

06/02/21 Wednesday

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Israel's Lapid Informs President Rivlin He Has Formed a Government, Ousting Netanyahu by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

By the terms of the Basic Law on Government, the new Israeli coalition government will have rotating offices, with Yamina chairman Naftali Bennett serving as prime minister for two years and Yesh Atid chairman Yair Lapid as alternate, then they will switch.

Late Wednesday night, just an hour before the deadline, Knesset Opposition Leader Lapid informed Israeli President Reuven Rivlin that he had successfully won a majority of the parliament to his coalition and would establish a government.

"Congratulations to you," Rivlin tweeted, "and to the heads of the parties on your agreement to form a government. We expect the Knesset will convene as soon as possible to ratify the government, as required."

"I give you my word that this government will work in the service of all of Israel's citizens, those that voted for it and those that did not. It will respect its opponents, and will do everything it can to unify and unite all parts of Israeli society," Lapid told President Rivlin.

Rivlin picked Lapid, a former finance minister who heads the centrist Yesh Atid, to form a [new government last month](#) after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed to do so. Lapid has turned to Bennett, who heads the New Right, a right-wing political party, and Yamina alliance, and to a diverse array of smaller parties to try and piece together a majority in the Israeli parliament.

In a statement issued by Lapid's office, he said that the government would be composed of the factions that comprise it, including Yamina and Yesh Atid but also Blue and White, led by Benny Gantz; Yisrael Beytenu, led by Avigdor Lieberman; New Hope, led by Gideon Saar; Labor, led by Marav Michaeli; Meretz, led by Nitzan Horowitz; and Ra'am, or the United Arab List, led by Mansour Abbas.

Earlier on Wednesday, local media reported that the United Arab List, a small group that recently split from the larger Joint List of Arab parties, had also joined the coalition. It will be the first time an Arab party has been part of an Israeli government, even though Arabs make up 21% of Israeli citizens and an even larger number live in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. The final piece of the coalition was reportedly New Hope, a recent split from Netanyahu's Likud Party.

Ra'am chairman Abbas said that he had only agreed to join the coalition after reaching "critical agreements on various issues that serve the interests of Arab society," including education, welfare, employment, economic development, planning, construction, and crime and violence, according to Haaretz.

Netanyahu is Israel's longest-serving prime minister, having lead the Israeli government for 12 consecutive years since 2009. He is [charged with bribery](#), fraud and breach of trust, and faces

up to 10 years in prison. This has helped create an unstable political situation in which Israel has [had four elections](#) since April 2019.

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WHO Revisits Puzzling COVID-Positive Blood Samples From Pre-Pandemic Italy in Origins Hunt

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The World Health Organization's initial investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic found little reason to believe the virus leaked from a Chinese biolab, but didn't outright dismiss the idea, either. Nonetheless, anti-China figures have continued to push the theory as being equal in validity to others, like zoonotic transfer.

WHO scientists are taking a harder look at a set of blood tests taken in Italy in October 2019 that later tested positive for antibodies against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. On Tuesday, [WHO officials confirmed](#) they were in contact with a group of scientists in Italy who published [a shocking report](#) last November revealing that several blood tests collected as part of a lung cancer screening program months before the first cases of COVID-19 were detected in Italy had mysteriously tested positive for antibodies the body produces to fight SARS-CoV-2. Their report, published by the Italian National Cancer Institute in its magazine Tumori Journal, found that 111 of 959 samples in the trial showed the unique spike protein SARS-CoV-2 uses to infect cells in the human body were present in the patient's blood, and that tests of other similar coronaviruses were negative. That would mean that the patients had contracted and recovered from COVID-19 by the time of the October blood tests, signaling that COVID-19 was circulating in northern Italy in September 2019 - six months before the first cases were detected in Milan in February 2020.

"The WHO asked us if we could share the biological material and if we could re-run the tests in an independent laboratory. We accepted," Giovanni Apolone, scientific director of the Milan Cancer Institute (INT), one of the institutions responsible for the November 2020 paper, [told Reuters on Monday](#).

According to Reuters, both positive and negative samples have been sent to Erasmus University in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, to be re-tested.

Apolone stressed that "none of the studies published so far have ever questioned the geographical origin," but likely indicate a less lethal variant of the virus has been in circulation for some time since the slew of deadlier, more virulent cases attracted medical attention in the Chinese city of Wuhan in the final days of 2019.

By February 21, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 in Europe was detected in Milan, Italy, and the city became the epicenter of Italy's outbreak. Italy suffered the worst of the first wave of the pandemic in Europe, with a death rate [as high as 7.2%](#) - twice the death rate reported in Hubei Province, where the outbreak was first recorded. However, there are indications the pandemic in Italy was even worse in 2020 than reported, according to an [Italian study published](#) in January.

However, even if a milder COVID-19 infection was circulating in China earlier in 2019, it would still seem to disprove the once-discredited theory, now revived by the Biden administration, that SARS-CoV-2 escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. [As Sputnik has reported](#), the theory was spread by former US President Donald Trump and right-wing anti-China figures close to him in early 2020 as the pandemic spiraled out of control in the US and his administration began looking for someone else to blame for it.

Last week, WHO spokesperson Fadela Chaib [told a United Nations](#) briefing the agency was preparing a proposal on a second phase of its investigation into the origins of SARS-CoV-2, but she provided no specific timeline. The first phase, conducted in January and February and [released in March](#), yielded no concrete results, but found a zoonotic exchange - that humans caught it from an infected animal - more likely than that the virus escaped from the Wuhan lab. They also suggested an international military sports tournament the city hosted in October 2019 be investigated as an additional possible vector.

Some scientists and political figures intent on pushing the “lab leak” theory have claimed Beijing denied the WHO scientists adequate access to data from the Wuhan virology lab, with more than a dozen US allies [issuing a statement](#) demanding openness, but scientists on the WHO team [have pushed back](#), saying their efforts weren’t impeded by Chinese officials, and that the level of openness being demanded of China is one no Western country would accept if it were made of them.

Also last week, US President Joe Biden ordered [an intelligence report](#) on the origins of COVID-19, “including whether it emerged from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory accident,” to be delivered in 90 days. In response, the [Global Times called](#) for the US biolab at Fort Detrick, Maryland, to be investigated as well.

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Beijing Criticizes Developed Nations for ‘Hoarding’ COVID-19 Vaccines, Praises BRICS for Equity

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

World health officials have urged that until COVID-19 is eradicated everywhere, it remains a global danger and will continue to affect all nations, even when just the poorest ones remain unvaccinated. While popular pressure toward vaccine equity has increased in recent months, the majority of vaccinations have been in the few richest nations.

During a Tuesday virtual meeting of foreign ministers from the BRICS countries intended to promote multilateralism, China hailed the bloc’s efforts to share vaccines, but blasted wealthier nations for focusing on vaccinating their own populations before taking care of the rest of the globe.

“The coronavirus pandemic has seen cases growing in the global south and declining in the north - the hoarding of vaccines and control of exports from some developed countries is not unrelated to this,” Chinese Foreign [Minister Wang Yi told](#) his counterparts from Brazil, Russia, India and South Africa on Tuesday.

Wang noted that “China has provided more than 350 million doses of vaccines to the international community. This is in sharp contrast with developed countries that have adopted a ‘domestic first’ approach.”

According to the Chinese National Health Commission, [as of June 1](#), nearly 682 million vaccine shots had been administered. The data did not differentiate between fully and partially vaccinated people, but shows that as many as 20 million shots are being administered each day. China has roughly 1.4 billion people.

[As of mid-March](#), the United States had already paid for 750 million complete SARS-CoV-2 vaccinations, or three times the US adult population. [As of Wednesday](#), the US has fully vaccinated 41% of its population and given 50.8% at least one shot, from one of the three approved vaccines: Moderna, Pfizer/BioNTech, and Johnson & Johnson.

By comparison, the US has [pledged to send](#) just 80 million of those excess shots to other nations by the end of June, although on Wednesday afternoon, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced the Biden administration would soon reveal a plan to distribute another 80 million vaccine doses.

In the UK, where seven vaccines have been approved, 40% of the adult population [had been vaccinated](#) as of June 1, and London has secured 340 million vaccines for its population of 65.5 million. While the UK has put 500 million pounds into vaccine giant Gavi, the Boris Johnson [government has said](#) it will only donate surplus vaccines.

Israel, with a population of just nine million, has [bought enough vaccines](#) for 30 million people and has [already vaccinated 81%](#) of its population. However, while Israel has donated some of its excess, it has refused to give more than a pittance to the Palestinian Authority, and has [even considered destroying](#) some of the extra vaccines.

BRICS Pushes Vaccine Equity

Wang contrasted the behavior of these nations with those of the BRICS, which have focused on ensuring vaccine access to the world’s poorest nations.

“We hope that BRICS countries will continue to make vaccines a global public good, and adhere to the principle of fair and reasonable distribution,” Wang said. “[We] support our vaccine makers to transfer their technology to other developing countries to co-produce vaccines.”

In addition to Chinese vaccine exports, Russia has [pledged 300 million shots](#) to Africa alone and has signed multiple deals to [produce Gamaleya's Sputnik V](#) vaccine locally.

However, Wang isn’t just preaching to the choir: he carried this message to a meeting of the United Nations Security Council last month, where he told the US, UK and other leading world powers that they needed to “help Africa bridge the pandemic divide.”

[Wang said they](#) must give “more assistance for Africa in terms of pandemic prevention materials, medicines, technology and funding to ensure the accessibility and affordability of vaccines.”

South Africa and India have also led the charge at the World Trade Organization (WTO) to [win a patent waiver](#) for COVID-19 vaccines. The 1995 Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement prevents the production of cheap generic drugs, forcing poorer nations to buy them from First World-based pharmaceutical corporations at First World prices.

As [Sputnik has reported](#), companies like Pfizer have looked to COVID-19 vaccines as their basis for future earnings, and Pfizer has used the TRIPS-created oligopoly to compel Third

World nations to offer up [their sovereign wealth](#) assets like embassies and military bases as collateral against future legal cases.

The World Health Organization has warned of the "shocking imbalance" in vaccination rates between rich and poor nations, with the UN noting that [just 2% of Africans](#) have received a COVID-19 vaccine. If this inequality persists, the world's poorest nations may not eradicate COVID-19 until 2024.

Last week, [the WHO urged](#) that 20 million second doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine are needed in Africa in just the next 6 weeks, while another 200 million are needed just to get the continent to the goal of 10% vaccination by September.

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US Authorities Seeking Answers After Firefighter Kills Colleague, Wounds Another in Murder-Suicide

by [Evan Craighead](#)

California's Los Angeles County Fire Department confirmed on Tuesday that one firefighter was killed, and a fire chief was left injured after a gunman opened fire on the station in Agua Dulce, California. This comes days after a Santa Clara Valley Transportation employee murdered nine co-workers before taking his own life in San Jose, California.

