

06/17/21 Thursday

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US Space Force Operations Chief Confirms Working on Space-Based Directed-Energy Weapons
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In the 1980s, the Pentagon attempted to develop satellite-based laser weapons to intercept incoming nuclear missiles. While the US lacked both technical knowhow and political will to finish the Strategic Defense Initiative, that didn't stop them from testing a slew of space weapons, many of which it fears, now that other nations possess them.

The US Space Force (USSF) has let slip that it is developing space-based directed-energy weapons, a direct violation of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which prohibits the militarization of space.

"Yes sir, we are," Chief of Space Operations Gen. Jay Raymond told Rep. Jim Langevin (D-RI) during [a Wednesday hearing](#) after being asked if the USSF was developing directed-energy systems for US satellites.

The hearing was one of two held in both the House and Senate Armed Services Committees in which Department of the Air Force leaders were asked about their strategic and budgetary priorities.

[Raymond told lawmakers](#) that while space has long been key to US economic and military success, "for the past three decades, we have been able to take that access and freedom for granted. Unfortunately, as the National Defense Strategy and the newer Interim National Security Strategy identified, this is no longer the case."

Reiterating the USSF's claimed *raison d'être* - that Russia and China are "rapidly developing their own space capabilities," Raymond claimed that both nations are fielding "directed energy systems that can blind, disrupt, or damage our satellites; anti-satellite weapons in space that are designed to destroy US satellites; and cyber capabilities that can deny our access to the domain."

Satellites are a pressure point for the US military and intelligence agencies because almost everything they do is dependent in some way or another on information relayed off a space antenna. That includes communication, GPS navigation and targeting, intelligence-gathering, and more. In its [doctrinal documents](#), the Space Force refers to space as the ultimate "high ground."

In 2006, the US National Reconnaissance Office [claimed that China](#) had tested a laser dazzler on a US satellite, temporarily blinding it, but to date the US has not publicly accused Russia or China of deploying directed energy weapons in space, meaning the US is willing to potentially be the first one to break that rule.

However, the US has derided alleged anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons tests by both nations as well, claiming they are a threat to US space assets. This, despite the fact that the US [developed anti-satellite missiles](#) more than half a century ago and has even [detonated nuclear weapons](#) in

space to test their ASAT capabilities. The US has already tested a directed-energy weapon in space too, when it fired off [a particle beam](#) for four minutes in 1989 in an effort to develop anti-ballistic missile capabilities.

In 1967, the Outer Space Treaty between the US, the UK, and Soviet Union laid down the basis for international space law, making it clear that the universe beyond Earth's atmosphere was not to be a domain for military contestation as signatories pledged never to place weapons in space. The treaty is non-binding, but an important statement of peaceful intent.

Notably, the treaty did not ban the construction, testing, or use of ground-based anti-satellite weapons.

To compensate for the dangers posed by other nations challenging the US' long-assumed supremacy in space, the Pentagon has laid out plans for [a vast expansion](#) of satellite capabilities. These include new ballistic missile and hypersonic missile detection satellites, communications and internet satellites, and other intelligence-gathering probes that could one day number in the thousands.

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US House Repeals 2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force in Iraq
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

When US President Joe Biden ordered an airstrike against a depot in Syria allegedly used by Iraqi militias in February, he claimed the action was ordered in self-defense, not under a War on Terror-era law, as has been used for similar past airstrikes.

The US House of Representatives voted on Thursday to repeal the 2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) against Iraq. The law was used to provide legal sanction for the 2003 invasion that overthrew Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, but critics say it has been used to authorize other military actions in recent years, for which it was not intended.

The lower congressional chamber voted 268-161 to repeal the law on Thursday, with 49 Republicans crossing the aisle to support repeal alongside 219 Democrats. The 2002 law had been passed by a wider margin in a Republican-led House in October 2002 and signed into law by then-President George W. Bush.

The [2002 AUMF built](#) on a 2001 AUMF passed in the days after the September 11 terrorist attacks that served as the basis for the War on Terror, authorizing military action even in [undeclared warzones](#) if the targets were from the Al-Qaeda terrorist group responsible for the attacks or were connected to the group. However, the 2002 law specifically targeted Iraq and legally justified a pre-emptive strike in order to remove Hussein from power if it was feared he might use weapons of mass destruction against the US or another target, such as Israel.

Those weapons, of course, did not exist, but Hussein was nonetheless overthrown just days after the US launched an all-out invasion of Iraq in March 2003. In the subsequent occupation war, an estimated 450,000 Iraqis were killed, [according to a study](#) in 2013, two years after US troops withdrew from the country.

Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-NY), who chairs the House Foreign Affairs Committee, [said Thursday the AUMF](#) was “vulnerable to being abused,” especially since Hussein is long gone.

“Repeal is crucial because the executive branch has a history of stretching the 2002 AUMF’s legal authority,” he said. “It has already been used as justification for military actions against entities that had nothing to do with Saddam Hussein’s Baathist’s dictatorship.”

One example given by Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY), who leads the Democratic majority in the Senate, which has yet to pass its version of the bill, was the January 3, 2020, airstrike outside Baghdad airport. The attack, carried out by a US MQ-9 Reaper drone, killed Iranian Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, commander of the elite Quds Force, as well as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the commander of Iraqi Shiite militia Kata’ib Hezbollah and the deputy commander of the paramilitary Popular Mobilization Forces.

The attack aroused fury around the globe. Several days later, Iran responded with a ballistic missile attack against two US bases in Iraq where the majority of US forces in the country are barracked, and the Iraqi parliament voted to ask US forces to leave the country.

Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX), the top Republican in the House Foreign Affairs Committee, dissented, warning that the repeal “sends a dangerous message of disengagement that could destabilize Iraq, embolden Iran, which it will, and strengthen al-Qaeda and ISIS [Daesh] in the region. We would avoid such dangers by taking up a repeal, but a replacement simultaneously.” [The Senate bill](#) also seeks to revoke the 1991 AUMF, which served as the authorization for Operation Desert Storm. If it passes, both chambers will have to reconcile their two versions of the bill before it can be sent to US President [Joe Biden to sign](#) into law.

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Indonesia Inks Deal for Eight Italian Frigates as Defense Ministry Mulls \$125B Modernization Push

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Two months after losing an aging submarine with all hands, Indonesia is looking to drop serious cash in order to modernize its military, buying up new warships and aircraft. Meanwhile, regional nations are meeting to try and defuse tensions in the South China Sea.

Jakarta is considering a massive new modernization effort that would pump \$125 billion over the next three years into buying a slew of new weapons, including possibly tripling the size of its submarine fleet, according to a draft presidential decree obtained [by Benar News](#).

According to the outlet, the government proposes putting \$79.1 billion into procuring new military equipment, while keeping another \$13.4 billion for paying off interest on loans, and another \$32.5 billion for contingencies and maintenance.

This is a dramatic increase in spending: Jakarta’s defense budget for 2021 is just \$9.6 billion, but this plan would increase it to \$26.3 billion per year.

“Investment made during the 2021-2024 period will increase Indonesia’s bargaining position to obtain defense equipment at more affordable prices,” Dahnil Anzar Simanjuntak, a spokesperson for Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, said on Twitter earlier this month. “In

addition, because the investment is made in a relatively short time, it can be ascertained that all equipment purchased will be interoperable.”

The draft reportedly includes no firm statements about which equipment will be sought.

However, several major deals have recently been reached or pitched that will likely play a part.

A Slew of New, Potential Deals

Last week, Italian shipbuilder [Fincantieri announced](#) it had signed a deal of unknown value to sell Indonesia six of its European Multi-Purpose Frigates (FREMMs), an advanced new class of warship in use by several militaries. In France, they are called the Aquitaine class, while Italy’s navy calls them the Bergamini class. The US Navy has also ordered several modified FREMMs to serve as its Constellation-class frigates, of which it may order as many as 20.

In addition, Indonesia is also set to buy two of Italy’s Maestrale-class frigates, an older, smaller class of warship that is about half the size of the 6,700-ton FREMM, and which Jakarta will obtain once they are retired from the Italian Navy. The Fincantieri statement didn’t say when that would be.

[According to Nikkei Asia](#), Indonesia also plans to increase its submarine fleet from four to 12 after the loss of the KRI Nanggala-402, a diesel-electric submarine built in 1977 that [sunk in April](#) during a live-fire torpedo drill off the eastern tip of Java. All 53 crew members died in the accident.

April also saw the unveiling of the KF-21 Boramae, an indigenous alternative to the F-35 jointly developed by Indonesia and South Korea. While not an equal to Lockheed Martin’s stealthy jet, the KF-21 will enable South Korea to replace its aging inferior US export fighters, which include the Vietnam War-era F-4 Phantom II and F-5 Tiger.

Jakarta has a 20% stake in the Boramae program. However, in the run-up to the jet’s unveiling, it [was widely speculated](#) that due to economic troubles, Prabowo might seek to renegotiate that percentage downward; his appearance at the ceremony at the Korea Aerospace Industries factory in Sacheon-si dispelled those rumors.

[Lockheed Martin also said](#) last month that the US government would not object if Jakarta wanted to buy more advanced versions of its F-16 fighters, offering the Southeast Asian nation some of its F-16V “Viper” variants, which sport advanced radars and are compatible with newer weapons systems.

On Wednesday, Prabowo signed [a letter of intent](#) to buy 36 Rafale fighters from Dassault and eight F-15EX Strike Eagles from Boeing by 2024.

South China Sea Cooperation

According to the South China Morning Post, Jakarta’s primary concern is events in the South China Sea, where several nations have made overlapping claims to groups of small islands that may contain hydrocarbon deposits in the surrounding seafloor. China’s claim is the largest, encompassed by the so-called “Four-Sha” claim to the Paracel and Spratly Island chains as well as Pratas Island and Scarborough Shoal. A small part of this claim overlaps with Indonesia’s, but includes no territory, only sea, and no issue has yet arisen. However, last year Jakarta [declined to host](#) US spy planes used to [scour the waterway](#) on a daily basis.

On Tuesday, defense ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Indonesia is a member, held virtual meetings in which they discussed, among other things, [working more quickly](#) to finalize a code of conduct for the South China Sea. The

document would provide a legal framework for nations to resolve disputes over drilling and exploration rights, fishing rights, and military access.

On Wednesday, ASEAN met with eight dialogue partners - Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Russia, and the US - and [India again urged](#) them to complete a code of conduct with China in order to ensure all nations obey and are protected by the 1982 United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea. The week prior, the foreign ministers of China and ASEAN released [a joint statement](#) pledging to avoid provocations in the waterway, and a few days earlier, the naval chiefs of China and Vietnam agreed to [establish a hotline](#) for resolving naval situations.

However, the US has made no such agreement to reduce tensions. Despite having no territory within 1,500 miles of the South China Sea, the US Navy has dispatched another carrier battle group to the waterway, with the USS [Ronald Reagan arriving](#) on Tuesday. The Biden administration is also mulling the creation of a permanent [naval task force](#) assigned to the region, allegedly to “counter China.”

