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Mali is Just the Latest: US Africa Command Trained Troops Behind at Least Seven Coups in 13 Years

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

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While the US Army School of the Americas is infamous for training right-wing guerrilla forces across Latin America, less well-known are the Pentagon's military training programs in Africa, including the Flintlock exercises for the G5 Sahel nations, nearly all of which have experienced military coups in the last 13 years.

On Thursday, Malian Vice President Assami Goita, a colonel in the Malian Army, completed his [second coup d'etat](#) in just nine months, overthrowing the interim government he helped install and declaring himself the country's interim president. A Western-trained soldier, Goita's is just the latest in an increasingly long list of coups d'etat in Africa by soldiers trained by US Africa Command since its creation 13 years ago.

Since it was created in 2008, troops trained by AFRICOM have been directly responsible for at least seven successful coups d'etat in Africa, nearly all of which have occurred in West Africa, and one that was directly carried out by AFRICOM forces. Here are some of them:

- Mauritania, 2008. In August 2008, after Mauritanian Gen. Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz overthrew the Mauritanian government of President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, a spokesperson for US European Command told US military publication [Stars and Stripes](#) that the US had a "bilateral relationship" with Aziz and had coordinated security cooperation programs with him. Aziz had also assisted in a previous coup three years earlier.
- Libya, 2011. The US part of the NATO-led war in Libya in March 2011 to overthrow longtime leader Muammar Gaddafi was dubbed Operation Odyssey Dawn, and was AFRICOM's first major military operation. The war eliminated the US' biggest opposition in Africa, with Gaddafi being responsible for [why no African nation](#) would agree to host AFRICOM headquarters.
- Mali, 2012. Amadou Sanogo, who led a coup against President Amadou Toumani Touré, had traveled to the US several times for [advanced military training](#) via the International Military Education and Training program, including at Marine Corps Base Quantico in Virginia. Driven by anger over Toure's handling of a Tuareg uprising in northern Mali, Sanogo's coup ironically created a vacuum allowing Tuareg control to expand rapidly, leading the country to ask for French military assistance the following year. The French mission, Operation Serval, eventually grew into the five-nation War on Terror style [Operation Barkhane](#).

- 2013, Egypt. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the minister of defense and commander-in-chief of the Egyptian military, led the coup that deposed Egypt's first democratically-elected president, Mohammed Morsi. [El-Sisi has received](#) extensive training from the US military, including a [basic training course](#) at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1981 and graduating from the US Army War College in 2006. When Morsi was overthrown in July 2013, Washington avoided acknowledging it as a coup.
- 2015, Burkina Faso. Gilbert Diendéré, the former military aide to the longtime Burkinabe ruler [Blaise Compaore](#), briefly deposed the interim government before being thrown out by a popular mass uprising. [Diendéré has participated](#) multiple times in AFRICOM's Flintlock all-domain training exercises the US uses to school members of the G5 Sahel nations' armies, including Niger, Chad, Mali, and Mauritania, many of which have also seen their own coups over the last 20 years.
- 2020 and 2021, Mali. [Goita has worked](#) for years with US Special Operations forces and also trained in Germany and France, officials said after the August 2020 coup. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell at the time [attempted to deflect blame](#) by saying that "We don't train armies to be putschists," but wound up admitting that "90% of the army has been trained by our mission."

War on Terror Spurs Army Training

AFRICOM grew out of [War on Terror missions](#) begun by the Pentagon in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, including the Pan-Sahel Initiative, which became Operation Juniper Shield, also known as Operation Enduring Freedom - Trans Sahara; and Operation Enduring Freedom - Horn of Africa. As a result, although AFRICOM was formally organized into a separate US command based in Stuttgart, Germany, in 2008, there were already forces scattered across more than a dozen African countries that had been trained by US forces.

The War on Terror created a hammer-and-nail-type situation, in which Washington suddenly became conscious of a vast number of paramilitary groups and of many of them being based in religiously-identified communities, many of which were also Muslim. The US itself undoubtedly created many of these networks itself by providing a crucible for various types of fundamentalism in the Mujaheddin insurgency it backed against the Soviet-backed socialist government of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Various Islamist insurgencies in the 1990s across the world, from Algeria to Chechnya [and Kosovo](#), sprung out of fighters returning from Afghanistan with the motivation to carry the fight against secularism or European influences into their home countries.

Money poured into training programs and armaments for militaries in fragile states the US judged to be at risk of a repeat of Afghanistan, where the Taliban fundamentalist group had seized power [after the Soviet exit](#) and provided safe haven for terrorist groups like al-Qaeda to plot their attacks against the United States. The 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists (AUMF) passed by Congress gave the US military wide leeway to carry out strikes in [undeclared war zones](#) if they believed the targets to be from or linked to al-Qaeda. The US isn't the only country to do this, though: the European Union also runs training programs in many of the same African nations, as do several member states, such as France, which operates its own programs in conjunction with former African colonies. China and Russia also train personnel from interested African nations.

'Fabergé Egg Militaries'

Experts say that these comprehensive training programs [create the very problems](#) they aim to avoid: prestigious, highly-trained, well-armed military forces see the opportunity to impose their will on the vulnerable governments they're supposed to be protecting from Islamist takeover. The Western connections these officers bring with them ensure that once in power, their cadres will have friends in high places, globally speaking, and in many cases Western governments win either way: a more stable government provides a new partner for lucrative business deals, and whether more stable or less, they get an opportunity to expand their military presence in yet another part of the globe.

However, in recent years the US hasn't looked away from this technique, it's actually turned further towards it. The demands of Washington's new focus - great power confrontation with Russia and China - has the Pentagon considering shifting troops away from training missions in Africa and toward European and Indo-Pacific bases. In response, the US is ramping up a surrogate training program [known as 127-Echo](#), with a \$100 million annual budget.

Maj. Gen. James Hecker, vice director for operations from the joint staff at the time, [told House lawmakers](#) in early 2019 that 127-Echo "provides us viable surrogate forces designed to achieve US CT [counterterrorism] objectives at relatively low cost in terms of resources and especially risk to our personnel ... The small-footprint approach inherent in 127 Echo ... in addition to lessening the need for large scale U.S. troop deployments, fosters an environment where local forces take ownership of the problem."

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EU to Continue Military Cooperation With Mali as Coup Leader VP Goita Appoints Himself President

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Brussels' military training mission in Mali is just one of several such operations in Africa, many of which are in former European colonies with dependent links to their old rulers. Earlier this month, the European Union weighed the option of sending thousands of troops to fight a growing uprising in Mozambique.

On Thursday, the European Union's foreign policy chief said the bloc will continue cooperating with Mali on military training, despite the army's recent seizure of power. Earlier, Malian Vice President Assimi Goita, a colonel and leader of the August 2020 coup d'etat, declared himself interim president.

EU High Representative Josep Borrell told reporters in Lisbon on Thursday that the Malian military "are very much engaged in fighting all over the territory of Mali, and I don't think it is going to help the country to stop this activity."

"But let's see how things are going," he added. Earlier, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas told reporters outside the same Lisbon meeting that the EU expects the political transition process to proceed as planned despite Goita's seizure of power, which would have no immediate effect on the EU military training mission there.

However, after the August 2020 coup led by Goita that brought down democratically-elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, the bloc did suspend the program temporarily in an attempt to distance itself from the coup plotters, many of whom - including Goita - had been trained in Germany, France, and the United States.

"We don't train armies to be putschists," [Borrell said](#) at the time. "Ninety percent of the army has been trained by our mission, but the four most prominent (coup) leaders have not been trained by our mission."

French President Emmanuel Macron was less charitable. He [called the Monday arrest](#) and removal from power of Interim President Bah Ndaw, Prime Minister Moctar Ouane, and Defense Minister Souleymane Doucoure a "coup d'etat in an unacceptable coup d'etat."

In January, the European Council [elected to extend](#) the EU Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali) for another two years, setting aside a \$108 million budget for the period. More than 600 soldiers from 28 European states take part in the program. It began in 2014 under the auspices of France's Operation Barkhane, a [War on Terror-style campaign](#) against Islamist militias in the Sahel region. Barkhane began as Operation Serval, a 2013 war against Tuareg rebels in Mali who seized large parts of the country amid the chaos of the 2012 military coup.

Earlier this month, Borrell defended the idea of a "rapid reaction force" for the European Union in comments indicating that Brussels could soon send a military training [mission to Mozambique](#), where government forces have struggled to contain a growing insurgency in the far northern Cabo Delgado province, which has garnered more international attention since ostensibly pledging itself to Daesh.

In February, a similar effort in the Central African Republic [came under fire](#) in the European Parliament, where critics said its five-year mission has failed to produce appreciable results in the waging of that country's ongoing civil war.

Borrell's statement comes as Goita on Thursday declared himself the interim president as the deposed ministers were set free.

"The prime minister and the transitional president were released last night around 1:30 a.m. (local and GMT). We have kept our word," a military official anonymously told AFP on Thursday. "The two men have returned to their homes in Bamako," having been kept since Monday at a Kati military base about 15 kilometers outside the capital city.

[According to Goita](#), they violated the Transitional Charter drawn up in September by him and the other colonels behind the August coup, a document intended to chart a returning path to democracy.

Goita has said the elections scheduled for 2022 [will not be affected](#) by this week's events, but the tension between his ruling clique of military officers and the June 5 Movement - Gathering of Patriotic Forces (M5-RFP) umbrella opposition party that propelled the military to power in mass demonstrations last summer has become higher. [According to Al Jazeera](#), the cabinet reshuffle that removed two of the colonels as heads of the defense and security ministries, and motivated Goita's second coup was largely in response to pressure by M5-RFP to reduce the power of the military over the interim government.

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China, US Hold 'Candid and Constructive' Talks on Phase 1 Trade Deal as Beijing's Surplus Grows

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Despite steadily cooling relations in the political sphere, Chinese and American trade representatives had what they described as a "candid and constructive" first conversation about the status of the trade deal agreed to just weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic set in.

On Wednesday, Chinese Vice Premier Liu He and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai, spoke on the phone about the status of both nations' implementation of the January 2020 trade deal in which China pledged to buy a minimum amount of different products from the US in exchange for lowered tariffs.

Their separate statements are remarkably similar, but neither gives significant details about the precise content of their talks.

"During their candid exchange, Ambassador Tai discussed the guiding principles of the Biden-Harris Administration's worker-centered trade policy and her ongoing review of the US-China trade relationship, while also raising issues of concern," a [readout by Tai's office](#) says.

"Ambassador Tai noted that she looks forward to future discussions with Vice Premier Liu." According to [China's Global Times](#), the Chinese Ministry of Commerce said Tai and Liu conducted "candid, pragmatic and constructive exchanges with an attitude of equality and mutual respect."

"Both sides believe that the development of bilateral trade is very important, and exchanged views on each other's issues of concern and agreed to continue to maintain communication," the ministry statement added. They are [required to consult](#) on their joint progress on the deal every six months.

The deal aimed to settle an 18-month-long trade war between Washington and Beijing that then-US President Donald Trump had intended to even out the US trade deficit with China. While the agreement saw China agree to buy another \$200 billion worth of various agricultural and manufacturing goods from the US over the following two years and sorted out some issues concerning intellectual property rights, some \$360 billion worth of annual [US tariffs remained](#) in place against Chinese goods from industries that receive state subsidies.

However, just two months after the deal was reached, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 novel coronavirus outbreak to be a global pandemic, and the unprecedented shutdowns in travel and trade put a severe hindrance on the two nations' abilities to adhere to the deal. By the end of 2020, Chinese imports were just 58% of what they were anticipated to become back in January, [according to data](#) collected by the Peterson Institute for International Economics, a Washington, DC-based think tank.

China's economy opened up much earlier than the United States', setting record [export increase rates](#) in the fourth quarter of 2020 and swelling China's trade surplus with the US even higher, thanks to sales of pandemic necessities like masks and medical equipment. However, even by the end of April, the Peterson Institute's data shows China's increased imports of US products at 73% of where they should be by this time.

