

06/15/21 Tuesday

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Spain Reportedly Urges Biden to Reverse Moroccan Deal as Nations Press UN on Peace Effort by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara has seemingly become a pawn in greater disputes, with Morocco's claim to rule the country being affirmed by the US in exchange for the normalization of relations with Israel, and now Spain is pushing for its ally in Washington to reverse the decision.

During a phone call with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Friday, Spanish Foreign minister Arancha Gonzalez Laya asked Washington to reverse its December 2020 recognition of Morocco's claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara, according to Spanish paper [El Confidencial](#), which cited "sources familiar with the deal between the two ministers."

[A brief readout](#) of the conversation posted by the US State Department makes no mention of the appeal; however, past conversations about Western Sahara haven't made their way into official statements, either.

Western Sahara is a former Spanish colony, but since colonial forces withdrew in 1975, Madrid has continued to play a major role in Saharawi politics, most recently [allowing Brahim Ghali](#), leader of the Saharawi liberation group Polisario Front, to be treated for COVID-19 at a Spanish hospital. According to [El Confidencial](#), however, Gonzalez's request is part of a larger spat between Madrid and Rabat that includes Spain's exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, surrounded by Morocco on the North African coast.

The paper reports that Spain hopes the US will become a mediator in its dispute with Morocco, including settling a simmering situation likely created by former US President Donald Trump's recognition of Morocco's claims over Western Sahara on December 10, 2020.

That same day, Morocco called off a planned summit with Spain that would have included a visit to Rabat by Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez. While the official reason was "the current epidemiological situation," the [Spanish outlet Atalayar](#) claims the real reason is that Sanchez's government includes the center-left party Podemos, which supports the self-determination of the Saharawi people, who are indigenous to Western Sahara. Podemos founder Pablo Iglesias Turrión was Sanchez's deputy prime minister at the time.

Sanchez's government issued a statement at the time saying the dispute can only be resolved through international consensus - a position reiterated in May when [Gonzalez called for](#) the status of Western Sahara to be resolved "as established by the resolutions of the UN Security Council," which has promised since 1991 to hold an independence referendum in the territory. Although the summit was rescheduled for February, that meeting was also postponed, with Moroccan Prime Minister Saad Eddine [El Othmani having](#) recently made remarks suggesting the situation of Ceuta and Melilla should be renegotiated.

The dispute may also be responsible for [Spain's absence from](#) the "African Lion" war games organized by US Africa Command and hosted in Tunisia, Senegal, and Morocco. Spanish daily

[El Pais reported](#) that with some of the drills reportedly being held in Western Sahara, Madrid didn't want to endorse Rabat's claims by taking part, but [Maghreb Intelligence](#) has claimed Rabat disinvited Madrid - a position taken up by the DC-based outlet [Morocco World News](#) as well.

El Confidencial further suggests that Sanchez has or will also lobby the French government for support in the dispute, since Spain and France and both European Union and NATO members and as the former protector of Morocco, Paris has "the greatest influence over Rabat."

Sanchez also met with Biden at the NATO summit in Brussels on Monday, although [according to El Pais](#), it was not substantive, being limited to a brief conversation after the group photo.

The Biden administration has [faced pressure](#) from lawmakers, current and former US diplomats, Saharawis and the international community to reverse Trump's recognition. Biden has so far taken a middling position, with State Department spokesperson Ned Price [saying last week](#) the administration was "consulting privately with the parties about how best to halt the violence and achieve a lasting settlement."

"I don't have anything to announce at the moment, but I think if you look at Western Sahara as part of... the previous administration's broader approach to the region in the context of the Abraham Accords, that is where you see quite a bit of discontinuity between the approach we have pursued and we have enacted versus what the previous administration did," Price added.

Nations Rally at UN for Greater Role

The news comes as the United Nations General Assembly's Committee on Decolonization, also called the Committee of 24 (C-24), met in New York on Monday and took up the question of Western Sahara. Dr. Sidi Omar, Polisario's representative at the UN, [told the body](#) the "inaction and complacency of the international community" has emboldened Morocco to violate UN resolutions and international law "with complete impunity."

"For three decades, we have been committed to the peaceful solution and we have constructively engaged in the UN peace process demonstrating patience, utmost restraint, and flexibility, despite the provocations and all the injustices that our people continue to endure at the hands of the Moroccan occupying state," Omar said. "Today, the Sahrawi people, under the leadership of the Frente POLISARIO, are saying loud and clear that enough is enough. Yes, we remain committed to peace, but we will never give up our inalienable and non-negotiable right to self-determination and independence."

"The legal nature of Western Sahara as a decolonisation issue on the agenda of this Committee since 1963 is abundantly clear, despite the futile attempts of the occupying power and its apologists to demonstrate otherwise. Therefore, given the gravity of the current situation, efforts should be redoubled to allow the people of Western Sahara the chance to exercise freely and democratically their right to self-determination and independence," he added.

Other nations also spoke in defense of the UN peace process and MINURSO, the UN's special mission to Western Sahara, including Algeria, South Africa, and Angola.

Mathu Joyini, South Africa's permanent UN representative, urged C-24 to send [a fact-finding mission](#) to Western Sahara "to obtain first-hand information on the general situation in the Territory," noting no such mission had been sent since 1975, when the territory gained independence from Spain and before the war between Polisario and Morocco that led to a peace agreement and the creation of MINURSO in 1991.

[Angola's permanent representative](#) to the UN, Maria de Jesus Ferreira, said it was necessary for the UN to appoint a new special envoy to Western Sahara, something that hasn't happened since the last one quit in 2019, stalling any kind of peace negotiations between the Saharawis and Moroccans.

MINURSO is the only UN mission to lack a [human rights component](#), and Saharawi figures and international human rights groups have both pressured the UN to do so, citing widespread alleged [human rights violations](#) by Morocco in Western Sahara and against Saharawis and Moroccans who challenge Morocco's right to control the territory.

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US Military Practices Bombing S-400 Batteries in Controversial 'African Lion' War Games in Morocco

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US-led war games in North Africa have provoked controversy after Morocco, one of the hosting countries, said some drills would be held in Western Sahara, a territory it claims to rule. The US has backed Morocco's claims, but contradicted Rabat's statement about the drills being held there.

During the massive "African Lion" war games in Morocco, the US-led international force practiced attacking Russian-made S-400 Triumf air defense systems. Washington has objected to the S-400's proliferation around the globe, sanctioning multiple nations for buying them, including its ally Turkey, and it's possible Algeria has obtained them as well.

Mention of the drill involving simulated strikes against S-400s was made in a June 9 Command Post exercise in Agadir, Morocco, [footage of which](#) was posted by the Pentagon as a B-roll video on its DVIDS media hosting site.

"Two strikes were conducted against those two S-400s," one person can be heard saying in the briefing room, adding they are "still awaiting battle damage assessments from yesterday's strike."

The drill was carried out by Southern European Task Force-Africa, a US Army formation that replaced US Army Africa [after it was remarried](#) with US Army Europe in November 2020. It's never stated which weapons were used for the strike, but it's likely to have been M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), which feature in other media posted from the drills. However, it's also possible another military than the US actually carried out the ersatz strike; hosting nation Morocco's [air force has bought](#) AGM-88 High-Speed Anti-Radiation Missiles (HARMs) from the US, which are used to strike enemy radar sites and could be carried by its F-16 C/D Falcon fighter-bombers, also bought from the US.

[The War Zone notes](#) that it's not clear if Morocco's neighbor and regional rival of Algeria has obtained S-400 systems, meaning the exercise isn't necessarily aimed at Algiers' military. It does have the slightly older S-300PMU-2, which is similar enough to the S-400 in terms of appearance to create ambiguity in [reports alleging](#) to show Algeria has obtained S-400s.

Regardless, other nations have definitely bought or are actively interested in buying their own S-400 systems, including of course Russia as well as China and Turkey, which have [already received](#) batteries. India's [will be delivered](#) before the year is out; Belarus and Saudi Arabia are presently in talks; and Russia has [offered the system](#) to both Iran and Iraq. Buyers risk being sanctioned by the United States under its Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which is intended to dissuade nations from buying advanced Russian military equipment.

Controversy Over Drill Locations

Although the [African Lion drills](#) are annual, this year's games have aroused particular fury after Morocco claimed some of them would be held in Western Sahara, a non-self-governing territory to its south over which it has claimed sovereignty. In December 2020, the US recognized Rabat's claims in exchange for the North African state normalizing relations with Israel, and just a month earlier, war in the territory between the Moroccan forces and the indigenous Saharawi liberation group Polisario Front erupted for the first time since 1991.

Days before the drills were set to begin, NATO ally [Spain suddenly withdrew](#) from them, with it being reported in Spanish media that Madrid had pulled out rather than legitimize Morocco's claims by participating. However, alternate theories also exist, and Madrid's official excuse was budgetary concerns.

The US has also pushed back, saying its troops [wouldn't take part](#) in any drills in Western Sahara, and US Africa Command's [naming of locations](#) has included Tunisia, Morocco, and Senegal, but nothing in Western Sahara. However, one of those locations, Grier Labouihi, is close to the borders of Algeria and Western Sahara, with drills taking place [just 30 miles](#) from the Algerian city of Tindouf, where Polisario's headquarters are located alongside a large Saharawi refugee camp.

Western Sahara was once the Spanish colony of Spanish Sahara, until Spanish forces were forced to withdraw in 1975. Polisario declared a Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in the territory, but Mauritania and Morocco invaded to seize it for themselves. [Polisario fought back](#) the Mauritians and then the Moroccans, signing a peace deal in 1991 that saw the United Nations agree to hold an independence referendum in the territory. However, that has not yet happened.

Until former US President Donald Trump's December 2020 recognition, the US had long supported the UN mission in Western Sahara, MINURSO, and the move [provoked widespread condemnation](#) among veteran US diplomats and from other nations, [including US allies](#) like the UK. The administration of US President Joe Biden, who took office the following month, [said last week](#) it is "consulting privately with the parties about how best to halt the violence and achieve a lasting settlement," but had not yet decided whether to adhere to Trump's decision or reverse it.

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Video: Israeli Aircraft Strike Targets in Gaza's Khan Younis, Yarmouk Camp
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Israeli aircraft bombed targets in the Gaza Strip early Wednesday morning, less than a month after a ceasefire ended an 11-day Israeli bombing campaign against Hamas that killed hundreds and just hours after a march through Jerusalem by right-wing Israeli settler groups.

According to the Palestinian [Shehab News Agency](#), the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) also hit targets in the Yarmouk refugee camp in the area of Maan Bakhaniounis, and [Quraysh, south](#) of Gaza City. Video of the airstrikes on Yarmouk camp were posted on social media.

The airstrikes are the first since Israeli Prime Minister [Naftali Bennett took office](#) on Sunday, ousting longtime leader Benjamin Netanyahu.

The IDF said in a statement posted to Twitter after the strikes that they had been in response to the launching of incendiary balloons into Israeli territory and that Hamas is responsible for Israel's airstrikes. They claimed that "terrorist activity" took place in the attacked compound.

The IDF has also released a thermal video of the airstrikes.

Several fires on Monday in the Negev Desert in southern Israel were [blamed on incendiary](#) balloons allegedly launched from Gaza.

Hazem Qassem, a spokesperson for [Hamas, told Shehab](#) that the Israeli bombing was a "failed attempt" to stop their solidarity and resistance with Jerusalem and a cover for the "unprecedented state of confusion" after the Israeli government authorized a "Flag Day" march in Jerusalem.

