Before joining LA28, Nelson served in a number of senior roles in the California Department of Justice, overseeing key initiatives, including Attorney General-led efforts to combat transnational criminal organizations, dismantle human trafficking networks, and build state and international

partnerships to stop money laundering and high-tech crimes," the White House said in a press release.

Nelson also served in the US Justice Department's National Security Division as deputy chief of staff, the release said.

Nelson led a list of nominees announced by the White House including: Lisa Brown as general counsel for the Education Department; Matt Olsen, Assistant Attorney General for the Justice Department National Security Division; and Elizabeth Rosenberg, Assistant Treasury Secretary for Terrorism Financing.

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Multiple Fatalities, Injuries in San Jose, California Shooting - Police

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - An active shooter situation at a rail yard in San Jose, California left multiple people injured and killed, Deputy Russell Davis, a spokesperson for the Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office said on Wednesday.

"I can confirm with you right now that we do have multiple victims, and we have multiple casualties at this point. I can't confirm the exact number of injuries and fatalities, but I will tell you that there are multiple injuries and multiple fatalities in this case," Davis said.

Among those killed is the shooter himself. Some victims of the shooting are currently receiving treatment, Davis added.

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US at Least 18 Months Away From Full Employment - Fitch Ratings

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The United States is at least 18 months away from achieving full employment, with the world's largest economy requiring an estimated 7 million new jobs to reach that goal, Fitch Ratings said on Wednesday.

"We do not see a return to 'full' or 'maximum' employment - with the unemployment rate back down to its non-inflationary rate and labor force participation rates back to sustainable mid-cycle levels - until 4Q22," Fitch said in a statement, referring to the fourth quarter of next year. "A return to full employment in the United States is still 18 months away and will require the creation of a further 7 million jobs."

The rating agency's forecast is in line with expectations of the Federal Reserve, which says that full employment - marked by an unemployment rate of 4 percent or below - was unlikely to occur before 2023. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 6.1 percent in April.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the novel coronavirus measures. At least 8 million of those jobs have not returned, the Labor Department said.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, although first quarter data for 2021 showed a dynamic rebound of 6.4 percent. The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent economic growth for all of 2021.

Fitch said the massive jobs disruption in 2020 was likely to lead to some medium-term "scarring" and reduced labor supply as long-term unemployment rose and older workers were permanently discouraged from labor force activity.

"However, even allowing for this, it will take quite a while for the labor market to regain balance," it said. "Stimulus measures and the reopening of face-to-face service industries are now boosting labor demand strongly. But the speed at which unemployment falls will be dampened by a relatively swift recovery in labor force participation as social distancing recedes."

On top of this, with the employment-to-working age population ratio remaining below 60 percent, upward pressures on wage inflation over the next 18 months should also be contained, Fitch said.

"Aggregate measures are yet to show material signs of increasing wage inflation. Recent reports of labour market shortages are more reflective of sector-specific dynamics and the pace of reopening, and are likely to be fairly short-lived," it added.

Fitch summed up by saying that the continuing shortfall in jobs was likely to heavily influence macro policy choices over the next year or so, particularly as any pandemic setback entails bigger risks for the labor market than for the US economy as a whole.

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Americans Want Action on Climate Change, Reject Total Break With Fossil Fuels - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - Americans support an array of measures to address climate change but balk at more extreme proposals such as ending the use of fossil fuel as an energy source, a poll by the PEW Research Institute said on Wednesday.

"The public has limited appetite for some of the more dramatic proposed changes to energy consumption, such as phasing out the use of fossil fuels entirely or ending the production of gasoline-powered vehicles by 2035," a press release explaining the poll said.

Still, most Americans favor using a mix of energy sources to meet the country's needs- including renewables and fossil fuels - albeit with younger adults more willing than their elders to shun natural gas, oil and coal, the release said.

For example, 43 percent of Generation Z - those born between 1997 and 2010 - believe the US should phase out fossil fuels, as do 42 percent of millennials born from 1981 to 1996. In contrast, just 25 percent of so called baby boomers, those born in the two decades following World War II, and older adults say the same. Overall, 33 percent favor a complete break with fossil fuels while 64 percent reject the idea, the release added.

Nevertheless, anxiety over climate change yields a large majority (71 percent) saying the United States should prioritize alternative energy development compared with 27 percent saying the United States should prioritize expanding fossil fuel production, according to the release.