According to [US government statistics](#), in the first three months of 2021, the US had imported \$73 billion more goods from China than it sold to China. For 2020, that number was \$310 million, a decrease of \$35 billion from 2019.

Gao Lingyun, an expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing who closely follows trade issues, told [the Global Times](#) on Thursday that the problem isn't on China's end. "China has been pushing to fulfill its part of the phase-one deal, including further opening up its market, and better intellectual property protection," Gao told the outlet, adding that "it has also been increasing purchase of US products, but the supply on the US side has been seriously hindered during the pandemic."

He Weiwen, a retired Commerce Ministry official who is now an executive director of the China Association of International Trade in Beijing, told the [New York Times](#) that "China is not violating that Phase 1 agreement," adding the socialist country had made a sincere effort to hold up its end of the deal.

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Afghan Army Outposts Rapidly Giving Way to Taliban as US Withdrawal Continues
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

According to a report by the New York Times, dozens of outposts and bases belonging to the Afghan National Army have surrendered to the Taliban in the last month, part of a demoralizing sweep intended to maximize the impact of the US pullout on Afghan forces.

According to the report, [at least 26 installations](#) in Laghman, Baghlan, Wardak and Ghazni provinces have decided since May 1 that their chances fared better if they accepted Taliban terms of surrender rather than waiting it out for reinforcements that might never arrive.

Many of the surrendering men have reportedly been given money and civilian clothes and sent on their way, after taping them making a statement that they would not rejoin the Afghan military and giving the Taliban their contact information.

May 1 is also when the thousands of US troops deployed to Afghanistan as part of Operation Resolute Support began their final withdrawal, which is due to be completed by September 11, 2021, exactly 21 years since the terrorist attacks that sent US forces to Afghanistan in the first place.

The US launched an invasion in October 2001 that quickly deposed the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban government then in power, which had harbored the al-Qaeda terrorists [responsible for the attacks](#) on the World Trade Center and Pentagon that killed more than 3,000 people.

However, the US quickly became bogged down in a counterinsurgency fight against the Taliban and other groups in the countryside, who it has never been able to beat.

As a result, the US was forced to agree to a ceasefire with the Taliban in February 2020, under the terms of which US forces would totally leave Afghanistan by May 1, 2021. When US President [Joe Biden said](#) this past spring that US troops wouldn't leave until September, the Taliban said it could resume attacks on US forces.

In the face of steady territorial losses to the Taliban in recent years, the Trump administration in 2019 ordered the Resolute Support mission to stop [publishing district control](#) numbers. By the eve of the February 2020 deal, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John Sopko stated that so much of the war had gone dark that [“we don’t know” basic things](#) like the size of the Afghan army and police forces whose salaries are paid by the US.

“Every time we find something that looks like it’s going negative, it gets classified,” Sopko told Congress at the time. “Most of the [methods] of measuring success are now classified.”

Figures opposed to the US withdrawal have noted a variety of dangers should Washington leave the Kabul government to its own devices, including the [further loss of rights](#) for Afghan women and the possibility that the Afghan [government could collapse](#) entirely and the Taliban could return to power. The war has killed hundreds of thousands of Afghans directly and indirectly and displaced millions more.

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Microsoft President Warns Orwell’s ‘1984’ Reality ‘Could Come to Pass’ in 2024 Without AI Controls

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Since its release in 1949, George Orwell’s famous “1984” novel has become a classic literary example of political and dystopian science fiction, even going so far as coining the terms “thought police” and “doublethink,” among others. The book focuses on the consequences of mass surveillance and the effect totalitarian regimes have on the public.

Microsoft President Brad Smith recently warned that if lawmakers fail to implement stiff regulations on artificial intelligence technology, life could soon mirror the reality depicted in Orwell’s “1984.”

The tech official remarked during an interview with the BBC One’s “Panorama” program that serious consequences would emerge within the next three years if government regulation did not meet the increasing developments of AI technology.

“I’m constantly reminded of George Orwell’s lessons in his book ‘1984.’ You know the fundamental story ... was about a government who could see everything that everyone did and hear everything that everyone said all the time,” Smith [said](#) during the program. “Well, that didn’t come to pass in 1984, but if we’re not careful that could come to pass in 2024.”

The BBC program had been exploring China’s use of artificial intelligence to monitor its citizens, with a focus on how the nation seeks to become the [world leader](#) in AI by 2030. In fact, China bested the US in 2019 as it managed to secure more patents for AI innovation at various academic institutions.

The UK, Singapore and Australia round out the top five countries with extensive mass surveillance technology in active use.

The US’ own surveillance practices came under fire in 2013, in the wake of revelations aired by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, who blew the whistle on the unconstitutional surveillance of Americans’ internet and telephone records.

In 2018, the US was dealt another blow when thousands of Google employees took a stand against the tech giant's involvement with Project Maven, an initiative greenlit by the US Department of Defense to use artificial intelligence to study images so that said technology could be used to improve drone strikes in the battlefield.

More recently, however, an [investigation](#) by the Associated Press found that the Google Maps service was continuing to track users' locations after the function was deactivated.

Smith later underscored during the program that "if we don't enact the laws that will protect the public in the future, we are going to find the technology racing ahead, and it's going to be very difficult to catch up."

The latest statements came as a recent [BBC report](#) detailed that China is allegedly using an AI-based camera system to detect the emotions of individuals, and that the AI and facial recognition technology has been tested on Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

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Videos: Bashar Assad Wins Syrian Presidential Election With 95.1% of Vote
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, the US along with four of its closest allies condemned the May 26 presidential election in Syria, alleging that the event was illegitimate. A statement released by the group stated the election "will neither be free nor fair."

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has won a fourth term in office after managing to clinch 95.1% of the vote, Hammouda Youssef Sabbagh, who serves as the speaker of the Syrian parliament, revealed on Thursday.

Sabbagh specified in a statement that Assad gained another seven-year term in office after having obtained approximately 14,239,140 votes, an amount that effectively saw the official "receiving an absolute majority."

Assad had scooped the presidential win in 2014 with just 88.7% of the vote.

The speaker also indicated that the presidential election saw a turnout that reached over 78%, and that the two other candidates, former state minister Abdallah Salloum Abdallah and fellow candidate Mahmud Merhi had received 1.5% and 3.3% of the vote, respectively.

Merhi later commented that Assad's presidential victory was a natural win. Assad has maintained the presidency since 2000.

Reacting to the win, Assad issued a statement through his campaign, thanking Syrians "for their high sense of nationalism and their notable participation" in the election.

"Thank you to all Syrians for their high sense of nationalism and their notable participation.... for the future of Syria's children and its youth let's start from tomorrow our campaign of work to build hope and build Syria," he wrote.

In the wake of the election announcement, video footage has emerged from Syria showing celebratory fireworks and cheering crowds.

The election ran from 7 a.m. to midnight on Wednesday, with more than 12,000 polling stations made available to participating individuals. Members of Russia's parliamentary delegation

relayed to Sputnik that the electoral process was held without any violations and in line with international rules.

Vladimir Churov, ambassador-at-large for the Russian Foreign Ministry, previously told Sputnik that terrorism and international obstruction were the main threats to the Syrian election process. In fact, one source [revealed](#) that an explosion erupted near a polling station in Syria's Daraa, but that no one appeared to have been hurt by the blast.

As election proceedings were unfolding, the US, UK, France, Germany and Italy issued a [joint statement](#) denouncing the vote because it reportedly did not fall in line with [UN Security Council Resolution 2254](#).

It's worth noting that while the five UN members cited Resolution 2254 to condemn the Syrian election, the same members have also failed to prevent terrorist attacks committed by Daesh or al-Nusra, as well as calling for parties to support Syria's "unity, independence [and] territorial integrity." Both acts are outlined under the same 2015 resolution.

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Johnny Depp May Sue ACLU for Defamation After Emails Reveal Group Drafted Amber Heard's 2018 Op-Ed

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In December 2018, the Washington Post published an opinion piece authored by actress Amber Heard that discussed domestic violence, specifically her experiences and the fallout she endured after speaking out. Although the op-ed never named her former husband and fellow actor Johnny Depp, he sued Heard for defamation in 2019.

Newly released emails have revealed that Heard's 2018 opinion piece was actually drafted by staffers with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) as opposed to being fully written by the actress, a detail that may see the rights group hit with a defamation lawsuit by the Depp camp. The previously unpublicized emails were [recently obtained](#) by the Daily Mail Online, which reported that correspondence between ACLU staffers, Heard, and the actress' representatives proved the "Aquaman" star "had minimal input" in the writing of the opinion piece.

ACLU communication strategist Gerry Johnson first reached out to Heard's camp on November 6, 2018, to discuss the opportunity, detailing that the group was looking for the actress to discuss "the ways in which survivors of gender-based violence have been made less safe under the Trump administration."

While Johnson goes on to outline various talking points that Heard can touch on in the piece, the official also states that Heard can compose the op-ed herself or have staffers "do the first draft." Johnson specifically states that if the agency writes the piece it would "include a quick phone interview to get her thoughts."

A follow-up email dated November 29 later indicates that the personal essay was assigned to strategist Robin Shulman, who discloses a phone conversation with Heard, and that she "tried to gather [Heard's] fire and rage and really interesting analysis" to form the article.

“Your lawyers should review this for the way I skirted around talking about your marriage,” Shulman points out. And there are a few places where I wasn’t sure if something was right or needed a few words to end the sentence.”

Additional emails highlight the back and forth between legal representatives on the language used in the piece in order to ensure that the draft did not violate the nondisclosure agreement that was part of the former couple’s divorce settlement. At one point, Heard wrote back to the ACLU staff, thanking them for “finding my voice.”

In a statement to the Daily Mail Online, Adam Waldman, a lawyer representing Depp, stated that the “new trove of emails finally proves one of the things the ACLU has fought for years to hide: they wrote Amber Heard’s false op-ed for her and were co-conspirators with Ms Heard from the start.”

“Those who scheme, write and publish defamation, even purported free speech advocates, are not immune from the consequences,” the legal official underscored.

However, it should be noted that Heard never stated she was the sole writer of the Washington Post piece, as the actress previously stated in legal filings that the op-ed was written with the help of advisers.

The latest development comes after the Depp camp [recently sued](#) the ACLU to force the nonprofit organization to reveal whether Heard had honored her public 2016 pledge to donate half of her divorce settlement to the group. The dollar figure was estimated to be \$3.5 million.

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US Senate Bizarrely Revokes, Reapproves Confirmation of First Female Army Secretary
by [Evan Craighead](#)

On Wednesday, Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-WA) took to the Senate floor and obtained unanimous consent to confirm Christine Wormuth as secretary of the US Army. However, the US Senate rescinded their confirmation Thursday morning, moments after Wormuth tweeted that she was “honored” to be in her new position.

The US Senate, on Thursday, again confirmed Wormuth, 52, as the 25th United States Secretary of the Army.

The official confirmation comes as the end of a puzzling 12-hour procedural misstep in the legislative chamber.

It remains unclear exactly what the procedural error was, but an aide with the Senate Armed Services Committee did tell reporters there was a “mix-up on the floor.”

Wormuth previously served as the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from 2014 to 2016, during former US President Barack Obama’s second term.

In November 2020, she was appointed as a volunteer member of the US President Joe Biden transition team for the US Department of Defense.

The official appointment of Wormuth is historic, as the 52-year-old has become the first woman to hold the role of the US Army’s top civilian leader.

Despite her relationship with Democratic administrations, Wormuth received unanimous bipartisan support during her confirmation.

The US Senate is expected to vote on two additional nominees: Mike McCord, a candidate for the role of Pentagon comptroller, and Ronald Moultrie, a candidate for the role of Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence.

Both McCord and Moultrie have received approval from the Senate Committee on Armed Services.