The airstrikes come hours after [right-wing Israeli groups](#) marched through Palestinian neighborhoods in Jerusalem, celebrating the city's capture from Jordan in the 1967 Six-Day War. Jerusalem has been a site of intense struggle over the last few months as Palestinian families in the districts of Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan resist removal by Israeli authorities. [Israeli police cleared](#) the march's path, blasting Palestinian counter-protesters with water hoses and [arresting 17](#) near the Damascus Gate, another site of protest in recent months. Israeli police said they were throwing stones and "disturbing the peace." Two Israeli officers were also wounded.

Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh called the march a "provocation of our people and an aggression against our Jerusalem and our holy sites," and Palestinian authorities in the West Bank called for a ["Day of Rage"](#) against the march.

Wednesday morning's airstrikes come less than a month after Israel reached a ceasefire with Hamas that ended [11 days of airstrikes](#) and rocket attacks. More than 250 Palestinians were killed in Gaza by Israeli bombs and 13 Israelis were killed by Hamas rocket attacks, which were launched beginning on May 10 in response to violence against Palestinians in Jerusalem, including an incident in which Israeli police stormed Al-Aqsa Mosque, injuring hundreds.

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NIH Study Finds Evidence COVID-19 Was Circulating in Five US States in December 2019 by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Antibody tests of blood samples in Italy have found evidence of COVID-19 infections as early as September 2019, six months before the first known cases in Italy. However, the US government continues to push the theory that the virus escaped from a Chinese biolab in late 2019.

A new study has found that COVID-19 was circulating in the United States several weeks before the first documented cases were identified, paralleling the first detected cases in China, where the outbreak is commonly believed to have begun. The discovery further undermines the theory that the virus originated in China, as cases in other nations have been detected even earlier. The study was carried out by researchers from the US National Institute of Health's "All of Us" program and [published in the journal](#) Clinical Infectious Diseases.

According to the study's abstract, the researchers looked at more than 24,000 blood samples from all 50 US states given between January 2 and March 18, 2020, searching for antibodies against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. The human body produces the antibodies in the process of fighting off the infection, meaning if someone has them in their blood, they have already contracted the illness at some time in the recent past.

The study found that in five US states - Illinois, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin - seven people who gave blood samples had SARS-CoV-2 antibodies. Three were from Illinois and taken on January 7, which was 17 days before the first case was identified on January 24. The other states had one case each, most of which were before the first known cases in those states, according to the NIH.

The first COVID-19 case identified in the US was a Washington state resident who tested positive on January 19, 2020. Since then, the US has suffered 33.6 million known COVID-19 cases and more than 600,000 Americans have died.

"This study allows us to uncover more information about the beginning of the US epidemic and highlights the real-world value of longitudinal research in understanding dynamics of emerging diseases like COVID-19," Josh Denny, chief executive officer of All of Us and an author of the study, said in [an NIH news release](#). "Our participants come from diverse communities across the US and give generously of themselves to drive a wide range of biomedical discoveries, which are vital for informing public health strategies and preparedness."

However, the researchers cautioned that their data was far from complete and suffered many limitations, including a small sample size from many US states, as well as a lack of knowledge about how they became infected.

The virus [was first identified](#) in the Chinese city of Wuhan in the final days of 2019 as several cases of a puzzling and severe respiratory illness piled into Wuhan hospitals. By January 12, 2020, the virus had been isolated and its genome sequenced, confirming it wasn't SARS-CoV-1, the virus that causes severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), but a close relative which was dubbed SARS-CoV-2.

[Chinese tracing](#) has identified a case of COVID-19 in Hubei Province as early as mid-November 2019, but blood sample tests in Italy have suggested the virus was circulating there as early as September of 2019; Italy didn't identify its first COVID-19 cases until February 21, 2020, although the country rapidly became the European epicenter of the outbreak.

In its quest to find the origins of COVID-19, earlier this month the World Health Organization [asked the Italian scientists](#) who found the SARS-CoV-2 antibodies to send the samples to Rotterdam to be double-checked. WHO scientists previously visited Wuhan at the start of 2021 to share data with Chinese scientists in the hope of pinning down a likely origin, but left with

more questions than answers, being unable to either identify or eliminate any of their possibilities.

WHO scientists have [considered zoonotic transit](#) - that is, an animal-to-human jump - as the more likely method that humans contracted the virus, but a possibility they considered unlikely has recently been seized by the US state as an ideological bludgeon against Beijing: the suggestion that it escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, a major Chinese biolab. As [Sputnik has reported](#), the lab leak theory was elevated by right-wing anti-China critics early in the pandemic and seized upon by then-President Donald Trump as a way to divert blame from his administration's failure to contain the virus as hundreds of thousands of Americans died of the illness. Their arguments have shifted from COVID-19 being an engineered bioweapon to being an escaped sample from a natural source that Beijing tried to cover up, but all ultimately hinge on the argument that China has failed to provide adequate access to its archives to disprove the theory.

WHO scientists have spoken out against this argument, saying their access to data in Wuhan was not inhibited, and that the kind of openness being demanded of the Chinese is one the United States [would never accept](#) if made of its own archives.

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Pompeo: 'Unprepared' Biden Will Meet Putin at Geneva Summit With 'Self-Dealt Weak Hand' by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin are set to meet on Wednesday in Geneva, Switzerland, a location chosen for its history of political neutrality. While the event will not be the first time the pair will be meeting, it will mark the first time Biden will be doing so as the American commander-in-chief.

Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo removed his gloves and gave the public his personal take on decisions recently made by the Biden administration, using the opportunity to outline what Biden must do at the looming Geneva summit in order to appear strong before his Russian counterpart.

In an [opinion piece](#) written for Fox News on Tuesday, Pompeo claimed that Biden would be starting off talks with a "self-dealt weak hand that could have been much stronger" had the commander-in-chief chosen to continue many Trump-era policies.

"We in the Trump administration created real leverage against Russia he could have used. Instead, he has chosen to abandon it," Pompeo wrote. "Even in just a few months in office, Biden has already signaled to Putin that he is timid and unprepared to confront the Russian challenge – a weakness that ex-KGB agent Putin surely senses."

"Biden has already begun squandering this leverage, in part by telegraphing climate change as his top national security priority," he added, noting that "encouraging" American troops to believe that the environment is a top priority is both a "ridiculous mindset" and "extremely dangerous."

"It tells aggressors that our strategic priorities are out of whack, and we are ripe to be taken advantage of. Biden needs to make clear to Putin that our military places Russian aggression in

the highest echelon of threats, and he will support our armed forces in deterring it," he continued.

"Any promises Putin makes of tackling climate change together are hollow. Russia is a major petroleum producing nation that will gain geopolitical leverage worldwide if America cuts back our oil and gas production. A Climate Change First agenda is foolish in more ways than one." He went on to explain that Biden needs to "make the case to Putin that cozying up to China will make his country a tributary state to the Chinese Communist Party," and that "Russia's better bet" is parting ways from China "in the long run."

Pompeo further urged Biden to call for the release of Alexei Navalny, persuade Putin to pressure China to join the US-Russia New START treaty, and push for a stop to the soon-to-be completed Nord Stream 2, a controversial pipeline that runs from under the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany that will be able to transport 55 billion cubic meters of gas per year to Europe.

"For years, Democrats complained that [former US] President [Donald] Trump wasn't tough on Russia, while ignoring the facts. Now President Biden has a chance to walk the talk," the former secretary of state remarked.

"If Biden apologizes for America or casts pie-in-the-sky visions for cooperation, Putin will sense weakness, and America's Russia policy will be in for a long three and a half years."

Although it's anyone's guess what agreements may be reached during the summit, the agenda for the meeting will touch on COVID-19, cybersecurity, strategic stability and regional disputes, among other talking points, according to Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov.

Over the last few days, there has been speculation over a potential prisoner swap, with relatives of imprisoned individuals, such as Russian pilot [Konstantin Yaroshenko](#) and US Marine [Paul Whelan](#), calling for their release. However, it was recently revealed that Whelan is [reportedly not](#) included on a list of eligible prisoners.

Pompeo Launches New PAC to Help GOP 'Crush' Opponents in Midterm Elections

Pompeo's remarks over the much-anticipated Geneva summit came as the former Trump administration official launched the Champion American Values PAC, a new political action committee that will raise funds for the 2022 Republican midterm candidates.

In an [interview](#) with Fox News, Pompeo remarked that the initiative will help to "get good people" in leadership roles across the US, and ultimately "make this the greatest nation in history."

However, the recent launch has sparked further speculation that Pompeo is leaning toward adding his name as a potential presidential candidate for the 2024 election cycle, one that many believe will also see the addition of Trump.

Since the start of the Biden administration, Pompeo has managed to stay in the limelight by making multiple public appearances at fundraisers and political events. In fact, he is also expected to participate in the Lincoln Day dinner in Miami, Florida, in the next few days.

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Epstein Accuser Seeks \$500 Million From Estate After Developing Bone Disease

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The Epstein Victims' Compensation Program (EVCP) was launched in June 2020 as part of a growing effort to provide a "fair and expeditious compensation" to individuals who have come forward with sexual abuse claims against deceased American financier Jeffrey Epstein. The initiative has paid out over \$60 million to eligible claimants.

Caroline Kaufman, one of many women who have alleged sexual abuse at the hands of Epstein, recently filed a lawsuit seeking \$500 million from the disgraced financier's estate after having developed a bone disease following their violent encounter.

Now 27, Kaufman [previously detailed](#) to British tabloid The Sun that she had been sexually assaulted by Epstein as a teenager after she had been repeatedly contacted by an associate of his during a horse show for a potential model casting.

Kaufman and Epstein eventually met months later after she was invited for the fake casting at his multimillion-dollar townhouse in New York's Upper East Side. Once at the home, Kaufman was subsequently taken into a room where Epstein allegedly pinned her against a wall and raped her.

It was during the abusive episode that Epstein reportedly "nicked" Kaufman's jaw, a strike that set off a series of health and mental issues for the young teenager. Kaufman told The Sun for a [Monday exclusive](#) that she has been diagnosed with osteomyelitis, a painful bone inflammation that she believes stems from Epstein having struck her in the face.

"The jaw issue is caused by an injury in the past, and when I had an encounter with Epstein, he pinned me down and went to grab my arm," Kaufman detailed. "He forced my arm and as he did that he nicked my jaw, it's the only thing I can think of [which has caused this]."

In the years that followed, her condition has only worsened.

"It's extremely painful, I've been to the emergency room for it, my face is swollen and I'm on medication," she revealed, adding that her condition has gotten so severe at times that she has "lost days of work" and encountered "difficulty eating."

"I didn't tell anyone at the time because I didn't want to explain what happened [with Epstein]," she explained to the outlet.

Although Kaufman initially began legal proceedings in 2020 against the estate, she opted to hold off the lawsuit in order to work with the [EVCP](#) after it began accepting claims the year prior. However, the victims' fund did not provide sufficient compensation, a move that prompted the renewed legal effort.

"The offer was too low," Kaufman recalled, stressing that the undisclosed figure was "not enough to cover surgery [meant to rectify her condition]."

The funds, if secured, would be used to cover expenses related to her surgery, as well as her plans to start a charity to help other victims of sexual assault. Kaufman is reportedly scheduled to go under for surgery sometime this month.

Epstein's estate has been estimated to be worth upwards of \$600 million, however, by the end of 2020, it has drastically fallen by hundreds of millions. Spencer Kivin, who is legally representing Kaufman and other Epstein accusers, told the publication that he believes funds are being "hidden" by the estate.

The EVCP has vowed that it will have enough funds to pay out any and all claims that are approved by the body, the Daily Mail [reported](#).