The coroner's office in Los Angeles has identified the murder victim as Tory Carlon, a 44-year-old firefighter specialist with three daughters and more than two decades of service to the department.

Los Angeles Sheriff's Lt. Brandon Dean told reporters that he expects the 54-year-old fire chief to survive after sustaining gunshot wounds in his upper body.

After carrying out [the attack](#) around 10:50 a.m. local time, the alleged gunman is said to have fled to his house, which soon became engulfed in flames. Authorities later found the 57-year-old dead in an empty pool, with a presumably self-inflicted gunshot wound.

[Early reports](#) have linked the shooting to Jonathan Tatone, owner of the now-charred property in Acton, California.

Los Angeles County Fire Chief Daryl Osby revealed on Tuesday that the alleged gunman "was not scheduled to work" on June 1, but "came back and confronted the on-duty personnel" at the fire station in Agua Dulce.

As authorities continue to investigate, members of the immediate Los Angeles community have banded together. According to the [Associated Press](#), hundreds attended a Tuesday night vigil in remembrance of Carlon.

Like the recent mass shooting in [San Jose](#), officers did not exchange fire with the alleged gunman, as the suspect fled the scene, and took his own life before cops could engage.

As of this article's publication, authorities have not identified a possible motive.

Sources "with knowledge of the situation" told the [Los Angeles Times](#) that there was an ongoing dispute between Carlon and the alleged gunman. Furthermore, Carlon and the suspect reportedly lived in the same area.

California, the most populous state in the US, observed at least 42 active shooter incidents between 2000 and 2019 - the most of any other state, according to a report published on Tuesday by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Florida ranked second, with 27 active shooter incidents logged during the same period.

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Condi's Two Cents -Political Cartoon

Condoleezza Rice notably served as Secretary of State during former US President George Bush's second term in office. Prior to her 2005 appointment, Rice served as US national security adviser and notoriously made the false claim that Iraq and Saddam Hussein may be close to producing a nuclear weapon.

In a [recent interview](#), Rice applauded former US President Donald Trump for his ability to rally Americans "who felt left out by globalization."

"What really struck me, and maybe it's because I'm a political scientist, is that the conditions that produced a populist leader, who had never been in government before, was something I think a lot of us had not paid much attention to, frankly," the former US secretary of state said during an appearance on "The Carlos Watson Show."

"He touched the nerve of people who felt left out by globalization, who felt diminished by elites," Rice asserted, speaking of Trump.

Moments later, Rice took a step back and emphasized that she did not vote for Trump "the first time around." The former US secretary of state also characterized the deadly January 6 riot at the US Capitol as "one of the most frightening things I have watched."

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Cheers to COVID? Anheuser-Busch to Offer Free Beer in Support of Biden's Vaccine Push by [Evan Craighead](#)

As COVID-19 vaccination rates have declined in the US, a number of American companies have teamed up with the White House to launch a number of promotional campaigns. Within recent months, American Airlines, Uber, Krispy Kreme and Shake Shack have all rolled out efforts to encourage those in the US to get the COVID-19 vaccine.

Anheuser-Busch announced on Wednesday that it would be rewarding Americans with a free beer if the US reaches the White House goal of getting 70% of adults partially vaccinated by July 4th - Independence Day in the States.

The US-based brewing company's products include a number of beers, including Budweiser, Michelob, Bud Light, Natural Light and Busch.

"At Anheuser-Busch, we are committed to supporting the safe and strong recovery of our nation and being able to be together again at the places and with the people we have missed so much. This commitment includes encouraging Americans to get vaccinated, and we are excited to buy Americans 21+ a round of beer when we reach the White House goal," Anheuser-Busch CEO Michel [Doukeris said](#) in a quoted statement.

As of this article's publication, three COVID-19 vaccines have been approved for emergency use authorization: Pfizer's two-dose vaccine; Moderna's two-dose vaccine; and Johnson & Johnson's single-shot vaccine.

More than 162,272,565 Americans have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, according to [Wednesday data](#) from the US Centers of Disease Control and Prevention. This total translates to approximately 62.9% of the adult population in the US.

If the US achieves the White House goal, those who wish to get a free beer, alcoholic seltzer or even a non-alcoholic beverage are required to visit [MyCooler.com/Beer](#) and upload a picture of themselves.

Anheuser-Busch's new campaign comes less than two months after [it announced](#) Budweiser would be joining the Ad Council and COVID Collaborative for a vaccine awareness public service announcement.

Similarly, United Airlines has unveiled its '[Your Shot to Fly](#)' sweepstakes; Krispy Kreme is offering [free donuts](#) to vaccinated customers; Shake Shack has rolled out its '[Get Vaxxed. Get Shack](#)' promotion; and McDonald's has launched its 'We Can Do This' campaign.

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North Korea's Kim Jong Un Establishes New Deputy Post Amid Speculation Sister is Possible Successor

by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

Citing an unidentified source, Yonhap News Agency on Tuesday said that Kim Jong Un, the leader of North Korea, established a first secretary post during a Supreme People's Assembly meeting in Pyongyang in January. There has been speculation over who will hold the position, with some sources naming his sister, Kim Yo Jong, as a candidate.

"In case of an emergency, including those involving leader Kim's health, Kim Yo Jong is likely to take up this deputy position and act temporarily as the successor until power is handed over to Kim Jong-un's son," former Unification Minister Lee Jong-seok told reporters during an online briefing Tuesday [according to Yonhap](#).

[According to CBS](#) News Lim Eul-chul, a professor at Kyungnam University's Graduate School of North Korean Studies, believes that even though Kim may have trusted his sister with several key responsibilities, Kim Yo Jong might not be considered for the role because she doesn't hold a high enough ranking in the party.

In the briefing, Lee maintained that a high ranking member of the Politburo, Jo Yong Won, who is considered a close aide to Kim Jong Un, was also cited as a possible candidate. However, Lee hinted that consideration for the role would focus on staying within the Kim family.

"We cannot completely rule out the possibility of Jo, but the deputy post appears to be aimed more at securing regime stability for the successor," he said.

Jo is seen as holding the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) government's number three position, after leader Kim Jong Un and Choe Ryong Hae, chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly. Another person who has been cited for the position is Kim Tok Hun, who is currently serving as premier of the nation.

The person elected to the position will be able to preside over key party meetings on behalf of Kim Jong Un and the second-in-command would take over should the current leader die or become incapacitated, though this claim has not yet been verified.

Rachel Minyoung Lee, a fellow with 38 North, US-based North Korean satellite surveillance website operated by the Stimson Center think tank in Washington, DC, [told Reuters](#) that "this seems to be the broader trend of North Korea delegating and redistributing some of Kim Jong Un's duties to others, not necessarily his powers, and streamlining the party leadership structure."

[According to CBS](#) News, Cheong Seong-chang, the director of the center for North Korean Studies at the Sejong Institute, said that this move shows North Korea's confidence as a standing global power.

"It is clearly distinct from the policy-making style of his father, Kim Jong Il, who failed to communicate well with party members and the public because he reviewed numerous documents one by one," Cheong said.

The position was created as the party revised its Worker's Party of Korea rules to include a paragraph that the party's Central Committee should elect a first secretary at the same time Kim Jong Un was elected general secretary of the party.

DPRK also dropped the word "songun," or military-first policy, in the preamble of the revised party rules, which was the main policy that was pursued by Kim Jong Il, the late father of the current leader.

"The term 'military-first politics', a major keyword in the Kim Jong Il era, is known to have been scrapped from the preface of the party by-laws," Reuters reported.

The North also deleted phrasing which stated that the party members "must actively fight to speed up the unification of the fatherland" in elaboration of members' duties. Some see the [change as suggesting](#) that North Korea has given up its push for the unification of North and South Korea, but is instead pursuing co-existence of the two different states on the Korean Peninsula.

The announcement of the position comes roughly a year after [international headlines](#) unleashed unconfirmed rumors that Kim Jong Un had undergone emergency heart surgery and fallen gravely ill triggered international headlines.

[According to reports](#) from Seoul, the North Korean leader was last seen in public on May 6, when he held a photo session with the members of the military's families following an arts performance.

The administration of US President Joe Biden has so far done very little to encourage diplomacy between the US, North and South Korea amid a nearly two-year impasse. Biden's administration announced last month that diplomat Sung Kim would serve as special representative for the DPRK, but said he has no plans to meet with Kim unless he makes a prior pledge to give up the North Korean nuclear weapons program.

"This was another signal that we are ready and prepared to have dialogue with the DPRK, and we hope that they will take us up on that possibility," Deputy Secretary of State Wendy [Sherman said Wednesday](#) in a telephone conference with reporters, voicing hope for DPRK to "take us up on that possibility."

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Chinese Customs Flags Western Brands as Child Safety Risks in Clap-Back at Xinjiang Sanctions

by [MariTi Blaise Lovell](#)

The United States banned cotton from Xinjiang under accusations of forced labor against Uyghurs and other predominantly Turkic minorities in northwest China. Beijing claims it has not forced Uyghur Muslims to pick cotton, and in response, Chinese state-owned media outlets called for a boycott of US clothing brands like Nike, H&M, and Adidas.

In a warning notice published on its website on Tuesday, China's General Administration of Customs listed companies including Lego, Ralph Lauren, Zara, Muji, and others as being flagged for quality and safety risks during the agency's annual examinations.

The children's product quality issued from June 2020 to May 2021 involved 81 imported children's clothing products, 10 brands, and 5 categories. [The examination found](#) that the products did not meet safety standards and were somehow deficient in product descriptions and labeling.

Nine batches of H&M woven cotton girls' dresses were found to contain what custom authorities claimed to be dyes and other harmful substances that could be easily ingested or absorbed through skin. The officials stated the same concern for a Nike cotton-knit boys' t-shirt, as well as two products from Zara which were a set of children's pajamas and a pair of cotton-knit baby shorts.

Similar risks were said to have been spotted in clothing items from The Gap and girls' T-shirts from GU, a sister retailer of the Japanese chain Uniqlo.

[According to reports](#), it is not the first time H&M and Zara have been targeted with this type of safety warning. Similar announcements were made in May of last year, when Chinese customs accused the two brands of importing children's clothes that had potential health risks for children. However, this represents the first time that brands Nike, GU and Gap have been included in the list.

China's General Administration of Customs said it had confiscated, destroyed or returned the non-compliant products, which included children's clothing, children's toys, children's toothbrushes and children's shoes.

Global brands have faced growing resistance from Chinese shoppers, who have taken to boycotting companies that are refusing to use cotton grown in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, citing accusations of human rights violations.

H&M products have even been removed from China's main e-commerce sites such as JD.com, Taobao and Pinduoduo.

[In January](#), the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agency seized two shipments of cotton shirts belonging to Japanese retailer Uniqlo upon arrival at the Los Angeles and Long Beach port, in violation of sanctions placed on China under suspicion of the retail goods being made with forced labor.

