

06/21/22 Monday

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WHO Warns 'Well Over Half' of Poor Nations Dependent on COVAX Are Out of COVID-19 Shots
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The World Health Organization (WHO) office in Africa pointed out last week that if the world's vaccine doses had been distributed equally, every elderly person and healthcare worker would have been vaccinated by now. Instead, 85% of the world's shots have been administered in the richest nations, while Africa has received just 2%.

A WHO official warned on Monday that the COVAX vaccine-sharing program it co-administers with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance doesn't have enough COVID-19 vaccines to continue the vaccination programs in more than half of the nations dependent on it. The news comes days after the Group of Seven, representing the world's wealthiest nations, pledged nearly a billion shots to the program.

"I would say of the 80 AMC [advance market commitment] countries, at least well over a half of them, would not have sufficient [amounts of] vaccine[s] to be able to sustain their programmes right now," WHO senior adviser Bruce Aylward said in a Monday briefing. The AMC nations are a group of poor and middle-income nations given free access to vaccines against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, thanks to donations by richer nations.

Aylward added that some have already run out.

In part, the program's shortage is caused by India, a major vaccine manufacturing center, temporarily barring the export of COVID-19 vaccines due to a catastrophic explosion of cases. At its height in early May, the country was breaking world records daily as it registered more than 400,000 new cases and more than 4,000 deaths per day. As of June 21, India has suffered 30 million cases and 388,000 deaths from COVID-19 - the vast majority in the last three months. However, the delayed support for COVAX by the world's richest nations has also created a crunch for the program, as countries like the US, the UK, France and Israel have vaccinated their own populations first before donating excess vaccines they had bought up beforehand. On Monday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said the Biden administration had finalized its plan for distributing the remaining [55 million doses](#) of the 80 million it had pledged to poor nations by the end of the month. Earlier this month, the administration also announced the purchase of [500 million vaccine](#) shots from Pfizer, whose effective-but-expensive two-dose vaccines have not been widely distributed across the Third World.

"What we've found to be the biggest challenge is not actually the supply - we have plenty of doses to share with the world - but this is a herculean logistical challenge and we've seen that as we have begun to implement ... this has not, as you all know, been done before."

However, separately from the COVAX program, China has exported 302 million doses of its Sinopharm and SinoVac vaccines as of Monday, reaching 33 African nations and every single country in South America, according to Beijing-based [consulting firm Bridge](#).

White House national security advisor [Jake Sullivan admitted](#) to the press on June 9 that the US' mass vaccine donations were part of an ideological pushback against the predominance of Chinese and Russian vaccine exports. He said the US wants to show "that democracies are the countries that can best deliver solutions for people everywhere."

Earlier this month, Chinese Foreign Minister [Wang Yi condemned](#) wealthy nations for "hoarding vaccines," noting the sharp rise in COVID-19 cases in the Global South "is not unrelated to this." Prior to the 500 million doses it announced it was buying for donation earlier in June, the US had purchased 1.5 billion shots for itself, or 750 million full vaccines - more than twice the entire US population. In the [US on Monday](#), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that 149.7 million people, or 46% of the US population, had been fully vaccinated.

However, the [WHO recently warned](#) that 47 of Africa's 54 nations were not on track to meet the goal of vaccinating 10% of the continent's population by September.

The [WHO reported on Thursday](#) that 85% of all vaccine doses have been administered in high- and upper-middle-income nations, at an average of 68 doses per 100 in high-income nations versus 2 doses per 100 people in Africa.

"A number of African countries have shown that they can move vaccines quickly, so while we welcome the recent international vaccine pledges, if we are to curb the third wave, Africa needs doses here and now," Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa, said on Thursday.

The WHO further noted that if the number of vaccine doses had been distributed equitably, it would have been enough to vaccinate every single health care worker and elderly person on the planet by now.

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Washington 'Looking Forward' to Seeing Direction of Iran Nuclear Deal Talks
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After a presidential election in Iran ushered into power the country's conservative judicial chief, the US is reportedly looking to solidify a return to the 2015 nuclear deal before he takes office in six weeks.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Monday that the Biden administration is "looking forward" to seeing the direction of the ongoing talks with Iran for the US to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a multilateral 2015 deal the US withdrew from in 2018.

"We don't currently have diplomatic relations with Iran or any plans to meet at the leader level. So it's unclear that anything has actually changed on that front," Psaki told reporters.

Meanwhile, both US President Joe Biden and Iranian President-elect Ebrahim Raisi have shrugged off suggestions they have any plans to meet at present. Raisi carried the Friday elections in which outgoing President Hassan Rouhani, who negotiated the 2015 deal, was not eligible to run.