The poll also showed broad support for many climate-change proposals included in President Joe Biden's infrastructure plan, such as requiring power companies to use more renewables (74 percent favor vs 24 percent oppose), and federal spending for a nationwide network of charging stations for electric cars (62 vs 36 percent).

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Situation in Syria 'Relatively Calm' as Russia Helps De-Escalate in Qamishli - Pedersen

UNITED NATIONS, May 26 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen said on Wednesday the military situation in the Arab Republic remained relatively calm with Russia helping lower tensions in the northeastern city of Qamishli and not shifting the front lines. "The military situation is relatively calm in some areas, with front lines frozen and Russian mediation helping de-escalate fighting in Qamishli," Pedersen told in a UN Security Council meeting on Syria.

Qamishli has recently seen clashes between Kurdish armed groups, which control most of the city, and pro-government forces. The United Nations said that as many as 20,000 people were forced to flee because of the recent hostilities.

Pedersen said recurring signs of a confrontation were still abundant in Syria, including spikes in mutual shelling and a cross-line raid into the government-controlled territory.

There has been more shelling in and around the cities of Afrin and Ain Issa, the special envoy said. At the same time, the country's southwest remained as turbulent as ever, and the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) has perpetrated more attacks on the ground.

Israel has launched more airstrikes into Quneitra, Latakia and Hama, while rockets were launched from southern Syria toward the occupied Syrian Golan, Pedersen said.

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Multiple People Dead in Shooting in San Jose, California - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - Multiple people are dead in a mass shooting that occurred in the US city of San Jose in the state of California, the Mercury News local newspaper reported citing sources on Wednesday.

The Santa Clara County Sheriff's Office said in a statement via Twitter that the gunman is dead. It is not clear whether law enforcement killed the shooter or whether he committed suicide. The seriousness of the injuries of those being treated, the number being treated, and if there are any fatalities are currently unknown.

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Amazon Reaches Deal to Acquire Hollywood Studio MGM for \$8.5Bln

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) – Tech behemoth Amazon will acquire Hollywood heavyweight Metro Goldwyn Mayer (MGM) for a price of \$8.45 billion while helping to preserve the entertainment company's heritage and movie catalog, the e-commerce giant said on Wednesday.

"Amazon and MGM today announced that they have entered into a definitive merger agreement under which Amazon will acquire MGM for a purchase price of \$8.45 billion," Amazon said in a release. "Amazon will help preserve MGM's heritage and catalog of films, and provide customers with greater access to these existing works."

The release noted that MGM has nearly a century of filmmaking history and complements the work of Amazon Studios that is primarily focused on producing TV show programming.

According to Mike Hopkins, Senior Vice President of Prime Video and Amazon Studios MGM's catalog of more than 4,000 films and 17,000 TV shows will be reimaged and developed by Amazon and MGM's team as the main result of the merger.

Amazon pointed out that the deal completion is subject to regulatory approvals and didn't provide the date of the agreement closure.

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Facebook Oversight Board Overturns Decision to Remove Navalny Comment

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) – Facebook's Oversight Board decided on Wednesday to overturn the tech giant's decision to remove a derogatory comment of a supporter of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny.

"The Oversight Board has overturned Facebook's decision to remove a comment in which a supporter of imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny called another user a 'cowardly bot.' Facebook removed the comment for using the word 'cowardly' which was construed as a negative character claim," the board said in a statement.

The Board found that while the removal was in line with the Bullying and Harassment Community Standard, the current Standard was an unnecessary and disproportionate restriction on free expression under international human rights standards. It was also not in line with Facebook's values.

Describing the case, the board noted that one Facebook user in Russia published on January 24 several pictures and video about rallies in support of Navalny that took place in different cities the day before. Another user, identified in the statement as "Protest Critic" called the protesters in Moscow "schoolchildren" and "mentally slow", the board noted.

"Other users then challenged the Protest Critic in subsequent comments to the root post. A user who was at the protest (the Protester) appeared to be the last to respond to the Protest Critic," the board's statement read. "They claimed to be elderly and to have participated in the protest in Saint Petersburg. The Protester ended the comment by calling the Protest Critic a 'cowardly bot.'"

Unauthorized protests took place on January 23 in different Russian cities and continued on January 31 in support of Navalny, who was arrested in a Moscow airport upon his return from Germany, where he had been recovering from an alleged poisoning. In addition, unauthorized rallies took place in Moscow on February 2 during and after a hearing in the Moscow City Court on Navalny's case.