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Photos: US Seizes \$1.2 Million Worth of Cocaine on Florida Beach Amid Sea Turtle Survey
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Researchers conduct sea turtle nesting surveys at varying schedules along the Florida coast in order to manage the potential negative effects of human activities on local turtle populations and their nests. The Sunshine State is home to five species of sea turtles: the green turtle, leatherback, loggerhead, hawksbill and Kemp's ridley.

Florida officials recently made quite the shocking discovery while carrying out a survey on the nesting habits of the local sea turtle population near the Cape Canaveral Space Force Station: \$1.2 million worth of cocaine.

The discovery was initially uncovered by Angy Chambers, a wildlife manager with the 45th Civil Engineer Squadron, while she was conducting a survey along the Florida beach on May 19, 2021. Immediately upon noticing a package wrapped in plastic tape, Chambers suspected that the content's of the item could be drug-related.

"I immediately contacted the 45th Security Forces Squadron (SFS)," Chambers said in a June 10 [statement](#) issued by the US Space Force. "While I was waiting for them to arrive, I drove a little further and noticed another package, and then another. At that point, I called SFS back and suggested they bring their UTV, or Utility Terrain Vehicle, as I counted at least 18 packages." retrieved from the scene. On-site tests revealed that the contents of the plastic-wrapped packages were indeed cocaine. They were subsequently turned over to the US Department of Homeland Security's investigation branch.

David Castro, an agent with Homeland Security who responded to collect the drugs, indicated in a statement included in the release that the packages likely arrived on the shore after breaking from the "bale wrapping" during transit.

The origins of the drugs remain under investigation.

The Sunshine State is no stranger to drug traffickers, as it is often tapped as a transfer point for cocaine shipments. Earlier, a US Coast Guard vessel [successfully managed](#) to offload about 5,500 pounds of cocaine in Miami, Florida, that was valued at nearly \$95 million.

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'Game of Pretend': Texas Governor Says Neither Biden Nor Harris Have Called About US-Mexico Border
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Texas Governor Greg Abbott (R) has announced that, in lieu of a federally funded border wall on the US-Mexico border wall, the Lone Star state will construct its own wall along the southern

border with Mexico. Federal funds for the structure were redirected, as US President Joe Biden believed the project was "a waste of money."

During a recent Ruthless podcast interview, Governor Abbott revealed that there has been little collaboration or communication with the White House regarding the burgeoning buildup of migrant encounters at the Southwest border.

"The president hasn't called; the vice president hasn't called. The only person I've talked to are some folks in the Department of Homeland Security, and that was a long time ago," [Abbott said](#) of Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, who was tapped to lead the administration's efforts to calm the migrant crisis at the US-Mexico border.

Harris, who recently returned from a [trip to Central America](#), has maintained that her primary goal as point-person will be addressing the root causes contributing to the [influx of migrants](#) traveling to the US.

During the month of May alone, US authorities logged 180,034 encounters along the Southwest land border, according to [US Customs and Border Protection data](#).

Despite Harris' comments, Abbott argued that the administration is dropping the ball when it comes to the US-Mexico border - particularly in Texas.

"They have a game of pretend going on, they are pretending that the Texas border does not exist because they're not talking about it either publicly or privately or calling us or anything else like that," the Texas governor said during the interview. "They just have this attitude that the Texas border with Mexico does not exist."

Abbott's assertions came alongside his announcement of a publicly-funded [border wall project](#) in Texas.

The Texas governor detailed that those "in the United States or everybody in the entire world" will be able to contribute to the border wall construction fund.

"Everyone will know every penny in, every penny out. But the sole purpose for those funds will be going to build the border wall," he said, emphasizing that the fund will have "great transparency."

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US Judge Blocks Biden Admin's Suspension of New Oil, Gas Leases on Federal Land, Waters by [Evan Craighead](#)

In the first days of his presidency, US President Joe Biden signed a series of Executive Orders seeking to prioritize climate change. The orders, in part, directed the US Department of the Interior to halt new natural gas and oil leases on federally operated lands and waters.

US District Judge Terry Doughty ruled on Tuesday that the Biden administration must lift its suspension on new oil and gas leases on federal land and waters.

Doughty, who heard arguments at a Louisiana court last week, granted a preliminary injunction to 13 states who alleged that the Biden administration's suspension bypassed a number of bureaucratic steps and subsequently violated several laws, including the Administrative Procedure Act.

The suit also argues that a number of energy sector jobs have been endangered by the now-monthslong suspension imposed by the administration.

The suit was initially filed by Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry back in March, weeks after the US president signed a number of Executive Orders geared toward climate change and related research.

Landry's suit represents his own state, as well as Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, and West Virginia. Representation for the administration argued that the 13 states "will not be harmed by the [suspension] because development activity from exploration through drilling and production has continued at the same levels as the preceding four years and because no existing lease has been cancelled as a result of the [suspension]."

Earlier this year, Alliance of Energy Producers President Jason Modglin [told Sputnik](#) that Biden's suspension on new oil and gas leases could have a severe impact on Texas - particularly if the period is extended or made permanent.

"Texas would be impacted pretty substantially if federal leasing in the Gulf of Mexico was impaired for a long period of time ... if a moratorium was issued for a long time," Modglin warned.

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Wildfire Ashes Dumped on Pelosi's Porch as Youth Climate Activists Descend on US Lawmakers' CA Homes
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Last month, the Sunrise Movement, a youth-led political movement against climate change, kicked off a series of 'Generation on Fire' marches in California and the Gulf Coast. Since then, members of the group have marched hundreds of miles and held a demonstration in Paradise, California, the site of a 2018 fire that displaced nearly 50,000 people.

The San Francisco, California, homes of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and longtime Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) became the sites of protest as over 100 young activists of the Sunrise Movement ended a 266-mile march on Monday.

The climate change activists could be overheard chanting, among many things, "Whose future? Our future!" as they marched across the Golden Gate Bridge to get to Pelosi's Normandie Terrace home and Feinstein's mansion.

The group first arrived at Feinstein's residence in San Francisco's Pacific Heights neighborhood, demanding the 87-year-old senator back climate change legislation.

Though Feinstein did not make an appearance, climate change activists toting Sunrise Movement-branded placards could be overheard shouting "be brave, Feinstein!" and "invest in us!"

At the House Speaker's Normandie Terrace home, protesters littered Pelosi's porch with ashes from the 2018 Camp fire in Butte County. The November 2018 incident - triggered by a faulty electric transmission line - was the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in the state's history.

"Invest in us," read a vibrant mural left in front of Pelosi's home.

The piece was pressure washed off the street soon after.

Activists with the Sunrise Movement are planning to re-assemble in Washington, DC, later this month for a protest in front of the White House.

During the late June demonstration, the group will call for a fully-funded civilian climate corps, according to Sunrise Movement organizer Sally Morton.

"The fight doesn't end here," Morton told the San Francisco Chronicle.

Joy Lee, Pelosi's press secretary, has said that the House Speaker believes the "courage and resilience of the young climate activists marching for climate justice is an inspiration."

"The climate crisis is the existential threat of our time and requires bold and immediate action, which is why House Democrats have presented the most ambitious, impactful and forward-looking climate response in Congressional history," Lee told Fox News.

Feinstein's office also commented on the matter, telling The Hill, "[t]hese young leaders are right — climate change is one of the greatest crises we're facing."

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Manhunt Ends as Alabama Police Locate Body of Suspected Gunman Who Killed Two Coworkers

Authorities say that gunfire broke out at a Mueller Co. factory in Albertville, Alabama, around 2:30 a.m. local time on Tuesday. After killing two people and injuring two others, the suspected gunman fled the fire hydrant factory, which employs more than 400 people.

Albertville Police Chief Jamie Smith announced on Tuesday that authorities searching for the alleged Mueller Co. plant shooter discovered the man's body some 15 miles (24.1 kilometers) away from the murder scene.

The suspect, identified as 34-year-old Andreas 'Andy' Horton, is believed to have died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Smith confirmed that Horton was employed by the factory for almost a decade.

It remains unclear what led the alleged gunman to carry out the Tuesday morning attack on his coworkers. About 100 workers were in the factory at the time.

Smith referred to the incident as "completely unprovoked."

The two murdered individuals have been identified as Michael Dobbins and David Horton.

Authorities do not believe David Horton is related to the gunman, despite sharing the same last name.

Those hospitalized were identified as Casey Sampson and Isaac Byrd. The two were first taken to a nearby hospital, but were then transported to a medical facility in Chattanooga, Tennessee. According to local law enforcement officials, the alleged gunman's body was found in a vehicle near the Guntersville City Cemetery gravesite of his mother, who died from cancer-related complications back in 2011.

"Andy was a good guy. Very quiet, easygoing. You would never expect this from him," Sanchez Watkins, a distant relative of the gunman, told the [Associated Press](#).

The Mueller Co. plant is expected to remain closed for the next few days.

The Tuesday morning incident of gun violence in Alabama came just hours before a [separate shooting in Chicago](#), Illinois, claimed the lives of four people, and injured four others.

Police are still searching for information and possible witnesses to the Chicago shooting, as a

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US Senate Panel Approves Three Biden's Top Cybersecurity Nominees

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) – The US Senate approved on Wednesday a list of three top cyber nominees by President Joe Biden, including former Deputy Director of the National Security Agency Chris Inglis, for the position of national cybersecurity director.

Besides Inglis, the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs has also approved nominations of Robin Carnahan who is slated to be the new administrator at the General Services Administration and Jen Easterly to be the new Director of Cybersecurity and Infrastructure.

Earlier in June, both Inglis and Easterly during the Congressional hearing agreed upon the need to safeguard the existing supply chains from external threats and the notion that the responsibility of private companies doesn't provide enough security for services that are critical on a national scale.

These appointments come amid White House efforts to strengthen cybersecurity in the United States following a series of major cyberattacks on American companies, including Colonial pipeline and the largest meat producer JBS.

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US, Saudi Arabia Agree in Kerry Visit to Back Mideast Green Initiatives – State Department

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) – The United States and Saudi Arabia have agreed to promote "Green" energy initiatives across the Middle East to combat climate change following a visit to Riyadh by US Special Envoy for Climate John Kerry, the State Department said on Wednesday.

"The United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are committed to addressing the increasing climate challenge with seriousness and urgency," the two countries said in a joint statement. "They affirmed their intention to work together to actively support ...the Saudi Green Initiative and the Middle East Green Initiative."

Washington and Riyadh will work to strengthen the implementation of the Paris Agreement and actively promote a successful G20 meeting in Italy and United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow in 2026, the statement said.

"Both countries affirm the importance of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and taking adaptation actions during the 2020s to avoid the worst consequences of climate change," the statement added.

The United States and the Saudis will also work together to promote clean energy, sustainable agriculture, and land use and to advance efforts under the Net-Zero Producers Forum on methane abatement, the circular carbon economy, clean energy and carbon capture and storage technologies, it noted.

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General Motors Boosts Investment in Electric, Self-Driving Vehicles to \$35Bln Through 2025

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) – A \$35 billion investment will fund two US battery manufacturing plants as part of a larger plan to expand electric vehicle (EV) production and also create autonomous driving technology (AV) on a commercial scale, General Motors said on Wednesday.

"General Motors Co. (NYSE: GM) announced today it will increase its EV and AV investments from 2020 through 2025 to \$35 billion, representing a 75 percent increase from its initial commitment announced prior to the pandemic," a GM press release said.

The statement said that the enhanced commitment will accelerate its strategy to become the market leader in EVs in North America, the global leader in battery and fuel cell technology through and to be the first to safely commercialize self-driving technology at scale.