Asked about Raisi's position, Psaki said the administration's position is that the "decision-maker" is Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the country's head of state and commander-in-chief. "That was the case before the election. It is the case today. It will be the case probably moving forward," she added.

Talks to revive the JCPOA have been ongoing in Vienna since April. The agreement is not a legally binding treaty, but since the US unilaterally reimposed economic sanctions against Iran that the JCPOA had lowered, and the other signatories have chosen to abide by the US position, Tehran has [steadily backed away](#) from its commitments made as part of the deal. A law passed by the Iranian Majlis in December 2020 has mandated increases in the quality and quantity of uranium refining and a decrease in cooperation with International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors. Iranian leaders have said the country doesn't seek a nuclear weapon, despite [claims to the contrary](#) by Israel and the United States.

Those talks continued on Sunday, as [Biden reportedly aims](#) to have an agreement in place before Raisi is sworn in in early August. Psaki said Monday it has no official timeline and will continue negotiations regardless.

Iran's position is that since the US left the deal first, it's the US who must first return to it, while the US says the opposite. Other US partners not party to the deal, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, have pushed for it to be expanded to include Iran's formidable ballistic missile arsenal. Raisi [said on Monday](#) the country's ballistic missile program "is non-negotiable," adding that the US "is obliged to lift all oppressive sanctions against Iran."

Psaki also said on Monday that Raisi will be held accountable for any human rights violations going forward.

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Slain Journo Khashoggi Covered Afghan Mujahideen With 'Good Friend' Osama Bin Laden by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

According to a CIA assessment, 59-year-old Jamal Khashoggi was killed in October 2018 by a hit squad whose mission was approved by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. However, Riyadh claims it was a rogue operation and that it has already punished the offenders.

A new podcast raises questions about slain Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi and his relationship with a close family friend - al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden - with whom he traveled to Afghanistan in the 1980s. Was bin Laden simply a gateway to a career-launching story, or a brother-in-arms on behalf of Islamic fundamentalism?

"I collapsed a little while ago crying in sorrow for you Aba Abdullah, you were beautiful and courageous in those beautiful days in Afghanistan before you succumbed to anger and passion," Khashoggi tweeted on May 2, 2011, using the nom de guerre of Osama bin Laden from his years as a mujahid in Afghanistan. Hours earlier, then-US President Barack [Obama had announced](#) the death of bin Laden during a raid in northern Pakistan by US Navy Seals.

“His fault began with his acquaintance with the Egyptian [Islamic] Jihad group, Peshawar, and we used to call them the infidels,” Khashoggi lamented. “Sheikh Abdullah Azzam was an impenetrable dam in the face of Osama and others with advice and gentleness.”

According to the latest episode of Yahoo News’ [“Conspiracyland” podcast](#), friends of Khashoggi have described a conflicted man who was at times unsure about condemning bin Laden’s terrorist activities in later years, as the two largely shared the same political goals: establishment of an Islamic state.

‘A Beautiful Thing to Me’

Bin Laden had traveled to the Central Asian country as early as 1980 for the US-backed insurgent war against the socialist Afghan government and its Soviet allies, called into the country in 1979 to save its collapsing authority as soldiers abandoned their posts and rallied to the cause of radical preachers in the countryside who condemned the government’s secular policies, such as the education of women. However, while bin Laden clearly came to take up the mission of a religious war against atheism, Khashoggi was, at least formally, there as a journalist to cover the war for the Saudi press, although he came in 1988 at the personal invitation of bin Laden.

“Arab youths fight shoulder to shoulder with Mujahedeen,” was the title of one story by Khashoggi written for Arab News, an English-language publication, on May 4, 1988. According to Conspiracyland, his writings tended to lionize mujaheddin like bin Laden, who he especially portrayed as playing a central role in the war.

According to journalist Lawrence Wright, who recorded several conversations with Khashoggi in 2005 for his book “The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11” that were quoted in the podcast, Khashoggi spoke fondly of his time with bin Laden in Afghanistan, where the lines between covering the war and taking part in it became blurred.

“It was moving because we were in a cave,” Khashoggi told Wright about one of his fondest moments with bin Laden. “It was dark at night, on candlelight. He had a sentiment of Muslims, a concept of jihad, and of being close to God. Knowing that you’re doing the right thing ... fighting those bloody Soviet infidels. It was a beautiful thing to me, particularly at that age.”

Family Friends

The friendship of bin Laden and Khashoggi was no accident: decades earlier, Mohammed bin Awad bin Laden, the founder of the Saudi Binladin Group and father of Osama, had helped [jumpstart the career](#) of a young businessman who facilitated the timely purchase of \$500,000 in trucks from American automaker Kenworth: Adnan Khashoggi.