Muji, a Tokyo-based brand owned by Ryohin Keikaku Co., gets about half its revenue outside its home market from China. The Japanese chain has publicly sided with the Chinese government, saying it uses cotton from the Xinjiang region and doesn't see a problem with advertising that fact.

In fact, Tuesday's customs notice has prompted patriotic netizens to continue promoting the purchase of domestic brands such as Li-Ning and Anta. Chinese celebrities have also taken to suspending their sponsorship deals with the Swedish company.

Chairs of the bipartisan Congressional-Executive Commission on China have since [sent a letter](#) to about a dozen NBA players who have deals with these labels, urging them to cut ties. This includes retired NBA All-Star Dwayne Wade, who has a lifetime deal with Li-Ning.

Following the backlash, in May, H&M closed one of its stores in Shanghai, which also came after a complaint about a "problematic map of China" featured on its website, which has since been changed.

Before that, Inditex, the parent company of Zara, announced it would be shuttering all its Bershka, Pull&Bear and Stradivarius stores in China. The Gap has also weighed the option of selling its businesses in China.

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Mother of Hunter Biden's Out-of-Wedlock Child Was on His Company Payroll, Text Messages Reveal

by [Evan Craighead](#)

According to Hunter Biden's recently published book, "Beautiful Things," he "had no recollection" of meeting Lunden Roberts, the mother of his fourth child. Although Biden initially denied paternity, an Arkansas judge in January 2020 ruled that DNA evidence proved he "is the biological father of this child."

While Hunter Biden has claimed he has "no recollection" of Lunden Roberts, messages from the 51-year-old's laptop show that Roberts was not only in contact with Hunter, but she was also on the payroll of Rosemont Seneca, Hunter's investment fund firm.

Screenshots [obtained by the Daily Mail](#) show that Roberts attempted to reach out to Hunter throughout her pregnancy. However, her text messages went unanswered.

"Reach out a few times, it's clear you don't want to be reached. Need to talk to you. If you feel the need to reach out, my line is always open. Hope all is well," Roberts said in a text message to Hunter on August 8, 2018.

The aforementioned text was sent four times.

Their daughter, Navy Joan Roberts, was born in August 2018.

Additional text messages [obtained from Hunter's laptop](#) show that while Roberts was ignored by him, he was in contact with Katie Dodge, an assistant at Hunter's firm.

During the text exchange, which took place three months after Hunter and Roberts' child was born, Hunter demanded the removal of Roberts from the company insurance plan.

"And just for clarification who is pay roll paid to now and for past 9 months? There[sic] salaries and benefits and who has rights to my accounts and ability to make autopay decisions and withdraws etc?" Hunter asked Dodge. "So when you took what's her name off and re directed her income did it also [e]nd my insurance?"

Dodge replied that, for the past nine months, she, Hunter, "Lunden, Hallie, Liz & Erin" [received salaries](#) and benefits.

Despite the court's DNA confirmation of Hunter being the child's father, the son of US President Joe Biden did not appear to embrace his child in his new autobiography.

"I'm not proud of it. It's why I would later challenge in court the woman from Arkansas who had a baby in 2018 and claimed the child was mine -- I had no recollection of our encounter," [he said](#), speaking of the case. "That's how little connection I had with anyone. I was a mess, but a mess I've taken responsibility for."

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RPT - Paul Whelan Twice Asked Putin For Clemency - Brother

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - US citizen and ex-marine Paul Whelan, who is serving a 16-year prison sentence for espionage in Russia, asked President Vladimir Putin for clemency twice, his brother David Whelan told Sputnik.

"It is my understanding that Paul has written to President Putin seeking clemency twice," David Whelan said on Wednesday.

He expressed doubts that his brother will plead guilty.

David Whelan said he does not believe that Russian and US Presidents Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden will discuss his brother's case during their upcoming meeting in Geneva in mid-June.

"I am hopeful that his wrongful detention will be discussed by representatives of the US State Department and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs either at the summit or in the following months," he said.

Whelan, who is also a citizen of Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom, was arrested in Russia in December 2018. A Moscow court sentenced him to a 16-year prison term for espionage last June. Whelan, however, has denied the charges and insisted that he came to Russia for a friend's wedding. Court papers have revealed that he had frequented Russia since 2007.

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RPT - US Youth Participate in First Russian Public Affairs Committee Intern Program - President

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - A group of young US students and recent graduates began participating in the first ever internship organized by the Russian Public Affairs Committee (Ru-PAC) and designed to improve relations between the United States and Russia, Ru-PAC founder and president Hunter Cawood told Sputnik.

"We've brought on 12 interns for the summer program who started in May. Most of them are college students or recent graduates who are looking to build their experience/credentials in international relations or more specifically Russia-US relations," Cawood said.

Ru-PAC is an independent, non-profit and non-governmental organization dedicated to developing and strengthening the relationship between the United States and Russia through education, dialogue, and policy recommendations that promote the interests and security of both countries, the organization's website read.

The 3-month internship gives participants practical experience, along with opportunities to publish articles, research, as well as the ability to network with other like-minded individuals, Cawood said.

"Essentially, the goal of Ru-PAC's internship program is to give young people in the American pro-Russia movement an opportunity to get involved and help strengthen Russia-US relations," he added. "Our hope is to give them the tools and experience they need to eventually become leaders in our grassroots movement."

All interns assigned to different Ru-PAC groups will have an opportunity to work on Russia-US relations as analysts, researchers or public relation specialists.

"The people who intern for Ru-PAC are people who love the United States and see that a better relationship with Russia is vital to American national security, beneficial to American businesses, and positively impacts the rest of the world," Cawood said.

A few participants have Russian heritage but most of them are ordinary Americans from California, Virginia, Washington, Georgia and other US states who want to improve relations between two countries.

"The internship is unpaid, but our interns are given ample opportunities to develop their professional portfolio while working with us," Cawood noted.

Ru-PAC also will provide interns with recommendation letters and will consider them among top candidates for opened positions inside the organization, he added.

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RPT - FBI Attributes Ransomware Attack on JBS USA to REvil, Sodinokibi - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The FBI told Sputnik that hackers used REvil and Sodinokibi malware during a cyberattack that targeted the meat-producing giant JBS USA earlier this week. "We have attributed the JBS attack to REvil and Sodinokibi and are working diligently to bring the threat actors to justice," the FBI said in a statement on Wednesday. "We continue to focus our efforts on imposing risk and consequences and holding the responsible cyber actors accountable."

The White House said on Tuesday it was in touch with the Russian authorities in light of the hacking attack on JBS, which led to the closure of its facilities in the United States. The US administration believes some of the members belonging to the hacker groups reside in Russia. The FBI said private sector partnerships are critical to responding immediately to a cyber breach, adding that "a cyber attack on one is an attack on us all."

The White House said earlier in the day it expects the ransomware attack on the JBS USA to be discussed at the upcoming summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden.

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RPT - PREVIEW - Israel's Defense Chief to Discuss Iran, Gaza with US Leaders

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz will discuss on Thursday international talks with Iran and ways to consolidate a ceasefire in Gaza during a brief visit to the United States that comes amid a major political reshuffle in his home country. Gantz arrives for a day of consultations with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan as part of a bilateral strategic dialogue which focuses on Iran with Israel continuing to oppose American-led efforts to revive the nuclear deal.

"I think it is safe to expect that among the things they will talk about are regional security issues and clearly we have every expectation that Iran and its malign behavior in the region will certainly come up," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters.

Earlier this week, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned that Israel may resort to unilateral action to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran even if it entails tensions with the US.

On Wednesday, Israel's opposition leaders announced that they have succeeded in their efforts to dethrone Netanyahu after a dozen years of uninterrupted rule. Gantz and his centrist Kahol Lavan party is part of an emerging "coalition of change."

Gantz's office said that various aspects of the Gaza ceasefire will also be under consideration during the visit. According to US Senator Lindsey Graham, Israel plans to ask the US for \$1 billion in aid to replenish the Iron Dome air defense system used to intercept rockets during the latest stand-off with Palestinian militant groups.

The hostilities which lasted for 11 days and ended in a ceasefire on May 20 killed 12 people in Israel and more than 270 Palestinians in Gaza, Jerusalem and the West Bank.

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Prosecutors Seek 30 Years for Officer Convicted in Death of George Floyd - Court Documents

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - Minnesota prosecutors are asking a court to sentence former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin to 30 years in prison after he was convicted of killing George Floyd, court documents revealed.

"The State respectfully requests a sentence of 360 months, or 30 years, for Defendant Derek Chauvin, a former police officer convicted by a jury of second-degree murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter in connection with the death of George Floyd," state prosecutors said in the court documents on Wednesday.

In April, Chauvin was convicted of second- and third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in Floyd's death. He will be sentenced on June 16.

Chauvin tried to arrest Floyd, who was accused of using a fake \$20 bill at a local convenience store, and knelt on the neck for more than nine minutes. After complaining he could not breathe, Floyd became unconscious during the arrest and died later at a hospital.

Floyd's death triggered mass protests in a large number of major cities in the United States, where demonstrators denounced police brutality and demanded justice for Blacks who suffered at the hands of US police officers. Some of the protests turned into riots complete with acts of vandalism and property destruction.

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Canada's Parliament Orders Health Agency to Turn Over Documents on Wuhan, Fired Scientists

TORONTO, June 2 (Sputnik) - Canada's parliament has ordered the country's Public Health Agency (PHAC) to turn over unredacted documents related to collaboration with China on deadly pathogens and the firing of two scientists.

The House of Commons on Thursday voted 179 to 149 to force PHAC to hand over unredacted documents concerning the transfer of Ebola and Henipah viruses from the National Microbiology Lab in Winnipeg to the Wuhan Institute of Virology and the subsequent dismissal of Drs. Xiangguo Qiu and Keding Cheng, who were stripped their security clearances in the process. PHAC has previously refused to turn over the documents to the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations, which is investigating the affair.

The scandal, which Canada's governing Liberals have likened to a conspiracy theory, resurfaced after a The Globe and Mail piece alleged that scientists working at the country's highest-security infectious-disease laboratory were working with Chinese military researchers to probe and conduct experiments on the deadly viruses.

Canada's Public Health Agency now has 48 hours to turn over the documents and Health Minister Patty Hajdu will be subpoenaed to testify before the committee no later than two weeks following the adoption of the order.

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Austin, Saudi Counterpart Discuss Ending War in Yemen - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his Saudi counterpart Mohammed bin Salman discussed ending the conflict in Yemen and enhancing Saudi Arabia's defenses, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said.

"On June 2, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke by phone with Saudi Minister of Defense His Royal highness Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman... They discussed regional security, particularly efforts to end the war in Yemen," Kirby said in a press release on Wednesday.

Austin also discussed with bin Salman the ongoing bilateral efforts to boost Saudi Arabia's defenses in light of Houthi attacks, Kirby said.