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Global Air Travel to Recoup 52% of Pre-Pandemic Traffic in 2021 - IATA

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The global air travel industry is expected to recover 52 percent of the pre-pandemic traffic this year as flights open up in most parts of the world in the coming months, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said Wednesday.

By next year, the recovery level is expected to be as high as 88 percent, while in 2023, it should surpass 2019 levels by as much as 105 percent, the global air travel body said in a statement.

"The rapidly growing vaccinated population and advancements in testing will return the freedom to fly in the months ahead," IATA Director General Willie Walsh said in the statement. "And when that happens, people are going to want to travel."

Walsh cited as an example the recent 100-percentage point spike in bookings from the UK to Portugal after the UK's "Green List" was announced in early May.

IATA said the projected recovery in passenger numbers was also slightly stronger than the initial rebound in demand measured in revenue passenger kilometers (RPKs), which was estimated to grow by an annual average of 3 percent between 2019 and 2039. This was owing to the expected strength of domestic markets like China with its large passenger numbers and shorter distances, it said.

Consumers have also accumulated savings in the lockdowns, in some countries exceeding 10 percent of gross domestic product, and were now eager to spend some of that money on travel.

"The immediate challenge is to reopen borders, eliminate quarantine measures and digitally manage vaccination/testing certificates," Walsh said. "At the same time, we must assure the world that aviation's long-term growth prospects are supported with an unwavering commitment to sustainability. Both challenges require governments and industry to work in partnership. Aviation is ready. But I don't see governments moving fast enough."

The travel and tourism sector was a major contributor to GDP and the livelihood of those who depended on it was at stake as the industry emerged from its deepest and gravest crisis triggered by the COVID-19, IATA said.

"This should be a clarion call to governments to get ready," Walsh said. "To avoid greater long-term economic and social damage, restart must not be delayed. Governments can facilitate

a safe restart with policies that enable restriction-free travel for vaccinated people, and testing alternatives for those unable to be vaccinated. Governments must also be ready with processes to digitally manage the vaccine or test certificates — ensuring that a safe restart is also efficient.”

IATA said global travel was not expected to slow down in a major way until 2030, when it is expected that weaker demographics and the assumption of limited market liberalization will begin to take their toll.

IATA represents some 290 airlines comprising 82 percent of global air traffic.

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Facebook Says It Has Taken Down Over 150 Covert Campaigns in Past 4 Years

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - US social media giant Facebook announced on Wednesday that it has prevented some 150 campaigns aimed at manipulative and covert influence of users over the past four years, many of them sourced from Russia and Iran.

“Platforms like Facebook have unique visibility into such behavior when it takes place on our services, and are best suited to uncover and remove these surreptitious, often highly adversarial campaigns. This is why from 2017 through mid-2021, we have taken down and publicly reported on over 150 covert influence operations that violated our policy against Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (“CIB”),” the report said. “They originated from over 50 countries worldwide and targeted both foreign and domestic public debate.”

According to the report, the source of such covert campaigns - 27 CIB networks - is most often located in Russia, followed by Iran with 23 CIB networks, Myanmar with 9 CIB networks, the US with 9 CIB networks and Ukraine with 8 CIB networks.

Facebook noted that of the more than 150 CIB operations it has taken down around the world to date, some half of them focused on social media users in the US, a smaller proportion focused on users in foreign countries, and the rest targeted people both in the US and abroad.

“Despite the fact that public discourse in the US shifted from focusing on foreign operations in 2017-2019 to focusing on domestic operations in 2020, we continued to see significant portions of all three types, and a steady rise in mixed targeting from 2018 through 2020,” the report added.

Facebook said earlier this month that it has removed from its platform nine coordinated networks from six nations during the month of April. Content policy enforcement removed 1,565 Facebook accounts, 141 accounts from the company's Instagram subsidiary, 724 pages and 63 groups, the release said.

Earlier this year, the company's Vice-President of Integrity Guy Rosen said that Facebook has removed more than 1.3 billion fake accounts from its platform between October and December of 2020 in an effort to tackle misinformation.

The first half of Donald Trump's presidency was overshadowed by a probe by former Special Counsel Robert Mueller into his campaign's alleged collusion with Russia and Moscow's alleged meddling in the 2016 US presidential election.