As Saudi Binladin became the kingdom’s premier construction firm following Mohammed’s appointment as minister of public works, Adnan Khashoggi became [more deeply intertwined](#) with the US-Saudi military relationship, becoming a representative for defense giant Lockheed Martin, who most infamously helped coordinate the secret flow of American arms to Iran during the Iran-Contra scandal.

[According to Egypt Today](#), Jamal Khashoggi joined the Muslim Brotherhood while in college. For decades, the Saudi monarchy and the Brotherhood enjoyed a mutually-beneficial relationship, but as differences emerged in their approaches to purging the Muslim world of its European and secular influences, they grew apart until 2012. That was when the Brotherhood was swept into power in Egypt’s first democratic elections, made possible by the overthrow of longtime US and Saudi ally Hosni Mubarak. A year later, when Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi was

overthrown by [US-trained army chief](#) Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, relations between Riyadh and Cairo were quickly restored and the Brotherhood grew all the more critical of the monarchy. The Arab Spring movement sparked a major resistance movement in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, which is majority-Shiite, and the Sunni Saudi monarchy regarded criticisms against it by the Shiites and the Brotherhood to be one in the same. A series of restrictive new laws [clamped down](#) on internet organizing by activists from both camps, and by 2017, the Saudis had declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization.

These divisions manifested in Khashoggi's paper, Al Watan, from which he was booted as editor in 2003 after publishing an article that criticized a prominent historical figure from the Wahabbist Sunni tradition followed by the Saudi monarchy. Khashoggi went into voluntary exile in London and began to establish a reputation for himself as a democrat and a progressive.

However, his views on democracy were nothing like those of the Westerners who celebrated him, arguing in a [Washington Post op-ed](#) a little more than a month before he was assassinated that "the eradication of the Muslim Brotherhood is nothing less than an abolition of democracy." 'We Are No Better Than Him'

After the duo returned to Saudi Arabia from Afghanistan, their paths sharply diverged. While Khashoggi's journalistic career took off and he became editor of Al-Watan, bin Laden followed Egyptian Islamic Jihad to Khartoum, Sudan, to plan a military campaign against the US forces that had been stationed in Saudi Arabia in conjunction with the US war and continuing confrontation with Iraq through the 1990s.

According to Wright, Khashoggi was sent to Khartoum by the bin Laden family to convince Osama to give up the terrorist's path and return to the kingdom. He reportedly stayed with bin Laden for three nights to argue his case, but found him intransigent and unconcerned by Khashoggi's warnings he would be ostracized.

[According to Yahoo](#) News, although Khashoggi never condoned al-Qaeda's killing of innocent people with its terrorist acts, he also never renounced his friendship with bin Laden, either. Nawaf Obaid, a Saudi academic and colleague of Khashoggi's, told Yahoo that after Al-Qaeda carried out the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which killed more than 3,000 people in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, Khashoggi faced a moment of reckoning on his former friend.

"If we cannot come out and condemn this, then we are no better than him," he continued. "And [Khashoggi] took the pictures and he went quiet. And then several hours later, I saw him again and he said, 'Yeah, you're right.'"

However, Khashoggi's connections to bin Laden were well-known, and Jordanian journalist and former Khashoggi colleague Salameh Nematt told [the Washington Post](#) that sometime in the early 2000, he had been forced to convince Jordanian authorities not to deport Khashoggi after suspecting him of having ties to al-Qaeda.

"He was getting into trouble all the time because of his connections with al-Qaeda groups, but he was doing that as a journalist," Nematt said. "He was very well linked, to the point where some people suspected he was financing extremist groups. I personally was convinced he was doing his job as a journalist and covering both sides."

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Pennsylvania Lawmaker Eyes Arizona-Like Audit of 2020 Election Results to 'Restore' Public Trust
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The 2020 US election saw a bevy of allegations emerge regarding voter fraud, with former US President Donald Trump and his GOP supporters pushing unsubstantiated claims that ballots were uncounted, and that votes from deceased Americans were being registered. In the months since the Biden administration came into power, the claims have remained.

State Sen. David Argall (R-Schuylkill), a top Republican lawmaker who heads a key election committee in Pennsylvania, recently hinted that he is in full support of initiating an audit of the 2020 presidential election results in order to regain the public's trust in the US voting system. Argall serves as the leader of Pennsylvania's Senate State Government Committee, which happens to have oversight of the election administration. His latest remarks were made during a Friday [speaking engagement](#) with Spotlight PA.

Despite the Keystone State having already conducted two audits on the election results, Argall informed the Harrisburg-based investigative outlet that he was supportive of an independent audit similar to that which is being conducted in Arizona.