"There is a strong and growing conviction among our employees, customers, dealers, suppliers, unions and investors, as well as policymakers, that electric vehicles and self-driving technology are the keys to a cleaner, safer world for all," GM CEO Mary Barra said in the release.

Plans call for construction of two new US battery plants, in addition to plants in Ohio and Tennessee now under construction, GM said.

GM will also collaborate with Honda to create two new SUV models powered with GM's Ultium batteries.

In addition, GM said it plans to supply its Ultium batteries and Hydrotec fuel cells to Wabtec Corporation, which is developing the world's first 100 percent battery-powered train locomotive.

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US Purchases Additional 200Mln Doses of Moderna's COVID-19 Vaccine

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) – US government has increased its order of Moderna COVID-19 vaccine by 200 million doses bringing the total quantity of doses purchased from this American manufacturer to 500 million, the company announced on Wednesday.

“Moderna today announced that the U.S. government has purchased an additional 200 million doses of Moderna’s COVID-19 vaccine, including the option to purchase other COVID-19 vaccine candidates from Moderna’s pipeline,” the company said in a statement. “This purchase brings the U.S. government’s confirmed order commitment to 500 million doses.”

The 200-million batch will include 110 million vaccine doses to be delivered at the end of 2021 and 90 million doses which are expected to be delivered in the first quarter of 2022, the statement said.

According to the statement, so far Moderna has supplied 217 million doses of its two-dose COVID-19 vaccine to the US government.

Last week, Moderna announced it had filed a request with the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for emergency use authorization of its coronavirus vaccine on adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18.

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US Congresspeople Take Aim at Biden Amid Summit With Putin

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) – US Congress members have taken to Twitter to criticize President Joe Biden’s approach to Russia while he meets with its leader, Vladimir Putin.

“President Biden is going into this meeting with Vladimir Putin, asserting weakness,” Republican House leader Elise Stefanik said in a tweet. “From gifting Russia the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to handing Putin a major victory by extending the New START treaty with no pre-conditions, Biden has proven he is too weak to stand up to Putin.”

Another Republican congresswoman, far-right gun rights advocate Lauren Boebert of Colorado, posited that Biden was the least qualified person to have negotiated on US behalf.

“I surely hope Joe Biden doesn’t accidentally return the state of Alaska to Putin in their meeting,” she said. “I’m praying for America today, because there has never been a more unqualified person negotiating on our behalf.”

Democrat Dan Kildee urged Biden to stick out for the release for US citizen Paul Whelan, imprisoned in Russia on espionage charges.

“Russia has failed to present any credible evidence of wrongdoing & yet sentenced him to 16 years in a labor camp. As Biden and Putin meet, [US President] should urge Russia to immediately release Paul,” he said.

All eyes are on Geneva’s Villa La Grange where Putin and Biden are meeting face-to-face for the first time in Biden’s presidency, with high expectations that the two world leaders will reach common ground on a number of issues of global importance, and ease tensions in bilateral relations.

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White House Pool Reporter Says Media Scuffle At Geneva Summit 'Most Chaotic' in Decade

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - A White House pool correspondent shared in his report on Wednesday that the media fight in the wake of the meeting between the Russian and US presidents is the most chaotic she has witnessed in almost a decade.

"The media scuffle was the most chaotic [I have] seen at a presidential event in nine years," Anita Kumar of Politico said in a pool report. "Journalists pushed and shoved, yelling at each other to move but no one did... Both presidents watched and listened to the media scuffle in front of them. They appeared amused by the scene. At one point, Biden leaned over and spoke to the interpreter and smiled."

Several minutes after that, Kumar wrote, Russian security pulled the red rope separating the press from the two presidents.

"Russian security yelled at journalists to get out and began pushing journalists. Journalists and White House officials screamed back that the Russian security should stop touching us," Kumar said. "[I] was pushed multiple times, nearly to the ground, as many poolers tripped over the red rope."

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RPT - UN Ahead of Putin-Biden Summit Says 'Encourages' Meetings Between UNSC Members - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, June 15 (Sputnik) - UN spokesman Farhan Haq told Sputnik ahead of the summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden in Geneva, the organization always encourages meetings among the UN Security Council member states.

"We'll wait to see what happens from that meeting," Haq said on Tuesday. "We always encourage meetings among the leaders of the member states, including the members of the Security Council."

UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said it was of great importance for the United Nations that the two "very important" countries have good, open and cooperative relations.

"We obviously welcome the fact that President Putin and President Biden will sit together to have a discussion," Dujarric said.

The upcoming summit between the Russian and the US leaders is scheduled for Wednesday at the Villa La Grange in Geneva. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the meeting will last about five hours.

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RPT - Soviet Army Reenactors in US to Commemorate 80 Years of Beginning of Great Patriotic War

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - A US-based group of reenactors of the Soviet Army will commemorate the 80th anniversary of the beginning of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945 by sharing living history with Americans in a museum in Long Island, New York state, group member Sukhrob Asilov told Sputnik.

The Museum of American Armor in Long Island will host a World War II Encampment Weekend event on June 19-20, just two days before the date when Russia and all former Soviet Republic commemorate the invasion of Nazi Germany in 1941.

"We will have our talk about that date during the event," Asilov said, who is portraying a World War II-era Soviet senior lieutenant of the infantry. "It is kind of special day for my family itself. Definitely, I am going to tell some stories about the beginning of the war to the public."

The museum event will gather together US-based reenactors portraying different armies that participated in World War II. They will be organizing firing and tactical demonstrations, as well as sharing stories about their military regiments.

"We are going to build small setup of the Soviet camp with few tents and few World War II vehicles that we own, as well as few lend-lease vehicles that museums will give us for that event," said Asilov, whose group will be portraying the 193rd rifle division of the Red Army. "We are going to introduce the Soviet Union and Red Army to the public, explain to them the story of World War II from the perspective of the Soviet nation."

World War II reenactors movement brings together thousands of people in the US who portray different armies. "We keep growing year after year," Asilov said.

Speaking of his own group, he noted that most of its participants are regular Americans. Only a fraction are first- or second-generation immigrants from former Soviet Republics, including Belarus, Ukraine, Russia and Uzbekistan.

Spectators, who visit living history events in the US, usually demonstrate great interest in World War II history but have different levels of knowledge.

"For some people, the history of World War II is just some pages in the US or world war history. People are not really involved in this type of stories, and they really know nothing about that," Asilov said. "But there is always a bunch of people, whom I see at events, who actually come by and they know the great knowledge of World War II history, and especially of the European theater, in which the Soviet Union was involved."

Some people know about the war from computer games, movies or documentaries, while others by studying in Europe or Russia.

"Our role is to explain and make people a little bit more interested, get them involved in something, and later on, when that person comes by the next time, they will come with a big cargo of knowledge, which is really nice to see," he said.

At dawn on June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union by attacking Brest, Kiev and other Soviet cities with the largest invasion force in the history of warfare. The Great Patriotic war lasted 1,418 days and ended on May 9, 1945, when Nazi Germany capitulated.

June 22 is observed annually in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine as Remembrance Day for the Great Patriotic War victims.

The 193rd rifle division of the Red Army was created in March 1941 and enlisted as part of the South Ural Military District in December 1941. The division participated in the battles of Stalingrad, Kursk, the Lower Dnepr Offensive and other major operations of World War II.

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RPT - Texas Border Wall Project Unlikely to Stem Illegal Migration Without Support - Ex-Official

EL PASO, June 15 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott's initiative to build more border wall will only shift the flow of illegal immigration, not stem it, without additional federal resources, former US Border Patrol sector chief Victor Manjarrez told Sputnik.

On Tuesday, former President Donald Trump accepted Abbott's invitation to make an official visit at the southern border on June 30. The announcement came just days after the governor signed an order authorizing border expansion.

"You'll see a shift [of illegal migration] from south Texas to other parts of the southern border that avoid Texas," Manjarrez said. "These smuggling organizations, they're not dumb, they adapt super quick. They adapt better than the government does, but that's the nature of it."

Last week, the Texas governor announced an initiative to enhance border security to stem illegal immigration, including plans to build additional wall on the state's border with Mexico and to approve a \$1 billion budget for border security. Abbott said he will ask the US public for donations to build the Texas border wall.

Although Abbott's measures seek to stem the influx of migrants coming to the border, Manjarrez said the initiatives will only redirect the flow to other regions along the US-Mexico border.

The Rio Grande Valley region in south Texas has borne the brunt of the mass surge of migrants coming to the US-Mexico border. Manjarrez said he expects the flow of migrants coming to the southern border will gradually move north along the Texas-Mexico border and into southern Arizona.

Last week, Abbott signed an agreement with Arizona that empowers states to help each other in times of disaster and emergency. The Texas governor called on other states to join in on the agreement to help Texas solve the border crisis.

Abbott's request to other states for help to curb illegal migration, Manjarrez said, makes sense because, "most of that activity doesn't look to stay in the immediate border area, it's a transit point, they [migrants] want to go into the interior of the United States."

Earlier this month, US Vice President Kamala Harris during a visit to Guatemala warned migrants in Central America to not come to the United States because they will be turned away. Manjarrez said these types of statements from US officials drive smuggling fees up and only encourage more migrants to come to the border before the window of opportunity closes. "That verbiage is actually different from putting resources on the ground," Manjarrez said. "You can say something but you can't really back it up until you get resources out there." Manjarrez said Abbott may be trying to prove a point that he is required to spend Texas taxpayers' money because the Biden administration is failing to meet its federal obligation. CBP data revealed this month that the number of asylum-seeking migrants apprehended along the southern border with Mexico in May set another record, reaching a new 21-year high. A total of 929,868 migrants have been apprehended illegally crossing the US-Mexico border since October, putting the Biden administration on pace to break the previous annual record of 977,509 set in 2019. The United States has apprehended more than 1.5 million illegal migrants at the southern border with Mexico in 1986, 1996, 1998-2000, according to CBP data.

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US Federal Judge Reverses Biden's Suspension of Oil, Gas Leases on Federal Land

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration must end its suspension of new oil and gas leases on federal land and waters, US District Judge Terry Doughty ruled.

"[T]he US Department of the Interior, the United States Bureau of Land Management, the United States Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, and the United States Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement... are hereby enjoined and restrained from implementing the pause of new oil and natural gas leases on public lands or in offshore waters," Doughty said on Tuesday.

Upon assuming office in January, Biden signed a series of executive orders that directed the Interior Department to halt new natural gas and oil leases on federal lands and waters in an effort to prioritize climate change.

In March, Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry filed a lawsuit representing his own state and the states of Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah and West Virginia joined as well.

The suspension will remain in effect until the legal case is resolved, or until otherwise ordered by the US Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit or the US Supreme Court.

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Niagara Falls Lit in Honor of Russia Day, NHL Team Despite Reports to Contrary- Spokesman

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The world-famous Niagara Falls were illuminated in red, white and blue to celebrate Russia's national holiday and Canada's remaining hockey team competing in the National Hockey League (NHL) playoffs, Niagara Parks told Sputnik. On Monday, the Canadian outlet Globe and Mail published an article in which it alleged that the Russian Consulate in Toronto misrepresented a light show intended to celebrate the Montreal Canadiens on its Twitter page, passing it off as a tribute to Russia's national holiday.

"Unfortunately, the coincidence in proximity of the Falls illuminations for the Montreal Canadiens and Day of Russian Federation caused some confusion. The Falls were illuminated on June 12 for the Day of Russian Federation and July 13 for the Montreal Canadiens. Both illuminations were red, white and blue," Chris Giles, acting manager, communications and stakeholder relations of Niagara Parks said in a statement.

The Globe and Mail's report has sparked a debate online with the Russian Consulate being subjected to abuse by passionate hockey fans and elements known for their Russophobia.