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Abraham Accords Partner Bahrain Seeks Answers on Bennett’s Palestinian Policy as Gaza Strikes Resume
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Following renewed hostilities in Gaza just days into the administration of Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, Bahrain’s foreign ministry has reached out to Jerusalem in order to find out more information about its commitment to the peace deal they signed in September. Bahrain’s foreign minister, Abdullatif Al-Zayani, said on Wednesday that he’d reached out to the Israeli government to ask about “the Israeli policy towards the efforts aimed at establishing peace in the region through the settlement of the Palestinian [issue], on the basis of the two-state solution and the international resolutions,” according to Manama’s [official BNA news agency](#).

Al-Zayani expressed his “keenness to communicate with its Israeli counterpart within the framework of the declaration supporting peace signed between the two countries, to push forward the peace process in the region in order to achieve security, stability and development for the benefit of its people,” the outlet said.

In September 2020, Bahrain joined the United Arab Emirates in signing a peace deal with Israel in which the two Arab states agreed to normalize relations with Israel in exchange for Israel delaying its planned extension of sovereignty over a large part of Area C of the West Bank, a territory with fertile farmland along the Jordan River Valley that is under complete Israeli military control. The deal was dubbed [the Abraham Accords](#) and later expanded to include Sudan and Morocco before the year was out.

However, the deal did nothing to halt Israeli bombardment of Gaza, which resumed almost before the ink was dry. While the accord signatories remained silent on the smaller-scale

attacks, when the massive IDF bombing campaign began on May 10, 2021, they attracted no shortage of criticism from other Muslim states.

At a summit of the the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) during the 11-day war, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad [Javad Zarif told](#) the accord signatories present that “the massacre of Palestinian children today follows the purported normalization,” adding that “this criminal and genocidal regime has once again proven that friendly gestures only aggravate its atrocities.” “Make no mistake: Israel only understands the language of resistance and the people of Palestine are fully entitled to their right to defend themselves,” he added.

In Bahrain, [protesters gathered](#) in Manama to protest the bombardment. However, the Bahraini government remained silent. According to [The Guardian](#), a similar drama played out among all four Abraham Accord states.

However, the Israeli government that signed the Abraham Accords and that prosecuted not only the May 2021 war in Gaza, but also those in August 2014 and December 2008-January 2009, passed out of power last week.

Benjamin Netanyahu’s 12-year term as Israeli Prime Minister came to an end Sunday as a wide agglomeration of smaller parties united to form a coalition government with Naftali Bennett, chairman of the right-wing nationalist party Yamina, at the helm.

Bennett has pledged that his government, which for the first time in Israeli history includes an Arab party in the form of the conservative Ra’am joint list, will not rock the boat on international agreements and even said he [wants to expand](#) the Abraham Accords. The deal with Ra’am [includes a pledge](#) not to annex any of the West Bank. However, his own beliefs have left no question of what his ultimate political goals are.

In November 2016, when Donald Trump won election to the US presidency, [Bennett boasted](#) that his victory “is a tremendous opportunity for Israel to immediately announce its intention to renege on the idea of establishing Palestine in the heart of the country – a direct blow to our security and the justice of our cause ... The era of the Palestinian state is over.”

During the 11-day war, Bennett [tweeted a video](#) in which he claimed that Gaza’s Al-Shifa Hospital is “where Hamas’ headquarter is located, while they are conducting terror actions against Israel.” The IDF said its bombs, which killed hundreds of civilians, were targeting alleged Hamas facilities. After a ceasefire was concluded on May 21, the IDF released [a detailed list](#) of the facilities it claimed to have destroyed, including launch sites for some of the 4,300 rockets fired into Israel during the war, which killed 13 people.

On Tuesday, after a pause of several weeks, [the shooting resumed](#) after Israeli police allowed a march of right-wing demonstrators to parade through Jerusalem neighborhoods celebrating the city’s capture in the 1967 Six-Day War, despite urges by Palestnian authorities not to permit the march to proceed. As incendiary balloons launched from Gaza set fire to grasslands in southern Israel, IDF airstrikes pummelled Gaza, [continuing on Thursday](#) for the third night in a row.

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Biden Signs 'Juneteenth National Independence Day Act' Into Law, Establishing June 19 as Holiday

by [Evan Craighead](#)

While the White House is just now recognizing Juneteenth as a national holiday, June 19 has historically been observed nationwide as a day to commemorate the emancipation of African American victims of chattel slavery in the United States.

US President Joe Biden on Thursday signed the "Juneteenth National Independence Day Act," officially establishing Juneteenth - June 19 - as a federal holiday in the US.

"I regret that my grandchildren aren't here, because this is a really, really, really important moment in our history," Biden said prior to signing the bill into law.

The June 19 holiday, aptly dubbed 'Juneteenth National Independence Day,' comes as the first new federal holiday since Martin Luther King Jr. Day - January 17 - was established in 1983.

Juneteenth has remained a celebration of the emancipation of enslaved Africans in the US since 1865, when Union soldiers under General Gordon Granger delivered General Order Number 3 to Galveston, Texas.

"The people of Texas are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free," the order read. "This involves an absolute equality of rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired laborer."

The move came about after the Emancipation Proclamation, and ended the legal practice of slavery in the state of Texas.

"Juneteenth marks both a long, hard night of slavery and a promise of a brighter morning to come," Biden remarked during the signing event, proclaiming "great nations don't ignore their most painful moments."

First Lady Dr. Jill Biden announced on Twitter that she was "so proud" of her husband's action. Prior to reaching Biden's desk, the bill unanimously passed in the US Senate, but encountered pushback from [14 Republicans](#) in the US House of Representatives.

Many of those against making Juneteenth a federal holiday are lawmakers representing southern states, including Rep. Scott DesJarlais (R-TN), Rep. Ralph Norman (R-SC), Rep. Ronny Jackson (R-TX) and Rep. Mo Brooks (R-AL).

Brooks asserted in a recent statement that his 'no' vote was not in opposition of the commemoration of the freeing of enslaved Africans in the US.

"The day the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, or the days the 13th, 14th or 15th amendments were passed, or the end of the Civil War would be more appropriate," said a spokesperson for the US representative from Alabama.

"He would also prefer that another federal holiday be eliminated to offset the \$1 billion price tag associated with giving federal workers the day off," the spokesperson added.

Due to Juneteenth falling on a Saturday this year, federal employees will receive paid time off for Friday, June 18, this year, according to the [US Office of Personnel Management](#).

Government offices will also be closed for the day.

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Ted Cruz Hopes 'Charming' Matthew McConaughey Does Not Run For Texas Governor
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Last month, famed Hollywood actor and producer Matthew McConaughey teased that a possible campaign for Texas governorship is a "true consideration." It is unclear what party the Oscar-winning actor would run under, as he has previously described himself as "aggressively centrist."

While McConaughey's gubernatorial bid remains in the air, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) made it clear on Thursday that he does not want the "Dallas Buyers Club" actor to slide into politics.

"I hope Matthew decides not to run," Cruz told "The Hugh Hewitt Show," highlighting that the actor is both "good-looking" and "charming."

The US senator from Texas went on to admit that McConaughey's charisma and star power would make him a "formidable" opponent against incumbent Texas Governor Greg Abbott (R), who is seeking reelection in next year's race.

"I like Matthew personally," Cruz admitted. "I know him a little bit, not well, but I've spent a little bit of time with him. And he's a very charming, very affable guy."

Cruz's comments come weeks after McConaughey, [once again](#), expressed that he has not ruled out a gubernatorial campaign.

"I'm not interested in going and putting a bunch of Band-Aids on that are going to be ripped off as soon as I'm out, I'm interested in building something that can last and I'm measuring what category that is, I don't know if that's politics," [he said](#), noting that many politicians "never get credit" for their "accomplishments."

[According to a survey](#) conducted by The Dallas Morning News and the University of Texas at Tyler, 45% of registered Texas voters would vote for McConaughey, who is a Texas native, in the 2022 governor's race.

Comparatively, some 33% of voters expressed that they would vote for Abbott again.

While it appears many Texans are looking for new blood in politics, Cruz has not been the only one to cast doubt on the actor's political aspirations.

Former US President George Bush, who served as Texas governor from 1995 to 2000, told "The Hugh Hewitt Show" [back in April](#) that he is unsure "whether or not [McConaughey] can put up with all the noise, all the rubber chicken circus - you know, all the stuff that goes on."

"The criticism can be pretty harsh, Hugh, and the question would be: does he have a set of principles firm enough to not worry about what the critics say?" Bush posed.

Following the political crossover success of former US President Donald Trump, a number of celebrities have expressed interest in running for public office, including McConaughey, wrestler-turned-actor [Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson](#), and retired Olympic gold medal-winning decathlete [Caitlyn Jenner](#).

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Biden's Glass House - Cartoon

As the saying goes, people who live in glass houses should not throw stones. According to netizens, US President Joe Biden did not adhere to this proverb during his Wednesday remarks on Russia following his summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Brussels, Belgium. "How would it be if the United States were viewed by the rest of the world as interfering with the elections directly of other countries? And everybody knew it?" Biden rhetorically asked reporters during his Wednesday news conference in Brussels, speaking of alleged Russian interference in US elections.

While the pre-selected reporters failed to press Biden on his comment, those viewing the press conference took to social media to pan his statement as woefully hypocritical.

Overwhelmingly, netizens brought up past instances of the White House working to bring about "[regime change](#)" in countries such as Iraq, Honduras, Libya, [Venezuela](#) and Syria.

A number of individuals replied to Biden's comments with the July 1996 cover of TIME Magazine, which notably featured a [cover story](#) on how "four US advisers used polls, focus groups, negative ads and all other techniques of American campaigning to help Boris Yeltsin win" the 1996 presidential election in Russia.

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Move Over, Models: Victoria's Secret Nixes Angels, Taps Rapinoe, Chopra as Reps in Major Rebrand

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Back in 2019, Victoria's Secret moved to cancel its annual fashion show for the first time in 2019. At the time, the lingerie brand's parent company, L Brands, said it was mulling how to "advance the positioning of the brand and best communicate that to customers."

Victoria's Secrets announced on Wednesday that, after years of low sales and poor fashion show ratings, it would be launching a rebrand that is more inclusive, and geared toward advocating for women.

Two initiatives - 'The VS Collective' and 'The Victoria's Secret Global Fund for Women's Cancers' - will kickstart the lingerie company's attempt to modernize its marketing.

"At Victoria's Secret, we are on an incredible journey to become the world's leading advocate for women," Victoria's Secret Chief Executive Officer Martin Waters said in a quoted statement to investors. "This is a dramatic shift for our brand, and it's a shift that we embrace from our core. These new initiatives are just the beginning. We are energized and humbled by the work ahead of us."