"I'm an agent of public opinion," he said, noting a variety of his constituents have raised their concerns about the election process to him. "If we're ever going to bring trust back into the system, I think it's a good idea to take a second look or a third look."

"It's a very careful recount, forensic audit, so yeah, I don't see the danger in it," Argall added, underscoring his beliefs that "it would not be a bad idea at all to proceed with an audit similar to what they're doing in Arizona."

Over yonder in Arizona, a [partisan review](#) of the election ballots in Maricopa County - the most populous district within the Copper State - has been ongoing for several weeks, and is expected to continue until the end of June. The re-recount process is being carried out by Florida-based contractor Cyber Ninjas, which has in its possession the nearly 2.1 million ballots submitted by county voters.

However, controversies have emerged as the so-called "audit" has come under fire, effectively being labeled as a [sham](#). As the process has been unfolding, state lawmakers from Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Georgia have flocked to the Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Phoenix, where the process is taking place, to examine how the review is being conducted. Argall further indicated during the event that his constituents "deserve to get an answer" to their questions and concerns surrounding the 2020 presidential vote even if election-related facts are already readily available, adding that "you would have danger whether you do the audit or you don't do the audit."

Cyber Ninjas at Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Phoenix. For some conspiracy theorists, the 2020 election still hasn't ended. Trump supporters are pushing to re-examine ballots from November across the country, and finding success in swing states like Arizona and Georgia.

Their efforts and sometimes misleading conclusions are being gleefully amplified by the former president.

"In a case like this, with so much mistrust out there, I think it's a good idea to be able to prove to people 'yes, you're right' or 'no, you're wrong,'" he continued. "The audit could be helpful in that regard."

The state lawmaker went on to emphasize that the audit, if cleared, needs to be conducted by an independent party. "[There] will be mistrust if the same people that conducted the election conduct the audit," he said.

It's presently unclear when Pennsylvania may take up recount efforts similar to those tapped by Arizona. Argall reiterated during the forum that there is "visible" support for the initiative.

Republicans within the state's House of Representatives have rejected such efforts.

The latest development came after Trump recently name-checked Argall and Pennsylvania Senate President Pro Tempore Jake Corman for their inaction in launching another audit of the 2020 election results. Although Argall has subpoena power as leader of the Senate committee, such an endeavor would require funding approved by the legislature.

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Drone Attack Reported Near Baghdad International Airport Where US Troops Are Stationed by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, unconfirmed reports detailed that Iran-backed militias were beginning to turn to fixed-wing drone attacks in the region so that strikes could go undetected on defensive systems. US officials previously stated that the threat was one of the bigger concerns for US service members.

Preliminary reports have indicated that a drone attack has struck a military facility near Baghdad International Airport in Iraq that houses US service members, it was revealed Monday.

It's presently unclear if the incident has caused any injuries, fatalities, or structural damages.

Iraqi officials have not yet confirmed initial reports.

Citing al-Sharq TV, Egyptian outlet el Balad [reported](#) that the drones targeting the military camp had been "booby trapped."

The latest incident comes several days after an unidentified drone dropped multiple explosive projectiles toward the same facility. At the time, Press TV [cited](#) a security source who informed Shafaq News that the drone targeted a wall at the base.

Drone strikes in the region are not uncommon by any measure. Two drone strikes were [previously downed](#) by air defense systems at Iraq's Ain al-Asad Air Base in early June, with another [drone attack](#) being carried out against a US State Department facility near the Baghdad airport just days later.

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Video: Israel Successfully Downs Multiple Targets With High-Powered Airborne Laser System by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The Israeli Ministry of Defense launched three separate programs in 2020 with the goal of developing three high-powered laser systems to help bolster the state's defenses and effectively complement the Iron Dome Missile Defense System. Despite the agency's latest success, the laser systems are not expected to be available for several years.

Israeli defense officials have successfully managed to conduct a series of interceptions and shoot down multiple drones through the use of an airborne laser system, it was revealed on Monday.

The Ministry of Defense detailed their newfound abilities in a video released earlier in the day that shows a high-powered laser being fired from a civilian Cessna plane, a move that subsequently destroyed the unmanned target and sent it plunging into the sea.

The at-sea trials were conducted over a period of days in coordination with the Israeli aerospace and defense company Elbit Systems, the Israeli Air Force and officials with the defense ministry's research and development department.

Yaniv Rotem, head of military research and development at the Defense Ministry, explained in an [agency statement](#) that the laser system, which is presently installed on a civilian light aircraft, was able to lock onto targets at a range of more than a kilometer with 100% accuracy.