The Globe and Mail has since issued a correction to the article, telling Sputnik that the outlet was given "incorrect information by the Niagara Falls authorities."

Sputnik has reached out to the Russian Consulate in Toronto for comment.

Russia Day is one of the country's youngest and most important holidays. It is celebrated since 1992 to commemorate the events of June 12, 1990, when the First Congress of People's Deputies of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialistic Republic (RSFSR) adopted a declaration of RSFSR's state sovereignty.

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Blinken Congratulates Brazil on Official Signing of Artemis Space Accords - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken congratulated Brazil on becoming the first South American nation to sign on to the Artemis Accords on space exploration, the State Department said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken delivered virtual remarks today to congratulate Brazil on signing the Artemis Accords. Brazil is the first South American country to join the Accords," the State Department said on Tuesday.

The Artemis Accords are a set of rules for the peaceful exploration of space that were prompted by a US-led effort to send two astronauts to the Moon in 2024 in an effort to establish a lunar colony.

Blinken also thanked Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro for becoming an official signatory of the Artemis Accords, adding that the United States looks forward to expanding space cooperation with international partners.

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Biden Thanks Swiss President for Hosting US-Russian Summit in Geneva

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden thanked his Swiss counterpart Guy Parmelin for hosting the US-Russia summit in Geneva on Wednesday, the White House said in a statement.

"President Biden thanked President Parmelin for hosting the US-Russia Summit in Geneva on June 16, and he expressed appreciation for Switzerland's unique historical role providing a neutral ground for diplomacy and negotiations," the White House said after Biden met with Parmelin and Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis.

The officials discussed the US-Switzerland commercial, scientific, educational and security ties and Biden thanked Switzerland for its 40 years of service as the US protecting power in Iran.

According to the White House, Biden also welcomed Switzerland's contribution to the global coronavirus pandemic response.

On Wednesday, Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin will meet at the lakeside Villa La Grange in Geneva's biggest park in an attempt to stabilize the relationship between the United States and Russia and find areas for possible cooperation. The meeting is expected to last 4-5 hours and the two presidents will then hold separate press conferences.

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Eritrean Forces Should Withdraw From Tigray Without Further Delay - UK Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, June 15 (Sputnik) - Eritrean troops must withdraw from the Tigray region in Ethiopia without delay, UK Ambassador to the United Nations told reporters.

"We were told in March that Eritrean forces would be withdrawing. It is now June - there can be no further delay," Woodward said during a briefing on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, the UN Security Council discussed behind closed doors the situation in Tigray region facing famine as crops are being destroyed in the conflict.

UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs chief Mark Lowcock and World Food Program Director David Beasley briefed the Security Council on the issue.

"We called today for council members to come together and urge with one voice for an immediate ceasefire and access to humanitarian aid," Woodward said after the meeting.

Fighting in the province of Tigray broke out in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party - Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) - of attacking a regional

military base to hijack weapons and arm the anti-government militia. In late 2020, TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael said that Eritrea, which was technically at war with Ethiopia until 2018, had sent troops across the border in support of Ethiopian government forces.

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FBI Probing Foreign Ties of US 'Domestic Terrorists' - Director

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The FBI is looking for possible ties between foreign non-state actors and domestic terrorists in the United States as part of the investigation of the US Capitol unrest and can not rule out that the latter received funding from abroad, FBI Director Christopher Wray said in a congressional testimony.

"We are very focused on the interplay between different types of... non-state actors overseas and domestic terrorists here in the United States," Wray told the US House Committee on Oversight and Reform on Tuesday.

Wray acknowledged the FBI has not found evidence of foreign funding for groups whose members took part in the January 6 events, but said would not rule it out.

"Certainly, the possibility of a foreign funding or support for domestic violent extremism is something that is particularly high on our priority list," Wray said.

On January 6, a group of supporters of then President Donald Trump entered the US Capitol to protest the congressional certification of the election in several states that Trump claimed were fraudulent. Wray told lawmakers that around 500 suspects have been detained across the United States and more arrests are coming.

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Canada Opposition Calls for Defense Minister's Ouster Amid Reignited Military Sex Scandal

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - Canada's opposition party is calling on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to oust Minister of National Defense Harjit Sajjan a day after the country's number two officer resigned because of the ongoing military sex scandal, Conservative Party Leader Erin O'Toole said.

The Canadian military sex scandal was reignited over the weekend after multiple outlets reported that Vice Chief of the Defence Staff Lt. Gen. Mike Rouleau and Royal Canadian Navy's Commander Vice-Admiral Craig Baines partook in a game of golf with former Chief of Defense Staff Gen. Jonathan Vance, who is under investigation after misconduct allegations were leveled against them.

"Canada's Conservatives are calling on [Prime Minister] Justin Trudeau to immediately fire his Minister of Defense, Harjit Sajjan," O'Toole said in a statement on Tuesday.

Sajjan's inability to address the misconduct scandal, that has plagued the Trudeau government for months, is part of a track record that has seen his Department of National Defense fumble the procurement of new fighter jets and be accused of embellishing the details of his personal military service, O'Toole said.

The outing touched off a political storm as Rouleau holds oversight authority over the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service, which is investigating Vance. Rouleau emphasized that the two did not discuss the ongoing investigation, however, this explanation has not quelled the criticism. Former service members called the incident is another instance of the 'old boys' club' in action and a member of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's cabinet called the revelation "appalling."

Rouleau becomes the latest senior military to step down from his post in relation to the ongoing military sexual misconduct scandal, after Vance's replacement, Adm. Art McDonald, was forced to temporarily step aside in February and the government's vaccine distribution czar, Maj. Gen. Dany Fortin resigned from his role in May.

The political firestorm forced the government to launch an independent review of sexual misconduct in the Canadian military, the second such probe in five years.

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Biden Thanks Swiss President for Hosting US-Russian Summit in Geneva

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden thanked his Swiss counterpart Guy Parmelin for hosting the US-Russia summit in Geneva on Wednesday, the White House said in a statement.

"President Biden thanked President Parmelin for hosting the US-Russia Summit in Geneva on June 16, and he expressed appreciation for Switzerland's unique historical role providing a neutral ground for diplomacy and negotiations," the White House said after Biden met with Parmelin and Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis.

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Canada's Ontario Allots \$8.2Mln to Identify Indigenous Mass Grave Sites

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Ontario announced that it is making available \$8.2 million for indigenous communities to study former residential school sites following the discovery of a mass grave at a site in British Columbia.

The announcement follows the grisly discovery of 215 children's remains, with some of the deceased as young as three years old, at the Kamloops Indian Residential School site in British Columbia.

"We know that the tragic findings at a former Indian Residential School site in British Columbia are sadly not an anomaly," Greg Rickford, Ontario's Minister of Indigenous Affairs, said in press release on Tuesday. "Indigenous leaders and Ontarians are looking to governments to commit to the work of investigating Indigenous Residential School burial sites on a priority basis and our government is taking action to support this process through to completion."

The mission will be community-led, the province said, with the \$8.2 million in funding going towards identifying technical experts, including archaeologists and forensic specialists to lead the investigation, the release said.

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. The last residential school closed in 1996.

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Trump Accepts Texas Governor Invite for Visit to Southern Border June 30 - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said he has accepted an invite from Texas Governor Greg Abbott to visit the US southern border on June 30 to get a first-hand look at the border crisis.

"I have accepted the invitation of Texas Governor Greg Abbott to join him on an official visit to our Nation's decimated Southern Border on Wednesday, June 30, 2021," Trump said in a press release on Tuesday.

Trump said the Biden administration created the border crisis after they decimated the immigration policies inherited from his administration.

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trump accepts texas governor invite for official visit to southern border on June 30 - statement
Sputnik

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NASA Administrator Seeks \$5Bln From Infrastructure Bill to Repair Dilapidated Facilities

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - NASA is urging Congress to earmark \$5 billion from a pending infrastructure bill to repair ten space flight centers and ten additional facilities, Administrator Bill Nelson said in a congressional testimony.

"I have already named Michoud and pointed out there are holes in that roof where we are putting together the first core, the first stage of the rocket, before it's shipped to the Stennis Space Center, where then the engines are tested with the live fire," Nelson told the US Senate Appropriations subcommittee responsible for NASA on Tuesday.

NASA's Space Launch System rocket, a centerpiece of US plans to return to the Moon and later to go to Mars, is being assembled at the Michoud Assembly Facility in New Orleans.

Nelson went on to explain NASA's infrastructure woes, saying that conservative estimates place the cost of repairs at a about \$5 billion.

"Not only at Michoud and at Stennis, but every NASA center, ten of them and ten facilities and there is crumbling infrastructure," Nelson said. "NASA can only squeeze so much out of its budget, \$380 million in the president's 2022 budget request for construction, environmental compliance and restoration."

Nelson, a former Senator and NASA astronaut, added that the pending infrastructure bill provides Congress with an opportunity to step in and help the agency with its own infrastructure woes.

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US Lawmakers Urge Biden to Address With Putin Issue of Americans Jailed in Russia - Letter

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan group of lawmakers sent President Joe Biden a letter urging him to raise the issue of imprisoned US citizens in Russia during his upcoming meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Geneva.

"We write to urge you to address the arrest and detention of falsely accused US citizens in Russia when you meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin on June 16," the letter said on Tuesday. "Over the past three years, the Russian Federation has arrested, detained, and convicted two American citizens, Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed, on legally dubious and politically motivated charges."

Co-signatories of the letter include Senators Debbie Stabenow and John Cornyn as well as Congressmen Haley Stevens and August Pfluger.

The lawmakers noted that the House of Representatives has passed two resolutions calling on Russia to release Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed.

A Moscow court sentenced Whelan to 16 years in prison for espionage. Reed was sentenced to nine years for endangering police officers after an altercation in Moscow in 2019.

The lawmakers characterized the arrest of Whelan and Reed as political, saying also they are unacceptable because they fly in the face of international legal standards.

Biden and Putin are scheduled to meet in Geneva on Wednesday to discuss a wide array of issues, including arms control, cyberspace, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, the situation in Ukraine and others.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) -

PUTIN-BIDEN SUMMIT

* Signing any documents is not on the agenda of the Wednesday meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart, Joe Biden, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik on Tuesday.

* The upcoming summit will last between four and five hours, with breaks and changes of format, Peskov said.

* Discussing the potential Russian-US prisoner exchange was not a proper thing to do at this stage, since the presidents should discuss this, Peskov said.

* Swiss President Guy Parmelin said that he hopes that the upcoming Russia-US summit will have positive outcomes for the whole world.

NEW WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST BELARUS

* The Permanent Representatives Committee of the European Union plans to agree on another package of sanctions against Belarus on Wednesday, according to the agenda.

US-EU COOPERATION

* The recent agreement between the United States and the European Union to take steps to resolve the disputes over aircraft subsidies is intended to lay the groundwork for a lasting solution to the problem, a senior US Trade Representative official said on Tuesday.

* The European Union and the United States call on the United Nations Security Council to ensure humanitarian access to Syria amid the crisis and the coronavirus pandemic, according to a joint statement issued after the EU-US summit.

* The European Union and the United States have set up a high-level climate action group with a view to strengthening cooperation on climate diplomacy ahead of the upcoming COP26 in Glasgow, set for November, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said.

* The two sides eventually reached an agreement to end the 16-year dispute over subsidies to plane makers Boeing and Airbus, tariffs will be suspended for five years, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said.

AZERBAIJAN-TURKEY TALKS

* Azeri President Ilham Aliyev and his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, on Tuesday signed a declaration on allied relations between Baku and Ankara during a meeting in the city of Shusha.