Martha Pease, the company's Chief Marketing Officer, detailed that the VS Collective will serve as a type of brand ambassador program to bring about new collaborations and "cause-related initiatives."

The first members of the VS Collective include US soccer player and activist Megan Rapinoe, actor Priyanka Chopra, and world champion freeskier Eileen Gu.

"We looked for women who had a track record of accomplishment, but also a multidimensional aspect to who they are and how they show up in the world that would help us bring a different type of narrative to our brand," Pease told NBC News.

Rapinoe tweeted that she was "excited and ready" for the partnership, which she says will "show ALL [sic] women their individual and collective beauty power."

"Victoria's Secret is changing," Pease said. "And the change is focused on being there for women, championing women, and advocating for women in ways that have a positive impact on their lives."

The move notably comes after the company faced fierce backlash for its "lack of diversity" in its once-annual fashion show - which featured the elite Victoria's Secret "angels." In 2019, the company announced that it would cease its fashion shows in order to better cater to its consumers.

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RPT - Yaroshenko's Defense Believes He Will Be Included in US-Russia Prisoners Swap

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The legal defense of the Russian national Konstantin Yaroshenko, who is serving a prison sentence in the United States, hopes that he will be included in a possible prisoner exchange between Moscow and Washington, Yaroshenko's lawyer Alexey Tarasov told Sputnik.

On Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said after the summit with his US counterpart Joe Biden that they raised prisoners exchange as an issue on which compromises could be found between Russia and the United States.

"I do believe that, if an exchange were to happen, that Konstantin Yaroshenko would be one of the people that would be exchanged," Tarasov said.

The lawyer welcomed the fact that both leaders raised the subject of prisoner exchanges. "I believe it is the right moment to raise this issue," he added.

The specifics of possible swap are yet to be worked out, Tarasov noted. In the meantime, he pointed out that Biden mentioned the timeframe of six months in his remarks following the talks in Geneva.

"So within the next six months, we will know if it would be possible to have the prisoners released," the lawyer said.

Tarasov did not rule out that another client, Yuri Martyshev, who is serving his 78-month sentence on computer hacking charges, as well as Viktor Bout, whose interests he represented in the past, would also be included in the swap.

"The fact that no particular names were mentioned does not exclude the possibility of other people being exchanged," Tarasov said.

Yaroshenko was arrested in Liberia in 2010 on suspicion of drug trafficking and later extradited to the United States. In 2011, a US court sentenced Yaroshenko to 20 years in prison for allegedly taking part in a conspiracy to smuggle a large amount of drugs into the country. Yaroshenko pleaded not guilty to the charges against him.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Putin-Biden Summit May Rejuvenate US-Russia Trade Relations

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden held in Geneva may infuse positive energy in US-Russia trade relations, US-based experts told Sputnik.

On Wednesday, Putin and Biden held their first in-person meeting at the lakeside Villa La Grange in Geneva. The two leaders covered a wide range of issues concerning strategic stability, cybersecurity and regional matters, including Ukraine and Afghanistan, among others. Putin and Biden signed a joint document on strategic stability and held separate press conferences after the summit.

SUMMIT "NET POSITIVE" FOR BUSINESS RELATIONS

"The summit in Geneva is a net-positive for US-Russian business relations," President of the Seattle-based Council for US-Russia Relations Derek Norberg said.

Norberg expressed regret about the difficulties and inability of businesspeople to obtain visas - a situation that discourages economic ties between the United States and Russia. As a next step after the summit, both governments should consult with their business communities about all that is needed to improve and accelerate business cooperation, he added.

"As I understand it, there is no shortage of proposals at the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Ministry of Economic Development to improve business conditions in Russia to benefit all businesses," Norberg said. "Improved conditions in Russia for business generally, including legal protections, will help accelerate opportunity for US-Russian business partnerships."

Both sides should pay particular attention to such issues as restoring visa services, reopening international travel and improving conditions for entrepreneurs, which are complicated but have to be addressed in order to improve business relations, he added.

Russian Public Affairs Committee (Ru-PAC) President Hunter Cawood acknowledged the Putin-Biden summit in Geneva may effectively be the catalyst for improved partnership between the United States and Russia, but cautioned it is too soon to make any definitive judgements.

"If this summit truly becomes the start of a gradual de-escalation in tensions that is followed by a lifting of sanctions, then this could be a catalyst for US-Russia business relations," Cawood said. "We could see a significant uptick in bilateral trade and business partnerships that will inevitably benefit both sides.

However, Eurasia Center Vice President Earl Rasmussen disagreed with the assessment as being too optimistic at present and expressed doubt about the prospects of US-Russia trade cooperation.

"Many businesses, US, European and Russian partners lost investments and markets as a result of the US-initiated sanctions," he said.

Rasmussen added that it will take time to regain lost ground and improvements will depend on the progress of follow-up actions after the summit.

FRUITFUL COOPERATION WILL ALLOW SANCTIONS REMOVAL

All experts called on both, Washington and Moscow, to develop cooperation in order to remove the element of sanctions in their relations.

"Having the two sides work more closely on a common-interest agenda does mitigate against negative behaviors or disruptive sanctions by either side. In this regard, the more fruitful the cooperation, the greater the incentive for both sides to behave well and not jeopardize the cooperative benefits and less likely are additional sanctions," Norberg said.

Ceasing the sanctions rhetoric depends heavily on US domestic policy, as both Democrats and Republicans use Russia as a political weapon against the , Norberg also said.

"If Moscow can somehow cease to be an effective instrument to pummel political opponents, then we might see a real shift in the discourse concerning Russia," he said.

The experts urged Biden to let US sanctions policy die down and expressed hope his Democratic party will follow in his footsteps.

"President Biden seems to be serious about bringing about a better, more stable relationship and I'm hopeful his party will follow suit," Cawood said.

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RPT - Leading US Civil Rights Organization Says Encouraged By Signing of Juneteenth Bill

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is encouraged that Juneteenth has become a national holiday in the United States, but the date serves as a reminder the fight for freedom is ongoing, a NAACP spokesperson told Sputnik.

President Joe Biden signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act into law earlier on Thursday, making it a national holiday that marks the emancipation of the enslaved people in the United States.

"As we work towards substantive pieces of legislation to protect voting rights and create transparency and accountability in policing, we are encouraged by today's signing of the Juneteenth bill," the spokesperson said in a statement on Thursday. "It is a reminder that freedom is an ongoing fight."

The legislation was passed by both the House of Representatives and the Senate with bipartisan support. It marks the first establishment of a new federal holiday since the creation of Martin Luther King Jr. day in 1983.

Juneteenth commemorates the anniversary of Union Army Gen. Gordon Granger proclaiming freedom for slaves in Texas on June 19th, 1865. Although President Abraham Lincoln had declared the emancipation of the slaves in 1862, enforcement of their freedom took longer as it took the Union forces more time to make their way to Texas.

The freed slaves and their descendants began celebrating the holiday, which often coincided with political rallies that instructed them about political and social activism.

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ANALYSIS - Putin-Biden Summit May Rejuvenate US-Russia Trade Relations

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden held in Geneva may infuse positive energy in US-Russia trade relations, US-based experts told Sputnik.

On Wednesday, Putin and Biden held their first in-person meeting at the lakeside Villa La Grange in Geneva. The two leaders covered a wide range of issues concerning strategic stability, cybersecurity and regional matters, including Ukraine and Afghanistan, among others. Putin and Biden signed a joint document on strategic stability and held separate press conferences after the summit.

SUMMIT "NET POSITIVE" FOR BUSINESS RELATIONS

"The summit in Geneva is a net-positive for US-Russian business relations," President of the Seattle-based Council for US-Russia Relations Derek Norberg said.

Norberg expressed regret about the difficulties and inability of businesspeople to obtain visas - a situation that discourages economic ties between the United States and Russia. As a next step after the summit, both governments should consult with their business communities about all that is needed to improve and accelerate business cooperation, he added.

"As I understand it, there is no shortage of proposals at the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Ministry of Economic Development to improve business conditions in Russia to benefit all businesses," Norberg said. "Improved conditions in Russia for business generally, including legal protections, will help accelerate opportunity for US-Russian business partnerships."

Both sides should pay particular attention to such issues as restoring visa services, reopening international travel and improving conditions for entrepreneurs, which are complicated but have to be addressed in order to improve business relations, he added.

Russian Public Affairs Committee (Ru-PAC) President Hunter Cawood acknowledged the Putin-Biden summit in Geneva may effectively be the catalyst for improved partnership between the United States and Russia, but cautioned it is too soon to make any definitive judgements.

"If this summit truly becomes the start of a gradual de-escalation in tensions that is followed by a lifting of sanctions, then this could be a catalyst for US-Russia business relations," Cawood said. "We could see a significant uptick in bilateral trade and business partnerships that will inevitably benefit both sides.

However, Eurasia Center Vice President Earl Rasmussen disagreed with the assessment as being too optimistic at present and expressed doubt about the prospects of US-Russia trade cooperation.

"Many businesses, US, European and Russian partners lost investments and markets as a result of the US-initiated sanctions," he said.

Rasmussen added that it will take time to regain lost ground and improvements will depend on the progress of follow-up actions after the summit.

FRUITFUL COOPERATION WILL ALLOW SANCTIONS REMOVAL

All experts called on both, Washington and Moscow, to develop cooperation in order to remove the element of sanctions in their relations.

"Having the two sides work more closely on a common-interest agenda does mitigate against negative behaviors or disruptive sanctions by either side. In this regard, the more fruitful the cooperation, the greater the incentive for both sides to behave well and not jeopardize the cooperative benefits and less likely are additional sanctions," Norberg said.

Ceasing the sanctions rhetoric depends heavily on US domestic policy, as both Democrats and Republicans use Russia as a political weapon against the , Norberg also said.

"If Moscow can somehow cease to be an effective instrument to pummel political opponents, then we might see a real shift in the discourse concerning Russia," he said.

The experts urged Biden to let US sanctions policy die down and expressed hope his Democratic party will follow in his footsteps.

"President Biden seems to be serious about bringing about a better, more stable relationship and I'm hopeful his party will follow suit," Cawood said.

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US Embassy Staff in Kabul Teleworking Amid COVID-19 Outbreak - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US Embassy staff in Kabul is teleworking amid a coronavirus outbreak in the compound that has already claimed the life of one local worker, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said at a briefing.

"Afghanistan as we know is experiencing an intense third wave of COVID-19 cases throughout the country, in response to an outbreak on the compound, the embassy has adjusted operations... this includes requiring all staff to telework," Price said on Thursday.

Price said he cannot confirm the number of COVID-19 cases among workers at the US Embassy in Kabul, but he said it is significant.

The American Foreign Service Association in a statement said the US embassy in Afghanistan announced that one employee has died and 114 have been infected.