"This is a groundbreaking technological achievement, and it is critical for further development of our airborne High-Power Laser System," Rotem said in a statement accompanying the release, which underscores that Israel is "among the first countries in the world" to achieve such a milestone.

Although the defense release reveals few details of the system's current capabilities, the Jerusalem Post [cited](#) Rotem as indicating that the system is able to destroy its intended target "regardless of weather conditions." It also remains locked onto the target until it is considered downed.

In a few years' time, Rotem indicated that the laser system is expected to have an effective range of 20 kilometers with a power of 100 kilowatts. The defense official also relayed that the ministry intends to install the laser system on a larger aircraft before undertaking the next trial phase, with the system eventually being relocated to another undisclosed aerial platform. Rotem further stated that in another 10 years, the system could possibly obliterate targets located several hundred kilometers away.

Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz hailed the development as "yet another milestone" in the agency's efforts, noting in a statement that the aerial success is "significant both in terms of cost-effectiveness and defense capabilities."

The aerial system, which will reportedly not be used to strike down incendiary balloons from the Gaza Strip, is just one part of the the defense ministry's larger initiative to develop three high-powered laser structures that are aerial, ground-based and can function on a maneuverable platform to defend troops.

Rotem told the publication that the ground-based system will be fitted with a 100-kilowatt laser that has a range of up to 10 kilometers. However, that system, which will more than likely be deployed as reinforcement along Gaza, is not expected to be operational until 2024.

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Trump Ally Says DeSantis Will Not Run in 2024 Presidential Election, Despite Leading 45 in New Poll

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Over the weekend, a straw poll on the potential Republican candidates in the 2024 US presidential election showed that conservative respondents overwhelmingly approved of both former US President Donald Trump and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. However, it was DeSantis who garnered the most support amongst those surveyed.

Former White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows revealed in a new interview that he does not believe the rumors around DeSantis' 2024 presidential campaign will come to fruition.

"Gov. DeSantis has made it very, very clear that he is running for reelection as governor of Florida, but he doesn't shy away from being very bold in terms of the initiatives that he's putting forth," Meadows told the [Washington Examiner](#) in an exclusive interview published on Monday. Meadows highlighted that he has recently met with DeSantis on three different occasions, and believes the reelection campaign will be a venue in which the Florida Governor can demonstrate the "courage" and "boldness" of his policies.

Prior to assuming his chief of staff position in Trump's administration, Meadows served as a US representative from North Carolina from 2013 to 2020, and also chaired the House Freedom Caucus from 2017 to 2019.

Meadows, who has remained a close ally to the former US president, contended that DeSantis is not trying to take on Trump in a presidential primary season.

"You know, I think Ron DeSantis is identified across the country now for the courage that he shows for conservative solutions, and he would be the first to say that if President Trump gets in, that he would win the nomination and would clear the field, and so I don't ever see it being a 2016 primary scenario," the former White House chief of staff said.

According to Meadows, DeSantis has even verbalized his intent to stay laser-focused on Florida.

"His answer has been consistent: He is running for reelection for governor of the state that not only he loves, but one that is, quite frankly, well run because of his leadership," Meadows said, noting that the Florida governor has said something akin to this "every time I'm in his presence." Meadows' published comments come just days after [a straw poll](#) conducted at the Western Conservative Summit showed DeSantis in a narrow lead over Trump for the 2024 election.

Of the 372 respondents to the survey, 74.12% approve of DeSantis as a 2024 candidate, while a close 71.43% backed Trump.

Though respondents were able to choose multiple candidates, there was a nearly 30% gap between Trump and Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX), who trailed behind DeSantis and Trump with 42.86% approval.

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Border Boundaries: Academics Cast Doubt on Rural Oregon Movement to Join Idaho
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Last month, advocacy group Citizens for Greater Idaho issued a 41-page proposal to relocate several rural, majority-Republican counties in Oregon, to neighboring Idaho. In order for such a move to take place, the matter has to be approved by both the Idaho and Oregon state legislatures, as well as the US Congress.

Within recent months, seven Oregon counties have voted to join the Citizens for Greater Idaho's proposal to consider relocating their land to fall under Idaho's governance, while another five counties are procuring signatures to get the matter onto a ballot.

The eastern Oregon [counties include](#): Idaho, Baker, Grant Lake, Malheur, Sherman, Union and Jefferson. All seven counties heavily supported former US President Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election.

Keaton Eams, vice president of government relations for Citizens for Greater Idaho, told [USA Today](#) that there is an "imbalance of power" between those in rural and urban areas of Oregon - such as Portland, Oregon, which has quickly become a hotspot for both the tech industry and millennials.

"Nobody from the valley between Portland and Eugene understands what goes on in these rural parts," Ems, an Oregonian, argued to the outlet.