The US defense chief said the United States considers Saudi Arabia a key partner for regional security in the Middle East and Washington remains committed to supporting Riyadh's self-defense.

Yemen has been torn apart by an ongoing armed conflict between the government forces, led by President Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi, and the Houthi movement for several years now. The situation has been further complicated after the Saudi-led coalition launched an air campaign against the Houthis in 2015, resulting in a humanitarian catastrophe.

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US, German Delegations Discuss Nord Stream 2, Ransomware Attacks - White House

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and his German counterpart Jan Hecker and their delegations discussed in Washington a range of global issues concerning the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project and the recent ransomware attacks against key US infrastructure and supply chains, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said in a press release.

"They talked about the upcoming G7 leaders meeting and NATO summit, the importance of securing Europe's energy future, collective efforts to share COVID-19 vaccines, coordination on cybersecurity and response to ransomware attacks, and foreign policy priorities including Russia, Ukraine, Iran, the Sahel, and the Western Balkans," Horne said in the release on Wednesday.

Horne added that experts from both governments discussed the United States' concerns over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

While President Joe Biden placed some sanctions on Russian businesses and vessels involved with the project in an effort to slow its construction, he waived in May other sanctions on Nord Stream 2 AG and its corporate officers.

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Trudeau to Attend NATO, Canada-EU Summits Following G7 Leaders' Meeting

TORONTO, June 2 (Sputnik) – Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will attend the NATO and Canada-EU summits following the conclusion of the G7 Leaders' Summit in the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) said.

On Friday, Canadian officials confirmed that the G7 Leaders' Summit in Carbis Bay, UK, beginning on June 11, will be Trudeau's first trip abroad since the onset of the pandemic.

"Following the Summit, he will attend the NATO Summit on June 14 followed by the Canada-European Union (EU) Summit in Brussels, Belgium," the PMO said in a statement on Wednesday.

Trudeau will discuss trans-Atlantic security threats and strengthening shared commitments at the NATO summit, the statement read. The Prime Minister will then meet with European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen for talks on climate change, the fight against climate change and fostering bilateral economic ties.

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Mueller to Teach Course on 'Russia Probe' - University of Virginia

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - Robert Mueller, the special counsel who investigated former President Donald Trump over allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 election, will teach law students about the probe he undertook, University of Virginia School of Law announced.

The School of Law noted on its website on Wednesday that the course "The Mueller Report and the Role of the Special Counsel" will be taught during the fall semester.

"The course will focus on a key set of decisions made during the special counsel's investigation. Instructors will talk about the legal and practical context for those decisions in a discussion format, and walk through the challenges and trade-offs when making decisions in a high-profile investigation," the notice said.

Mueller said he was fortunate to return to teach at the University of Virginia, which he attended after his stint with the Marine Corps.

"I look forward to engaging with the students this fall," Mueller was quoted as saying by the website.

Mueller will be joined in teaching the course by three of his prosecutors - Deputy Special Counsel Aaron Zebley, Senior Counsel Jim Quarles and Assistant Special Counsel Andrew Goldstein.

Mueller served as FBI director from 2001 to 2013 before taking up the investigation against Trump. The investigation did not prove a Trump-Russia collusion in the 2016 election. Trump repeatedly called the probe a political witch-hunt and an attempt by Democrats to undo the results of the 2016 election. Russia has also denied being involved in the US political system.

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Thirty-Eight States Join New UN Group of Friends of Women of Sahel - Niger Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, June 2 (Sputnik) - Some 38 member states at the United Nations had joined the newly launched Group of Friends of Women of the Sahel, Niger Ambassador to the United Nations Abdou Abarry told reporters.

"A new Group of Friends of Women of the Sahel was created, co-chaired by Niger, the African Union and the European Union," Abarry said on Wednesday. "The group includes 38 country members who officially joined the group today."

Abarry said the group will be tasked with discussing policies and practices in the Sahel region by facilitating exchanges with women.

The group will also seek to promote women's participation and increase female leadership in various organizations throughout the region.

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PREVIEW - Israel's Defense Chief to Discuss Iran, Gaza with US Leaders

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Blinken, Mexican Counterpart Discuss Security Cooperation, Migration - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Mexican Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard discussed boosting hemispheric security and addressing the causes of irregular migration in the region when they met in San Jose, Costa Rica, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Mexican Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard today in San Jose, Costa Rica," Price said in a readout on Wednesday. "Secretary Blinken and Secretary Ebrard discussed continued cooperation between the United States and Mexico on a variety of issues to promote the prosperity and security of both nations."

Blinken also thanked Ebrard for the Mexican government's continued collaboration on addressing the root causes of irregular migration in the region, Price said.

The two officials also discussed progress toward addressing the COVID-19 response and economic recover, as well as issues related to regional democracy and governance, Price added.

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The White House said earlier in the day it expects the ransomware attack on the JBS USA to be discussed at the upcoming summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden.

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NASA Chief Urges Russia Think 'Long and Hard' Before Severing Space Ties With US

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - NASA Administrator Bill Nelson urged Russia on Wednesday to think "long and hard" before severing space cooperation with the United States that dates back to the mid-1970s.

Nelson decried what he called were concerning statements from the Russian government and some in the Russian space program about pulling out of the International Space Station or teaming up with China for a Moon mission.

"What I hope is that they are going to think long and hard before they would pull out of the cooperation that they have had with us," Nelson said during a press conference.

NASA chief said that he will be speaking on Friday with head of Russian space agency Roscosmos Dmitry Rogozin and pins hopes on the US-Russian scheduled for June 16.

"Let's see how the summit goes between the two Presidents," Nelson said.

"My experience in government is that you have the politics that kind of gets in the way. But people on the line that are doing the work they have a different thought. And suspect that most of the people in the Russian space program really enjoy working with the Americans," he said.

The United States wants to continue this cooperation dating back to the Soyuz-Apollo mission of 1975, Nelson added.

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Two US Missions to Venus to Study How Earth-Like Planet Became Uninhabitable Inferno-NASA

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - Two US missions to the planet Venus - possibly the first habitable planet in our solar system - will study how it became hothouse incapable of supporting life, NASA said on Wednesday.

"The missions aim to understand how Venus became an inferno-like world when it has so many other characteristics similar to ours - and may have been the first habitable world in the solar system, complete with an ocean and Earth-like climate," NASA said in a press release on Wednesday.

A mission named Deep Atmosphere Venus Investigation of Noble gases, Chemistry and Imaging (DAVINCI+) consists of a probe that will descend into the Venus' shrouded atmosphere. Here, scientists hope to learn how the planet formed and evolved, as well as to determine whether the world ever had an ocean, the release said.

A second mission dubbed Venus Emissivity, Radio Science, InSAR, Topography, and Spectroscopy (VERITAS) will orbit the planet with a synthetic aperture radar able to penetrate clouds that hide the planet's surface from astronomers on Earth, the release added.

NASA explained in the release that VERITAS will map Venus' surface to determine the planet's geologic history and understand why it developed so differently than Earth.

The satellite will also map infrared emissions from Venus' surface to identify and map its rock type, which is largely unknown, and determine whether active volcanoes are releasing water vapor into the atmosphere, the release said.

"We're revving up our planetary science program with intense exploration of a world that NASA hasn't visited in over 30 years," NASA Associate Administrator for Science Thomas Zurbuchen said in the release. "Using cutting-edge technologies that NASA has developed and refined over many years of missions and technology programs, we're ushering in a new decade of Venus to understand how an Earth-like planet can become a hothouse."

NASA is budgeting about \$500 million to develop each mission, with launches expected in the 2028-2030 timeframe, according to the release.

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US to Re-Impose Sanctions on 9 Belarusian Companies After Ryanair Incident – White House

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) – The United States will re-impose full blocking sanctions with respect to nine Belarusian state-owned enterprises following the forced landing of the Ryanair commercial plane on May 23 and arrest of an opposition figure Roman Protasevich.

The sanctions will mainly affect the Belarus state-owned oil-refining sector industry and preclude US nationals from engaging in transactions with the enterprises, including Belshina, Grodno Azot, Belneftekhim, Grodno Khimvolokno, their property, or their interest in property.

The aforementioned Belarusian enterprises have enjoyed sanctions relief granted by a series of special licenses from the US Treasury Department until it was announced on April 9 that Washington plans to end sanctions relief period starting June 3 due to the alleged human rights violations and the falsification of the 2020 presidential election.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) -

PUTIN-BIDEN SUMMIT

* Switzerland will not accept certificates of inoculation with the Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine for the purposes of media accreditation at the upcoming US-Russia summit in Geneva, Swiss Foreign Affairs Department spokesperson Pierre-Alain Eltschinger told Sputnik on Wednesday.

* Switzerland's decision not to accept the certificates will not affect the organization of the meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart Joe Biden in Geneva, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik.

* It is too early to talk about adopting joint documents between Russia and the United States prior to the meeting between Putin and Biden, Peskov said.

RANSOMWARE ATTACKS IN US

* The White House expects the ransomware attack on the JBS USA meat producer to be discussed at the upcoming summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US Leader Joe Biden, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

* Biden told reporters that he is "looking closely" at the issue of recent cyberattacks and doesn't think Russian President Vladimir Putin is testing him by way of allegedly hacking major American companies.

* The Massachusetts company Steamship Authority, which regulates all ferry operations between the state's mainland and pleasure-resorts on the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, said it was targeted in a hacker attack.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN DISPUTE

* Trilateral consultations of representatives from Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia were held on Wednesday in the Russian capital, sources told reporters on Wednesday.

* The Armenian Defense Ministry refuted as disinformation Azerbaijan's claims about illegal border crossing by the Armenian military.

* Azerbaijan supports the start of demarcation and delimitation on the border with Armenia, the foreign ministry said, slamming Yerevan for staging provocations.

PUTIN-MALPASS TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and World Bank Group President David Malpass discussed over the telephone topical issues of interaction between Russia and the World Bank and in particular the prospects for financing the modernization of the Russian economy, the social sphere and infrastructure, the Kremlin said on Wednesday.

NORD STREAM 2

* A request from Environmental Action Germany will not automatically stop construction work at the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency (BSH) of Germany told Sputnik on Wednesday.

* The German government considers the preservation of Ukrainian transit along with operation of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project to be very important, the German Foreign Ministry told Sputnik, commenting on Moscow's statement about interest in this route of Russian gas deliveries.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

* In line with Dutch Acting Health Minister Hugo de Jonge's decision, the Janssen coronavirus vaccine will no longer be administered to young people in the Netherlands, they will be offered Moderna or Pfizer vaccines instead, RTL Nieuws broadcaster reported.

RUSSIAN SHIP DETENTION IN JAPAN

* The district court of Japan's Asahikawa demanded that Russia's Amur merchant ship be detained as a guarantee for compensation for its recent collision with a Japanese fishing vessel, Kyodo news agency reported on Wednesday.