The AFSA also said the embassy is now on "lockdown" and called on the White House to take action.

"AFSA urges the Biden Administration to take swift action to allow the Department of State to require all personnel, including local employees and third-country nationals, serving at our embassies and consulates abroad under Chief of Mission authority, direct-hire and contract alike, to be fully vaccinated for Covid-19 as a condition of their physical presence in the workplace," the statement said.

The Wall Street Journal, citing an internal management notice, reported that the situation was chaotic at the embassy as the illness spread rapidly, forcing health units to create temporary wards because the intensive care unit at the US military hospital that supports the embassy is at full capacity.

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US Envoy to Visit Seoul June 19-23 to Discuss N. Korea Policy With Partners - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative Sung Kim will visit Seoul this weekend to discuss the outcomes of the United States' North Korea policy review with South Korean and Japanese government officials, the State Department said in a press release. "US Special Representative for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) Ambassador Sung Kim will travel to Seoul, June 19-23," the release said on Thursday. "Special Representative Kim will also meet with other senior ROK [South Korean] officials and engage members of academia and civil society to discuss the outcomes of the United States' DPRK policy review."

Kim will also join a trilateral meeting with South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Noh Kyu-duk and Japanese Director-General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Funakoshi Takehiro.

Kim will be accompanied by Deputy Special Representative Dr. Jung Pak and a representative of the White House National Security Council, the release added.

The state-run Korean Central News Agency reported that North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un has outlined Pyongyang's approach toward the United States, stressing the need for both dialogue and confrontation.

The Biden administration's North Korea policy review will outline the United States' approach to denuclearize the Korean peninsula in coordination with Japan and South Korea. Last month, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said that under the new US policy toward North Korea, Washington would not focus on achieving "a grand bargain."

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Canada's Health Agency in Contempt of House for Withholding Documents on Work with China

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Canada's House of Commons has voted to find the country's Public Health Agency (PHAC) in contempt of parliament for failing to turn over unredacted documents related to collaboration with China on deadly pathogens and the firing of two scientists.

On June 2, Canada's parliament voted to force PHAC to hand over unredacted documents concerning the transfer of Ebola and Henipah viruses from the National Microbiology Lab in Winnipeg to the Wuhan Institute of Virology and the subsequent dismissal of Drs. Xiangguo Qiu and Keding Cheng, who were stripped of their security clearances in the process.

The House of Commons voted 176 to 150 on Thursday to find PHAC "to be in contempt for its failure to obey the order of the House, adopted on June 2, 2021, as well as the orders of the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations adopted on March 31 and May 10, 2021."

As per the ruling, PHAC President Iain Stewart will have to appear before the House of Commons to receive formal admonishment from the speaker and to turn over the documents in question. Failure to do so could force the government to invoke an enforcement mechanism. PHAC has previously refused to turn over the documents to the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations, which is investigating the affair. It is unclear whether Health Minister Patty Hajdu intends to honor the subpoena order to testify before the committee, which was part of the June 2 order.

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

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Biden Clarified to Putin US Cyber Capabilities in Geneva - White House's Sullivan

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden clarified to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin American cyber capabilities and his "full willingness" to use them if Russia fails to deter criminals operating from its territory from attacking the country's critical infrastructures, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said.

"I won't go into further detail now but President Biden did clarify to President Putin our capacities and his full willingness to use them if necessary depending on how things develop," Sullivan told CNN on Thursday.

During their meeting in Geneva both leaders agreed to start cooperation on cybersecurity following a series of ransomware attacks on US companies allegedly carried out by Russian-based hackers.

Biden passed to Putin a list of 16 entities designated as "critical infrastructure" and demanded that they should be off limits for any cyberintrusions.

"We have significant capacities in cyberspace and in other domains and the President is prepared to use them if it turns out that Russia cannot control the criminals operating from its soil," Sullivan quoted Biden as saying in both private and public settings.

He added that this was not a threat or ultimatum, but an indication of readiness to take action in defense of US critical infrastructure.

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President Joe Biden signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act into law earlier on Thursday, making it a national holiday that marks the emancipation of the enslaved people in the United States.

"As we work towards substantive pieces of legislation to protect voting rights and create transparency and accountability in policing, we are encouraged by today's signing of the Juneteenth bill," the spokesperson said in a statement on Thursday. "It is a reminder that freedom is an ongoing fight."

The legislation was passed by both the House of Representatives and the Senate with bipartisan support. It marks the first establishment of a new federal holiday since the creation of Martin Luther King Jr. day in 1983.

Juneteenth commemorates the anniversary of Union Army Gen. Gordon Granger proclaiming freedom for slaves in Texas on June 19th, 1865. Although President Abraham Lincoln had declared the emancipation of the slaves in 1862, enforcement of their freedom took longer as it took the Union forces more time to make their way to Texas.

The freed slaves and their descendants began celebrating the holiday, which often coincided with political rallies that instructed them about political and social activism.

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**Canadians May Take Pfizer or Moderna Second Dose After Receiving AstraZeneca Vaccine-
NACI**

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) is recommending those who received the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus shot as the first dose in their vaccination schedule to get vaccinated with a messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccine for their second dose.

"An mRNA vaccine should now be offered as the second dose for individuals who received a first dose of AstraZeneca or [its Indian analogue] COVISHIELD vaccine," Canada's Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said during a press briefing on Thursday.

There are two mRNA vaccines currently approved for use in Canada produced by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna.

NACI said the mixed-dose schedule provides better protection against the disease and reduces the risk of developing Vaccine-Induced Immune Thrombotic Thrombocytopenia.

Canadian public health officials have received 56 reports of blood clotting events following vaccination with AstraZeneca, with 38 of the cases being confirmed, and all were related to the first dose .

Canada's "vaccine czar" Krista Brodie said there are 600,000 AstraZeneca vaccine doses in circulation in the country and their future will now be determined by the provinces.

Canada's vaccination regime has faced repeated setbacks, with the country experiencing a shortage of doses, while NACI has been criticized for inconsistent messaging and Canadian health officials' decision to delay the time between vaccinations for up to four months based solely on acquisition schedules.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik)

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday that he reached agreement with his US counterpart Joe Biden during the summit in Geneva on the key issues on which the United States and Russia could narrow the gap.

* Putin expressed gratitude to his Swiss counterpart, Guy Parmelin, for the hospitality during the top-level Russian-US summit in Geneva.

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov informed his Belarusian counterpart Vladimir Makei and CIS member states ambassadors to Russia about the results of the summit between presidents Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden in Geneva, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* The United States expects the coming months will show whether progress is possible in its relationship with Russia or it should resort to unilateral measures to protect its interests, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said.

* Biden and Putin discussed during the summit in Geneva issues related to employing locals at their respective diplomatic missions, and Putin assured his counterpart he would allow the US mission in Moscow to be properly staffed, Sullivan said.

BIDEN-ERDOGAN TALKS

* US President Joe Biden and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met on the margins of the NATO summit and discussed the potential for Turkey to guard the Kabul airport with the two sides agreeing to ensure the facility was protected, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.

* Biden discussed with Erdogan the issue of Russian-made S-400 air defense systems, but no resolution was found with both parties determined to continue the dialogue, Sullivan said.

* Erdogan said that Biden intends to pay a visit to Turkey.

NORD STREAM 2

* The US Deputy State Secretary Wendy Sherman has reiterated Washington's opposition to Nord Stream 2 pipeline project in a meeting with German counterpart Miguel Berger, the Department's spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

LAVROV-RAAB TALKS

* UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov discussed international security, COVID-19 and climate change during a phone conversation on Thursday, the UK Foreign Office said.

* Lavrov told Raab it is important that London rejects provocative rhetoric against Russia, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

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Biden Signs Law to Create Holiday Marking Freeing of Black Americans From Slavery

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - June 19 is now an official, national holiday marking the emancipation of enslaved people in the US following the signing of the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act into law by President Joe Biden on Thursday.

"Today we consecrate Juneteenth for what it ought to be, what it must be -- a national holiday," Biden said.

The legislation, which formally established the day as a national holiday, was passed by both the House and Senate with bipartisan support. It marks the first establishment of a new federal holiday since the creation of Martin Luther King Jr. day in 1983.

Biden added in his speech that the holiday can act as an opportunity to learn about US history and celebrate progress, noting that "great nations don't ignore their most painful moments" but rather, embrace them.

Juneteenth commemorates the anniversary of Union Army general Gordon Granger proclaiming freedom for slaves in Texas back on June 19th, 1865. Although President Abraham Lincoln had declared the emancipation of the slaves back in 1862, enforcement of their freedom took longer as it took Union forces plenty of time to make their way to Texas. Freed slaves and their descendants began celebrating the holiday, which often coincided with political rallies that instructed newly-freed slaves about political and social activism.

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US Diplomat Reiterates Opposition to Nord Stream 2 in Meeting With German Counterpart

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – The US Deputy State Secretary Wendy Sherman has reiterated Washington's opposition to Nord Stream 2 pipeline project in a meeting with German counterpart Miguel Berger, the Department's spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman met with German State Secretary Miguel Berger today in Washington, D.C.," Price said in a release. "The Deputy Secretary [Sherman] underscored the importance of European energy security, reiterating the United States' opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline."

The two officials also reaffirmed their support for the sovereignty of Ukraine and territorial integrity in the face of alleged Russian aggression while underscoring the need for Kiev to make continued progress on reforms.

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US Supply Chains Have 10 Days Less Stock Due to COVID-19 Measures - White House

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US supply chains are struggling with near record-low inventories of homes and cars as complications caused by the coronavirus pandemic measures have left manufacturers with ten days less supply than a year ago for most goods, the White House said on Thursday.

"While retailers had 43 days of inventory in February 2020, today they have just 33 days," the White House said in a blog. "Inventories of cars and homes are also at or near record lows, sufficient for just one month of car sales and 4.4 months of home sales, as compared to pre-pandemic levels of about two months for cars and 5.5 months for homes."

Such shortages were also withholding business activity in some sectors, the White House said, citing the inventory deficit in framing lumber, wallboard and roofing materials and their impact on homebuilding.

Another impact of the shortages has been abrupt price increases, with commodities tracked within the Producer Price Index rising by 19 percent between May 2020 and May 2021, the largest year-over-year increase since 1974.

While the pandemic itself was mainly responsible for the breakdown in supply chains, the reaction of businesses to the crisis also contributed significantly to the inventory deficit and slowing of stocking and delivery.

"A key reason for the acute problems in motor vehicles is that automakers appear to have underestimated demand for their products after the start of the pandemic," the White House said. "Expecting weak demand, they canceled orders of semiconductors, an item with a long lead time and with a secular increase in demand from other industries. This problem is compounded by the fragmentation in recent decades of the auto supply chain across many countries and many firms. This phenomenon has made it difficult for automakers to trace the root causes of bottlenecks, since for example a semiconductor may be designed by one firm, manufactured by a second firm, embedded into a component (such as an air bag) by a third supplier, and only then delivered to an automaker's assembly plant."