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'Tension, Conflict and War': US State Department Cautions Israel Against Sheikh Jarrah Evictions
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared "a two-state solution" would be necessary for "Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state," as well as "give the Palestinians the state they're entitled to." That same day, Blinken pledged to rebuild US-Palestinian relations by reopening a mission for Palestinians in Jerusalem.

Blinken cautioned Israeli officials against tentative evictions of Palestinian families in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, according to a Thursday report published [by Axios](#).

During [his visits](#) to Jerusalem and Ramallah, the US Secretary of State reportedly warned officials that future unrest around the holy site of Temple Mount could lead to renewed "tension, conflict and war."

"[E]victions of Palestinians from their homes where they lived for decades and generations, the demolitions of housing as well ... and of course everything that took place on and around the Temple Mount," he said, Blinken told Axios's Barak Ravid, noting the al-Aqsa Mosque has also been a site of conflict.

He went on to detail that, during his diplomatic trips, US officials raised concerns to the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) about the "incitement to violence or letting violence go forward with impunity," as well as "very problematic" payments delivered to Palestinian families convicted of terrorism.

Blinken stopped short of revealing the responses from PNA and Israeli officials, but he did express that there has been support for a continued ceasefire.

"But it's also important that we avoid various actions that could unintentionally, or not, spark another round of violence," he reiterated. "The ceasefire was not an end in itself, as important as it was, but also a means to have some space to start to build something a little bit more positive."

Blinken's published remarks come alongside [Israel's refusal](#) to cooperate with a United Nations Human Rights Council commission on the conflict.

"Israel rejects outright the resolution adopted today (Thursday, 27 May 2021) by the United Nations Human Rights Council, a body with a built-in anti-Israel majority, guided by hypocrisy and absurdity," Jerusalem detailed in a statement.

"Any resolution that fails to condemn the firing of over 4,300 rockets by a terror organization at Israeli civilians, or even to mention the terror organization Hamas, is nothing more than a moral failure and a stain on the international community and the UN."

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Patrisse Cullors Resigns From Black Lives Matter Organization After Backlash Over Real Estate Buys

by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Patrisse Cullors, who co-founded the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation (BLMGNF) in 2013, has recently faced fierce backlash over the purchase of a \$1.4 million home in California. The home purchase left many questioning how much of the group's donations were going into social justice programs.

In a virtual meeting Thursday afternoon with journalists and BLMGNF leaders, Cullors announced that she is stepping down from her role as executive director in order to focus on other projects, including the upcoming release of her second book and a multi-year TV development deal with Warner Bros.

"I've created the infrastructure and the support, and the necessary bones and foundation, so that I can leave," Cullors told the [Associated Press](#). "It feels like the time is right."

Melina Abdullah, who co-founded the Black Lives Matter's Los Angeles chapter, said that the organization will continue to grow and evolve despite the departure of its co-founder.

"I would like her to be there forever, but I also know that that's not feasible. The real test of any organization is can it survive the departure of its founders. And I have no question that Black Lives Matter will survive and grow and evolve, even with the departure of our final co-founder in a formal role," Abdullah said, according to the [Daily Mail Online](#).

Cullors' resignation comes after the activist came under fire for five-years' worth of real estate purchases, which amounted to over [\\$3 million](#). Cullors referred to the scandal as a smear campaign put on by those on the far-right who wished to do her harm, but claimed that this was not the reason behind her step down from the position.

"This is not a crisis, this is a moment of celebration," Cullors said. "With smart, experienced and committed people supporting the organization during this transition, I know that BLMGNF is in good hands."

Cullors added in a YouTube video on Thursday that she made the decision because she felt like it was time to transition out.

The BLM foundation defended its co-founder, saying that she had not received an annual salary from the organization but revealed in February that donations to the organization amounted to over \$90 million in 2020 following the murder of Minnesota resident George Floyd.

The foundation claimed to have spent a quarter of its assets on operating expenses and grants donated to other Black-led organizations, including those focused on LGBTQ rights. BLMGNF said it ended 2020 with a balance of more than \$60 million, which critics felt should have gone to the families of Black victims of police brutality.

Some leaders from affiliated organizations have called for an [investigation](#) into Cullors for her recent spending, but it is currently unclear if one has been opened.

The organization confirmed Cullor's resignation in a [Twitter post](#) on Thursday, praising the co-founder for her work.

In her resignation, Cullors announced Makani Themba and Monifa Bandele as the incoming senior executives to serve in the interim.

Themba is currently the chief strategist at Higher Ground Change Strategies and the former executive director of the Praxis Project. "I am looking forward to working alongside the powerful team at BLMGNF and BLM Grassroots to continue to work towards Black liberation," Themba said in a [release](#).

Bandele serves as the chief operating officer at Time's Up Foundation, which raises money to support victims of sexual harassment, and also serves as a senior leader on the policy table of the Movement for Black Lives. "I'm fortunate to follow the creative and successful leadership of so many across the country, who have set a bold path for the foundation," Bandele said.

Cullors has described her latest book, "An Abolitionists Handbook," as a guide for activists on how to care for each other while "fighting to end systemic racism," is set for release on October 5. Cullors is also developing and producing original cable and streaming TV content that centers on Black stories, under a multi-year deal with Warner Bros.

Her first TV project is set to debut in July. Cullors last day with the organization is on May 28.

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RPT - Canadian Content Creators Say Trudeau's Bill C-10 Threatens Free Speech, Freedom of Press

TORONTO, May 27 (Sputnik) - New legislation introduced by the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to overhaul Canada's media framework is an assault on free speech and freedom of the press, content creators told Sputnik.

On November 3, Trudeau's Minister of Canadian Heritage, Steven Guilbeault, who oversees the country's media and culture sectors, introduced Bill C-10 - An Act to amend the Broadcasting Act and to make related and consequential amendments to other Acts – in the House of Commons.

Trudeau, Guilbeault and other high-ranking government officials claim the Bill is intended to loosen international social media goliaths' grip on the country's media landscape, ensure that Canadian media giants are duly paid for their content disseminated through social networks and overhaul an outdated media framework.

Critics, however, say that the Bill is a cynical attack on freedom of speech and the press in Canada, pointing to the removal of a clause - at the last second before the legislation was to be reviewed by the parliamentary committee on Canadian heritage - that protected independent content creators from government oversight.

"The Bill is censorship. I don't even want to call it disguised censorship," David Freiheit, a former commercial litigator turned political YouTuber, told Sputnik.

Driving the debate are the potentially sweeping powers that would be granted to Canada's state broadcasting and telecommunications regulator, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), under the new legislation.

The CRTC - established in 1976 - regulates everything from the amount of so-called Canadian content broadcast via television and radio to the channels included in Canadians' digital TV packages. To date, the agency's regulatory mandate has been restricted to established media outlets, primarily television and radio; however, the new legislation would allow it to police anything published through social media by equating the platforms to traditional broadcasters. Despite Trudeau lauding Canada as the "first postnational state" in a New York Times interview upon assuming power in 2015, Guilbeault has indicated that the legislation is about protecting Canadian culture and ensuring it remains adequately funded.

Canada has an extensive history of combatting foreign influence on its culture. The CRTC's cultural predecessor and the existing state broadcaster CBC's immediate precursor, the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC), was established in 1932 based on the recommendations of a 1929 report that sounded the alarm over Canadians' excessive exposure to US media at a time when radio broadcasting was revolutionizing mass media.

Aside from scoffs at the discrepancy between Trudeau's infamous 'postnational' quip and today's onus on protecting Canadian culture, critics question the efficacy of artificially promoting Canadian content.

In a Washington Post op-ed, one of the country's best-known political YouTubers, J.J. McCullough, who has been vocal in his opposition to the Bill, argued that hundreds of Canadian YouTube stars have flourished and produced quality content without government intervention. Others, however, see something more nefarious in play.

Last January, a telecommunications panel made several recommendations for broad sweeping changes to Canada's communications rules in a report titled, "Canada's communications future: Time to act." The report - considered to be the precursor to Bill C-10 - called for the government to license media and require international outlets to fund Canadian content.

The report, along with Guilbeault's infamous interview in which he said that Ottawa would pursue media licensing, drew widespread condemnation, with then-official opposition leader Andrew Scheer calling the proposed changes Orwellian, forcing Trudeau to quell the firestorm, promising that the government would not impose licensing on press agencies or regulate their content.

Amongst independent media and even some closer to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), there is a growing perception that the Trudeau government is tightening its grip on the Canadian media landscape. Many viewed the governing Liberals' \$450 million "media bailout" in 2019, which was offered to outlets registered as qualified Canadian journalism organizations (QCJO), as confirmation of their fears.

In his federal TV appearances intended to rationalize the legislation, Guilbeault has only reinforced the existing perceptions. In an interview earlier this month, Trudeau's communications czar suggested that the legislation could impact users with large social media followings, who "are broadcasters or who act like broadcasters." In another interview, Guilbeault struggled to explain why his department removed the clause protecting individual content creators.

The disastrous performances on federal channels have led to criticism that, perhaps, the minister hadn't actually read the proposed legislation; Guilbeault refuted the assertion in a testy exchange during a parliamentary Question Period session.

Freiheit believes that, regardless of the intent, the legislation will only advance what he describes as an "incestuous relationship" between the federal government and media.

"It's a manner of really empowering your media allies, which is what it seems to be doing. This is not going to penalize the CBC or other entities that already get hundreds of millions of dollars from the federal government. This is going to penalize the independent creators, it's now going to increase their cost of doing business when they're not getting any of these subsidies from the government in the first place. So, whether or not the intent, the outcome seems relatively obvious," Freiheit said.

Others are more categorical in their assessment.

One of Canada's most visible parliamentarians, the Conservative Party's jobs and industry critic, Pierre Poilievre, who maintains a larger YouTube following than the Prime Minister, wondered if he would become subject to regulation under the new rules.

"My YouTube channel has twice as many subscribers as the Prime Minister and has had 16.8 million views. Is that big enough to be subjected to your regulations," Poilievre mused via Twitter.

Renowned Canadian clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson, who boasts nearly 4 million followers on YouTube, pondered the same thing.

"I have a million more YouTube subscribers than our national broadcaster CBC. So, does that make me a broadcaster to be regulated by Trudeau's pathetic minions? Or does it just indicate that CBC is a failure, despite the fortune it takes in in public subsidy," Peterson said in a scathing Tweet.

Some fret that the legislation will see them taken offline permanently.

Ezra Levant, one of Trudeau's fiercest critics, says the Prime Minister makes no effort to conceal his intention to censor Rebel News, the firebrand Conservative outlet he founded, and Bill C-10 would pave the way for this by circumventing Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees freedom of the press.

"Justin Trudeau has made it clear that censoring Rebel News is his political goal," Levant told Sputnik, citing statements made by Trudeau and other top Canadian officials about the outlet and the measures taken to impede its work.

During the 2019 national election campaign, Rebel News and another conservative outlet, the True North Centre for Public Policy, had to fight the Leaders' Debates Commission in Federal Court to attend the debate and participate in the question-and-answer session with the candidates.

"The courts have not been kind to Trudeau's censorship of us. But if he can outsource his censorship to YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other social media companies, and pressure them to deplatform us, he can achieve his goal without any judicial review or transparency at all," Levant said.

Nevertheless, most content creators are also aware that the new rules could work to their benefit by advancing their content through the new "discoverability" requirements included in the legislation. However, the creators say they are not looking to reap the potential benefits of a new

regulatory regime and would prefer to enjoy the benefits of the freedom of creativity and let their work stand for itself.

"My worst fear would be that [C-10] would effectively cripple my channel... but I'm still concerned that it could artificially promote my channel because what could be more Canadian content than a Canadian making content out of his car in Montreal," Freiheit said, echoing what other YouTubers have said since debate around the Bill intensified.

Amid the growing controversy, the government shelved the legislation while the Justice Department reviewed allegations that the Bill violated the Charter of Rights. However, Trudeau's Minister of Justice and Attorney General David Lametti has since concluded that the Bill does not violate social media users' free speech rights.