* Turkey plans to open a consulate in Azerbaijan's Shusha, Erdogan said.

RUSSIA SPACE PLANS

* Russian space agency Roscosmos plans to send scientists to the International Space Station where they will be able to conduct experiments themselves, Roscosmos head Dmitry Rogozin said on Tuesday.

* A new contract for a space tourist's flight to the International Space Station (ISS) aboard a Russian Soyuz spacecraft may be signed by the end of the year, Dmitry Loskutov, the general director of Glavkosmos (a subsidiary of the Russian State Space Corporation Roscosmos), told Sputnik.

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NASA Chief Predicts US Race with China to Put Next Human on Moon

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - Chinese technical prowess demonstrated by landing a rover on Mars, plus an upcoming Russia-China announcement on cooperation in space, suggests that the United States could face competition in its bid to land two American astronauts on the Moon in 2024, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said on Tuesday.

"You're seeing statements made by the Chinese government that they don't want to wait around until the 2030s to land on the moon with humans," Nelson told a Senate Appropriations subcommittee responsible for space.

Nelson said China's successful May 14 landing of a rover on Mars, the second nation apart from the US to achieve the feat, had energized the Chinese space program and possibly provided the impetus for a major announcement on space by Russia and China expected Wednesday afternoon at an international space conference in St. Petersburg.

On Tuesday, Roscosmos space agency chief Dimitry Rogozin hinted at such an announcement during the GLEX-2021 conference, saying that Russia and China are discussing a framework for creating an international scientific lunar station.

Nelson said such cooperation could challenge the primacy of the US Space program, making it especially important for the United States to be landing on the surface of the moon "before our competitors do."

Nelson said NASA's \$24.8 billion budget request for fiscal 2022 was adequate to advance US plans to return humans to moon in 2024.

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US Yemen Envoy to Visit Saudi Arabia on June 15-17 for Talks on Ceasefire - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) – US special envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking will be visiting Saudi Arabia on June 15-17 where he plans to meet senior officials from Sanaa and Riyadh to discuss steps to achieve a comprehensive ceasefire in the ongoing conflict with the Houthis, the Department of State said on Tuesday.

"U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking will travel to Saudi Arabia on June 15-17 where he will meet with senior officials from the Governments of the Republic of Yemen and Saudi Arabia, as well as UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths. Throughout the trip, Special Envoy Lenderking will discuss the latest efforts to achieve a comprehensive, nationwide ceasefire, which is the only way to bring Yemenis the relief they so urgently need," the Department said in a release.

The State Department also welcomed Oman's and Saudi Arabia's support to the peace process in Yemen and reiterated its commitment to the free flow of essential commodities and humanitarian aid into the country.

Yemen has been gripped by an internal conflict between the government forces and the Houthi movement for over six years. Since 2015, the Saudi-led coalition fighting on the government's side has been conducting air, land and sea operations against the rebels, as well as repeatedly blocking the Yemeni waters by its warships. The Houthis often retaliate by firing projectiles and bomber drones on Saudi territory.

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Biden Nominates US Ambassadors to NATO, Mexico, Israel, Paraguay - White House

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden expressed his intent to nominate Julianne Smith, who presently serves as Senior Adviser to the US Secretary of State, as ambassador to NATO, along with emissaries to seven countries and a US representative on the Council of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the White House said on Tuesday.

"Today, President Joe Biden announced his intent to nominate the following individuals - including four career members of the Senior Foreign Service - as ambassadors to represent the United States on the world stage: ... Julianne Smith, Nominee for the United States Permanent Representative on the Council of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, with the rank and status of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary," the White House said in a notice. Biden also nominated US ambassadors to Sri Lanka, Gambia, Republic of Guinea, Paraguay, Mexico, Israel and Costa Rica, the notice added.

Smith previously served in the Obama administration as acting National Security Advisor and Deputy National Security Advisor to then-Vice President Biden. She also held several positions at the Defense Department and worked at different think tanks.

The White House said that Biden's nominee to the post of US ambassador to Israel is Thomas Nides. He served as Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources from 2010-13 and as Chief of Staff to then US Trade Representative Micky Kantor.

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US Democrats Hope to Send Budget, New Infrastructure Bills to Congress in July – Schumer

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) – US Democrats controlling the Senate hope to complete work on preparing President Joe Biden's first annual budget bill and a massive, bipartisan spending bill to renew America's aging infrastructure by July, Senate Majority leader Chuck Schumer said on Tuesday.

"Both the budget resolution and the bipartisan bill [on infrastructure] we hope to get done in July," Schumer told a Capitol Hill press conference. "We hope to get that first budget resolution on the floor and passed in July. ...[Also] we are working on a bipartisan infrastructure proposal." The Senate Democrats were working with the Republicans to push through the aspects of the legislation they both agreed on in a bipartisan way but simultaneously they were also preparing separate legislation to try and push through other measures that the Republicans opposed, Schumer explained.

"One track is bipartisan, the other pulls in other elements of Biden's jobs plan and families plan, even if they don't have bipartisan support, our Senate committees are working on both tracks at the same time... Both tracks are moving forward and progressing very well," he said.

Schumer also said he and other Senate Democrats were pushing for more advanced measures that Republicans would not support on combating climate change and more infrastructure projects.

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UPDATE - Southwest Airlines Grounds Flights in US Due to Computer Issues - Aviation Agency

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - Southwest Airlines requested a full grounding of flights across the United States while the company solves technical issues with its reservation system, the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) stated on Tuesday.

"The FAA issued a temporary nationwide ground stop at the request of Southwest Airlines while the company resolved a reservation computer issue. Please contact the airline for further details," the FAA said in a tweet.

Southwest in their own tweet said they are aware of the issues and are working quickly to resolve them.

The US Air Traffic Control System Command Center Advisory notice that went out ordered all Southwest Airlines flights in airspace of the contiguous US to stop due to technology issues.

The US-based airline in another tweet later said it was in the process of resuming normal operations.

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Biden Nominates Ambassadors to NATO, Mexico, Israel, Paraguay, Sri Lanka – White House

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden expressed his intent to nominate current Senior Adviser to the Secretary of State Julianne Smith as ambassador to NATO, along with emissaries to seven countries and US representative on the Council of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the White House said on Tuesday.

“Today, President Joe Biden announced his intent to nominate the following individuals – including four career members of the Senior Foreign Service – as ambassadors to represent the United States on the world stage: ... Julianne Smith, Nominee for the United States Permanent Representative on the Council of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, with the rank and status of Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary,” the notice said.

Biden also nominated ambassadors to Sri Lanka, The Gambia, the Republic of Guinea, Paraguay, Mexico and Costa Rica, it added.

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Biden's 'Reckless Spending' Causing Rise in US Inflation – Republican Senators

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden's authorization of massive federal government spending since taking office in January is driving the current surge in US inflation levels, Republican senators said on Tuesday.

“The Fed [Federal Reserve] has an \$8 trillion balance sheet: Reckless spending is causing this inflation,” Senator Rick Scott of Florida told a press conference of Republican senators on Capitol Hill.

Republican Senate Leader Mitch McConnell told the press conference that he wanted to reach an agreement on a massive infrastructure spending bill with Senate Democrats but only if a way could be found to do it without raising either taxes or inflationary pressures.

“I would love to see us get an outcome on infrastructure... Put me down as listening, and [as] hopeful that somehow, some way, we can move forward on an infrastructure bill that does not compromise the 2017 tax bill. We want to go above what the revenue from the gas tax produces to credibly pay for it,” McConnell said.

The entire Republican Senate leadership believed that former President Donald Trump's 2017 tax reform legislation was the main contributing factor to producing the best domestic economy in half a century up to 2020 until the COVID-19 pandemic hit, McConnell said.

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Southwest Airlines Grounds Flights Nationwide Due to Computer Issues - FAA

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - Southwest Airlines requested a full nationwide grounding of flights while the company solves technical issues with its reservation system, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) stated on Tuesday.

"The FAA issued a temporary nationwide ground stop at the request of Southwest Airlines while the company resolved a reservation computer issue. Please contact the airline for further details," the FAA said in a tweet.

Southwest in their own tweet said they are aware of the issues and are working quickly to resolve them.

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Five Polio Workers Killed in Five Separate Attacks in Afghanistan Tuesday - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, June 15 (Sputnik) - At least five polio aid workers were killed in five separate incidents in eastern Afghanistan on Tuesday, forcing the country to suspend its national vaccination campaign, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing.

"Five health workers were killed and four others injured in five separate attacks today in Nangarhar province. These attacks took place on people who were conducting a polio vaccination campaign," Dujarric said.

The attack comes just a week after 11 aid workers from the HALO Trust who were engaged in demining activities, were killed and 15 others were injured in an incident in Baghlan Province.

"As a direct result of these attacks, the national polio vaccination campaign, which began yesterday, has been suspended in the eastern region of Afghanistan," Dujarric said.

The suspension may deprive millions of children of protection against the preventable disease, according to Dujarric.

The United Nations called on the parties to the Afghan conflict to protect civilians and aid workers and ensure that civilian infrastructure is not targeted in military operations, Dujarric said. Afghanistan has been in the grip of a violent internal conflict between the official government and the radical Taliban movement, which had taken control of a significant part of the country's rural area and launched attacks on large cities.

Though the US-negotiated peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban kicked off in September 2020, the negotiations are yet to show any results as the violence has only escalated over the past few months.

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Biden Expands Category of Parents Who Can Petition for Migrant Children to Join Them in US

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has expanded the category of parents who can petition the federal government to allow their migrant children to join them in the United States, the US departments of State and Homeland Security said on Tuesday. In March, the Biden administration revived the Central American Minors (CAM) program to reunite qualified children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras with their parent or parents who are lawfully present in the United States

"Eligibility to petition will now be extended to include legal guardians (in addition to parents) who are in the United States pursuant to any of the following qualifying categories: lawful permanent residence; temporary protected status; parole; deferred action; deferred enforced departure; or withholding of removal," the agencies said in a joint press release.

Moreover, the release said eligibility will also be expanded to US-based legal guardians and parents with pending asylum or visa-applications that were filed before May 15.

The Los Angeles Times reported, citing a senior US administration official, that at least 100,000 legal guardians and parents will be eligible to seek petition under the new requirements.

The CAM program has been reinstated to provide a safe alternative for migrant children considering the risky journey to the US southern border.

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Chinese National Pleads Guilty to \$20M In COVID-19 Fraud Scheme – US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) – Chinese national from New York Muge Ma has pled guilty to a fraud scheme to obtain over \$20 million in loans provided to small businesses as part of the federal COVID-19 relief program, the US Department of Justice said on Tuesday.

"A Chinese national who resided in New York, New York, pled guilty today in connection with a fraudulent scheme to obtain over \$20 million in Government-guaranteed loans designed to provide relief to small businesses during the novel coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic," the Department said in a release.

In the period between March 2020 and May 2020, the defendant allegedly used his two companies to obtain more than \$20 million in the US Government-guaranteed loans from the Small Business Administration and at least five banks by falsely claiming that the companies paid millions of dollars in wages to hundreds of non-existent employees, the release said.

Ma used the name and identity of another person when pretending to be a US citizen while he was a lawful permanent resident in the US, according to the release.

The Justice Department said the defendant pled guilty to one count of bank fraud, one count of aggravated identity theft, and faces up to 32 years in prison.

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Israelis, Palestinians Must Not Exacerbate Tensions Amid Jerusalem March - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - Israelis and Palestinians must refrain from exacerbating tensions in the region, US State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Tuesday.