"We're proud to be Oregonians," he said. "We love the land that we live on, and we wouldn't want to leave or put up a stand or ostracize ourselves in any way. We just want to talk about simpler issues, and that's why we believe that Idaho would be a better jurisdiction for our citizens to be under."

Aside from voting, the [movement also promotes](#) that Idaho is a better jurisdiction because of lower taxes, less regulation and unemployment, and more 'law and order.'

Mike McCarter, president of Citizens for Greater Idaho, told USA Today that their movement is rooted in a desire to preserve "traditional values."

"It has been talked about for many years how eastern Oregon and southern Oregon are more like Idaho than they are to northwest Oregon," the movement's president said. "Their lifestyles, their attachment to their lands – those traditional values of people who live out in space, in open lands, feel that they're more aligned with the people in Idaho."

Despite the similarities between rural Oregonians and Idaho, those wishing to carry out the relocation will have to receive approval from a number of governing bodies, including the US Congress.

"In an abstract sense, people should be represented however they see fit, but people live in actual polities that they didn't create themselves and live in municipalities, live in states, live in countries," said Joseph Lowndes, a political science professor at the University of Oregon.

"Practically, in democracies, people can't just pick up and leave and choose another government whenever they feel like it."

Zachary Price, a constitutional law expert at the University of California Hastings College of Law, also told the outlet that movement will have to take on a political process that "makes it pretty difficult."

Nevertheless, Citizens for Greater Idaho plan to schedule weekly meetings with Idaho lawmakers, as both the Oregon and Idaho legislatures would have to back the matter, according to Ems.

Additionally, Idaho would have to amend its state constitution, as the document defines the state's boundaries.

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US Airline Advocacy Groups Call on DoJ, FAA for 'Public Prosecution' of Violent Travelers
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Late last month, the US Department of Transportation's Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) announced it would be proposing civil penalties - ranging from \$9,000 to \$15,000 - against at least five unruly airline passengers. At the time, the FAA had logged a total of 2,500 similar reports of bad behavior, including 1,900 facemask incidents.

Ten airline advocacy groups, including Airlines for America and the Allied Pilots Association, issued a letter to the US Department of Justice (DoJ) on Monday, calling on the DoJ to pursue the "public prosecution" of violent airline passengers.

"Specifically, the federal government should send a strong and consistent message through criminal enforcement that compliance with federal law and upholding aviation safety are of paramount importance," read the letter, as reported by [NBC News](#).

The organizations' plea comes months after the FAA announced it would be implementing a zero-tolerance policy toward rowdy or unruly passengers. Rather than receiving a warning, offenders would be slapped with fines and/or jail time, according to FAA Administrator Stephen Dickson in January.

One organization, Airlines for America, issued a separate letter to Dickson on the matter, calling for increased enforcement of onboard policies.

"Unfortunately, we continue to see onboard behavior deteriorating into heinous acts, including assaults, threats and intimidation of crewmembers that directly interfere with the performance of crewmember duties and jeopardize the safety and security of everyone onboard the aircraft," the organization said.

"We respectfully request that the FAA and other federal agencies amplify the messaging to reach all travelers about the proposed penalties in addition to using all resources, including the media, to put a very public spotlight on the sentences handed down to perpetrators."

Just last month, the FAA proposed to fine an airline passenger \$52,500 - largest fine against an air traveler this year - after he punched a flight attendant in the face and tried to open the door to the aircraft's cockpit.

At the time, Dickson told [ABC News](#) that the "alarming increase" in disruptive, and sometimes violent passengers is something the FAA will "need to get under control."

"This is something we should all be concerned about," he added.

More recently, a male passenger aboard Delta Air Lines Flight 1730 from Los Angeles, California, to Atlanta, Georgia, attempted to open the cabin door mid-flight, and [had to be restrained](#) by fellow passengers and crew members. The man was later identified as a disgruntled, off-duty employee of the airline.

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NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab Awards Lockheed Martin Contract to Build Mars Lander Aeroshell

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) – NASA has awarded US defense manufacturer Lockheed Martin a contract to build the atmospheric protective shell for the upcoming unmanned mission to Mars, the company announced on Tuesday.

"NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory awarded Lockheed Martin a contract to design and build the aeroshell for the Mars Sample Retrieval Lander," the company said in a press release "The capsule will protect the spacecraft through its landing sequence on Mars."

The lander will enter the Martian atmosphere at an extremely high speed to generate thousands of degrees of heat, requiring the protection of the heat-resistant aeroshell, Lockheed Martin explained.