As a result, in most cases, neither the automaker nor the semiconductor manufacturers could trace what went on in these intermediate layers - or "tiers" - of the supply chain, due in part to lack of trust among parties in supply chains, who fear that the information might be used to replace them or to bargain for a price reduction, the White House said.

"While these problems are most acute in semiconductors, they are found in other parts of the auto supply chain as well," it added. "The auto sector is 'the industry of industries', so the price of cars is affected by the prices of the 30,000 parts in the car, from semiconductors to steel to plastic to rubber, and the logistics of transporting these parts across multiple national borders," it added.

In some cases, businesses were just not prepared for inordinate demand shocks that occurred during the pandemic, the White House said, citing the 40 percent boom in demand for toilet paper in the early days of the pandemic due to hoarding by Americans fearing they would run out on this.

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US Approval of COVID-19 Benefits More Likely for Whites than Blacks - Audit

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Approval of benefits for individuals applying for COVID-19 unemployment payments came more readily for White applicants than their Black counterparts, an audit by the General Accountability Office (GAO) said on Thursday.

"Among the most recent phase 3 survey respondents, 80.2 percent of White, non-Hispanic/Latino UI [unemployment insurance] applicants reported receiving UI benefits, as compared to 73.0 percent of Black, non-Hispanic/Latino applicants," the audit report said. The report did not attempt to determine reasons for these disparity, but the results "could suggest that states may be approving or processing unemployment claims differently for applicants in different racial and ethnic groups," the report said.

Phase 3 refers to the COVID-19 relief package approved by Congress in March 2020, which provided an additional \$600 to weekly unemployment benefits to workers who lost jobs due to the pandemic.

GAO found similar disparities in a preliminary review of Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) in five states. The program temporarily expanded benefits to self-employed workers, independent contractors and part-time workers impacted by the pandemic.

In two of the five states, for example, the percentage of White PUA claimants who received benefits in 2020 was considerably higher than the percentage of Black PUA claimants who received benefits that year, the report said.

GAO noted that while its PUA analysis based on state-provided data was preliminary, auditors continue to examine racial disparities with the selected states.

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No Exact Timeframe When Sixth Round of JCPOA Talks Will End – US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - There is no exact timeframe for the conclusion of the sixth round of talks on the Iranian nuclear deal that began in Vienna last week, US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"We don't have a timeframe for the sixth round of talks [to end], but we will keep you updated as updates are available," Price said in a briefing.

Price underscored that the US continues to consider diplomacy as the primary means to achieve a return to the seminal deal while expecting Iran to set aside what he called its "provocative behavior," including attempts to produce enriched up to 60 percent uranium. The sixth round of talks began in Vienna on Saturday and promises to be the toughest phase as it will be primarily focused on the most difficult issues and remaining disagreements. Rafael Grossi, the head of the UN nuclear watchdog International Atomic Energy Agency, told the Italian newspaper La Repubblica that there would be no breakthroughs before Iran elects a new government.

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US Still Not Granted Access to American Danny Fenster Detained in Myanmar - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United States has still not been granted access to American journalist Danny Fenster who was detained in Myanmar last month by the nation's military junta, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Our consular officers in Burma have sought to visit Daniel, but we have not been afforded access to him by regime officials," Price said in a telephone briefing.

Fenster, 37, worked as the managing editor of the Frontier Myanmar news magazine. He was detained on May 24 at Yangon International Airport before he could board a plane to leave the country.

Media reported that earlier on Thursday, Fenster appeared before a special court in Yangon's Insein Prison to face charges under a law that criminalizes encouraging dissent against the Myanmar military.

The military in Myanmar seized control of the nation in a coup d'état on February 1, 2021. There have been mass protests since the coup was staged. On the other hand, the military authorities assert that it was justified and vow to transfer power after a new election, the date for which however is yet to be given.

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Dems View US Capitol Riot as 'Insurrection,' Republicans Favor 'Legitimate Protest' - Poll

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Nearly three-fourths of US adults agree the January 6 storming of the Capitol should be classified as a riot, but a huge partisan gap exists on whether it reached the level of insurrection, a Monmouth University Poll revealed on Thursday.

"Riot receives the most cross-partisan approval - 87% of Democrats, 67% of independents, and 62% of Republicans say the word is an apt description - but there is a wide gap for applying 'insurrection' to the event," a press release explaining the poll said.

"Insurrection" is an appropriate description for 85 percent of Democrats, 48 percent of independent voters and just 33 percent of Republicans, the release said.

Nearly half of Republicans (47 percent) called "legitimate protest" an acceptable description compared with just 13 percent of Democrats and 39 percent of independents, the release added.

"Most Americans agree that the violence at the Capitol was not a legitimate protest. Whether it rises to the level of an insurrection depends on which side of the aisle you sit," Monmouth Polling Director Patrick Murray said in the release.

Should Congress form an independent commission to probe the violence – an unlikely scenario given opposition from Senate Republicans - clear majorities would approve of investigators looking into the growth of militant groups in the country (74%), the role of white nationalism (68%), whether Trump played a role (66%), and potential voter fraud in the 2020 election (58%), according to the release.

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G7 Exploring Action Against China's Forced Labor - US National Security Adviser

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – The United States expects its G7 partners to impose restrictions on China's goods produced with forced labor, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.

"We expect that our G7 partners will look at various forms of restrictions on goods that are proven to be produced with forced labor. The precise form of these restrictions will vary from country to country. But our expectation is that we will align in a broad approach to take tangible action," Sullivan told reporters in a telephone briefing.

He added that the G7 identified three sectors where China allegedly employs forced labor – garments, agriculture and solar energy.

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Congress Should Not Raise Gas Tax to Pay for Infrastructure Spending - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Congress should not consider raising the federal tax on gas, or petroleum for cars to pay for the proposed up to \$1.7 trillion infrastructure spending bill, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Thursday.

"I would not be for that," Pelosi told a Capitol Hill news conference. "I don't think America's working families should be footing the bill for roads and bridges that America's wealthiest people and businesses are using and not paying for."

A bipartisan group of senators has proposed raising the gasoline tax to fund the Biden administration's ambitious infrastructure plans. Green and environmental activists favor the move as forcing a transition to more fuel efficient cars, especially those at least partially run on electric power.

However, the proposal is also seen as disproportionately hurting working class families who will be least able to afford the costs and because it would further boost inflationary pressures across the US economy.

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US Allows COVID-Related Trade with Iran, Venezuela, Syria Despite Sanctions - Treasury

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Licenses allowing the trade of goods related to the prevention, diagnosis, or treatment of COVID-19 with sanctioned countries Iran, Venezuela, and Syria having been issued, the US Treasury Department announced on Thursday.

"The Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is issuing Syria General License 21, Venezuela General License 39, and Iran General License N, 'Authorizing Certain Activities to Respond to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic,'" the Treasury Department said.

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Canadians Say Worse Off Now Than in 2020 Amid Rising Prices of Necessities, Housing - Poll

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Canadians increasingly say they are worse off now compared to a year earlier, citing rising prices on essential goods and housing, an Angus Reid Institute poll revealed on Wednesday.

"Canadians are much more likely to say they are worse off now than they were at this time 12 months ago (34%) than to say that they are better off (20 percent)," the study dubbed "Inflation Nation" said.

Residents in Western Canada, namely Alberta and Saskatchewan, were most discouraged with their financial prospects, with nearly half of residents - 45 percent in Alberta, 43 percent in Saskatchewan - saying they are worse off now than during the initial wave of the coronavirus pandemic, the findings showed.

Additionally, less than a quarter of Canadians, of all incomes, believe that they would be better off a year from, compared to now, with the number dropping to one-in-five among citizens on the lower end of the income scale - those earning less than \$40,000.

The skepticism comes amid an increase of prices on necessities, including food and housing. According to the poll, more than 90 percent of Canadians say they have noticed prices going up at the grocery store and at the pump, with respondents being in near-unanimous agreement that buying a home or embarking on a major home improvement project has become more expensive. Furthermore, 85 percent say housing prices - both owning and renting a home - is now more costly.

Canadians, meanwhile, are not holding out hope for a reprieve. The vast majority of Canadians - over 80 percent - say grocery bills, gas prices as well as buying and maintaining a home will become even more expensive in the last year.

The soaring prices are now attracting the attention of the country's highest offices. On Wednesday, Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem was grilled by members of the Standing Senate Committee on Banking, Trade and Commerce about the rising costs of living.

Canada's central banker testified that inflation, while rapidly rising at the moment, will return to a sustainable level of 2 percent in the long-term, while noting that the Bank had no choice but to embark on path of extraordinary stimulus response. Macklem added that the current surge in housing prices is "not sustainable," and will not last, warning Canadians not stretch themselves thin in housing bidding wars observed around the country.

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Biden Seeks Opportunities for Meeting China's Xi in Coming Months – Sullivan

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden is looking for opportunities to have a meeting or any other form of a one-on-one engagement with Chinese leader Xi Jinping in the coming months, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.

"He will look for opportunities to engage with President Xi... It could be a phone call, it could be a meeting on the margins of another international summit, it could be something else," Sullivan told reporters in a telephone briefing.

"No decisions have been made on this score, but the notion that President Biden will engage in the coming months with President Xi in some way to take stock at where we are at the relationship and to ensure that we have that kind of direct communication that we found valuable with President [of Russia Vladimir] Putin yesterday - we are very much committed to that. It is just a question of when and how," he added.

Sullivan recalled that both leaders are likely to participate at the G-20 forum in Italy in October.

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US Embassy Staff in Kabul Teleworking Amid COVID-19 Outbreak - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US Embassy staff in Kabul is teleworking amid a coronavirus outbreak in the compound that has already claimed the life of one local worker, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Afghanistan as we know is experiencing an intense third wave of COVID-19 cases throughout the country, in response to an outbreak on the compound, the embassy has adjusted operations...this includes requiring all staff to telework," Price said during a telephone briefing. Price said he cannot confirm the number of COVID-19 cases among workers at the US Embassy in Kabul, but he said it is significant.

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US Condemns Arrest of 4 Apple Daily Senior Executives in Hong Kong - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns the arrest of four senior executives of the Apple Daily newspaper in Hong Kong and expresses its concern over alleged use of national security laws by the Chinese authorities to hinder freedom of expression, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"We strongly condemn the arrest of senior executives from Apple Daily and its parent company Next Digital, and we call for their immediate release. We are deeply concerned by Hong Kong authorities selective use of the National Security Law to arbitrarily target immediate organizations, the charges, of course, of collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security, appear to be entirely politically motivated," Price said in a briefing.