While Guilbeault has urged parliamentarians to approve the proposed legislation expeditiously and has the support of three opposition parties – enough votes to see it sail through the House of Commons – Bill C-10, nevertheless, faces an uphill battle with the Conservative Party digging in against it and public opinion not in the government's favor.

Media outlet, The Hub, reported that a Public Square and Maru/Blue poll conducted last month found that most Canadians are either unfamiliar or vaguely familiar with the Bill; however, those actively monitoring the situation oppose the legislation by a near 2 to 1 margin.

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RPT - US Will Not Rejoin Open Skies Treaty Given Russia's Alleged Non-Compliance - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United States will not rejoin the Open Skies treaty, citing concerns over Russian non-compliance with the accord as a reason for the departure, a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

"In concluding its review of the treaty, the United States therefore does not intend to seek to rejoin [Open Skies treaty], given Russia's failure to take any actions to return to compliance," the spokesperson said.

The State Department said Russia's behavior, including its actions toward Ukraine, are not indicative of a partner ready to commit to confidence-building effort.

The Open Skies treaty established surveillance flights over participant countries so that all parties can gain mutual confidence by having open access to information about military forces. Earlier on Thursday, the Russian Foreign Ministry confirmed that US officials had formally notified them of the United States intention not to return to the treaty.

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Trudeau, Guilbeault and other high-ranking government officials claim the Bill is intended to loosen international social media goliaths' grip on the country's media landscape, ensure that Canadian media giants are duly paid for their content disseminated through social networks and overhaul an outdated media framework.

Critics, however, say that the Bill is a cynical attack on freedom of speech and the press in Canada, pointing to the removal of a clause - at the last second before the legislation was to be reviewed by the parliamentary committee on Canadian heritage - that protected independent content creators from government oversight.

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US Welcomes Agreement to Hold Elections in Somalia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes the agreement to proceed with elections in Somalia, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"The United States welcomes the May 27 agreement between Somalia's national and Federal Member State leaders to proceed with parliamentary and presidential elections on the basis of the September 17, 2020, framework," Price said Thursday.

Somalia's federal government and states authorities agreed earlier in the day to hold presidential and parliamentary elections within the next 60 days. The Prime Minister, Mohamed Hussein Roble, said that the government would implement elections in a transparent, free and fair manner.

The State Department also called upon the leaders to maintain the spirit of cooperation and compromise throughout the elections, adding that they look forward to continuing their support for the process.

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US Prosecutors Investigating if Ukrainian Officials Meddled in 2020 Election - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - US federal prosecutors are investigating whether Ukrainians meddled in the 2020 presidential election, the New York Times reported citing people with knowledge of the situation.

The report said on Thursday that US federal investigators are looking into whether certain Ukrainian officials, including using Trump campaign attorney Rudy Giuliani, spread misinformation to hurt then Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden in order to help former President Donald Trump win re-election.

Giuliani is not a target in this investigation, but he is part of a separate criminal probe looking into his dealings in Ukraine, the report said.

As part of the probe, federal prosecutors looked into a trip Giuliani made to Europe in December 2019 when he met with several Ukrainians, the report said citing a confidential source.

The probe began during the final months of the Trump administration, but it is unclear if any Ukrainian officials will be charged, the report said.

Spokesmen with the US Justice Department and FBI declined to comment on the matter, the report said.

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Biden Security Adviser, India's Top Diplomat Meet to Review Partnership - White House

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and New Delhi's top diplomat met to review the US-Indian relationship including cooperation on the pandemic and in the Indo-Pacific, National Security Council Spokesperson Emily Horne said in a statement.

"Sullivan met today with Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar of India to review the strong partnership between the world's largest democracies," Horne said Thursday. "They discussed a range of regional and global issues, and agreed the United States and India should continue working closely together to address common challenges throughout the Indo-Pacific region."

Among the topics the two leaders discussed were supporting a free and open Indo-Pacific region, leading the globe on climate change issues, and the \$500 million total in COVID aid sent to the Indian people from the US government, states, companies, and private individuals. India has confirmed 211,298 new cases of the coronavirus over the past 24 hours, with the total number of those infected having reached 27,369,093 the country's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare said on Thursday. The death toll from the disease has reached 315,235 people, with 3,847 new fatalities being recorded over the past day.

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US 'Outraged' Over Violence Against Protesters in Iraq - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United States is outraged over the violence against protesters during street demonstrations in Baghdad, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"The United States is outraged that peaceful demonstrators who took to the streets to urge reform were met with threats and brutal violence," Price said on Thursday.

Price said the US welcomes every effort to hold accountable the militias that attacked Iraqis exercising their right to freedom of expression.

Iraqi security forces attacked demonstrators earlier this week who were out calling for reform following a rise in targeted killings of activists and journalists.

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Russia Backed by China, S.Africa on Ryanair Incident at ICAO Meeting But Snubbed By Others

TORONTO, May 27 (Sputnik) - Russia's position regarding the Ryanair airplane diversion in Belarus received support from China and South Africa during the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Council meeting on the incident, but was "not heard" by other members, the Russian delegation told Sputnik.

"We were under the impression that the Europeans had prepared their presentations in advance, with each state having been assigned a role to play," Russian delegation member Sergey Gudkov said on Tuesday, lamenting that other member states were unwilling to consider Russia's position.

Despite Russian, Chinese and South African appeals for a complete investigation under Annex 17 of the Chicago Convention, alleging interference on the part of the ICAO's Air Navigation and Legal Affairs and External Relations bureaus, the counterparts at the meeting launched an investigation into allegations of Belarus violating flight security protocols by diverting the plane. Belarus asserts that it alerted the flight crew to a bomb threat on board, which was later revealed to be a false alarm, after receiving threats from abroad.

Western officials, meanwhile, maintain that the target of the alleged staged grounding was journalist Roman Protasevich, the founder of a Telegram channel which Minsk has designated as an extremist entity. The journalist, who is now also wanted by the self-proclaimed Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) for participating in the Donbas conflict as part of the far-right Azov Battalion, faces up to 15 years in prison for his part in last year's unrest following the reelection of Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko.

The Russian ICAO delegation argued during the meeting that Belarus acted in accordance with ICAO protocols in alerting the flight crew of the bomb threat and the crew members made the decision to land in Minsk independently.

The international civil aviation body convened an urgent meeting of 36 diplomatic representatives in the ICAO Council to discuss Sunday's incident. The meeting was also attended by representatives of Belarus, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine.

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ICAO Underlies Importance of Establishing Facts in Ryanair Diversion to Belarus- Statement

TORONTO, May 27 (Sputnik) - The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Council said during an urgent meeting that establishing the facts of the Ryanair airplane diversion in Belarus is of the utmost importance.

"At a special meeting convened, the ICAO Governing Body underlined the importance of establishing the facts of what happened, and of understanding whether there had been any

breach by any ICAO Member State of international aviation law, including the Convention on International Civil Aviation (Chicago Convention) and its Annexes," the ICAO Council said in a statement after the meeting on Thursday.

The meeting resulted in the ICAO Council launching a fact-finding investigation into allegations of Belarus violating flight security protocols by diverting the airplane, en route from Athens to Vilnius, over a false bomb threat.

The Russian delegation, meanwhile, with the support of the Chinese and South African delegations, argued that a full investigation should be conducted into alleged interference on the part of the ICAO's Air Navigation and Legal Affairs and External Relations bureaus.

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The ICAO Council urged member states and other stakeholders to collaborate with the investigation offered the assistance and expertise of the international body. ICAO Secretary General Dr. Fang Liu assured that the council has the support of the Secretariat in its mission. The international civil aviation body convened an urgent meeting of 36 diplomatic representatives in the ICAO Council to discuss Sunday's incident. The meeting was also attended by representatives of Belarus, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine.

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US Conducts Successful Test of Hypersonic Strike System - Lockheed Martin

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin announced that it conducted together with Northrop Grumman a successful, live fire test of a new hypersonic strike system.

"The Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman team successfully conducted a significant live fire hypersonic strike system test in support of the US Navy's Conventional Prompt Strike (CPS) and US Army's Long Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW) programs," Lockheed Martin said in a statement on Thursday.

The test marks a major milestone on the path to providing hypersonic strike capability to the US Army and Navy, the statement said.

The Defense Department has said the development of hypersonic strike systems is among the top mission priorities.

Existing hypersonic weapons are capable of flying at speeds of up to 27 times the speed of sound and are highly maneuverable while operating at varying altitudes, according to published reports.

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Ex-US Officials, Microsoft Seek to Challenge FISA Rulings Before Supreme Court - ACLU

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - A group of former US government officials, judges and civil society organizations, along with Microsoft are petitioning the Supreme Court to hear a case challenging the secretly-reached opinions of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance (FISA) Court, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said.

"Former government officials, former magistrate judges, media and civil society organizations, and Microsoft are filing amicus briefs with the US Supreme Court today urging it to hear a case challenging the secrecy of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court's opinions," the ACLU said in a press release on Thursday.

Former CIA Director John Brennan and former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper were among those who filed the brief, the ACLU said.

"The petition was filed last month by the ACLU, the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, the Media Freedom and Information Access Clinic at Yale Law School, and former Solicitor General Theodore Olson. The groups argue that the First Amendment requires the FISC to make its legal opinions public," the release said.

Congress created the FISC in 1978 to authorize and oversee electronic surveillance conducted for foreign intelligence purposes. Its role was originally narrow, but today, following legislative changes and new technology, the court evaluates broad surveillance programs including ones that involve the collection of emails, phone records, and internet data, the release added.

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California Launches \$116Mln Lottery Prizes for Vaccinated Against Coronavirus - Governor WASHINGTON, May 28 (Sputnik) - California Governor Gavin Newsom announced that his state will distribute more than \$116 million in cash prizes to residents who have received a coronavirus vaccine by way of a lottery-like selections on three dates in June.

"Ca[ifornia] is launching a \$116.5 million giveaway for vaccinated Californians! \$15 million in cash prizes for ten winners selected 6/15 \$50k for winners on 6/4 and 6/11 Already vaccinated? You're entered," Newsom said via Twitter on Thursday.

Newsom also said that the next 2 million unvaccinated Californians will receive a \$50 grocery or prepaid card if they become vaccinated.

To be eligible to win \$1.5 million, a person must reside in California and have received at least one dose of the coronavirus vaccine while those incarcerated or living outside the state are not eligible to participate.

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Russian National Mariya Chernykh Gets 3 Years Probation in US for Immigration Fraud

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - A US federal court has sentenced Russian National Mariya Chernykh to three years of probation on charges related to immigration fraud, court documents revealed.

"It is the judgment of the Court that the defendant, Mariya Chernykh, is hereby sentenced to Probation for a term of 36 months, on Counts 1, 3, 4 and 5 of the indictment, to be served concurrently," the court documents said on Thursday.

Chernykh pleaded guilty to federal immigration fraud charges in January 2017. She reportedly was in a sham marriage with US citizen Enrique Marquez in order to obtain immigration benefits. Chernykh made false statements in her immigration documents, paid Marquez for participating in the scheme and made false material statements in interviews with FBI agents. Chernykh faced up to 20 years in prison and a fine of up to \$1 million. She must also pay a fine of \$400, according to the court documents.

Chernykh is the sister-in-law of the San Bernardino terrorist Syed Rizwan Farook, who, along with his wife, killed 14 people and injured 22 others in a terrorist attack at the Inland Regional Center in California on December 2, 2015.

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US Will Not Rejoin Open Skies Treaty Given Russia's Alleged Non-Compliance - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United States will not rejoin the Open Skies treaty, citing concerns over Russian non-compliance with the accord as a reason for the departure, a US State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

" In concluding its review of the treaty, the United States therefore does not intend to seek to rejoin [Open Skies treaty], given Russia's failure to take any actions to return to compliance," the spokesperson said.

The State Department said Russia's behavior, including its actions toward Ukraine, are not indicative of a partner ready to commit to confidence-building effort.