* There is no substantial evidence of wrongdoing on the part of the crew of Russia's Amur merchant ship, which collided with a Japanese fishing vessel in late May, Russian Consul General in Sapporo Sergey Marin told Sputnik, adding that the ship's captain is being pressured into admitting guilt.

* Russia's Amur merchant ship was detained in Japan under civil proceedings over an administrative violation, Marin told Sputnik.

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US Navy Pilots Tell NASA Administrator Encountered Unidentified Aerial Phenomena 'Real'

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - US Navy pilots involved with the Defense Department-confirmed videos of unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP) said they believe the mysterious objects to be real, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson told reporters on Wednesday. "What you have seen on the TV recently, on the Navy films, I had known about this in my former capacity in intel and the Armed Services Committee, and I've talked to those pilots, and they think [the UAPs are] real," Nelson said during a press conference.

The news comes amid increasing number of serious discussions about UAPs following the release and authentication of videos showing such phenomena encountered by US Navy pilots as well as the upcoming release of the Senate Intelligence Committee report on June 25.

NASA Associate Administrator for Science Thomas Zurbuchen said the kind of questions that focus on life elsewhere in the universe is in the realm of NASA's scientific activity, noting that people have tended to underestimate nature in the last several decades.

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Bill Gates, Warren Buffett Private Power Firms Team Up to Build US Nuclear Power Reactor

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - Microsoft founder and philanthropist Bill Gates said his advanced nuclear reactor company TerraPower has teamed up with billionaire investor Warren Buffet's power firm PacifiCorp to build a so-called Natrium nuclear power facility on the site of a retiring coal plant in the US state of Wyoming.

"Wyoming has been a leader in energy for over a century and we hope our investment in Natrium will allow Wyoming to stay in the lead for many decades to come," Gates said in a live-streamed speech marking the launch of the project.

The reactor would be just the second nuclear plant built in the United States in the last 20 years by TerraPower, which Gates founded about 15 years ago, and PacifiCorp, which is owned by Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway investment company.

"This is our fastest and clearest course to becoming carbon negative," Wyoming Governor Mark Gordon said.

Proponents of nuclear energy say it is a superior emissions-free technology, although critics say advanced reactors like those involved in the Wyoming project could carry higher risks than conventional ones.

The Wyoming project will comprise a 345-megawatt sodium-cooled fast reactor with molten salt-based energy storage that could reach 500 MW during peak power cycles.

The project would cost about \$1 billion, according to Gates, who achieved global recognition first as founder of the ubiquitous personal computers under Microsoft's Windows operating system before launching the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which focused on public health in the global south and has played a role in the global response to the coronavirus pandemic.

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Paul Whelan Twice Asked Putin For Clemency - Brother to Sputnik

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) – US citizen and ex-marine Paul Whelan, who is serving a 16-year prison sentence for espionage in Russia, asked President Vladimir Putin for clemency twice, his brother David Whelan told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"It is my understanding that Paul has written to President Putin seeking clemency twice," David Whelan said.

He expressed doubts that his brother will plead guilty.

David Whelan said he does not believe that Russian and US Presidents Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden will discuss his brother's case during their upcoming meeting in Geneva in mid-June.

"I am hopeful that his wrongful detention will be discussed by representatives of the US State Department and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs either at the summit or in the following months," he said.

Whelan, who is also a citizen of Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom, was arrested in Russia in December 2018. A Moscow court sentenced him to a 16-year prison term for espionage last June. Whelan, however, has denied the charges and insisted that he came to Russia for a friend's wedding. Court papers have revealed that he had frequented Russia since 2007.

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Canada Looking for Package Deal on Digital Services, Global Corporate Taxes - Minister

TORONTO, June 2 (Canada) - Canada is looking for a package deal on a proposed digital services tax on multinational technology giants and the global minimum corporate tax rate at a Group of Seven (G7) meeting this week, Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland said on Wednesday.

Freeland will travel to the in-person meeting G7 finance ministers in London this week, where attendees are expected to discuss a minimum global corporate tax and a tax on digital services. "What we're looking for is a deal on both [points], it's important for us that they go together," Freeland said during a virtual press briefing.

Freeland, however, declined to share the minimum global tax rate estimates being discussed and said that, while Canadian officials have discussed the idea of imposing a unilateral digital services tax with US counterparts, she would not divulge the results of the conversation.

The trip will be the Canadian deputy prime minister's first trip abroad since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Freeland emphasized that she has consulted with the country's Chief Public Health Officer Theresa Tam regarding the trip and will adhere to the public health guidelines, including the hotel quarantine stay, upon return.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will attend the G7 Leaders' Summit in Carbis Bay, United Kingdom, beginning on June 11.

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US Launches \$1.1Bln in Grants to Pay Household Water Bills For Poor - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) – The US government has earmarked \$1.1 billion in COVID-19 relief to help residents in low-income and marginalized communities pay household water and sewer bills, with initial grants of \$166.6 million, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) said on Wednesday.

"This first-of-its-kind water assistance program will expand access to more affordable water and help low-income households affected by the COVID-19 pandemic pay their water and wastewater bills, avoid shutoffs, and support household water system reconnections related to non-payment," an HHS press release said.

In total, \$1.1 billion will be available through the Low-Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP), nearly half of which is funded by the recently approved \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan with the remainder from an earlier appropriation, the release said.

"Having access to affordable, clean, and safe drinking water is essential to everybody's health and well-being. No family or child should go without access to water because of challenges paying the bills," Health Secretary Xavier Becerra said in the release.

The \$166.6 million, about 15 percent of allocated LIHWAP funding, is being made immediately available to LIHWAP grantees to establish the program, according to the release.

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US House Democrats Urge Republican Senator to Release Aid to Palestinians

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - Over one hundred US House Democrats penned a letter on Wednesday to Republican Senator James Risch urging him to stop blocking tens of millions of dollars in humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians in the wake of the escalation between Israel and militant groups in Gaza.

"We write with a great sense of urgency to respectfully request that you release your hold on tens of millions of dollars in appropriated humanitarian aid that is so desperately needed to meet the needs of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian civilians rebuilding their lives in the wake of the fighting between [Gaza's ruling movement] Hamas and Israel," the letter said.

It was signed by 145 House Democrats headed by Jamie Raskin. Risch is the ranking Republican member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. According to the Haaretz newspaper, the sum in question amounts to \$75 million.

"Rendering humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian population serves American values as well as our diplomatic and security interests. Please act with dispatch to release these funds," the lawmakers asked.

They emphasized that the aid was passed in the 2020 fiscal year with bipartisan support and signed by then-President Donald Trump.

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Runaways Aged 12, 14 Engage in Shootout With Police in Florida - Sheriff's Office

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - A runaway 14-year old girl and 12-year old boy engaged in an armed standoff with police in Florida, resulting in the girl being non-fatally shot by the responding officers, the Volusia County Sheriff's office said in a statement on Wednesday. "A 12-year-old boy and a 14-year-old girl who ran away from a children's group home Tuesday night in Enterprise broke into a house, armed themselves with several of the homeowner's guns and opened fire on several responding deputies who tried to talk them into surrendering," the release said about the incident that occurred Tuesday night.

The 14-year old girl was shot and wounded by police after she exited the house while pointing a shotgun at police officers, the release said. The 12-year old boy then put down the AK-47 he had armed himself with and surrendered to law enforcement.

Although both fired multiple shots at officers throughout the standoff, none were injured in the exchange, according to the statement. The 14-year old girl, the release added, was transported to the hospital where she underwent surgery for her injuries. She is now in stable condition, the sheriff's office said.

While officers were searching the area for the two runaways, neighbors reported hearing the sound of breaking glass from a nearby home, and after contacting the homeowner – who warned the officers about the guns and ammunition in the house – they surrounded the house and attempted to peacefully resolve the standoff, the release added.

Charges against the two are currently pending. The deputies involved in the shooting have been placed on paid leave, as is standard during police-involved shooting investigations, according to the sheriff's office.

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US Congressional Committee Chairs Call for Review of Gov't Remote Work Security Risks

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - A group of House committee chairs jointly sent a series of letters to the US Inspectors General, urging them to review the security risks posed by increased government remote working throughout the pandemic, Representative Jamie Raskin said in a press release on Wednesday.

"The widespread use of virtual private networks and other remote-access technologies to facilitate continuity of operations across the federal government allowed federal agencies to continue to serve the nation throughout a deadly pandemic but also created additional cybersecurity vulnerabilities that could jeopardize the integrity of federal information technology networks," the chairs said.

The congressional leadership involved includes Chairwoman of the Committee on Oversight and Reform Carolyn B. Maloney; Chairman of the Subcommittee on National Security Stephen F. Lynch; Chairman of the Subcommittee on Government Operations Gerald E. Connolly; Chairman of the Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy Raja Krishnamoorthi; Chairman of the Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Jamie Raskin; and Chairman of the Subcommittee on the Environment Ro Khanna.

Back in 2016, the National Institute of Standards and Technology warned that telework poses major security concerns including a lack of physical security controls, the use of unsecured networks, the connection of infected devices to internal networks, and the availability of internal resources to external hosts.

The letters come amid an uptick in cyberattacks against the US government and private companies, including the Microsoft Exchange and SolarWinds hacks, as well as ransomware attacks on Colonial Pipeline and meat producer JBS Foods.

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Canada to Make \$22.4M In Available for Study of Indigenous School Sites - Minister

TORONTO, June 2 (Sputnik) – The Canadian government is making \$22.4 million available for indigenous communities to study former residential school sites following the discovery of a mass grave at a site in British Columbia, Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister Carolyn Bennett said on Wednesday.

The Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation announced on Thursday that a deep scan of the Kamloops Indian Residential School site with ground-penetrating radar confirmed the discovery of 215 children's remains, with some of the deceased as young as three years old.

"Indigenous communities from coast to coast to coast are calling for support in this important but challenging work. Our government is there to support them," Bennett said during a press briefing, calling the \$22.4 million a "step in the right direction."

Asked why this funding wasn't made available earlier, Bennett said that the indigenous communities and leaders have requested an indigenous-led, community-based and "survivor-centric" approach and the federal government is moving at the pace of indigenous groups. The grisly discovery has prompted politicians and indigenous leaders across the country to call for action.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday that Canada has failed the country's indigenous community, namely the children whose remains were found at the mass gravesite.

On Monday, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Perry Bellegarde urged the authorities to launch a probe into all former residential school sites, noting that indigenous survivors have long been trying to draw attention to the issue but nobody believed them.

Kamloops was one of the largest schools in Canada and operated from the late 19th Century to the late 1970s as part of the residential school system, which placed indigenous children in state-sanctioned boarding schools where they were to be culturally assimilated.

According to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, released in 2015, roughly 150,000 aboriginal children were forcibly assimilated through the residential schools from 1883 to 1998, in a process equated to "cultural genocide."