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US Lawmakers Seek Probe of Stolen COVID-18 Unemployment Benefits - Letter

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Reports that up to half of COVID-19 pandemic-related unemployment benefits had been stolen, much of the funds by foreign criminal syndicates, prompted a fresh appeal for a congressional investigation by Republicans on the US House Oversight Committee in a letter to Democratic Chair Carolyn Maloney on Thursday.

"This week we learned that "[c]riminals may have stolen as much as half of the unemployment benefits the US has been pumping out over the past year. This amount may be more than \$400 billion," the letter said. "To make matters worse, the bulk of the money likely ended in the hands of foreign crime syndicates - making this not just theft, but a matter of national security."

The letter from Oversight Committee Ranking Republican James Comer and committee members Darrell Issa and Gary Palmer noted that Maloney had rejected a similar request for

hearing on unemployment fraud in February. It also accused the Biden administration of failing to take the threat seriously.

Despite the earlier rejection, the lawmakers' fresh appeal for Maloney to hold hearings said the committee still has the power to find out what happened to the money and prevent additional fraud in the future.

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Russia Convenes Closed UNSC Discussion on Ukrainian Saboteurs Attack in LPR - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, June 17 (Sputnik) - Russia requested to convene a closed meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss the deadly attack earlier in the month by a Ukrainian sabotage group on an observation post of the People's Militia of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy told Sputnik on Thursday.

On June 11, a sabotage group of a separate special operations center 'West' killed five members of the LPR at the observation post near Holubiv's'ke, controlled by the LPR.

"Russia will convene today the consultations under 'Any Other Business' agenda, on the incident that took place on June 11," Polyanskiy said.

Kiev launched a military operation against Luhansk and Donetsk in 2014, with numerous attempts since to resolve the conflict or, at the very least, end hostilities. Prospects for peace have been discussed on various platforms, including the Trilateral Contact Group, which, since September 2014, has already adopted three documents containing steps to de-escalate the conflict.

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Blinken, Top Libyan Diplomat, Discuss Upcoming Berlin Conference in Call - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed the upcoming Berlin Conference on Libya with his Libyan counterpart, interim Foreign Minister Najla Mangoush, on Thursday, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price stated in a readout of their call.

"The Secretary and Foreign Minister discussed the upcoming June 23 Second Berlin Conference on Libya and underscored the importance of ensuring national elections are held in December 2021," Price said.

The conference, which will take place in Berlin on June 23, will include discussions about the progress made in stabilizing Libya so far, preparations for the December 24 national elections, and further steps needed to bolster Libya's security and economy.

Blinken and Mangoush also discussed the importance of maintaining an October 2020 ceasefire agreement in Libya, as well as the withdrawal of all foreign forces and mercenaries from the country. The ceasefire and troop withdrawal are also expected to be on the Berlin Conference's agenda.

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US Hopes to See in Coming Months if Progress is Possible with Russia - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United States expects the coming months will show whether progress is possible in its relationship with Russia or it should resort to unilateral measures to protect its interests, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.

"There are three or four different areas where we will be able to see in the months ahead whether progress is possible or whether we will simply have to take action to safeguard our interests because progress hasn't occurred," Sullivan said in a telephone briefing after the US-Russia summit in Geneva.

Areas of potential cooperation listed by Sullivan include cybersecurity, the strategic stability dialogue, regional issues ranging from Afghanistan to Syria and Iran as well as practical steps to ensure that the US and Russian embassies "operate in a unencumbered, effective way so that we can manage this difficult relationship."

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Biden Admin. Earmarks \$3Bln to Research New Antiviral Drugs - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – The US launched a \$3 billion effort to develop a new class of next-generation antiviral drugs to combat COVID-19 and other viral pathogens of the future, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) said on Thursday.

"This plan – called the Antiviral Program for Pandemics – will respond to the urgent need for antivirals to treat COVID-19 by spurring the availability of medicines to prevent serious illness and save lives. It also will build sustainable platforms for discovery and development of antivirals for other viruses with pandemic potential, helping better prepare the nation to face future viral threats," an HHS press release said.

The \$3 billion investment is funded by the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, the release said. The effort seeks to develop a new generation of anti-viral drugs that could be taken orally, at home following when symptoms of the disease first emerge, similar to antiviral drugs often given to flu victims, especially those at high risk for complications, the release added.

This plan accelerates and expands government backing of clinical trials for newly developed antiviral drugs, including 19 medications that have been prioritized for as potential therapies. It

budgets more than \$300 million for research and lab support, nearly \$1 billion for preclinical and clinical evaluation, and nearly \$700 million for development and manufacturing through the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA), according to the release.

As an example, the release cited the Biden administration's purchase of 1.5 million doses of an experimental COVID-19 drug from the pharmaceutical company Merck earlier this year. If ongoing clinical trials prove successful, Merck said it could apply for emergency use authorization later this year.

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Biden, Erdogan Discussed Potential for Turkey to Guard Kabul Airport - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met on the margins of the NATO summit and discussed the potential for Turkey to guard the Kabul airport with the two sides agreeing to ensure the facility was protected, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters on Thursday.

"President Biden and President Erdogan had a detailed discussion of a potential Turkish mission to secure the airport once the Resolute Support mission as ended," Sullivan said during a telephone briefing. "The president [Biden] and President Erdogan agreed that they would work together to make this happen."

The Biden administration has also been looking at contingency plans in case Turkey is unable to guard the Kabul airport, including the option to hire security contractors for the job, Sullivan said.

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Biden, Erdogan Found No Solution to S-400 Issue, Agreed to Continue Dialogue - White House

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden discussed with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan the issue of Russian-made S-400 air defense systems, but no resolution was found with both parties determined to continue the dialogue, White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.

"On the S-400 – they discussed it. There was not a resolution of the issue, there was a commitment to continue the dialogue on the S-400," Sullivan told reporters.

Biden and Erdogan met on the sidelines of a NATO summit in Brussels on June 14. Erdogan earlier said that he reaffirmed to Biden that Turkey's stand on S-400 systems remains unchanged. The United States pressures its NATO ally into relinquishing the purchase.

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US Bans Guatemalan Lawmaker Over Alleged Corruption- State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United States barred Guatemalan Congressman Boris Espana Caceres from entering the US due to alleged involvement in corruption, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Today, we are announcing the public designation of Guatemalan Congressperson Boris Espana Caceres, due to his involvement in significant corruption. In his official capacity, Espana has been involved in corrupt acts, including bribery and interfering with public processes, that jeopardized the stability of Guatemala's democratic institutions and the Guatemalan public's confidence in its representatives," Price said in a statement.

The designation prohibits Caceres and members of his immediate family - including his spouse and two children - from entering the US.

Price said the designation demonstrates the US's commitment to tackling corruption, and the impunity thereof, in Guatemala.

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Canadian Unemployment Benefits Claims Up Nearly 10% in April - Statistics Canada

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Canadian unemployment benefits claims increased by nearly 10 percent in April during the peak of the so-called third wave of the coronavirus pandemic in the country, Statistics Canada said on Thursday.

"The number of Canadians receiving regular [Employment Insurance] EI benefits rose 9.8% (+144,000) to 1.6 million in April," Statistics Canada said in its monthly EI report.

The rise in unemployment benefits claims coincided with several provinces - most notably British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec - reintroducing strict lockdown measures to stem the surge of new COVID-19 cases. The rise in claims was, accordingly, led by Ontario and British Columbia, where the number of regular benefits recipients rose by 19.1 and 12.1 percent respectively.

Canada lost over 275,000 jobs in April and May due to the increased restrictions that sent the unemployment rate to 8.2 percent, according to Statistics Canada.

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US, Russian Presidents Discussed Locally Employed Staff at Diplomatic Missions - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin during their summit in Geneva discussed issues related to employing locals at their respective diplomatic missions, the Russian leader assured his counterpart he would allow the US mission to be properly staffed, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Thursday. "On the question of locally employed staff in Russia, the two presidents did discuss it... President Putin indicated that he would take measures to ensure that our mission was properly staffed, whether it's through the provision of visas for Americans to be able to fill those roles or through some other adjustment in regulation within Russia," Sullivan said in a telephone briefing. Sullivan pointed out that the Biden-Putin summit, including the G7, NATO, and EU summits were productive.

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Drought on Verge of Becoming 'Next Pandemic' Unless World Takes Action - United Nations

UNITED NATIONS, June 17 (Sputnik) - Drought is on the way of becoming the "next pandemic" as the number of affected people continues to increase worldwide, United Nations Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction Mami Mizutori said on Thursday. "Drought is on the verge of becoming the next pandemic and there is no vaccine to cure it. Drought has directly affected 1.5 billion people so far this century and this number will grow dramatically unless the world gets better at managing this risk and understanding its root causes and taking action to stop them," Mizutori said. On Tuesday, the United Nations published a special report on drought that called for a new global mechanism to support countries to address risk through partnerships, innovation and action at the regional and community levels. The report also promoted the establishment of national drought resilience partnerships between public, private and civil society organizations that would work to seamlessly connect action at the national and local levels.

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Donors Pledge \$954Mln for Venezuela Refugees - Host Country Canada

UNITED NATIONS, June 17 (Sputnik) - International donors pledged a total of \$954 million to support Venezuelan refugees and migrants at a conference hosted by Canada in collaboration with the UN refugee (UNHCR) and migration (IOM) agencies, Canada's Minister of International Development Karina Gould said on Thursday.

"A total of \$954 million in grants alone has been committed by more than 30 donors today, including six new donors, to address both immediate and longer-term needs in Venezuela," Gould said.

She added that the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank have also pledged \$600 million in loans to support long-term response on a demand-driven basis.

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Falcon 9 Rocket Successfully Launches GPS Satellite for US Space Force - SpaceX

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - A Falcon 9 rocket successfully lifted off from Cape Canaveral in Florida and propelled a new Global Positioning System (GPS) satellite into orbit for the US Space Force, SpaceX announced on Thursday.

SpaceX podcast the successful launch of the GPS III Space Vehicle 05 mission from Space Launch Complex 40 at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in Florida at 12:09 pm Eastern Daylight Time (EDT).

Falcon 9's reusable first stage landed successfully on the company's drone ship located in the Atlantic Ocean, the podcast showed.

The mission was the first Defense Department-approved flight with a previously used booster and the fifth GPS III satellite launched so far, the company noted.

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Russia Does Not Pose 'Black Swan' Event Threat – Canadian Defense Minister

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – Canadian Defense Minister Harjit Sajjan said on Thursday he does not believe Russia poses the threat of launching an unexpected and devastating attack. "Russia has already set a pattern, so I don't really consider that a 'Black Swan,' I see that a pattern and then [NATO] counters that pattern," Sajjan said at the GLOBSEC 2021 Bratislava Forum, citing Moscow's alleged involvement in Ukraine's ongoing civil conflict and Crimea's decision to reunite with Russia.

A Black Swan event is defined by NATO as an event "with an exceptional or extraordinary character representing a surprise for the observer."