"The lander will retrieve samples of Martian soil taken by the Perseverance Rover, which landed on the Red Planet in February 2021. An ascent vehicle brought by the lander will then launch those samples into Martian orbit to rendezvous with a European Space Agency orbiter for their trip to Earth in the early 2030s," the release said.

Lockheed Martin has designed and built aeroshells for 10 previous NASA Mars missions including the Perseverance Rover now operating on Mars, the release noted.

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US Study Links Young Adults' Suicide Risk With Marijuana Use - Nat'l Institutes of Health

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) – An analysis of survey data from more than 280,000 young adults ages 18-35 in the United States showed an association between marijuana use and suicide risk, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) said on Tuesday.

"While we cannot establish that cannabis use caused the increased suicidality we observed in this study, these associations warrant further research, especially given the great burden of suicide on young adults," the study's author, NIH's National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) Director Nora Volkow said in a press release. "As we better understand the relationship between cannabis use, depression, and suicidality, clinicians will be able to provide better guidance and care to patients."

The study, also published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, showed an association between marijuana use and suicidal thoughts, plans to commit suicide and actual suicide attempts, regardless of whether young adults were also experiencing depression, the release said.

Researchers examined data from 281,650 young adults ages 18 to 35 years — the age range when most substance use and mood disorders emerge — with an almost even number of women and men, the release added.

About 3 percent of those without a major depressive episode and who did not use marijuana suffered from suicidal thoughts, compared with 9 percent for daily cannabis users and 14 percent for those with cannabis use disorder, according to the release.

Among people with depression, 35 percent who did not use cannabis had suicidal thoughts compared with 53 percent of daily users and 50 percent of those who had a cannabis use disorder. Similar trends existed for the associations between different levels of marijuana use and suicide plans or attempts, the release said.

The release cited NIDA data showing a doubling of cannabis use from 22.6 million Americans in 2008 and 45 million in 2019, and a near tripling of daily or near-daily users from 3.6 million to 9.8 million during the same period.

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UNRWA Appeals for \$164Mln to Aid Palestinian Refugees in Gaza - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, June 21 (Sputnik) - The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) launched a \$164 million humanitarian appeal to support the people in Gaza affected by the recent conflict between Hamas and Israel, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"The UNRWA is launching a \$164 million humanitarian and recovery appeal following the hostilities in Gaza in May," Dujarric said.

The updated appeal seeks to fund the immediate emergency response and early recovery needs of Palestine refugees in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, Dujarric said.

Israel and Hamas, which governs the Gaza Strip, were locked in armed conflict for 11 days until a ceasefire was announced on May 20. The hostilities were preceded by days of clashes between Palestinians and the Israeli police in East Jerusalem over an Israeli court's decision to evict several Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood.

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Low US Interest Rate Can Lead to Excessive Valuations - Federal Reserve Official

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - An environment of very low US interest rate can lead to excessive asset valuations that can ultimately destabilize the economy, Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland President Loretta Mester said in a speech on Tuesday.

"Excessive valuations are a vulnerability because if risk appetites were to change suddenly, these valuations could fall suddenly, leading to margin calls and losses, especially if leverage is elevated, which is more likely in a low-interest-rate environment," Mester said. "Low interest rates could more directly impact the profitability of banks by lowering net interest margins and earnings, thereby limiting banks' capital levels and their ability to lend through a downturn and changing their appetite for risk."

Last week, the Federal Reserve signaled there will be two interest rate hikes before the end of 2023. Rates have been kept between zero and 0.25 percent since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. The Federal Reserve also said it was studying for an appropriate exit for its stimulus program and is expected to provide more details soon.

Mester said financial stability should not be regarded as a "third priority" for the Federal Reserve after its twin mandates of ensuring maximum employment for Americans and keeping inflation at no more than 2 percent a year to balance growth.

While the Federal Reserve was not at the point where it could withdraw altogether its accommodative policy for the economy, there were indications of some frothiness in asset prices that the central bank needed to be wary of, she said.

Mester said if the economy is already near its monetary policy goals of maximum employment and price stability, then continuing to keep policy rates very low to move even closer to these goals could contribute to a buildup of financial vulnerabilities.

"This creates the potential for a future period of financial instability that could jeopardize the achievement of monetary policy goals over time," she added.

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US, African Nations Wrap Up Large-Scale Military Drills on Continent – AFRICOM

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) – The large-scale African Lion 21 military drills, with the participation of the United States and eight other African nations, have come to a close, US Africa Command (AFRICOM) said in a statement on Tuesday.

"African Lion, US Africa Command's premier joint annual exercise, successfully wrapped up its 17th iteration in Morocco, Tunisia and Senegal, June 18," the statement read.

This year's drills became the largest and most complex in its history, Commander of the Southern European Task Force Africa Maj. Gen. Andrew Rohling said.