The report discovered that around 3,200 died in the schools, with the greatest number of deaths taking place before 1940. Schools also had high rates of tuberculosis and other health incidences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with death rates remaining high until the 1950s.

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US Inflation Pressure 'Brisk' Through May Amid Moderate Economy - Fed Beige Book

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - Inflation rose steadily in the United States from early April through the end of May despite seeing only moderate economic growth, the Federal Reserve's Beige Book report said Wednesday.

"On balance, overall price pressures increased further since the last report," the central bank said. "Selling prices increased moderately, while input costs rose more briskly. Input costs have continued to increase across the board, with many contacts noting sharp increases in construction and manufacturing raw materials prices. Increases were also noted in freight, packaging, and petrochemicals prices."

The report, which is based on data from twelve financial districts, also said continuous supply chain disruptions intensified inflation pressure as well.

"Strengthening demand, however, allowed some businesses, particularly manufacturers, builders, and transportation companies, to pass through much of the cost increases to their customers," the report said. "Looking forward, contacts anticipate facing cost increases and charging higher prices in coming months."

Despite significant supply chain challenges, factory output increased during the period, the report noted.

"Strong demand for homes outpaced homebuilders' capacity, leading some to limit sales," the Fed said. "Demand for business services increased moderately; for transportation services was exceptionally strong."

But the central bank also noted that it remained difficult for many firms to hire new workers, especially low-wage hourly workers, truck drivers, and skilled tradespeople.

"Lack of job candidates prevented some firms from increasing output and, less commonly, led some businesses to reduce their hours of operation," the Beige Book report said. "Overall, wage growth was moderate, and a growing number of firms offered signing bonuses and increased starting wages to attract and retain workers. Contacts expected that labor demand will remain strong but supply constrained in the months ahead."

The US economy grew by an annualized rate of 6.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021, after a 3.5 percent contraction for all of 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by the pandemic. The Fed expects a 6.5 percent growth for all of this year, though some officials of the central bank have been more ambitious with their forecasts.

The problem for the Fed though is inflation as prices of almost everything have soared from the lows of the pandemic. The central bank's closely-watched gauge for inflation, the Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, jumped 3.6 percent in April compared to the same month of 2020. The scenario has scared economists into believing that inflation growth in 2021 could be the highest in 35 years.

The Fed acknowledges the price pressures arising from bottlenecks in US supply chains struggling to cope with demand in an economy reopening after months of

pandemic-suppression. But the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, led by Chairman Jerome Powell, insists that these inflationary pressures are "transient" and will fade as the economy makes a full recovery from the COVID-19.

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Nuclear Talks in Vienna Will Continue at 'Appropriate' Pace - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The US efforts in the Vienna talks seeking to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal will progress at an appropriate pace, US Department of State deputy spokesperson Jalina Porter said in a press briefing on Wednesday. "[US Special Envoy for Iran Robert] Malley is in Vienna, he'll be returning to Washington pretty soon. Talks are ongoing and they will continue at a pace that's honestly appropriate to address the significance of the issues that are currently on the table," Porter said.

She added that Malley will return to Washington for consultations at the end of the week.

Earlier in the week, Iran's lead negotiator Abbas Araqchi said that the fifth round of talks was difficult and unlikely to be the last.

Since April, Vienna has been hosting the sessions of the commission on the JCPOA as well as informal meetings in different formats. In late May, the fifth round of the talks started.

Iran has scaled back its commitments under the JCPOA to produce purer uranium after the US quit the pact in 2018 and reimposed crippling sanctions on Tehran. Since then, the US has elected a new president, and the talks on restoring the JCPOA began.

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US Offers \$7Mln Reward for Information on North Africa Al-Qaeda Leader - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) – US administration offered a \$7 million reward for information on the leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (terrorist group, banned in Russia) Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Anabi, the State Department said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The US Department of State's Rewards for Justice program, which is administered by the Diplomatic Security Service, is offering a reward of up to \$7 million for information leading to the location or identification of Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Anabi," the statement said.

Al-Anabi, an Algerian citizen also known as Yazid Mubarak, became the new AQIM leader last November after his predecessor Abdelmalek Droukdel was killed in June 2020, the State Department noted.

"Al-Anabi has pledged allegiance to al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri on AQIM's behalf and is expected to play a role in al-Qa'ida's global management as Droukdel had done," the statement added.

The State Department designated al-Anabi as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) in 2015. In February 2016, he was placed on the United Nations (UNSCR 1267) sanctions list.

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SEC Awards More Than \$23 Million to 2 Whistleblowers For Tips on Securities Law Violations

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) – Two whistleblowers received rewards of \$13 million and \$10 million for reporting violations of US security laws, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said on Wednesday.

"The Securities and Exchange Commission today announced awards of approximately \$13 million and \$10 million to two whistleblowers whose information and assistance led to successful SEC and related actions," the commission said in a statement.

Acting chief of the SEC's Office of the Whistleblower, Emily Pasquinelli, explained that the corporate whistleblowers alerted authorities of fraudulent activity involving large sums of money. "The whistleblowers' information and assistance led to multiple successful enforcement actions related to a complex and fraudulent scheme involving multiple individuals and tens of millions of dollars in ill-gotten gains," Pasquinelli said.

The tipsters provided the SEC and another federal agency with documents and identified key individuals during interviews as part of the investigation, the release said.

Whistleblower awards range from 10 percent to 30 percent of the money collected when the monetary sanctions exceed \$1 million, according to the release.

The SEC said it has awarded more than \$928 million to 166 individuals since issuing the first award in 2012.

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Catholic Church Needs to Apologize for Canadian Indigenous School Abuse - Minister

TORONTO, June 2 (Sputnik) - The Catholic Church needs to apologize for their role in Canada's residential school system, which has been described as an institution that perpetuated cultural genocide upon the country's indigenous peoples, Indigenous Services Minister Marc Miller said on Wednesday.

"I do, I do," Miller said during a press briefing when asked if he supports calls for a papal apology, one of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report.

Miller emphasized that the lack of an apology to date is "shameful," adding that responsibility falls "squarely on the shoulders of the Council of Bishops in Canada."

The minister's sentiment was shared by Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister Carolyn Bennett.

Wednesday's press briefing was a continuation of the fallout following the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation's discovery of 215 children's remains at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School site.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday that Canada has failed the country's indigenous community, namely the children whose remains were found at the mass grave site.

The grisly discovery has prompted politicians and indigenous leaders across the country to call for action.

On Monday, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Perry Bellegarde urged the authorities to launch a probe into all former residential school sites, noting that indigenous survivors have long been trying to draw attention to the issue but nobody believed them.

Kamloops was one of the largest schools in Canada and operated from the late XIX century to the late 1970s as part of the residential school system, which placed indigenous children in state-sanctioned boarding schools where they were to be culturally assimilated.

According to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, released in 2015, roughly 150,000 aboriginal children were forcibly assimilated through the residential schools from 1883 to 1998, in a process equated to "cultural genocide."

The report discovered that around 3,200 died in the schools, with the greatest number of deaths taking place before 1940. Schools also had high rates of tuberculosis and other health incidences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with death rates remaining high until the 1950s.

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Biden Says 170M In Americans Received 1 Coronavirus Vaccine Dose, 52% Fully Vaccinated

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - Approximately 170 million Americans have received one coronavirus vaccine dose and 52 percent are considered fully vaccinated, US President Joe Biden told reporters on Wednesday.

"Nearly 170 million Americans of every party, every background, every walk of life, have stepped up, rolled up their sleeve, and gotten the shot. Fifty-two percent of adults are now fully vaccinated, including 75 percent of all seniors," Biden said.

The number of vaccinated Americans continues to increase as the Biden administration hopes to reach their goal of getting 70 percent of all eligible individuals fully vaccinated by July 4.

Twelve US states have currently reached that goal.

Biden pointed out that Americans who receive their first vaccine dose this week will be able to receive a second dose by July 4. The US president also said a number of public-private partnerships are being used to increase vaccination rates, including free rides to and from the vaccination sites by transportation companies like Uber and Lyft, extended pharmacy hours and inducements like free beer from Anheuser-Busch are also being offered.

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Biden Doesn't Think Putin Testing Him Via Cyberattacks, Says 'Looking Closely' at Issue

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden told reporters on Wednesday that he is “looking closely” at the issue of recent cyberattacks and doesn't think Russian President Vladimir Putin is testing him by way of allegedly hacking major American companies.

“Looking closely at the issue,” said Biden when asked whether he is going to retaliate against Russia for the recent ransomware attacks.

Biden also answered “no” when a reporter asked him if he thinks Putin tests him by way of the cyberattacks which allegedly originated in Russia.

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UN Mideast Envoy Meets Israel's Defense Chief to Ensure Ceasefire Stands - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, June 2 (Sputnik) - UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland on Wednesday met with Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz to ensure that the ceasefire with Gaza holds, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing.

“Tor [Wennesland] was in Gaza a few days ago. I know that he met with Israeli authorities today. I know he met with Mr. Benny Gantz, the Defense Minister, to continue his discussions as he's had with parties to ensure that the ceasefire and the cessation of hostilities and the calm stands and is solidified,” Dujarric said.

The spokesman added that Wennesland will continue his engagement with all relevant parties to push for a political solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israel and Palestine's Gaza Strip were in a state of conflict for 11 days that ended with an Egypt-brokered ceasefire on May 20. The hostilities came after days of clashes between Arabs and Israeli police in East Jerusalem over an Israeli court's decision to evict several Palestinian families.

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UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Afghanistan to Visit Region Soon - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, June 2 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General's Personal Envoy on Afghanistan Jean Arnault will soon travel to the region in the wake of the escalating violence there, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"We are continuing to engage with relevant parties. Jean Arnault... is increasing his engagement, and we expect him to travel to the region soon," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

The spokesman said in the eastern Langham province, heavy fighting and airstrikes have continued from last week, impacting nearly all districts. The conflict has further been spreading into neighboring Nuristan and Nangarhar provinces, forcing more than 10,500 people to flee their homes.

"We urge the parties to the conflict to better protect civilians and civilian infrastructure, including of course schools and hospitals, which have sadly been targeted all too often," Dujarric said. According to the United Nations, almost 260,000 people have been displaced by the conflict in Afghanistan and some 5 million people have been in protracted displacement since 2012.

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Global Airline Trade Group Seeks G7 Push to Reopen Air Travel Based on COVID-19 Data

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - Leaders at the upcoming G7 summit can help revive global air travel by developing data-based plans that rely on coronavirus vaccines and testing instead of quarantine rules imposed on travelers by many nations, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said on Wednesday.

"We call on the G7 governments meeting later this month to agree on the use of data to safely plan and coordinate the return of the freedom to travel which is so important to people, livelihoods and businesses," IATA's Director General Willie Walsh said in a press release.

Evidence continues to show that vaccination protects travelers from serious illness and death, and carries a low risk of introducing the virus into destination countries, the release said.