Canada's defense chief, however, said the threat of a cyberattack is of greater concern falling within the realm of what is considered a Black Swan event.

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UN Chief Welcomes Joint Statement by Biden, Putin on Strategic Stability - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, June 17 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has welcomed the joint statement issued by Russia and the United States on Strategic Stability Dialogue and

expressed hope that this would lead to concrete measures resulting in nuclear arms arsenal reduction, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday. "The Secretary-General welcomes the Joint Statement on Strategic Stability issued by the Presidents of the Russian Federation and the United States following yesterday's summit, especially the reaffirmation of their adherence to the principle that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought," Dujarric said. "Furthermore, the Secretary-General welcomes the intention of the Russian Federation and the United States to engage in an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue and expresses his hope that this would lead to concrete arms control measures, including further reductions in the size of the world's largest nuclear arsenals," the spokesman added.

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US Supreme Court Sides With Catholic Adoption Agency Refusing to Work With Gay Couples

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court on Thursday ruled unanimously against the city of Philadelphia refusing to contract with the child adoption agency Catholic Social Services (CSS) over the latter's refusal to work with same-sex foster parents because of its religious beliefs.

"The refusal of Philadelphia to contract with CSS for the provision of foster care services unless it agrees to certify same-sex couples as foster parents cannot survive strict scrutiny, and violates the First Amendment," Chief Justice John Roberts wrote in the Supreme Court's opinion.

The Supreme Court said Philadelphia hampered the CSS from exercising its religious beliefs by forcing the organization to either to curtail its mission or certify same-sex couples as foster parents in violation of the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

A lower district court and the US Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit initially denied CSS's case, arguing that Philadelphia's actions were permissible under First Amendment precedents.

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US Announces \$407Mln in Humanitarian Aid for Venezuelans Amid Crisis - Ambassador to UN

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide nearly \$407 million in humanitarian assistance to support Venezuelans in need as well as refugees and migrants who fled the country amid the continuing crisis in the country, United States mission to the United Nations spokesperson Olivia Dalton said on Thursday.

"Today US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield announced nearly \$407 million in new humanitarian assistance to respond to the needs of vulnerable Venezuelans in Venezuela, Venezuelan refugees and migrants, and their host communities across the region,"

Dalton said in a release. "Our assistance supports the more than seven million Venezuelans in need of humanitarian assistance inside Venezuela, the more than 5.6 million Venezuelans who have fled to countries across the region, and the communities hosting them."

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Seven-Day Average of Coronavirus Cases in US Drops to 12,000 Per Day – CDC Chief

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – US has reported 12,190 COVID-19 new daily infections over the past week, a new low of seven-day average since the beginning of the pandemic, with deaths and hospitalization also in decline, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Dr. Rochelle Walensky said on Thursday.

"Our seven-day average is 12,190 cases per day. This represents a decrease of about 16 percent from the prior seven-day average and is the lowest seven-day average since March 27, 2020," Walensky said during a briefing. "The seven-day average of hospitalizations is about 2000 per day, a decrease of about 10 percent from the prior seven-day period, and the seven-day average of daily deaths has also declined to 286 per day. The first time that average daily deaths have been below 300 since March 27 2020."

Walensky put the aforementioned number of new coronavirus cases into the context of January when the seven-day average was about 252,000 cases per day to demonstrate the correlation between the growing quantity of vaccinated Americans and new infections number.

At the same time, Walensky noted that now it was time for children to get vaccinated as COVID-19 pandemic took lives of more than 320 American children under age 18.

On Friday, CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices will review the reports of heart inflammations associated with COVID-19 vaccination over 300 confirmed cases among 20 million adolescents vaccinated have been reported to CDC and the US Food and Drug Administration, Walensky announced.

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Iran Trying to Develop Nuclear Weapon, But Decision Not Made on National level - Milley

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Iran is trying to develop a nuclear weapon, but the decision to do so was not made on a national level, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

Asked whether he agrees that Iran is trying to develop a nuclear weapon, Milley said, "I think yes, but... I don't believe and I haven't seen any evidence that there has been national level decision to do that."

"I am talking about national strategic decision," Milley said, noting that such national strategic plan would have to come from the Supreme Leader of Iran.

In 2015, Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the P5+1 group of countries comprising the United States, China, France, Russia, Germany and the United Kingdom as well as the European Union. The accord required Iran to scale back its nuclear program and severely downgrade its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief. In 2018, the United States unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA and reintroduced sanctions against Iran, prompting Tehran to largely abandon its obligations under the accord. Iran passed a law in December of 2020 to increase its uranium enrichment and limit UN inspections of its nuclear sites in response to the killing of nuclear physicist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh.

In April, Iran announced that it had managed to reach 60 percent uranium enrichment, after Tehran notified the IAEA of its plan.

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US House Repeals 2002 Authorization For Military Force Against Iraq

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – The Democratic-led US House of Representatives voted 268-161 to revoke a 2002 law that allowed then-President George W. Bush to invade Iraq, a step supporters argued is no longer needed.

With a simple two-thirds majority required, 219 Democrats and 49 Republican lawmakers voted in favor of the resolution, while 160 Republicans and one Democrat against it.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer announced his support for the measure on Wednesday, saying he expected to bring the measure to the Senate floor later this year.

"The Iraq war has been over for nearly a decade, and authorization passed in 2002 is no longer necessary in 2021," Schumer said on the Senate floor.

President Joe Biden has also voiced support for the measure.

The measure, known as an Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), was approved prior to the March 2003 US invasion of Iraq to satisfy a constitutional requirement that only Congress can declare war.

Thursday's vote does not affect a broader 2001 AUMF. Passed after the September 11 terrorist attacks, that measure greenlighted the US invasion of Afghanistan and two decades of war that followed.

The 2001 AUMF also provided a justification for US military operations against other terrorist targets such as in Somalia.

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Pentagon Chief Says Afghan Terror Groups Could Pose Threat to US, Allies in 2 Years

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Lloyd Austin, US Secretary of Defense, said in a Senate hearing on Thursday that it would likely take some two years for the Afghan terror groups to regenerate enough to pose an international threat.

When asked to rate the likelihood of international terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda or Islamic State (both banned in Russia) regenerating inside Afghanistan and presenting a threat to the United States and its allies based on the current situation, Austin said, "I would assess it as medium."

"I would also say, Senator, that it would take possibly two years for them to develop that capability," Austin said.

General Mark Milley, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, who is also testifying at the Senate, echoed Austin's assessment.

"I think that if certain other things happen, if there was a collapse of the government or dissolution of the Afghan Security forces, that risk would obviously increase, but right now it's a medium and about two years or so," Milley said.

On May 1, the United States and NATO began pulling their troops out of Afghanistan. American forces are expected to leave by September 11, the 20th anniversary of terrorist attacks against the United States that sparked the so-called War on Terror by then-President George W. Bush. Armed violence continues in Afghanistan despite the Kabul-Taliban peace talks and the start of the withdrawal of foreign troops. The negotiations and the troop pullout are a part of the 2020 US-Taliban peace deal signed in 2020, which also committed the radical movement to reducing violence and cutting ties with terrorists.

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US Supreme Court Rules for Nestle, Cargill in Case Brought By Former Cocoa Farm Slaves

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court on Thursday reversed a ruling by the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit that had allowed six individuals from Mali to sue Cargill and Nestle over claims they were trafficked as slaves to farms in the Ivory Coast to supply the two food companies with cocoa.

"Although respondents' injuries occurred entirely overseas, the Ninth Circuit held that respondents could sue in federal court because the defendant corporations allegedly made 'major operational decisions' in the United States. The Ninth Circuit erred by allowing this suit to proceed," Justice Clarence Thomas wrote in the Supreme Court's decision.

Cargill and Nestle do not own or operate any of the farms in the Ivory Coast but they do purchase cocoa and provide technical and financial resources to them.

The six plaintiffs filed the lawsuit under the Alien Tort Statute, which provides federal courts jurisdiction to hear claims brought by aliens for torts committed in violation of US law. The Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit had ruled that the lawsuit could proceed because the two companies' major operational decisions were made in the United States.

The Supreme Court said the plaintiffs improperly sought to sue under the Alien Tort Statute for conduct that occurred outside the United States and failed to establish that the conduct relevant to the statute occurred in the country even if other conduct occurred abroad.

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US House Repeals 2002 Authorization For Military Force Against Iraq

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – The Democratic-led US House of Representatives voted 268-161 to revoke a 2002 law that allowed then-President George W. Bush to invade Iraq, a step supporters argued is no longer needed.

With voting still underway, 219 Democrats and 49 Republican lawmakers voted in favor of the resolution, while 160 Republicans and one Democrat against it.

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US HOUSE BACKS LEGISLATION TO REPEAL 2002 AUTHORIZATION FOR WAR IN IRAQ
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Canada to Receive 1Mln Additional Moderna Vaccine Doses from US on Thursday – Minister
WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – Canada will receive an additional 1 million Moderna coronavirus vaccine doses from the United States later in the day, Minister of Public Services and Procurement Anita Anand said on Thursday.

“Canada has reached an agreement with the US government under which Canada will receive an additional 1 million doses of the Moderna vaccine, set to arrive this evening,” Anand said in a statement via Twitter.

Canada is now set to receive 8 million Moderna vaccine doses in June – prior to today’s announcement, the procurement minister announced that the US drugmaker would deliver 7 million doses this month.

According to the latest figures from Our World in Data, over 65 percent of Canadians have received at least one dose of the coronavirus vaccine, however, only 14.85 percent have been fully vaccinated against the deadly disease.

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Pentagon Preparing Request for Extra Military Aid for Israel - Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department is preparing a request for Congress to approve funds to replenish Israel's air defense Iron Dome systems, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

“You will see a request,” Austin told the US Senate Committee on Appropriations.

Israel is reportedly asking \$1 billion in extra military aid from the United States to replenish Iron Dome batteries that were used to intercept a significant number of Palestinian rockets during the latest clashes in Gaza in May.

Austin said two weeks ago he met his Israeli counterpart Benny Gantz who “walked through the details of what his requirements were.”

Both sides are working on the details of what is needed before submitting the request to Congress, he added.

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US Supreme Court Upholds Obamacare in Face of Republican Challenge - Ruling
WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court on Thursday ruled against Republicans seeking to challenge the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, in a decision that leaves the national health care legislation in place.

Republicans from 18 US states, backed by the former Trump administration, had filed a lawsuit challenging the penalty imposed under the legislation on people without health insurance.

"They have failed to show that they have standing to attack as unconstitutional the Act's minimum essential coverage provision. Therefore, we reverse the Fifth Circuit's judgment in respect to standing, vacate the judgment, and remand the case with instructions to dismiss," Justice Stephen Breyer wrote in the court's opinion.

The 18 states, led by Texas, had argued that the penalty imposed on those who do not have minimum essential health insurance coverage – which was reduced to \$0 back in 2017 – is unconstitutional. As such, they argued that the whole piece of legislation should be thrown out, because the penalty is not severable from the rest of the act.