The Open Skies treaty established surveillance flights over participant countries so that all parties can gain mutual confidence by having open access to information about military forces. Earlier on Thursday, the Russian Foreign Ministry confirmed that US officials had formally notified them of the United States intention not to return to the treaty.

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Model Predicts Early Lifting of COVID-19 Restrictions Would Double Death Toll - Rand Corp.

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - A computerized simulation predicted that a complete lifting of US COVID-19 restrictions by the US July 4 Independence Day holiday would create a new surge due to variants that would double the nation's death toll if the nation falls short of the 60 percent vaccination goal set by President Joe Biden, the Rand Corporation said in a report. "We simulated thousands of scenarios of how the pandemic potentially could unfold in the months ahead: Would new variants of the virus spread faster and further? Would vaccine hesitancy decrease? Each simulation produced projections for cases and deaths," the report said on Thursday.

The simulations indicated that fully reopening an economy before the 60 percent target was met doubled the average number of COVID-19 deaths between Independence Day and the end of the year - nearly all of these deaths coming from the portion of the population that remained unvaccinated, the report said.

In scenarios where the July 4 target wasn't met, COVID-19 surges comparable to those of summer 2020 - before the vaccine was distributed - were three times more likely to occur in the weeks after social mixing at Independence Day picnics, barbecues, and baseball games, the report added.

The model assumed much of the surge would be driven by variants of the original strain from China - mutations that made the virus more transmissible though not more deadly, such as with strains circulating in Brazil and India.

On the other hand, the model predicted that by vaccinating 160 million American adults by July 4, about 60 percent of the population at least 18 years old, could save tens of thousands of American lives, the report said.

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Russia Backed by China, S.Africa on Ryanair Incident at ICAO Meeting But Snubbed By Others

TORONTO, May 27 (Sputnik) - Russia's position regarding the Ryanair airplane diversion in Belarus received support from China and South Africa during the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Council meeting on the incident, but was "not heard" by other members, the Russian delegation told Sputnik.

"We were under the impression that the Europeans had prepared their presentations in advance, with each state having been assigned a role to play," Russian delegation member Sergey Gudkov said on Tuesday, lamenting that other member states were unwilling to consider Russia's position.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) -

OPEN SKIES TREATY

* The Biden administration has informed Russia that it has no intention to return the United States to the Open Skies treaty, which provided for surveillance flights in both countries, the Associated Press reported on Thursday.

* The Russian Foreign Ministry confirmed that Washington had notified Moscow that it would not return to the Open Skies treaty.

RYANAIR GROUNDING IN BELARUS

* The International Civil Aviation Organization is launching an investigation into the incident with the flight of the Irish airline Ryanair, which had to make an emergency landing in Minsk after over a bomb threat that later proved to be false, the Irish Department of Transport said on Thursday.

* Moscow supports Minsk's position on the need for an international investigation into the incident with the Ryanair flight, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said in a conversation with his Belarusian counterpart, Roman Golovchenko.

* G7 Foreign Ministers said that they condemn the arrest of Belarusian journalist Roman Protasevich and threaten to levy sanctions on Minsk.

* The Kremlin expects that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko will brief Russian President Vladimir Putin on the Ryanair plane emergency landing and the situation around detained Russian citizen Sofia Sapega, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

PUTIN-BIDEN MEETING

* The exact venue of the meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart, Joe Biden, in Geneva is yet to be determined, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

* Putin told his Belarusian counterpart, Alexander Lukashenko, that he had discussed Belarus with US President Joe Biden simply out of political correctness, Peskov said.

* The venue of the Russia-US summit is chosen by the delegations of the countries, Switzerland will help with the organization, Paola Ceresetti, a spokeswoman for the Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the UN Geneva Office, told Sputnik.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN DISPUTE

* The United Nations called on all relevant actors in Armenia and Azerbaijan to exercise restraint and avoid further escalation of tensions following the capture of six Armenian servicemen at the countries' border, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

* Moscow calls on Yerevan and Baku to resolve all border issues in a peaceful manner and is ready to assist in the negotiation process, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* Armenia's Acting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan proposed to deploy international observers representing Russia or another co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group on the border with Azerbaijan.

* The United States is concerned by the detention of Armenian troops by the Azerbaijani military and urges both parties to promptly and peacefully resolve the incident, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

MIDEAST CONFLICT

* The United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) said in a statement on Thursday that it has passed a resolution to launch an investigation into alleged human rights violations in the recent violence between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.

* The United Nations launched an appeal on Tuesday seeking \$95 million to assist one million people throughout the Gaza Strip over the next three months, UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territory Lynn Hastings said.

* UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet expressed concerns over Israeli rocket attacks in the West Bank and noted that this could be defined as war crimes if found discriminate and disproportionate.

* Israel refuses to cooperate with the commission on Gaza and Israel, the creation of which is envisaged by a UN Human Rights Council resolution, and rejects the resolution itself, claiming that it acted in accordance with international law and ethical standards, the Israeli Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

ELECTION IN SYRIA

* The EU does not consider the presidential election in Syria either free or fair, therefore it does not recognize its results, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said following an informal meeting of EU foreign ministers in Portugal.

* Russian observers have not registered any significant violations in the Syrian presidential election that could affect vote legitimacy, Leonid Slutsky, the head of the Russian lower chamber's international affairs committee, said,

* The position of the European Union on the presidential election in Syria undermines the peaceful settlement of the intra-Syrian conflict, Konstantin Kosachev, the deputy speaker of the Russian upper chamber, told Sputnik.

CRISIS IN ETHIOPIA

* Ethiopia and Eritrea should expect additional US punitive measures over the crisis in the Tigray region, Acting Assistant Secretary Robert Godec for African Affairs said in Senate testimony on Thursday.

* The United States ought to begin implementing a wider array of sanctions against Ethiopia and encourage the international community to do the same in response to reports of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the country's northern Tigray region, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez said.

* The US State Department is looking into the possibility of implementing new sanctions against Ethiopian individuals and institutions over the alleged human rights abuses in the Tigray region, Acting Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of African Affairs Robert Godec said.

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Some 400,000 Congolese Face Displacement Due to Risk of Volcano Eruption - UNICEF

UNITED NATIONS, May 27 (Sputnik) - Some 400,000 Congolese, more than half of whom are children, are at risk of being displaced because of a possibility of another volcano eruption, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) said in a release on Thursday.

"As the authorities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) advise people living in part of the city of Goma to vacate their homes due to the risk of another volcanic eruption, UNICEF has warned that as many as 400,000 people - including 280,000 children - could be displaced and in need of protection or support," the release said.

UNICEF praised the government's efforts to protect residents in the Red Zone of eastern Goma from risks associated with additional Mount Nyiragongo eruptions.

The UN agency noted that thousands of people fleeing Goma are going to the nearby town of Sake, which is an area prone to cholera outbreaks, after the May 22 volcanic eruption.

"An order by the authorities on Thursday, May 27, that residents of the ten neighborhoods in the east of Goma known as the Red Zone must immediately vacate their homes has seen a further mass exodus. The Zone is thought to be the part of the city most at risk should another eruption occur," the release said.

UNICEF continued to say that many people who left Goma on Thursday traveled on foot, carrying mattresses and cooking utensils.

At least 32 people have died as a direct result of the eruption, including three children, while 40 people have been reported as missing, according to the release.

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US Has 'Very Big Concerns' About Upcoming Nicaragua Elections in November

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United States has substantial concerns about the upcoming elections in Nicaragua in November and believes the conditions for the vote to be free and fair have not been met, the Acting Assistant US Secretary of State Julie Chung said on Thursday.

"There are very big concerns about elections being planned for later this year and whether the right conditions are there for those being fair elections," Chung told reporters during a briefing. Chung pointed out that the State Department has been very concerned about the situation with alleged violations of human rights and the restriction of civil society activities in Nicaragua and will continue to work in multilateral format with its regional partners, including Costa Rica, to change the situation.

On November 7, Nicaragua will hold presidential and parliamentary elections, including a vote for representatives for the Central American Parliament. Incumbent President Daniel Ortega is running for another term in office.

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RPT - ICAO Opens Probe Into Incident With Ryanair Flight in Belarus - Irish Transport Minister

MOSCOW, May 27 (Sputnik) - The International Civil Aviation Organization is launching an investigation into the incident with the flight of the Irish airline Ryanair, which had to make an emergency landing in Minsk over a bomb threat that later proved to be false, the Irish Department of Transport said on Thursday.

"Minister for Transport Eamon Ryan TD welcomes the decision of the International Civil Aviation Union (ICAO) to launch an investigation into the incident which took place in Belarus on the 23rd of May involving the coercive forced landing of a Ryanair flight and the detention of a journalist and another passenger," the department said in a statement.

"The ICAO is due to produce an interim report by the 25th of June," it added.

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Over One-Third of Americans Believe UFOs Come From Outer Space - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - A survey on UFO's ahead of a widely anticipated report to Congress on unexplained aerial phenomena finally found an issue on which Democrats and Republicans can agree - about one third believe aliens are watching Earth, survey by Quinnipiac University said on Thursday.

"Go figure... the two political parties, so sharply divided on virtually everything on Earth, find common ground in the mysteries of space. Thirty-six percent of Republicans and Democrats believe something or someone not of this earth has been visiting" Quinnipiac Polling Analyst Tim Malloy said in a press release.

Asked what they think these sightings of flying saucers and other mysterious aircraft are, 42 percent of Americans say they think they are man-made aircraft, 35 percent say they think they are aircraft from another world, and 22 percent did not offer an opinion, the release said. Delivery of an unclassified report by the US Director of National Intelligence and the Secretary of Defense on unexplained aerial phenomena is due in Congress next month, sparking renewed interest in a topic that has remained a closely guarded government secret since reports of a 1947 UFO crash in the state of New Mexico first made headlines.

The US government has long claimed that a flying disk purportedly found on a ranch near Roswell, New Mexico, was an Air Force balloon.

Whether one believes in UFOs or not, the Quinnipiac poll also examined Americans' fascination with space exploration in an era when private rocket companies are planning such flights for tourists.

The poll found that about a third of Americans (35 percent) want to blast off when the opportunity becomes available and 32 percent said they would like to visit the Moon and Mars if the distant worlds are colonized in their lifetimes.

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Baer Bank Admits Laundering Over \$36Mln in World Soccer Case - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The Bank Julius Baer (BJB) in Switzerland has agreed in a US federal court to pay more than \$79 million in penalties after admitting it conspired to launder over \$36 billion in bribes through the United States to officials with the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) and other soccer federations, the US Justice Department said on Thursday.

"The Bank has entered into a three-year deferred prosecution agreement with the [US] government," the Justice Department said in a press release. "As part of this agreement, the Bank has agreed to pay more than \$79 million in penalties (including a fine of \$43,320,000 and forfeiture of \$36,368,400) to resolve the investigation."

The bribes were in furtherance of a scheme in which sports marketing companies bribed soccer officials in exchange for broadcasting rights to soccer matches Jorge Luis Arzuaga, a former BJB relationship manager who worked in the Bank's Montevideo, Uruguay and Zurich, Switzerland offices, pleaded guilty in June 2017 for his role in this conspiracy..

"BJB and its employees facilitated bribes and its compliance department turned a blind eye to glaring red flags of money laundering. This Office will hold accountable those corporations or individuals that use the American banking system for corrupt ends," acting US Attorney Mark Lesko said in the release.

According to admissions in the statement of facts, from February 2013 to May 2015, BJB, through Arzuaga, conspired with sports marketing executives and others, to launder through the United States at least \$36,368,400 in bribes paid to soccer officials in exchange for broadcasting rights to soccer matches, the release said.

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New York Attorney General Sues County Over Early Voting Site Access - Office

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - New York Attorney General Letitia James sued a county election board for refusing to provide fair access to early voting sites, her office said in a press release on Thursday.