The release cited multiple studies in the United States and Europe showing little likelihood of a vaccinated person transmitting the coronavirus disease and minimal additional benefit from a seven-day quarantine period required of international travelers by many nations.

In addition, data collected during the past year also demonstrates that COVID-19 testing of travelers, even those who are unvaccinated, can reduce infection risk to a minimum, the release said.

In a recent report, IATA predicted that global air travel would recover to 52 percent of pre-pandemic levels this year.

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US Youth Participate in First Russian Public Affairs Committee Intern Program - President

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - A group of young US students and recent graduates began participating in the first ever internship organized by the Russian Public Affairs Committee

(Ru-PAC) and designed to improve relations between the United States and Russia, Ru-PAC founder and president Hunter Cawood told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"We've brought on 12 interns for the summer program who started in May. Most of them are college students or recent graduates who are looking to build their experience/credentials in international relations or more specifically Russia-US relations," Cawood said.

Ru-PAC is an independent, non-profit and non-governmental organization dedicated to developing and strengthening the relationship between the United States and Russia through education, dialogue, and policy recommendations that promote the interests and security of both countries, the organization's website read.

The 3-month internship gives participants practical experience, along with opportunities to publish articles, research, as well as the ability to network with other like-minded individuals, Cawood said.

"Essentially, the goal of Ru-PAC's internship program is to give young people in the American pro-Russia movement an opportunity to get involved and help strengthen Russia-US relations," he added. "Our hope is to give them the tools and experience they need to eventually become leaders in our grassroots movement."

All interns assigned to different Ru-PAC groups will have an opportunity to work on Russia-US relations as analysts, researchers or public relation specialists.

"The people who intern for Ru-PAC are people who love the United States and see that a better relationship with Russia is vital to American national security, beneficial to American businesses, and positively impacts the rest of the world," Cawood said.

A few participants have Russian heritage but most of them are ordinary Americans from California, Virginia, Washington, Georgia and other US states who want to improve relations between two countries.

"The internship is unpaid, but our interns are given ample opportunities to develop their professional portfolio while working with us," Cawood noted.

Ru-PAC also will provide interns with recommendation letters and will consider them among top candidates for opened positions inside the organization, he added.

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UNGA Secures Over \$15Mln for Lebanon Tribunal Facing Funding Crisis - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, June 2 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) that is investigating the 2005 attack in which Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was killed, has received more than \$15 million from the UN General Assembly to continue operating, spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, the STL announced it might be forced to close after July because it faces what it termed were "unprecedented" financial challenges.

"What we secured from the General Assembly is \$15.1 million," Dujarric said. "There is still an outstanding balance from the government of Lebanon."

Dujarric also said that UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is deeply concerned by STL's financial hardships and has been actively engaged in trying to secure additional funding.

"The Secretary-General continues to make an urgent appeal to member states and the international community for voluntary contributions in order to secure the funds required to support the independent judicial proceedings that remain before the Tribunal," Dujarric said.

About 51 percent of STL's funding comes from donor countries' voluntary contributions and Lebanon is responsible to cover the remaining 49 percent.

Established in 2007, the STL seeks to prosecute those responsible for the killing of Hariri in Beirut on February 14, 2005. The suicide truck bomb, apart from Hariri, killed 22 more people and injured 226.

In August, the Tribunal exonerated three main suspects: Hussein Hassan Oneissi, Hassan Habib Merhi and Assad Hassan Sabra. Simultaneously, the Tribunal declared Salim Jamil Ayyash, a Hezbollah member, guilty on all counts.

On December 11, Ayyash was sentenced in absentia to five concurrent life imprisonment terms. A month later, the defense filed notices of appeals, the proceedings of which are currently ongoing.

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US GDP Could Grow 7% in 2021 But Time Ripe to Think About 'Tapering' - Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The US economy could grow as much as 7 percent this year and while an interest rate hike is still some way off, it may be time to start thinking of how to taper the tens of billions of dollars of fiscal support extended since the start of the coronavirus outbreak, Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia President Patrick Harker said Wednesday.

"We're digging out of a very deep hole - and we have a long way to go - but for now, I'm anticipating national GDP growth to come in around 7 percent for 2021, before moderating to 3 percent growth next year," Harker said in a speech on the outlook for the US economy and inflation.

Right after the coronavirus outbreak in March of 2020, the Federal Reserve dropped interest rates to between zero and a quarter percentage point and has since kept it in that range to stimulate economic growth. The Federal Reserve has also bought \$80 billion of bonds each month and \$40 billion of other assets.

"At the Fed, we're planning to keep the federal funds rate low for long," Harker said, referring to interest rates.

However, Harker added that it may be time to at least start thinking about tapering the \$120 billion in monthly Treasury bond and mortgage-backed securities purchases.

"This is not something we are going to do suddenly, though. We need to follow the playbook we had after the Great Recession; that is, start to taper the bond purchases slowly. We will remove accommodation carefully and methodically as the economy continues to strengthen," he said.

Despite the blight on the economy from the pandemic, Harker said consumer spending, which accounted for around 70 percent of total GDP, grew by 2.7 percent over the past three months - a reminder that it was never a good idea to bet against the US consumer.

"There are, of course, downside risks, including vaccination hesitancy that precludes true herd immunity as well as the possibility of new COVID-19 variants that render the vaccines less effective," Harker said. "As encouraging as these trends are, the pandemic is not yet over."

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Florida Man Pleads Guilty to Breaching US Capitol During January 6 Riot - Justice Dept. WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - Florida resident Paul Hodgkins has pleaded guilty to the charge of breaching the Capitol building during the January 6 riot and to disrupting a joint session of Congress convened to confirm the votes count in the presidential election of 2020, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"A Florida man pleaded guilty today to crimes related to the breach of the US Capitol on Jan. 6 which disrupted a joint session of the US Congress in the process of ascertaining and counting the electoral votes related to the presidential election," the Justice Department said in a release. US law enforcement alleges that at around 2:50 p.m. on January 6, Hodgkins illegally entered the US Senate chamber inside the Capitol building, walked among the desks, took a selfie and exited the building at approximately 3:15 p.m., the release said.

Hodgkins has pleaded guilty to one count of obstructing an official proceeding and faces maximum sentence of 20 years in prison, a fine of \$250,000 or twice the monetary gain or loss of the offense, the Justice Department said.

On January 6, a group of supporters of the former US President Donald Trump entered the US Capitol to protest lawmakers certifying Joe Biden's election victory in several US states Trump claimed were stolen. In the four months since the January 6 events, about 440 individuals have been arrested on charges related to the Capitol breach, including over 125 individuals charged with assaulting or impeding law enforcement.

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Ukraine's Militarization by West Prevents Resolution in Country, Region - Russian UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, June 2 (Sputnik) - The continued militarization of Ukraine by the West impedes the normalization of the situation in the country and the region, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said during an Arria Formula meeting on Wednesday.

"There should be no illusions – the continued militarization of Ukraine by the Western countries, the support of drawing up forces to the Contact Line in Donbas and the NATO exercises, such as "Defender Europe 2021" or any other, are not bringing the normalization of the situation in

Ukraine and in the region any closer," Nebenzia said at the informal meeting of the UN Security Council.

The diplomat also pointed out unless the Western countries stop encouraging Kiev's violence and "unabated nationalism," the war in Ukraine will remain far from resolution.

On November 21, 2013, protests broke out in Ukraine due to the authorities' decision to halt policy aimed at reaching an association agreement with the European Union. The mass demonstrations led to a coup culminating in the ousting of then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.

During clashes between the security forces and protesters, more than one hundred people died. Subsequent Ukrainian authorities headed by President Poroshenko blamed Yanukovich.

In April 2014, Kiev launched a military operation against self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in its eastern region of Donbas after they refused to recognize the new government due to legitimacy concerns.

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UNICEF Reaches Coronavirus Vaccine Supply Agreement With Moderna

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said on Wednesday that it has reached an agreement with vaccine manufacturer Moderna to supply their international vaccination efforts against the novel coronavirus.

"Through the supply agreement, UNICEF, along with procurement partners including the PanAmerican Health Organization (PAHO), will have access to up to 34 million doses of the vaccine for around 92 countries and territories in 2021," UNICEF said.

The vaccines will be supplied to UNICEF's COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) facility. The goal of the COVAX facility is to help provide access to vaccines to all participating countries and territories regardless of income level.

UNICEF said the vaccines are expected to be delivered in the final quarter of 2021 and will be allocated in a way that reflects the program's value of equity in access.

UNICEF also noted that it has signed four other supply deals for coronavirus vaccines, including agreements with the Serum Institute of India, Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Human Vaccine.

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White House Expects Ransomware Attack to be Discussed at Putin-Biden Summit

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The White House expects the ransomware attack on the JBS USA meat producer to be discussed at the upcoming summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US Leader Joe Biden, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"We do expect this too to be one of the issues that the President will discuss with President Putin at the summit that will be two weeks from today," Psaki said. "In terms of considerations, we are not taking any options off the table in terms how we may respond but of course there is an internal policy review process to consider that."

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US Poseidon Aircraft Conducts First-Ever Firing of Harpoon Missile in NATO Exercise – Navy

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) – The At-Sea Demo/Formidable Shield (ASD/FS) exercise in the North Atlantic featured the first-ever firing of the Harpoon anti-ship missiles from a US P-8A Poseidon marine patrol aircraft, the Navy said on Wednesday.

"Patrol Squadron FOUR (VP-4) successfully conducted a coordinated missile launch with VP-40 using two Air to Surface Missile (AGM-84D) Harpoons against a target barge off the coast of Norway during exercise At-Sea Demo/Formidable Shield (ASD/FS), May 31, 2021," a Navy press release said. "This marked the first use of Harpoon missiles by P-8A Poseidons in the European theater."

Throughout the live-fire air and missile defense exercise, NATO forces conducted live engagements with Driven Ammunition Reduced Time of flight (DART) munitions, Standard Missile-2, Evolved Sea Sparrow Missiles (ESSM), Aster 15, and Aster 30 missiles against various targets, including subsonic Banshee, Mirach, and Firejet targets and ground-launched supersonic drone (GQM-163A) targets, the release said. Additionally, ballistic missile defense tests with Standard Missile-3 launches were conducted.

At-Sea Demonstration is a recurring live maritime exercise planned and supported by the Maritime Theater Missile Defense Forum (MTMD-F), a coalition of twelve nations, the release said.

Formidable Shield is a biennial training exercise led by US Sixth Fleet and conducted by Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO which aims to improve allied interoperability in a live-fire, integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) environment using NATO command and control reporting structures, the release added.

In total, approximately 3,300 personnel, 16 naval vessels, and more than 10 aircraft participated in the training exercise conducted on the U.K. Ministry of Defense's Hebrides Range located on the Western Isles of Scotland and the Andøya Space Defense facility in Andenes, Norway, according to the release.