"We believe that it is essential for all parties to refrain from any steps that exacerbate tensions," Porter said in response to a question about the United States' position on a controversial march being held in Jerusalem.

Porter added that the United States has not done at present an official assessment of the situation.

However, the US Embassy in Israel issued a demonstration alert on Monday in anticipation of the march, prohibiting US government employees and their family members from entering Jerusalem's Old City on Tuesday and informing US citizens to take the warning into account as they plan their travels.

The demonstrations come following a change in Israeli government leadership as Naftali Bennett takes over as the country's prime minister position after a coalition government ousted long-time Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

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California to Drop All COVID-19-Related Restrictions - Governor

NEW YORK, June 15 (Sputnik) - California has removed all restrictions it had imposed due to the novel coronavirus after more than 40 million residents received vaccines, Governor Gavin Newsom said on Tuesday.

"It's reopening day," Newsom said via Twitter. "We've administered over 40 million vaccines. Now... No more social distancing. No more capacity limits. No more colors or county tiers. And if you're vaccinated - no more masks."

In addition to California, the state of New York also announced dropping all COVID-19-related restrictions and reopened its economy fully after 70 percent of its residents received vaccines. While California was the first of the 50 US states to impose a lockdown when the pandemic broke out in March 2020, it now has one of the lowest rates of infection in the country, at below 1 percent.

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UN Concerned About Humanitarian Situation in Syria Ahead of UNSC Vote on Aid Delivery

UNITED NATIONS, June 15 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is seriously concerned about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Syria ahead of the UN Security Council's vote next month

on the renewal of cross-border aid mechanism, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"We are indeed very concerned about the deteriorating humanitarian situation of 13.4 million people throughout the country," Dujarric said. "The situation is particularly dire in northwest Syria."

The spokesman said more than 90 percent of 3.4 million people in need in the region are facing catastrophic shortages, and the only means to reach them is using the last remaining Bab al-Hawa border crossing from Turkey.

Through the crossing, humanitarian organizations can bring aid to some 2.4 million Syrians per month, and the operation comprises nearly half of all assistance in Syria, Dujarric said.

"As the Secretary-General [Antonio Guterres] has stressed, the large-scale cross-border response for an additional 12 months is essential to save lives and that we have no alternative," Dujarric added.

The UN Security Council's authorization to use the Bab al-Hawa crossings is due to expire on July 10.

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UN Ahead of Putin-Biden Summit Says 'Encourages' Meetings Between UNSC Members - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, June 15 (Sputnik) - UN spokesman Farhan Haq told Sputnik ahead of the summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden in Geneva, the organization always encourages meetings among the UN Security Council member states.

"We'll wait to see what happens from that meeting," Haq said on Tuesday. "We always encourage meetings among the leaders of the member states, including the members of the Security Council."

UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said it was of great importance for the United Nations that the two "very important" countries have good, open and cooperative relations.

"We obviously welcome the fact that President Putin and President Biden will sit together to have a discussion," Dujarric said.

The upcoming summit between the Russian and the US leaders is scheduled for Wednesday at the Villa La Grange in Geneva. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the meeting will last about five hours.

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UN Envoy Says Efforts Fail to Bridge Gap in Yemen But Ceasefire Can Turn Corner

UNITED NATIONS, June 15 (Sputnik) - Outgoing UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths said on Tuesday the outlook for the country remains bleak as political talks have made only limited progress, but Houthi rebels' commitment to a nationwide ceasefire could turn the corner in the conflict.

"The gap between the parties - the government of Yemen and Ansarallah [Houthis] remains too wide for me to announce what I would love to announce, which was that we had a deal. We tried to bridge the gap, but so far, we have not been able to do so," Griffiths said in his press conference in his current capacity.

Griffiths said the picture on Yemen after six years of war remains "awfully bleak" for humanitarian, political and military reasons.

"The crucial area that we are focusing on here is a commitment to the ceasefire from Ansarallah [Houthis], in addition, of course to the opening up the ports and the airport and then the political process," he said. "If we can zero in on how we can be sure that that's going to happen, then I think we may finally be turning the corner on Yemen just as I depart."

Concluding his more than a three-year-long assignment, Griffiths praised the "diplomatic firepower" conducted in the recent months by US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking and the region.

Oman, whose delegation visited the capital of Sanaa last week, has recently intensified the efforts to try to achieve the ceasefire between the Houthi rebels and the Yemeni government.

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Canada to Return J&J COVID-19 Vaccines as Federal Gov't, Provinces Mull Campaign's Future

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) – Canada will return a shipment of coronavirus vaccine doses produced by Johnson & Johnson subsidiary Janssen Pharmaceuticals to the company after it was deemed inadmissible by public health officials, Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said on Tuesday.

On Friday, Canadian health officials determined that the vaccine doses from the East Baltimore facility, which had previously produced a faulty batch earmarked for the US vaccination regime, did not meet the country's regulatory requirements and decided not to authorize the doses for use in the country.

"It will be given back to the company," Tam told reporters when asked what would happen to the inadmissible shipment, adding that the decision concerning the subsequent use of the doses would be made by the company.

Canadian officials stress that J&J will have to compensate Ottawa for the faulty batch. However, according to Tam, it is now unclear how the J&J vaccine fits into Canada's vaccination regime. Canada, where over 75 percent of residents have received their first dose, is running low on individuals who are expected to receive their first dose, Tam said, noting that the country has an abundant supply of Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines. Canada's chief medical officer added that the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) is engaged in talks with the provinces concerning their interest in accepting J&J vaccine doses.

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

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Only 16% of Pregnant Women Vaccinated in US by Early May - Health Dept. Study
WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - Just over 16 percent of pregnant women had received at least one vaccine dose in the United States as of early May, a US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) study revealed on Tuesday.

"During December 14, 2020–May 8, 2021, a total of 135,968 pregnant women were identified, 22,197 (16.3%) of whom had received ≥ 1 dose of a vaccine during pregnancy. Among these 135,968 women, 7,154 (5.3%) had initiated and 15,043 (11.1%) had completed vaccination during pregnancy," the report said.

Receipt of at least one jab was highest among women aged 35–49 years (22.7%) and lowest among those aged 18–24 years (5.5%).

Asian (24.7%) and White (19.7%) women were at much higher rates than Hispanic (11.9%) and Black women (6.0%), the report showed.

The CDC characterized the report as the first in the United States to assess COVID-19 vaccination during pregnancy, while cautioning that the data came from nine health care organizations in seven US states. As a result, the findings might not be generalizable to all pregnant women in the United States, according to the report.

Low coverage among pregnant women likely results in part from limited data on vaccine safety during pregnancy and a need for increased vaccine confidence among healthcare providers and expectant mothers, the report said.

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Rocket Lab Wins Contract to Design NASA Spacecraft for Unmanned Mars Mission - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - NASA has ordered the design of two new unmanned spacecraft for a Mars orbital surveillance mission, the California-based company Rocket Lab announced on Tuesday.

"Rocket Lab, a global leader in dedicated launch and space systems, has been awarded a contract to design two Photon spacecraft for a scientific mission to Mars," the company said in a press release.

The Escape and Plasma Acceleration and Dynamics Explorers (ESCAPADE) project is a twin-spacecraft science mission that will orbit two spacecraft around Mars to understand the structure, composition, variability and dynamics of the planet's hybrid magnetosphere, the release said.

ESCAPADE is being developed under NASA's Small Innovative Missions for Planetary Exploration program in the Science Mission Directorate, the release also said.

The two spacecraft are planned for launch in 2024 to Mars ridesharing aboard a NASA-provided commercial launch vehicle, the release added.

The mission will use the Curie P propulsion system to investigate the Mars environment to explore how the solar wind strips atmosphere away from the planet to better understand how its climate has changed over time, according to the release.

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US Senate Confirms Big Tech Critic Lina Khan as Federal Trade Commissioner

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The US Senate confirmed on Tuesday the appointment of Lina Khan as Federal Trade Commissioner, putting a major critic of Big Tech in charge of the country's domestic trade amid the Biden administration's crackdown against alleged antitrust practices by firms such as Google and Facebook.

The Senate voted 69-28 to confirm the 32-year-old Khan, making the Columbia University professor the youngest person ever to head the Federal Trade Commission. Her confirmation also signals a bipartisan desire to impose more regulations on Big Tech companies increasingly accused of shutting out smaller competitors to monopolize online search and digital advertising among other activities.

Khan achieved recognition in antitrust circles after writing "Amazon's Antitrust Paradox" for the Yale Law Review in 2017, while a student at that university. The paper made the case for using a different framework for evaluating competitive harm than the popular consumer welfare standard. That standard essentially says that antitrust law violations can be determined based on harm to consumers, which is often measured based on prices.

But Khan's criticism was that such a standard could miss significant competitive harm in the modern economy, like predatory pricing that lowered consumer prices in the short term but allows a company that can afford it to quickly gain market share. She also said that by both owning and selling on a marketplace platform, as Amazon did, the online retailing behemoth could exploit information across the ecosystem to undercut the competition.

In recent years, Khan has become a favored advocate for those eager to see more expansive enforcement of the antitrust laws. She also participated in the Congress Judiciary subcommittee's antitrust investigation into Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google, helping to compile the report from Democratic staff that found each held monopoly power.

In October, the Justice Department filed an antitrust lawsuit against Google for alleged abuse of online search dominance. It was the most forceful action in more than two decades by the US government to ostensibly protect competition in the online search space since the groundbreaking case that began in the late 1990s against Microsoft. It could also be a precursor to similar antitrust actions against other big tech names.

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Biden Privately Asked NATO Leaders for Advice Ahead of Summit With Putin - US Official

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden asked the leaders of the NATO member states for advice ahead of his upcoming meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin and vowed to coordinate with them the arms control agenda, a senior Biden administration official told reporters on Tuesday.

"And he explained to the leaders what he intended to say. He did so privately, behind closed doors, so I'm not going to get into the details of it," the official said. "And he asked them to share whatever thoughts or advice they had about the meeting."

The official noted that several leaders responded with commentary and were positive about the upcoming summit with Putin.

"He [Biden] also pledged to them that on an ongoing basis -to the extent, for example, we're working with Russia on arms control-related issues - he would coordinate closely with NATO so that they had a chance to have input into the arms control agenda," the official added.

The upcoming summit between Putin and Biden is scheduled for Wednesday at the Villa La Grange in Geneva. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the meeting will last about five hours.

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US-EU Aircraft Subsidies Agreement Step Toward 'Durable Solution' - Trade Representative

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The recent agreement between the United States and the European Union to take steps to resolve the disputes over aircraft subsidies is intended to lay the groundwork for a lasting solution to the problem, a senior US Trade Representative (USTR) official said on Tuesday.

"This is an agreement that we think can lay the basis for a durable solution, and I think if we demonstrate that's the case in the near-term, we can build on that," the official said.

As part of the new agreement, the United States will suspend its tariffs imposed on the European Union although Washington has noted that it reserves the right to reimpose them should the block fail to meet the expectations in the agreement.

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Biden-Putin Summit May Last Some 5 Hours, With 'No Breaking of Bread' - US Official

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The upcoming meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden will last some five hours but without a joint meal, a senior administration official told reporters on Tuesday .

"Nothing formal," the official said. "No breaking of bread."

Earlier on Tuesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the summit is expected to last between four and five hours, with breaks and changes of format.

The senior administration official noted that Putin is expected to be the first to arrive at the Villa La Grange at about 1:00 p.m.

Swiss President Guy Parmelin will welcome Putin upon his arrival as well as Biden when he arrives later.

"Inside, they'll share a short greeting with the Swiss President," the official noted. "They will, all three of them, walk back outside where there will be a 'press moment.' The only person who is expected to speak during that moment is the Swiss President."