"James today announced a lawsuit against the Rensselaer County Board of Elections (BOE) and its commissioners, Jason Schofield and Edward McDonough, for failing to provide voters in Rensselaer County with adequate and equitable access to early voting poll sites," the release said.

James, in the same release, said the board's decision unlawfully denied low-income and communities of color a fair and equal opportunity to vote.

The lawsuit asks the court to nullify BOE's current early voting locations and its decision not to place a site in Troy, the most densely populated area of the county.

The majority of the county's Black, Hispanic, and lower-income communities reside in Troy, where a third of voters rely on public transportation to exercise their right to vote, according to the release.

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US Whistleblower Wins \$4Mln for Initiating Probe of Corporate Abuses - Regulator

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - A US federal watchdog said it awarded \$4 million to a whistleblower on Thursday for reporting legal violations by his corporate employer.

"The [US] Securities and Exchange Commission today announced an award of more than \$4 million to a whistleblower who alerted SEC staff to certain violations, prompting the opening of an investigation. The whistleblower then provided substantial assistance by meeting with SEC staff, identifying key players, and providing additional helpful information and documents," the SEC said in a press release.

The SEC, which regulates companies with publicly traded stock, has awarded nearly \$1 billion in rewards to 164 individuals since the program began in 2012, the release added.

In announcing awards, the SEC withholds the names of informants and the identity of the targeted corporation.

Tips that yield successful enforcement actions with monetary sanctions of at least \$1 million can earn the tipster between 10 percent and 30 percent of the money recovered, according to the release.

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US Concerned Over Detention of Armenian Soldiers by Azerbaijani Forces - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned by the detention of Armenian troops by the Azerbaijani military and urges both parties to promptly and peacefully resolve the incident, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement on Thursday.

"The United States is concerned by recent developments along the international border between Armenia and Azerbaijan, including the detention of several Armenian soldiers by Azerbaijani forces," Price said. "We call on both sides to urgently and peacefully resolve this incident. We also continue to call on Azerbaijan to release immediately all prisoners of war and other detainees, and we remind Azerbaijan of its obligations under international humanitarian law to treat all detainees humanely."

The Azerbaijani Defense Ministry reported on Thursday a new border provocation by the Armenian armed forces, noting that six Armenian servicemen were captured.

Price also stressed that the United States calls on the parties to the conflict to quickly return to negotiations under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs.

The two countries fought a short but bloody war over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh in the fall, which resulted in Armenia ceding some of the territories to Azerbaijan.

The border row reignited on May 12 when Armenia accused Azeri troops of attempting a cross-border reconnaissance mission.

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US Defense Budget Proposal for 2022 Continues Work to Modernize Nuclear Triad - Austin

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The \$715 billion US defense budget proposal for 2022 includes investments to keep modernizing the United States' nuclear triad capabilities, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"You can expect to see continued investment in the modernization of the triad," Austin said when asked what the public can expect to see in the 2022 budget with respect to nuclear modernization.

Austin also said the budget will include substantial investments in missile defense and naval forces.

The Trump administration began work to develop US hypersonic missile systems after Russia and China attained the capability.

The details of the \$715 billion defense budget will be rolled out on Friday.

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Three Washington State Police Officers Charged With Killing Black Man – Law Chief

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - Washington State Attorney General Bob Ferguson has filed murder and manslaughter charges against three police officers in the city of Tacoma over the killing of a Black man while in custody last year, his office announced on Thursday.

"Today the Washington Attorney General filed felony charges against three Tacoma Police Department officers involved in the homicide of Manuel Ellis," Ferguson's office said in a news release. "The Attorney General charged Christopher Burbank and Matthew Collins with Second-Degree Murder and Timothy Rankine with first-degree manslaughter."

If convicted, the standard sentencing range for second-degree murder with no prior criminal history in Washington State is 10 to 18 years in prison and the standard range for first-degree manslaughter with no prior criminal history is 6.5 to 8.5 years, the office said. The maximum sentence for both offenses is life in prison, it said.

"This is the first time the Washington Attorney General's Office has criminally charged police officers for the unlawful use of deadly force, and just the second time homicide charges have been filed in Washington against law enforcement officers since Washingtonians adopted Initiative 940 in November 2018," the attorney-general's office said.

Ellis was killed on March 3, 2020 while being detained by Tacoma Police. The investigation was originally handled by the Pierce County Sheriff's Office but months later, it was revealed that Pierce County Sheriff's personnel were involved in his detention. State Governor Jay Inslee later directed the Washington State Patrol to investigate the case, the office said.

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US Ready to Help Demarcate Armenia-Azerbaijan Border Through Peaceful Negotiations

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to help demarcate the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan through peaceful talks and calls on both sides to relocate their forces, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement on Thursday.

"Specifically, we call on Azerbaijan to relocate its forces to the positions they held on May 11. We also call on Armenia to relocate its forces to the positions they held on May 11, and welcome statements of intent to this effect," Price said. "These actions will de-escalate tensions and create space for a peaceful negotiation process to demarcate the border on an urgent basis. The United States is prepared to assist these efforts."

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US Concerned Over Detention of Armenian Soldiers by Azerbaijani Forces - State Sept

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US Government Can Not Be Good Steward of Recovery With Budget Designed for 2010 - Yellen

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The US government can not be a good steward of the economic recovery with a budget that is a decade behind and also has the lowest number of tax auditors since World War II, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said during a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"[W]e cannot continue to be good stewards of this recovery - and tackle the new bodies of work that Congress assigns to us in the years beyond - with a budget that was designed for 2010," she said.

Yellen's comments came ahead of President Joe Biden's 2022 budget announcement on Friday during which he is expected to propose a \$6 trillion in expenditure that would take the United States to its highest sustained levels of federal spending since World War II, and run deficits above \$1.3 trillion through the next decade.

The US government has ran a \$3.1 trillion deficit in fiscal year 2020 and already has accumulated more than \$1.9 trillion in red ink through the first seven months of fiscal year 2021. The deficit as a portion of GDP soared to nearly 15 percent in 2020, the highest level since 1945.

Yellen said stronger spending was needed for her department, particularly in tracking financial crimes, community development projects and in cracking down on tax cheats.

"The IRS is in need of additional resources, too," she said, referring to the Internal Revenue Service. "Over the next ten years, the American people could see roughly \$7 trillion dollars fall through the cracks of our tax system. Why? Because many of the country's wealthiest taxpayers

do not pay their full tax bill, and the IRS is not nearly staffed up enough to ensure compliance. Today, the IRS has fewer auditors than at any time since World War II." Yellen asked for \$13.2 billion to fund IRS discretionary spending and \$417 million to guide Biden's American Families Plan.

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Canadian Government Allots \$2.15Bln Toward Energy Efficient Home Retrofits - Statement

TORONTO, May 27 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has allotted \$2.15 billion for grants for energy-efficient home retrofits, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced on Thursday. "Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, today launched the new Canada Greener Homes Grant, which will help up to 700,000 Canadian homeowners across the country improve the energy efficiency of their homes and reduce their energy bills through an investment of C\$2.6 billion [US\$2.15 billion] over seven years," the Prime Minister's Office said in a statement. Homeowners will be eligible to receive more than \$4,140 for home improvement projects, including include replacing windows and doors, adding insulation, sealing air leaks and improving heating and cooling systems, the statement said. Trudeau said the initiative is in accordance with his government's plan to address climate change and with measures calls for energy efficient retrofits in both residential and commercial structures. However, critics have characterized the plan as being part of a pre-election spree ahead of the anticipated federal election later in the year.

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Alaska Man Admits Threatening to Kill Synagogue Congregants - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - A defendant in the US state of Alaska pleaded guilty to charges he threatened to kill members of a Jewish synagogue in Los Angeles, California, in a November 2019 phone message, the Justice Department said on Thursday. "William Alexander, 50, of Anchorage, Alaska, entered a guilty plea before US District Court Judge Matthew McCrary Scoble to an indictment charging them [sic] with one count of making threatening interstate communications and one count of intentionally obstructing and attempting to obstruct persons in the enjoyment of their free exercise of religious beliefs through the threatened use of force," the Justice Department said in a press release. Alexander left a voice message stating that he planned to kill the synagogue's members, while repeatedly using slurs referring to people of Jewish faith. Alexander admitted that he intended the voice message to be viewed as a threat, the release said. Alexander's sentencing hearing is scheduled for August 23, the release added.

US officials have reported a spate of threats against Jewish Americans following an 11 -day war between Israel and Palestinians in Gaza that ended with a cease-fire agreement earlier this month.

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Canada Backs Calls for Further Investigation Into COVID-19 Origins - Trudeau

TORONTO, May 27 (Sputnik) - Canada backs the calls for further investigation into the origins of the novel coronavirus disease, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday.

US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that his country's Intelligence Community (IC) has determined there is 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.

"We support the call by the United States and others to better understand the origins of COVID-19," Trudeau said.

Canada's position is not simply about "ensuring accountability" but also unwinding the underlying causes to prevent similar reoccurrences in the future, Trudeau added.

The Wall Street Journal reported on Sunday, citing intelligence data, that three laboratory 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 there.

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 said he suspected it originated in the virology laboratory in Wuhan.

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US Will Not Rejoin 'Open Skies' Treaty With Russia - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has informed Russia that it has no intent to return the United States in the Open Skies treaty, which provided surveillance flights in both countries, the Associated Press reported on Thursday.

Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman informed Russia on Thursday that the United States has no plans to re-enter the agreement the former President Donald Trump had withdrawn from, the report said.

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Two-Thirds of US Voters Believe China Likely Created COVID-19 in Biolab - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - A 68 percent majority of American adults believes the novel coronavirus probably originated in a laboratory in the Chinese city of Wuhan, a Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Thursday.

"The... survey finds that 68 percent of likely US voters believe it is 'Likely' that the COVID-19 virus originated in a Chinese laboratory, including 43 percent who think it's Very Likely," a press release explaining the poll said.

The so-called lab-leak theory had largely been dismissed until President Joe Biden on Wednesday admitted that some US intelligence estimates pointed to China's Wuhan Institute of Virology as the source of the virus that causes COVID-19.

Biden ordered a divided US Intelligence Community - some of which accepted Chinese claims that the disease was spread from animals to humans - to re-examine the lab-leak theory and produce a report within 90 days.

Earlier this year, a joint report by Chinese scientists and the World Health Organization concluded that the disease resulted from animal-to-human transmission.

However, the US State Department reported in January that several researchers at the Wuhan laboratory were hospitalized in the fall of 2021 with respiratory infections resembling COVID-19. The State Department document had been largely overlooked until Biden admitted that the two possible scenarios had yielded divided assessments by US intelligence analysts.

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US Military to Revise Leadership Program to Focus on Russia, China - Chiefs of Staff

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United States will revise its leadership development program to study how China and Russia have changed their capabilities to wage war, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"We will also revise our leader development Joint Professional Military Education [JPME] to support the JWC [Joint Warfighting Concept]. Specifically, we are increasing the amount of JPME devoted to the study of the changing character of war and both China and Russia as potential adversaries," Milley told the US House Appropriations Committee.

The general said the JWC will guide and revitalize how the US organizes, trains, and equips its forces in an effort to evolve and shape the strategic environment of future operations.

The JWC is a multi-year, comprehensive approach for joint operations against future threats that provides a guide for future force design and development, he noted.

Milley pointed out that China and Russia represent the two greatest military and geopolitical threats, with each country posing a particular set of challenges.

This assessment includes developments made by China in almost every area of warfighting, as well as the perennial threat posed by Russia's nuclear capabilities, he said.

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Russia Testing Weapons That Threaten US Military Presence in Space - Joint Chiefs

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The Russian military has tested anti-satellite weapons that place the United States' space capabilities in danger, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"Russia has recently tested both a ground-based anti-satellite missile and an on-orbit anti-satellite weapon prototype which threatens our space capabilities," Milley the US House Appropriations Committee.