Alongside the United States, participating nations included Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

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Western Countries at UNSC Skip Russia's Informal Meeting on Ukraine's Maidan - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, June 2 (Sputnik) - A number of Western countries at the UN Security Council decided to skip a Russian-organized Arria Formula meeting on Ukraine's Maidan revolution, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Wednesday. "Starting our formula meeting... I must say from the beginning that some Western colleagues enriched our informal working methods on formula meetings by choosing not to participate and they explained their absence by the fact that some of the briefings are on the national sanctions list," Nebenzia said.

On Tuesday, Russia hosted an informal meeting of the UN Security Council on the circumstances of the Maidan revolution and its aftereffects in the Donbas region. Briefers invited to update the UN Security Council on the topic included Ukraine's former Prime Minister Nikolay Azarov and former Rada members Oleg Tsaryov and Vladimir Oleynik. Nebenzia noted that Russia took part in all Arria Formula meetings, including those that saw the participation of individuals Moscow sanctioned for their criminal activities in Crimea. "Now, we have no other choice but to act reciprocally," Nebenzia said, indicating that Russia might skip certain meetings in the future.

Between November 21, 2013, and February 22, 2014, more than 100 people died in clashes on Kiev's central Maidan Nezalezhnosti square, according to the Ukrainian authorities. The unrest led to a change of government, forcing then-president Viktor Yanukovich to flee the country to Russia. The Ukrainian authorities have claimed Yanukovich was responsible for the

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World Bank President, Putin Discuss Russia's Role in Debt Relief for Poorest Countries

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - World Bank Group President David Malpass conducted a telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin during which they discussed Russia's role in debt relief for the world's poorest countries as well as Moscow's efforts to promote international cooperation on climate, the World Bank said in a release on Wednesday. "Today, World Bank Group President David Malpass had a phone call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia," the release said. "President Malpass also highlighted Russia's role in addressing unsustainable debt burdens, including in the Paris Club and its support for comprehensive debt treatment for the world's poorest countries."

Malpass also thanked Putin for Russia's commitment to the International Development Association twentieth replenishment process, the release said.

The World Bank launched an early twentieth replenishment process of the International Development Association - the organization's fund for the world's poorest countries - to support countries in their recovery from the coronavirus crisis.

Earlier on Wednesday, Malpass held a meeting with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin to discuss the country's transition to a lower-carbon economy and the ways to provide transparent and comprehensive debt treatment with respect to the world's poorest countries, the added.

Between 1991 and 2004, Russia had forgiven about \$20 billion in debt accumulated during the Soviet period to a number of developing African countries.

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Trump Blog to Shut Down Less Than One Month After Launch - Spokesman
WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The blog of former US President Donald J. Trump will be shutting down less than a month after it was launched, Trump spokesman Jason Miller told CNBC on Wednesday.

The page "will not be returning," according to Miller, who added that the platform was simply an "auxiliary to the broader efforts we have and are working on," although he declined to give further information on said efforts.

Trump was banned from major social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook following the storming of the the Capitol Complex on January 6. The platforms deemed that his activities in relation to the event violated their policies.

The blog, entitled "From the Desk of Donald J. Trump," was launched on May 4 of this year as a way for the former president to communicate with the public without having to use one of the major social media platforms.

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US Imposes Global Magnitsky Sanctions on 3 Bulgarians, Dozens of Entities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on three Bulgarian individuals and dozens of entities linked to them in an effort to dissuade and disrupt international corruption, the Treasury Department announced on Wednesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned three Bulgarian individuals for their extensive roles in corruption in Bulgaria, as well as their networks encompassing 64 entities," the Treasury Department said.

The three individuals named in the Magnitsky designations include businessman Vassil Bojkov, member of parliament Delyan Peevski and former State Agency for Technical Operations Deputy Chief Ilko Zhelyazkov.

OFAC said the designation exposes Bojkov, Peevski, and Zhelyazkov for abusing public institutions for their own gain and blocks them from accessing the US financial system. They also encouraged other governments to implement similar measures to address corruption, it added.

The measures require that all property of the individuals and entities placed on the list be blocked and reported to OFAC, even if in the possession of US citizens. The measures restrict making any contribution or provision of funds, goods, or services by, to, or for the benefit of any

blocked person or the receipt of any contribution or provision of funds, goods, or services from any such person.

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US Announces, Immediately Suspends Tariffs on 6 Nations Over Digital Service Taxes - USTR WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The US announced and then immediately suspended additional tariffs on Austria, India, Italy, Spain, Turkey, and the UK as the result of a one-year investigation into international digital service taxes, the US Trade Representative (USTR) said on Wednesday.

"The final determination in those investigations is to impose additional tariffs on certain goods from these countries, while suspending the tariffs for up to 180 days to provide additional time to complete the ongoing multilateral negotiations on international taxation," the USTR said.

The US began the investigation into the aforementioned countries' digital service taxes, finding that they discriminate against US digital companies and are inconsistent with international tax principles.

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Rise in Global Clean Energy Investment For 2021 Falls Short of Net Zero Pathway – Report

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) – Clean energy investments in 2021 are expected to comprise just four percent of global oil and gas company budgets, up from 1 percent in 2020 but far below amounts needed to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by mid-century, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said in a report on Wednesday.

"The anticipated USD 750 billion to be spent on clean energy technologies and efficiency in 2021 is encouraging but remains far below what's required to put the energy system on a sustainable path," an IEA press release explaining the report said.

The 2015 Paris accord on climate change sets a goal of net-zero carbon emissions by mid-century.

The influence of pandemic recovery packages and new climate policy measures reflects rising expenditure in 2021 on renewable power, electricity grids, energy efficiency – notably in the buildings sector in Europe – and emerging technologies such as carbon capture, utilization and storage, and low-carbon hydrogen, the report said.

But the net-zero-emission goal would require a tripling of clean energy investments the remainder of the decade, thereby keeping the door open for a 1.5 degrees Celsius stabilization called for in the Paris Accord, the IEA report said.

The Paris-based IEA represents 30 industrial nations and eight associate members, including major energy consumers China and India.

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US Imposes Global Magnitsky Sanctions on 3 Bulgarians, Dozens of Entities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The US has imposed sanctions on three Bulgarian individuals and dozens of entities, the Treasury Department announced on Wednesday. The three individuals named in the Magnitsky designations include Vassil Kroumov Bojkov, Delyan Slavchev Peevski, and Ilko Dimitrov Zhelyazkov, according to the Treasury Department. The individuals and entities were placed on the US Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons (SDN) list, managed by the Office of Foreign Assets Control. The SDN List is designed to place sanctions or embargo measures on designated terrorists, officials and beneficiaries of certain authoritarian regimes, and international criminals.

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US Steamship Authority Says Hit By Ransomware Attack

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) – The Massachusetts company Steamship Authority, which regulates all ferry operations between the state’s mainland and pleasure-resorts on the islands of Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket, said Wednesday it was targeted in a hacker attack. “The Woods Hole, Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket Steamship Authority has been the target of a ransomware attack that is affecting operations as of Wednesday morning. As a result, customers traveling with us today may experience delays,” the company said on Twitter. A team of IT professionals is currently assessing the impact of the attack and will provide additional information upon completion of the initial assessment, it added. The company’s website is currently down. The Steamship Authority is the only ferry operator to carry automobiles to and from the islands. It also operates several freight vessels.

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US Brewing Giant Vows 'Biggest Beer Giveaway' to Boost Vaccinations Before July 4

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) – The US' biggest brewer, Anheuser-Busch, has promised to get the next round of beer for vaccinated adults in a drive to boost vaccination figures to the 70 percent mark before the July 4 Independence Day celebrations, as set out by the White House earlier this year.

"Anheuser-Busch, the country's leading brewer, today announced a national campaign with the White House to help meet President Biden's goal of encouraging as many Americans as possible to get vaccinated against COVID-19 by July 4th," the brewer said in a statement. "When the nation reaches the White House's goal of 70% of adults partially vaccinated, Anheuser-Busch will buy America's next round of beer, seltzer, non-alcoholic beverage or other A[nheuser]-B[usch] product."

American adults of 21 and older will have to upload a picture of themselves having a beer in their favorite place to the company's website to receive a free beer on Anheuser-Busch, the statement explained.

Anheuser-Busch's campaign is expected to become the biggest giveaway of beer in history on top of other brewer's commitments, including over \$1 billion investment over the next two years in its facilities "to drive economic prosperity in communities across the US," the statement added.

On May 4, US President Joe Biden announced his plan to administer at least one coronavirus injection to 70 percent of adults in the United States and fully inoculate 160 million residents by July 4.

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US In-Person Worship Rebounds as COVID-19 Eases, 1 in 5 Attended in Past Week – Poll

WASHINGTON, June 6 (Sputnik) – About 20 percent of Americans worshiped in a church, synagogue, mosque, or temple in the past week, a rebound attributed to falling COVID-19 limits as vaccinations increase, a Gallup poll said on Wednesday.

Another 10 percent said they attended a service remotely, a press release explaining the poll said.

"Twenty percent of U.S. adults report that they have attended a place of worship in person in the past week and another 10% say they have participated virtually," Gallup said.

Over the previous pandemic-addled year, the annual average fell to 30 percent, its lowest point on record, according to Gallup, which has measured Americans' attendance at religious services since 1939, Gallup added.

While a drop in religious service attendance is understandable during the pandemic, virtual participation was not enough to make up the difference. It remains unclear whether a four-percentage-point drop in US attendance from 2019 to 2020 reflects a lack of access to virtual services, a lack of interest in watching them, or both, according to Gallup.

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G7 Ministers Pledge to Take Measures to Tackle Corruption - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The G7 countries, in tandem with the High Representative of the European Union, vowed to adopt strong measures aimed at tackling corruption, a joint statement released on Wednesday said.

"As the G7, we will work to ensure there are strong measures in place to prevent corruption and other forms of illicit finance to protect our financial centres and deny safe haven to the proceeds of crime," the statement said. "We will support other countries' efforts to do the same, including anti-corruption safeguards and transparency mechanisms in the delivery of humanitarian aid to ensure that aid, required in times of natural disaster and other emergencies including the COVID-19 pandemic, reaches intended beneficiaries."

The G7 ministers pledged to actively enforce both domestic and foreign bribery laws as well as ensure effective implementation of the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention.

"As some of our financial centres and industries can attract corrupt actors and the proceeds of crime, we commit to strengthening international cooperation to deny safe haven to corrupt individuals and their ill-gotten gains, including through information sharing, and the appropriate use of sanctions and visa restrictions," the document added.

The statement went on to say that they commit to counter money laundering linked to foreign corruption and to recover proceeds of crime.

The statement by the G7 ministers of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, the United States, as well as the EU's top diplomat was made on the UN General Assembly Special Session against Corruption.

The ministers also stressed that they were anticipating the G7 ministerial meeting in September to discuss joint efforts to tackle corruption.