The official went on to say that the Biden-Putin summit will kick off with a so-called P+1 one meeting - the one that includes the US Secretary of State.

"Then there is a plan for there to be an expanded portion of the meeting, which is P + 5," the official added.

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US Domestic Anti-Terror Strategy Fails to Halt Targeting of Muslims - ACLU

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's strategy against domestic terrorism, unveiled in a report earlier on Tuesday, fails to address a litany of abuses against Blacks, other minorities and especially against American Muslims, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said.

"This new strategy fails to rein in abusive counterterrorism tools that result in unfair and unjustified surveillance and targeting of Black and Brown people, particularly Muslims," an ACLU press release said on Tuesday.

The strategy lacks safeguards against biased profiling, overbroad law enforcement information sharing, and other measures that harm free expression and equal protection, including of the very communities that white supremacists target, the release said.

The "National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism" unveiled by the Justice Department followed an in-depth review of violent extremism ordered by President Joe Biden on his first day in office.

The strategy outlined in a 32-page report focuses on racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists, principally those who promote the superiority of the white race, and associated militia as potentially lethal threats.

To combat the threat, the report recommends expanded information-sharing between US government agencies, technology companies as well as other nations.

The report also authorizes the Department of Homeland Security to allocate more than \$77 million to state, local, tribal and territorial partners to address to the threat.

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New York Drops All COVID-19 Restrictions as 70% of Residents Vaccinated - Governor
NEW YORK, June 15 (Sputnik) - New York State has dropped all COVID-19-related restrictions and reopened its economy fully after the number of vaccinated adult residents against the coronavirus reached 70 percent, Governor Andrew Cuomo said on Tuesday.

"Today, New York State reached our goal of 70 percent adult vaccination," Cuomo said in an announcement on Twitter. "That means we can return to life as we know it. Effective immediately, state-mandated COVID-19 restrictions are lifted across commercial and social settings."

As of June 14, New York authorities reported 470 new cases, down 46 percent over a 14-day period. Hospitalizations were at 1,173 with 12 COVID-19-related deaths.

At the peak of the coronavirus outbreak in April of 2020, there were about 18,000 hospitalized residents and 800 deaths per day from virus-related complications.

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US COVID-19 Death Toll Crosses 600,000 Mark – Johns Hopkins University

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) – The coronavirus death toll in the United States has topped the 600,000 mark, according to figures provided by the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center on Tuesday.

As of 12:50 p.m. (4:500 GMT), the death toll stood at 600,012, with 33,477,016 documented cases in the country since the start of the pandemic.

The United States has recorded the highest number of COVID-19 cases for any country, as well as the highest death toll worldwide.

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US Launches \$3Bln Fund to Help Protect Aviation Industry Jobs - Transportation Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has launched a \$3 billion fund to help protect aviation industry jobs, giving airlines the flexibility to cover employee salaries for up to six months, the Department of Transportation announced on Tuesday.

Eligible businesses of all sizes were encouraged to apply for allocations under the Aviation Manufacturing Jobs Protection program funded through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021,

which aims to save jobs across industries as the economy recovers from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the Department of Transportation said in a statement.

"(The) \$3 billion can be used to help cover employee compensation costs for up to six months," the statement added.

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Justice Department Urges US Supreme Court to Reinstate Death Penalty for Boston Bomber

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department (DOJ) asked the Supreme Court to reinstate the death sentence originally handed down to Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, a brief filed with the court by the DOJ on Monday revealed.

Tsarnaev, who carried out a bomb attack at the 2013 Boston Marathon alongside his older brother, was sentenced to death by a jury in 2015. Last year, however, a federal appeals court overturned the sentence, arguing that prospective jurors had not been questioned by the court about whether they had prior biases about the case before the trial began.

"The judgment of the court of appeals should be reversed," the DOJ said, adding that the members of the jury "carefully considered each of [Tsarnaev's] crimes and determined that capital punishment was warranted for the horrors that he personally inflicted — setting down a shrapnel bomb in a crowd and detonating it, killing a child and a promising young student, and consigning several others 'to a lifetime of unimaginable suffering.' That determination by 12 conscientious jurors deserves respect and reinstatement by this Court."

Much of Tsarnaev's argument that won over the court of appeals was based on the premise that the district court had abused its discretion by excluding evidence about a 2011 triple homicide in Waltham, Massachusetts. They alleged that the Tsarnaev brothers were linked to the crime, with older brother Tamerlan influencing or intimidating Dhokhar into committing the murders — something they argue could have happened during the Boston Marathon bombing as well, which may have changed the jury's view on the death sentence had they known.

The DOJ, however, argued in their brief that the trial court properly selected an impartial jury for the trial and that the court of appeals made an error in their judgment to reverse the death sentence in Tsarnaev's case. He is currently imprisoned at the US supermax prison near Florence, Colorado while his sentence goes through the appeals process.

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Two Dead, Two Injured in Shooting at Factory in US State of Alabama - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - Four people were shot during an incident that occurred at the Mueller Co. plant in Albertville, Alabama, overnight leaving two dead and two injured, the local broadcaster News 19 reported on Tuesday.

The suspect fled the scene. He is believed to be an employee of the plant who started shooting at around 2:30 a.m. (07:30 GMT), Albertville Police Chief Jamie Smith confirmed to News 19. The injured were taken to a hospital and the investigators continue to work to determine the identity of the suspect, the report said.

Mueller Co. is a manufacturer of water distribution products, including fire hydrants and distribution products for the natural gas industry, with a 400 employees working at its plant in Albertville.

Another news source, Al.com, reported that the shooter was found dead after he apparently killed himself.

"The person believed to be the shooter and the vehicle were located just before 6 a.m. this morning in the area of Carlisle Street in Guntersville," Smith was cited by Al.com as saying. "The person was deceased from what appears to be a self-inflicted gunshot wound. There is no danger to the public. Guntersville Police are handling the scene in Guntersville."

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UN Ahead of Putin-Biden Summit Says 'Encourages' Meetings Between UNSC Members - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, June 15 (Sputnik) - UN spokesman Farhan Haq told Sputnik ahead of the summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden in Geneva the organization always encourages meetings among the UN Security Council member states. "We'll wait to see what happens from that meeting," Haq said on Tuesday. "We always encourage meetings among the leaders of the member states, including the members of the Security Council."

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Documents Show Trump Pressed Justice Dept. to Overturn Election Results - US House Panel

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump made a series of attempts to exert pressure on the Justice Department to overturn the results of November 2020 election, according to documents released by US House Committee on Oversight and Reform on Tuesday.

"Today, Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney, the Chairwoman of the Committee on Oversight and Reform, released new documents showing President Trump's efforts to pressure the Department of Justice (DOJ) to overturn the lawful results of the 2020 presidential election," the Committee said in a news release.

Mononey said the documents show Trump tried to corrupt the US chief law enforcement agency "in a brazen attempt to overturn an election that he lost."

The congressman characterized these events as "attempted subversion of democracy" and called on Trump's aides who advised him to make "unlawful actions" to answer questions from lawmakers.

On December 14 - the day electors in each state certified the Electoral College votes - Trump's White House Assistant sent an email with the subject "From POTUS" to then-Deputy Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen, the release said.

"The email attached materials about alleged voter fraud in Antrim County, Michigan, including 'talking points' that asserted, 'a Cover-up is Happening regarding the voting machines in Michigan,' and, 'Michigan cannot certify for Biden,'" the release said.

Soon thereafter, Trump sent these materials to other officials, the release also said.

Other documents revealed that Trump conducted similar actions in December 2020 and in early January 2021, the release added.

On January 6, a group of Trump's supporters entered the Capitol to protest the congressional certification of Joe Biden's election victory in several US states Trump claimed were illegitimate. In the four months since the event, about 440 individuals have been arrested with more than 125 charged on charges of trespassing, impeding law enforcement and assaulting a police officer.

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US Airlines Trim Losses to \$4.2Bln in Q1 21 on Resurgent Domestic Travel - Transport Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) – US passenger airlines reported a net loss of \$4.2 billion after taxes in the first quarter of 2021, down from a \$7 billion shortfall in the final three months of 2020, the Transportation Department said (DOT) on Tuesday.

"While these first-quarter losses are the fifth consecutive quarterly losses, the extent of the losses is narrowing," a DOT press release said. "The first-quarter after-tax net loss of \$4.2 billion was reduced from the fourth-quarter loss of \$7.0 billion."

The improvement in US airline balance sheets was confined to domestic operations, with an after-tax net loss of \$2.4 billion, less than half of the \$5.7 billion loss in the fourth quarter of 2020, the release said.

Lately, US domestic airlines have reported a surge in leisure travel attributed to pent-up demand unleashed by an end to many pandemic restrictions as vaccination coverage expands.

At the same time, first-quarter net US airline losses from international travel swelled to \$1.8 billion in the first quarter, up from \$1.2 billion in the final quarter of 2020, according to the release.

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US Homebuilding Confidence at 10-Month Low as Fewer Buyers Amid Soaring Prices - NAHB

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) - US homebuilding confidence hit 10-month lows in early June from a combination of rising material prices and supply chain shortages, the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) said in its closely-followed survey on home building on Tuesday.

"Higher costs and declining availability for softwood lumber and other building materials pushed down builder sentiment in June," NAHB Chairman Chuck Fowke said. Builder confidence in the market for newly-built single-family homes fell two points to 81, the lowest reading since August 2020.

The survey on homebuilding came after the Labor Department announced earlier on Tuesday that the prices charged by businesses to customers in the United States rose at record high levels in May from a year ago, even as retail sales dipped for the first time in three months to ease some inflation pressure.

While higher costs have moved some new homes beyond the budget of prospective buyers, the reading of above 80 for home building confidence still signaled runaway demand in a market lacking inventory, the NAHB said.

"Policymakers need to focus on supply-chain issues in order to allow the economic recovery to continue," Chairman Fowke added.

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 COVID-19. The Federal Reserve envisions a 6.5 percent expansion for all of this year, although some officials at the central bank have more ambitious expectations, forecasting growth of up to 7.0 percent.

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 inflation benchmark, the Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, jumped 3.6 percent in April compared to the same month of 2020.

But the Consumer Price Index more commonly used by economists surged 5.0 percent for the year to May, its highest since 2008. The closely-followed UMich Consumer Sentiment rose to 86.4 points by early June, from 82.9 points in May. The combination of these has scared some economists into believing that this year's inflation could be the highest in 35 years.

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Biden-Putin Summit May Last Some 5 Hours, With 'No Breaking of Bread' -US Official

WASHINGTON , June 15 (Sputnik) - The upcoming meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden will last for some five hours but without a joint meal, a senior administration official told reporters, according to a White House pool reporter.

The Biden-Putin meetings will have "no breaking of bread," a senior administration official told reporters on Air Force One As quoted by a pool reporter.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said earlier in the day that the summit is expected to last between four and five hours, with breaks and changes of format.

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US Allocates \$2.5Bln in Farm Aid to Fill Gaps in Earlier COVID Relief – Agriculture Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 15 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) plans to begin distributing more than \$2.5 billion in additional aid to farmers and food producers to address disparities in previous COVID-19 relief packages, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said on Tuesday.

“USDA is honoring its commitment to get financial assistance to producers and critical agricultural businesses, especially those left out or underserved by previous COVID aid,” Vilsack said in a press release.

The package includes \$200 million for small lumber companies, \$700 million for biofuel producers, \$980 million for the dairy industry, and more than \$700 million for COVID-19 protection equipment for meat, seafood and specialty crops producers, the release said. Previously, USDA provided more than \$11 billion in pandemic relief since January, the release added.