Milley's testimony comes amid discussions about the Defense Department budget for fiscal year 2022. With the creation of the US Space Force, discussions about the importance of the military's presence in Earth's orbit have become more commonplace.

Earlier in the week, the head of Russian state space agency Roscosmos, Dmitry Rogozin, invited the newly appointed head of NASA Bill Nelson to visit Russia to discuss the two nations' cooperation in the space sphere.

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Blinken, Stoltenberg Discuss Upcoming NATO Summit, Transatlantic Security - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg discussed the upcoming summit of the military alliance in June and Transatlantic security, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"Secretary Blinken and Secretary General Stoltenberg discussed next month's NATO Summit as well as NATO's importance to the security and prosperity of the Transatlantic community and the world," Price said.

Both leaders highlighted an importance of modernizing NATO to meet the new challenges of the 21st century, including advancing the NATO 2030 initiative as essential to ensure Transatlantic security, Price added.

The NATO Summit is scheduled to take place on June 14 in Brussels.

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US to Discuss 80Mln Coronavirus Vaccine Donation, Recipients With G7 Partners - Psaki

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The US government will discuss the donation of 80 million coronavirus vaccine doses, including logistics and recipients, at the meetings with its G7 partners, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"We have announced that we will be donating 80 million [vaccine] doses to the global community. What is happening now behind the scenes is that there is an internal policy process to determine how we can do that in an equitable and transparent way," Psaki said. "I know you are all eager to know where they are going, our process will be. That will certainly be a point of discussion, we expect, and certainly of any questions that come up from our partner countries in the G7 or conversations in NATO."

Psaki added that the ways to work together to get the coronavirus pandemic under control will be a significant topic of conversation at the upcoming G7 meetings.

Earlier in May, President Joe Biden announced the United States will donate 80 million coronavirus vaccines by end of June, including 20 million doses authorized for domestic distribution and 60 million AstraZeneca vaccines that have not been approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

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US Withdrawal From Afghanistan Proceeding Ahead of Schedule - Defense Chief

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The US withdrawal from Afghanistan is proceeding ahead of schedule, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said during a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"The retrograde is proceeding on pace, indeed, slightly ahead of it," Austin told the House Appropriations Committee during a hearing on the 2022 defense budget.

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US Condemns Chinese Sanctions on Former Religious Freedom Official - Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns China's move to impose sanctions on former US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Commissioner Johnnie Moore, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"The United States condemns the People's Republic of China's (PRC) sanctions on a former USCIRF commissioner," Blinken said in a statement on Thursday. "These sanctions follow the PRC's March retaliatory sanctions against two USCIRF commissioners as well as Canadian, UK, and European officials, academics, and organizations."

Blinken's announcement came the day after the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced the sanctions on Moore, who was responsible for the latest report on international religious freedom.

Previously, the United States sanctioned Yu Hui, former office director of the Central Leading Group on Preventing and Dealing with Heretical Religions, of Chengdu, Sichuan Province on May 12, when the Department of State released its 2020 Report to Congress on International Religious Freedom.

Sanctions against Yu were introduced because of his role in the "arbitrary detention of Falun Gong practitioners for their spiritual beliefs," the US report said. China named Falun Gong as an evil cult and launched a campaign to root out its influence in the country in 1999.

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UN Panel Agrees to Probe Alleged Human Rights Violations in Israel-Hamas Conflict in Gaza
UNITED NATIONS, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) said in a statement on Thursday that it has passed a resolution to launch an investigation into alleged human rights violations in the recent violence between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.

"HRC just adopted a resolution establishing an ongoing Commission of Inquiry to investigate alleged Human Rights violations and abuses in Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and in Israel, up to and since 13 April 2021," the statement said.

The United Kingdom, Germany, and Austria were among the eight member states that voted against the probe. Russia, China, and Pakistan were among the 24 countries that supported the investigation.

France, Japan, South Korea, Ukraine, Poland, and nine other countries on the HRC abstained from voting.

The United States, which is not on the HRC, said in a statement through the mission in Geneva that it deeply regrets its decision to launch the probe, adding that it threatens to imperil the progress that has been made in recent weeks.

"The actions of the Human Rights Council today do not contribute to peace," the US mission in Geneva said in a statement. "They will not help bring about lasting solutions to the challenges in the region, nor provide greater dignity, freedom, or prosperity for either Palestinians or Israelis. We will continue to advocate for Israel to be treated fairly in the Human Rights Council."

UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland said during a Security Council meeting on Thursday said Israeli airstrikes hit at least 57 schools, nine hospitals and 19 primary healthcare centers, completely or partially damaging them, he added. Moreover, Wennesland said more than 1,948 Palestinians were injured in the strikes, and more than 112,000 were displaced. The vast majority of them have already returned home, while 9,000 people still remain displaced, he said.

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.

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US Intelligence Studying All Evidence to Discover COVID-19 Origin - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The US Intelligence Community is studying all evidence and new information to fulfil President Joe Biden's order to uncover the true origins of the novel coronavirus origin, Assistant Director of National Intelligence (DNI) for Strategic Communications Amanda Schoch said on Thursday.

"The Intelligence Community continues to examine all available evidence, consider different perspectives and aggressively collect and analyze new information to identify the virus' origins," Schoch said in a statement.

Biden issued his directive to the 17 main US intelligence agencies on Wednesday. However, Schoch acknowledged that most of the agencies still had no clear idea of how virus emerged while the three with suggestions were uncertain and divided in their assessments.

Schoch noted that the US Intelligence Community does not know exactly where, when or how the virus was transmitted initially.

"[E]ither it emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals or it was a laboratory accident. The majority of elements in the Intelligence Community do not believe there is sufficient information to assess one more likely than the other," she said.

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US Inflation Spike 'Temporary' Phenomenon That Could Last Until Year-End - Yellen

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The recent spike in US inflation is likely a temporary phenomenon caused by materials shortage in an economy rebounding from the coronavirus pandemic, though high annualized rates of inflation could persist each month until the year end, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Thursday.

"The recent inflation we have seen will be temporary, it's not something that's endemic," Yellen said. "I expect it to last several more months and to see high annual rates of inflation through the end of this year."

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, the Federal Reserve has kept US interest rates at between zero and a quarter percentage point to help the economy recover. The central bank has also been buying at least \$80 billion per month of Treasury securities and a minimum of \$40 billion per month of agency mortgage-backed securities to stimulate recovery. However, economic data have lately shown an increase in inflation via higher consumer and producer prices. The US Consumer Price Index grew by an annualized rate of 4.2 percent in April for its largest increase in almost 13 years, after months of commodity price increases. Prices of almost everything, from houses to the lumber that goes into building them, have

soared, making economists concerned that inflation growth in 2021 could be the highest in 35 years.

The Federal Reserve insisted that the inflationary pressures are "transient" and will fade as the US economy makes a full recovery from the pandemic and it does not see an immediate need to raise interest rates.

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UN Urges Armenia, Azerbaijan to Show Restraint in Wake of Soldiers' Arrests - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United Nations called on all relevant actors in Armenia and Azerbaijan to exercise restraint and avoid further escalation of tensions following the capture of six Armenian servicemen at the countries' border, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"We're following with concern the developments in the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. We urge all relevant actors to exercise restraint to avoid any action that may escalate tensions further," Dujarric said. "All outstanding bilateral issues should be resolved peacefully through dialogue and diplomatic means."

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UN Conducting Damage Assessment in Gaza Following Israeli Strikes - Special Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is conducting a rapid assessment in the Gaza Strip to ascertain the destruction following an 11-day war between Israel and Hamas, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland said during a Security Council meeting on Thursday.

"In Gaza, the IDF [Israel Defense Forces] conducted over 1500 strikes against what it said were militant targets belonging to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Nevertheless, there was significant damage to homes and civilian infrastructure," Wennesland said. "The UN and partners are currently undertaking a rapid damage and needs assessment to understand the full scale of destruction and needs on the ground."

Wennesland said at least 258 buildings were damaged or destroyed, translating to nearly 2000 units, during the hostilities.

In addition, Israeli airstrikes hit at least 57 schools, nine hospitals and 19 primary healthcare centers, completely or partially damaging them, Wennesland said.

Some 1,948 Palestinians were injured in the strikes, and more than 112,000 were displaced. The vast majority of them have already returned home, while 9,000 people still remain displaced, he added.

Earlier on Thursday, the United Nations launched a \$95 million appeal to assist Palestinians affected by the latest violence in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

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Biden Says May Release 90-Day Report on COVID-19 Origins if No New Findings Emerge

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he may agree to release the US Intelligence Community's 90 day-review into the origins of COVID-19 if no new findings emerge in the investigation.

"Yes, unless there's something that I'm unaware of," Biden said when asked whether he would release the report in full when it is complete.

On Wednesday, Biden said he directed the US Intelligence Community to redouble efforts to investigate the origins of the novel coronavirus and to report their findings to him in 90 days. Biden said he does not know what result he could expect after the 90-day review.

The US Intelligence Community said it has determined there is insufficient evidence to assess whether COVID-19 came from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory leak. The US Intelligence Community is expected to reach out to China with specific questions about the COVID-19 origins. It will also 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.

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

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US Considering Global Magnitsky, Other Sanctions Against Ethiopia Over Tigray Conflict

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The US State Department is looking into the possibility of implementing new sanctions against Ethiopian individuals and institutions over the alleged human rights abuses in the Tigray region, Acting Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of African Affairs Robert Godec said on Thursday.

"We are looking at a range of other sanctions to include a global Magnitsky act sanctions, other potential sanctions that would be targeted and directed at individuals or institutions that are supporting the ongoing conflict, impeding resolution, impeding an end to the conflict, or otherwise obstructing humanitarian access or committing human rights abuses and violations," Godec said.

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US Will 'Carefully Review' Iran Sanctions if Tehran Returns to Nuclear Agreement - Yellen

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United States will review carefully its sanctions regime against Iranian oil exports if Tehran returns to the 2015 nuclear agreement that aimed at preventing the Islamic Republic from acquiring nuclear weapons, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Thursday.

"With respect to Iran. I think you know, the president is looking at negotiations that might succeed in bringing Iran back to full compliance (with)... the JCPOA and as indicated that the United States is prepared to do the same if Iran agrees to that," Yellen said referring to the Iranian nuclear agreement. "So we will carefully review what sanctions relief would be appropriate if Iran takes the appropriate steps."

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Ethiopia, Eritrea Should Anticipate Further US Actions Over Trigray Crisis - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - Ethiopia and Eritrea should expect additional US punitive measures over the crisis in the Tigray region, Acting Assistant Secretary Robert Godec for African Affairs said in Senate testimony on Thursday.

"While diplomatic efforts have been underway, the administration has also taken stronger steps," Godec said. "Should those stoking the conflict fail to reverse course, Ethiopia and Eritrea should anticipate further actions. It cannot be 'business-as-usual' in the face of the violence and atrocities in Tigray."

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US Senate Committee Chairman Calls for More Sanctions, Arms Embargo on Ethiopia

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United States ought to begin implementing a wider array of sanctions against Ethiopia and encourage the international community to do the same in response to reports of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the country's northern Tigray region, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez said on Thursday.

"I support the administration's announcement of visa sanctions and a pause in some assistance. We should also impose targeted financial sanctions on individuals perpetrating conflict, use our voice and vote at international financial institutions to oppose all funding that does not directly support the basic needs of the Ethiopian people, and ensure that Ethiopian troops currently operating in Tigray who may be implicated in war crimes are not deployed as UN peacekeepers. In addition, the administration should begin marshalling international support for arms embargoes so that the weapons of war fueling this disastrous crisis can be taken off the table," Menendez said.

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 an ongoing regional conflict between the Ethiopian government and a local, militant ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

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US Will Fully Use Treasury's Authorities to Target Russian 'Malign Activities' - Yellen

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United States is committed to using the Treasury Department's authority to target Russian "malign activities," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Thursday.

"We are firmly committed to using the full breadth of the Treasury's authorities to target the range of Russian malign activities," Yellen told a Congressional hearing.