The opinion written by Breyer, with whom Justice Clarence Thomas concurred in his own written opinion, asserted that the plaintiffs failed to show a specific injury fairly traceable to the Obamacare penalty provision. Because the Constitution only gives the Supreme Court authority to resolve "cases" or "controversies," the justices cannot rule in favor of the plaintiffs, they wrote. Justices Samuel Alito and Neil Gorsuch, however, dissented from court's majority opinion. "Because the mandate is unlawful and because the injury-causing provisions are inextricably linked to the mandate, the federal defendants cannot enforce those provisions against the state plaintiffs," Alito wrote, adding that "the state plaintiffs are entitled to a judgment providing as much."

Thursday's ruling marks the third time that the Supreme Court has allowed the law to stand in the face of Republican challenges to it.

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Yaroshenko's Defense Believes He Will Be Included in US-Russia Prisoners Swap

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – The legal defense of the Russian national Konstantin Yaroshenko, who is serving a prison sentence in the United States, hopes that he will be included in a possible prisoner exchange between Moscow and Washington, Yaroshenko's lawyer Alexey Tarasov told Sputnik.

On Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said after the summit with his US counterpart Joe Biden that they raised prisoners exchange as an issue on which compromises could be found between Russia and the United States.

"I do believe that, if an exchange were to happen, that Konstantin Yaroshenko would be one of the people that would be exchanged," Tarasov said.

The lawyer welcomed the fact that both leaders raised the subject of prisoner exchanges. "I believe it is the right moment to raise this issue," he added.

The specifics of possible swap are yet to be worked out, Tarasov noted. In the meantime, he pointed out that Biden mentioned the timeframe of six months in his remarks following the talks in Geneva.

"So within the next six months, we will know if it would be possible to have the prisoners released," the lawyer said.

Tarasov did not rule out that another client, Yuri Martyshev, who is serving his 78-month sentence on computer hacking charges, as well as Viktor Bout, whose interests he represented in the past, would also be included in the swap.

"The fact that no particular names were mentioned does not exclude the possibility of other people being exchanged," Tarasov said.

Yaroshenko was arrested in Liberia in 2010 on suspicion of drug trafficking and later extradited to the United States. In 2011, a US court sentenced Yaroshenko to 20 years in prison for allegedly taking part in a conspiracy to smuggle a large amount of drugs into the country. Yaroshenko pleaded not guilty to the charges against him.

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Commerce Dept. US Data Set Shows Link Between Poverty, Lack of Broadband Access
WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – Vast tracks of rural America with high-poverty communities coincide with dead zones for high-speed internet access, according to data compiled in an interactive map to illustrate the scope of Biden administration efforts to ensure 100 percent broadband coverage of the US, the Commerce Department said on Thursday.

"As we release this important data to the public, it paints a sobering view of the challenges facing far too many Americans as they try to connect to high-speed broadband and participate in our modern economy," Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said in a press release. "In his American Jobs Plan, President Biden has proposed a once-in-a-lifetime investment that would finally connect one hundred percent of the country to reliable and affordable high-speed broadband."

The map puts poverty and lack of broadband access on the same page. The data set allows users to see where high-poverty communities are located and how that relates to internet usage patterns, as well as to a lack of computers and related equipment, the release said.

Aggregated data from US Census Bureau, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), private and civil society groups for the presentation shows many parts of the country with internet access speeds that fall well below the FCC benchmark for fixed broadband speeds of 25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload, the release added.

President Joe Biden has proposed an expenditure of up to \$100 billion to upgrade the nation's broadband infrastructure at a time when the coronavirus pandemic forced millions of American workers and students to rely on the internet for remote work and study.

An estimated 6 percent and 12 percent of Americans lack access to a quality broadband network, with zero broadband access for up to 18 million people, according to a recent report by the Brookings Institution.

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US, UK Say Clinch Aerospace Deal to Extend Ceasefire Pact on Boeing-Airbus

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United States and the United Kingdom have agreed not to impose tariffs for the next five years on the large aircraft businesses between their countries and to instead challenge competitors like China, the two governments announced Thursday in a move aimed at resolving the long-running Boeing-Airbus dispute, among others. "The United States and the United Kingdom today reached an understanding to resolve a long-standing trade irritant relating to large civil aircraft," the Office of the US Trade Representative said in a joint statement by the two governments. "The framework provides that the US and the UK will work together to overcome any disagreements in the sector and counter non-market practices. It also provides that they will not impose tariffs related to this dispute for five years."

The agreement was reached during US President Joe Biden's visit this week to the United Kingdom and follows through with a similar US-European Union deal aimed at resolving the Boeing-Airbus aircraft-subsidy dispute. With the United Kingdom's EU exit last year, any broad agreement involving Europe has to be signed separately with Britain.

The US-UK agreement cited the need for American and British aerospace companies to face up competition from what they called non-market economies such as China.

"As part of (the) cooperative framework, the United States and the United Kingdom also released an annex on confronting China and other non-market economies," the statement released on Thursday said, adding that this included cooperation on information sharing, inward/outward investments and joint analysis of non-market practices.

The dispute between the US-based Boeing and Airbus, which is manufactured by a European aerospace consortium whose component makers include UK companies, began in 2004 when the United States filed a case with the World Trade Organization alleging that Airbus had received billions of dollars in illegal subsidies. The European Union retaliated, claiming that Boeing had been granted billions of dollars in 'trade-distorting' subsidies.

Over the years, both sides accused the other of refusing to negotiate any settlement and targeted one another with billions of dollars worth of tariffs during the presidency of Donald Trump.

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HRW, Amnesty Call on Canada to End Abusive, Discriminatory Immigration Detention System

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – Canada should end its abusive and discriminatory immigration detention system, Ketty Nivyabandi, Secretary General of Amnesty International Canada, said on Thursday.

The call to action corresponds to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International report titled, “‘I Didn’t Feel Like a Human in There’: Immigration Detention in Canada and its Impact on Mental Health” in which immigration detainees, including refugee claimants, described the system as abusive, discriminatory and harmful to mental health.

“Canada’s abusive immigration detention system is in stark contrast to the rich diversity and the values of equality and justice that Canada is known for globally,” Nivyabandi said in a joint statement. “Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch call on the Canadian authorities to end the inhumane treatment of people in the immigration and refugee protection system by gradually ending immigration detention in Canada.”

Former detainees – not held on any criminal charges or convictions – described being held in some of the country’s strongest-security provincial correctional facilities, where they were handcuffed, shackled, searched, kept in solitary confinement – often in tight quarters – and constantly monitored.

Samer Muscati, associate disability rights director at Human Rights Watch, said that with many detainees being released because of COVID-19 concerns, Canada has an opportunity to revamp the system to prioritize mental health and human rights.

According to the report, 8,825 individuals between the ages of 15 and 83, were in detention on immigration-related matters between April 2019 and March 2020, with 1,932 in being incarcerated provincial jails.

The human rights advocacy organizations also urged the Canadian government to establish an independent oversight body over the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), which according to the report remains the country’s only major law enforcement agency without independent civilian oversight.

Public Safety Canada and the office of Public Safety Minister Bill Blair did not respond to Sputnik requests for comment.

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Major US, Australian Firms Briefly Go Offline in Internet Outage – Tracking Service

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – A large number of American and Australian airlines, banking and communication companies, including United Airlines and Comcast, briefly went offline overnight following a major internet failure of unknown nature, according to website outages monitoring company Downtdetector.

According to outage history compiled by Downtdetector, the major internet outage happened between midnight (05:00 GMT) and 3 a.m. (08:00 GMT) and affected over forty predominantly US and Australian companies, including United Airlines, Commonwealth Bank of Australia, Westpac Bank, TikTok USA, AT&T, Comcast.

"We are experiencing technical issues and working promptly to fix them. We will update you once this matter is resolved," United Airlines said on Twitter in reply to a user complaint. Akamai Technologies, a global content delivery network has also confirmed it was hit by the internet outage in a statement on Twitter and informed its users that it is working to restore services as soon as possible.

Neither of the affected companies has reported any significant disruption caused by the internet outage.

This is the second wave of website outages following another one that occurred earlier in June when internet users around the world had problems with access to YouTube, Twitter, Reddit, Spotify, Twitch, Amazon and Paypal.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Rise After 7 Weeks, Challenging Recovery From COVID - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The weekly filing for jobless benefits in the United States was about 37,000 above the previous week, rising for the first time in nearly two months in a setback to the recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, the Labor Department said Thursday. "In the week ending June 12, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 412,000, an increase of 37,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a statement.

Filing for unemployment benefits had previously fallen for seven straight weeks, bolstering hopes for labor market recovery from the COVID-19 amid a surfeit of other bullish economic data and plunging COVID-19 infection rates owing to a massive vaccination drive.

That had led economists polled by US media to forecast just 360,000 jobless claims for the week to June 12, putting what the Labor Department reported about 50,000 higher than expectations.

"(A) disappointment for the jobless claims numbers... moving back above the 400,000 level," economist Greg Michalowski observed in a comment posted on ForexLive.

Continuing claims for the week ended June 5 — reported with a one-week lag — were virtually unchanged at 3.52 million.

That left the weekly reading for unemployment flat at 2.5 percent.

More than a year into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring job growth remains one of the main concerns of US policymakers.

The Labor Department said there were only 559,000 job additions for all of May, at least 90,000 below economists' estimates.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. About 8 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

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

The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent economic growth for all of 2021 although Jerome Powell, chairman of the central bank, says he does not expect "full employment" — defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower — to occur anytime soon. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 5.8 percent in May.

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UN Alarmed By Recent Myanmar Violence, Calls for Accountability - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United Nations office in Myanmar on Thursday said it was alarmed by the latest wave of violence in the country in the wake of the February 1 military coup and called for all those responsible, including senior commanders, to be held accountable for violations.

"The UN in Myanmar is alarmed at recent acts of violence that illustrate a sharp deterioration of the human rights environment across Myanmar," the statement said. "The United Nations calls for those responsible for human rights violations to be held accountable, including the perpetrators and their chain of command."

The statement cited the discoveries of two mass graves in Kayin State containing the remains of 25 people, reportedly detained by the Karen National Defense Organization, and burning by security forces of some 150 homes in Kin Ma Village in Magway Region this week.

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Number of Migrant Children in US Custody Dramatically Down - Homeland Security Chief

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – The United States was able to dramatically decrease the number of unaccompanied migrant children in the US Custom and Border Patrol (CBP) custody, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said on Thursday.

"The number of unaccompanied children who have been in custody longer than 72 hours has decreased from 4,078 at its peak on March 29 to two on the morning of June 11," Mayorkas said in his Congressional testimony.

During the same period, the average time in custody for those children has fallen from 133 hours to 23 hours, he added.

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