Russian officials have repeatedly denied meddling in the US election, saying the allegations were invented to excuse the election loss of a presidential candidate as well as deflect public attention from actual instances of election fraud and corruption. Trump has also repeatedly denied any collusion with Russia, calling an ongoing investigation into the allegations a political witch hunt that has not produced evidence in two years.

Mueller's final report on his Russia investigation and said the probe found no evidence of collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian officials in the run-up to the 2016 US presidential election.

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Pushkin Online Birthday Celebration to Attract Worldwide Audience - Project Director

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - An online marathon celebrating the iconic Russian poet Alexander Pushkin's 222nd birthday will attract admirers of his work from around the world, Project Director Julian Henry Lowenfeld told Sputnik.

"The project is called Pushkin for the Whole World. It is like an online flash mob. People around the world are sharing their love for Pushkin with video links, which we are putting together," Lowenfeld, an American-Russian poet, playwright and translator, said.

The Pushkin online marathon will kick off on June 6 at 1:00 p.m. MSK (11:00 GMT).

THE WORLD CELEBRATES PUSHKIN

The project will gather many celebrities - including opera singers, actors and writers - along with everyday people from different countries.

"People from Ireland, Britain, Canada, all over Europe, and of course we are getting emails and videos from all over Russia - from Vladivostok to Kaliningrad," Lowenfeld said.

A famous Russian clown and cat tamer Yuri Kuklachev will present his performance the "Learned Cat," referring to one of the characters of Pushkin's tales.

Speaking of his own country, Lowenfeld noted that people from many US states will pay tribute to the famous Russian poet.

"I will be reading my translations, I will be talking with people from all over the world about Pushkin and his significance, and what he means to them," he said.

MOST DEMOCRATIC POET

Lowenfeld called Pushkin the most positive and democratic of the great Russian writers.

"I would say he is the most Western of all Russian writers, even though he was never out of Russia," Lowenfeld said. "He spoke perfect French, English, German, and he read European literature intensively. He was imbued with the ideas of the French enlightenment, and he believed in liberal values."

Pushkin's legacy is that his literature motivates people to improve their lives, to practice introspection and to steer clear of vices, the marathon organizer noted. He expressed confidence that even reading Pushkin's lyrics daily helps to improve the world.

"It is just like if you play a little bit of Bach per day - it is good for your soul. Same thing with Pushkin: if you read a little bit of Pushkin - it is good for your soul, good for the spirit," he said.

Lowenfeld expressed disagreement with those who think that Pushkin's lyrics are impossible to translate to other languages.

"I know that myth is wrong, because I have devoted my life to translating him and seen the results" he noted, citing famous Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva, who said Pushkin's poems are already a translation from what is beyond words to ordinary speech.

PUSHKIN AND THE DIASPORA

The popularity of Pushkin's lyrics in the US is growing, with more and more Americans coming to revere him, his translator said.

In the meantime, Lowenfeld called for Russia to do more to popularize one of its most famous figures. Germany, China, Italy, Spain and many other countries have international projects dedicated to their renowned figures, such as Goethe, Confucius, Dante and Cervantes, he noted.

"Yes, there is Rossotrudnichestvo, which is kindly assisting me in this project, but there has never been a concerted national effort to do for Pushkin what other countries do for their national writers," he said. "Britain has the Royal Shakespeare Company. There is no such thing as the Russian National Pushkin Company in Russia. There are no Russian equivalents to Germany's Goethe Haus, Spain's Instituto Cervantes, China's Confucius Institute, Italy's Casa Dante, and so on."

Lowenfeld lamented that Russia does not even fund the publishing of bilingual editions of Pushkin and other great Russian poets for its diaspora,

"I have been working a lot with the Russian diaspora, and it breaks my heart to see grandparents and their grandchildren when they are basically unable to communicate with each other because the older generation has not really learned English yet, and the younger generation has not really learned Russian," he said.

Young people can speak a few words on a basic level, but cannot read Pushkin, Lowenfeld noted, adding that similar situations exist in Europe as well.

"That is why I like these bilingual books that we are publishing - Pushkin's tales, Eugene Onegin, his lyric poems, his prose. They bring not just countries together, but they bring families and generations together," he said. "That is what our project is about."

In addition to Pushkin, Lowenfeld has translated into English the verses of Mikhail Lermontov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Alexander Blok, Osip Mandelshtam, and other Russian poets.