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Trudeau Apologizes for Government Internment of Italian Canadians During World War II
TORONTO, May 27 (Sputnik) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Thursday issued an apology on behalf of the federal government for the internment of Italian Canadians during World War II. "I rise in this house today, to issue an official apology, on behalf of the Government of Canada, for the internment of Italian Canadians during the Second World War," Trudeau said during a special sitting of the House of Commons.

Trudeau said Canadians of Italian heritage have helped shape Canada and they continue to be an invaluable part of the diversity that makes the country strong.

"Today, as we acknowledge and address historical wrongs against the Italian Canadian community, we also show our respect for their great contributions to our country," he added. Following Fascist Italy's entry into World War II as an ally to Nazi Germany over 600 Italians were interned in camps under wartime regulations. In total, approximately 31,000 Italian Canadians were declared "enemy aliens" and had to report to local registrars on a monthly basis.

Former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was the first Canadian leader to acknowledge the injustice during a meeting with the Italian diaspora in 1990, according to a press release from the Prime Minister's Office.

Canada is presently home to approximately 1.6 million Canadians of Italian descent.

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US Warns Americans in Lithuania to Avoid Friday Embassy Protest By Belarusian Activists

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - Plans by Belarusian activists to protest in front of the US Embassy in Vilnius on Friday prompted the mission to issue a travel alert urging Americans to avoid the demonstration.

"The Vilnius police are aware and taking precautions. However, even peaceful demonstrations can become confrontational and escalate quickly," the alert said.

The alert urged Americans to "avoid the areas of demonstrations" and to "exercise caution" when in the vicinity of large protests.

The demonstration in front of the US Embassy by a Belarusian non-governmental organization operating in Vilnius is scheduled from 12:00 to 2:00 p.m. on Friday, the alert said.

The demonstration comes after the arrest of dissident journalist Roman Protasevich, who was detained on Sunday when his flight from Athens to Vilnius was forced to land in the Belarus capital of Minsk.

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Blinken Says Electoral Reform Bill Limits Hong Kongers From Participating in Governance

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on Thursday that the Hong Kong electoral system reform legislation passed earlier in the day places significant limits on residents to meaningfully take part in their own governance.

"The Chinese government continues to undermine the democratic institutions of Hong Kong, denying Hong Kong residents the rights that the People's Republic of China (PRC) itself has guaranteed," Blinken said. "The Hong Kong Legislative Council (LegCo) passage on May 27 of new measures that alter the composition of the LegCo and Election Commission severely constrains people in Hong Kong from meaningfully participating in their own governance and having their voices heard."

Earlier on Thursday, the Hong Kong Legislative Council approved in the third reading the bill seeking to reform the city's electoral system.

Blinken said decreasing Hong Kong residents' electoral representation will not foster long-term political and social stability for Hong Kong.

"This legislation defies the Basic Law's clear acknowledgment that the ultimate objective is the election of all members of the LegCo by universal suffrage," he said.

Blinken emphasized the US government is urging the Chinese and the Hong Kong authorities to allow the voices of all city residents to be heard.

"We also call on these authorities to release and drop charges against all individuals charged under the National Security Law and other laws merely for standing for election or for expressing dissenting views," he said. "The United States stands united with our allies and partners in speaking out for the human rights and fundamental freedoms guaranteed to the people in Hong Kong by the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law."

In March, the Chinese parliament passed the reform plan for the Hong Kong electoral system, changing the procedures for electing the head of the city administration and forming the legislative body.

The changes prompted criticism from a number of Western countries that believe that the bill undermines Hong Kong's independence. However, Beijing reiterated that the issue is an internal matter concerning China.

Forty lawmakers voted in favor of the bill and two voted against. The bill will now be sent to Chief Executive Carrie Lam to sign it into law. It is expected to enter into force before the September 19 election of the Election Committee, the city's electoral college that is responsible for picking the chief executive. A general election has been scheduled for December 19 and an election for chief executive on March 27, 2022.

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Lockheed Martin to Equip Kuwaiti F-18 Super Hornets With Sniper ATP Targeting Pods

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - A successful test integrating the Sniper Advanced Targeting Pod (ATP) on a Kuwait Air Force F-18 Super Hornets advances plans to deploy the system by late 2023, Lockheed Martin said on Thursday.

"This integration gives existing and future Super Hornet fleets the ability to add Sniper ATP's precision targeting and surveillance capabilities, which are critical to pilot survivability," Lockheed Martin said in a press release.

To verify the mechanics of the system, flight-testing with an operational sniper ATP was conducted at Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake in the state of California, the release said. The Sniper ATP is currently deployed on 15 different types of aircraft in 27 nations, including older versions of the F-18 in Kuwait, the release noted.

The system features an electro-optical targeting system housed in a pod that attaches to the aircraft fuselage. It provides precision targeting for both air-to-air and air-to-ground munitions, as well as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, according to Lockheed Martin.

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UPDATE - US Weekly Jobless Benefits Down 9% in Continued Progress From COVID- Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The weekly filing for jobless benefits in the United States fell by about 9 percent last week as some 406,000 people filed for unemployment claims, the lowest number since the start of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 , the Labor Department said Thursday.

"In the week ending May 22, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 406,000, a decrease of 38,000 from the previous week's unrevised level of 444,000," the department said in a statement. "This is the lowest level for this average since March 14, 2020 when it was 225,500."

Economists polled by US media had anticipated 425,000 filings for unemployment benefits in the week to May 15. That put the 406,000 claims reported by the department decently below their target.

"The claims data continues to move steadily to the downside," economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on ForexLive. "There are expectations that once the COVID employment benefits lapse in September, that the weekly claims data will fall even more sharply as those choosing to receive government aid instead of working, decide to go back to work."

Unemployment benefits have fallen in four of the past five weeks, signaling a recovery from the COVID-19 marked by other bullish macroeconomic data and falling infection rates versus vaccinations for the virus.

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

The Labor Department said there were only 26,000 job additions for all of April, versus March gains of 916,000. Economists had expected as many as 1.0 million new jobs last month. Elaborating on the weekly unemployment filings, the department said continuing claims for the week ended May 15 — reported with a one-week lag — fell to 3.64 million, from 3.74 million during the week to May 8.

That reduced the weekly reading for unemployment to 2.6 percent from a previous 2.7 percent. The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. More than 8 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, although first quarter data for 2021 showed a dynamic rebound of 6.4 percent.

The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent economic growth for all of 2021 although Jerome Powell, chairman of the central bank, said he did not expect “full employment” — defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower — before 2023. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 6.1 percent in April.

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UN Seeks \$95Mln to Assist People in Gaza Over Next Three Months - Humanitarian Coordinator

UNITED NATIONS, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United Nations launched an appeal on Tuesday seeking \$95 million to assist one million people throughout the Gaza Strip over the next three months, UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territory Lynn Hastings said in a press briefing on Thursday.

“The appeal that I launched today in Jerusalem requests \$95 million to address [the] needs over three months,” Hastings said. “One million people will be targeted to receive assistance.”

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US Q1 GDP Grew By 6.4%, Commerce Dept Says in 2nd Estimate For Period

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - US Gross Domestic Product likely expanded by 6.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021, the Commerce Department said Thursday in its second estimate of January-March growth as the economy made a strident recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 6.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021, reflecting the continued economic recovery, reopening of establishments, and continued government response related to the COVID-19 pandemic," the department said in a statement. "The increase was the same rate as the 'advance' estimate released in April." The GDP expansion was enabled partly by government assistance payments to individuals, expanded unemployment benefits and Paycheck Protection Program loans distributed to businesses through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act and the American Rescue Plan Act, the statement added.

The Commerce Department issues three GDP readings for each quarter, with Thursday's being its second estimate for the January-March period.

For the fourth quarter of 2020, GDP grew by 4.3 percent, the department said in its final reading issued on March 25.

While the Q4 GDP for last year was positive, the economy still shrank 3.5 percent for all of 2020 due to COVID-19 related lockdowns. One main reason was that some 8 million or more jobs lost at the height of the pandemic have not returned, officials said.

The first quarter estimate released Thursday came in slightly lower than the 6.5 percent forecasts by economists polled by US media.

"With the drop in inventories and the poor performance of trade possibly reversing later in the year, there will be a consistent tailwind for GDP for a few quarters," economist Adam Button said in a comment posted on ForexLive.

The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent GDP for all of 2021, although it says it does not expect "full employment" — defined by an unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower — to return before 2023. The unemployment rate stood at 6.1 percent at the end of April.

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Blinken to Travel to Costa Rica Next Week for Talks on Migration – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will travel to Costa Rica next week for talks on migration and security with Western Hemisphere leaders, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Blinken will travel on June 1-2 to San Jose, Costa Rica, where he will engage with senior leaders from Central America, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic, as well as Costa Rican government officials and civil society," Price said in a statement.

The top US diplomat is expected to meet with Costa Rican President Carlos Alvarado Quesada and Foreign Minister Rodolfo Solano Quiros, Blinken for talks on bilateral relations. Blinken will also participate in a meeting with senior leaders from member-states of the Central America Integration System (SICA), along with Mexico.

"Together, they will advance a collaborative approach to addressing the root causes of migration, including improving democratic governance, security, and economic opportunity for the people of Central America," Price said.

During the visit, Blinken will engage with his regional counterparts to discuss joint efforts to address bilateral and regional issues, he added.

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US Unveils New Cybersecurity Requirements for Pipelines - Homeland Security Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The United States has ordered the country's pipelines to report any suspected cyberattacks to the government as part of a series of new requirements issued in the wake of the attack on the Colonial Pipeline, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Thursday.

"Today, the Department of Homeland Security's Transportation Security Administration (TSA) announced a Security Directive that will enable the Department to better identify, protect against, and respond to threats to critical companies in the pipeline sector," the department said in a press release.

The directive requires pipeline owners and operators to report both confirmed and potential cybersecurity incidents to the DHS Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). Companies will also be required to designate a cybersecurity coordinator who is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"It will also require critical pipeline owners and operators to review their current practices as well as to identify any gaps and related remediation measures to address cyber-related risks and report the results to TSA and CISA within 30 days," the release said.

TSA is considering further mandatory measures to support companies in the pipeline industry in boosting their cybersecurity, DHS added.

The directive comes after the ransomware cyberattack earlier this month on the Colonial Pipeline, one of the nation's largest providers of fuel that provides around 45 percent of the gasoline to the country's East coast. Colonial reportedly paid a ransom of about \$5 million to Russia-based hackers, against the advice of the US government, and regained access to their systems.

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US Weekly Jobless Benefits Down 9% in Continued Progress From COVID- Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - The weekly filings for jobless benefits in the United States fell by about 9 percent last week as some 406,000 people filed for unemployment claims, the lowest number since the start of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, the Labor Department said Thursday.

"In the week ending May 22, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 406,000, a decrease of 38,000 from the previous week's unrevised level of 444,000," the

department said in a statement. "This is the lowest level for this average since March 14, 2020 when it was 225,500."

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Biden to Propose \$6T In US Budget for 2022, Highest Deficit Since WW2 - NYT

WASHINGTON, May 27 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is set to propose on Friday a \$6 trillion budget that would take the United States to its highest sustained levels of federal spending since World War II, while running deficits above \$1.3 trillion throughout the next decade, the New York Times reported on Thursday.

While the president will be calling on the federal government to spend \$6 trillion for fiscal year 2022, total spending will rise to \$8.2 trillion by 2031, the report said, citing documents it obtained.

The budget will cover the cost upgrading the nation's infrastructure and expanding the social safety net and will include planned increases in discretionary spending, the report said.

The proposal includes increased funds for national defense, though spending in this category would decline as a share of the economy, according to the report.

The proposal shows the sweep of Biden's ambitions to wield government power to help more Americans attain the comforts of a middle-class life and to lift US industry to better compete globally in an economy the administration believes will be dominated by a race to reduce energy emissions and combat climate change, the Times said.