"I would like to thank our Moroccan, Senegalese and Tunisian partners for hosting African Lion in their respective countries. This year's African Lion was the largest and most complex we have had, to date," he noted.

Speaking of plans, Rohling noted that another fifteen states observed the training with the potential to join for African Lion 22.

African Lion 21 culminated with a combined arms live-fire exercise displaying capabilities of the total force June 18, 2021, in Morocco, AFRICOM said. Other parts of drills included joint training of special operations forces, humanitarian assistance and threat reduction operations, the statement read.

As part of the maritime domain of the exercise, the Navy warship USS Hershel Woody Williams stopped at the port of Agadir to train alongside a Moroccan frigate, it added.

African Lion 21, is a joint, multi-national exercise in Morocco, Tunisia and Senegal, which took place from June 7-18.

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Taliban Yet to Honor Obligations Under Doha Peace Deal - Afghan Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, June 21 (Sputnik) - The Taliban movement has not fulfilled any of its obligations under the peace agreement signed with the United States in Doha last year, Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Haneef Atmar said at a UN Security Council meeting on Tuesday.

"In good faith, the United States and our NATO partners have met almost all of their obligations in the agreement, including the withdrawal of their troops to be completed in coming weeks," Atmar said. "It is a sad reality, but the Taliban have not honored any of their obligations under the Doha peace agreement."

Atmar explained the Taliban has yet to cut ties with international terrorist organizations, adding that the Islamist movement is hosting and supporting not only Al-Qaeda (banned in Russia) but also regional terror groups in pursuit of violence against Afghanistan and other countries.

In addition, the Taliban has intensified attacks against the civilian population and Afghanistan is now witnessing the "worst violence of the past two decades," Atmar said.

The Taliban has also demonstrated a lack of commitment to enter negotiation with the Afghan government and reach a political settlement, he said.

"For almost 10 months now, we have had no serious engagement from the Taliban for serious peace negotiation and no response to our peace plan and absolutely no counter-proposal," Atmar said. "The situation calls for a serious review and assessment as to where we as the international community are with the peace process."

The Afghan diplomat urged the international community and regional partners to apply their influence to persuade the Taliban to honor their obligations under the Doha agreement.

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UK Launches First Carrier-Based F-35 Strikes Against Islamic State - US CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) – The United Kingdom's Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier launched the vessel's first combat sorties with F-35 fighter jets targeting the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia) in support of the American-led Operation Inherent Resolve, US Central Command (CENTCOM) said on Tuesday.

"HMS Queen Elizabeth's first missions against Daesh [ISIS] will be remembered as a significant moment in the 50-year lifespan of this ship," UK Carrier Strike Group 21 Commander, Commodore Steve Moorhouse said in the release. "Now we are ready to deliver the hard punch of maritime-based air power against a shared enemy.

The strike group includes 18 fifth-generation F-35 Lightning jets, the largest concentration of maritime and air power to leave the UK in a generation and the strike group's first operational deployment, the release said.

Sorties from the Queen Elizabeth also mark the first combat mission flown by US-made aircraft from a foreign aircraft carrier since the UK Carrier Victorious in the South Pacific in 1943, according to the release.

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US Home Sales Down 3rd Month in Row Due to Tight Supply - National Association of Realtors

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - Existing-home sales in the United States slowed by 2.7 percent in April for a third straight monthly decline as fewer houses came on the market to match demand that remained up double-digits for the year despite record high prices, the National Association of Realtors (NAR) said on Tuesday.

"Home sales were down again in April from the prior month, as housing supply continues to fall short of demand," NAR Chief Economist Lawrence Yun said also noting a 34 percent increase in demand from last year. "We'll see more inventory come to the market later this year as further COVID-19 vaccinations are administered and potential home sellers become more comfortable listing and showing their homes."

NAR reported that the total housing inventory at the end of April amounted to 1.16 million units, up 10.5 percent from March's inventory but down 20.5 percent from a year ago.

"The additional supply projected for the market should cool down the torrid pace of price appreciation later in the year," Yun said.

The median existing-home price for all housing types in April was at a record high \$341,600, up 19.1 percent from the April 2020 median of \$286,800, as every US region recorded increases, he said.

The housing market is the cornerstone of the US economy and accounts for nearly 15 percent of GDP. US house prices have increased every year for nearly ten years and appreciated even during the height of the novel coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

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Canada's Controversial Bill to Overhaul Broadcasting Rules Gets Green Light from House

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) – Canada's Bill C-10, introduced by the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to overhaul the country's media framework, was adopted in the House of Commons on Tuesday.

Parliamentarians voted 196-112 in favor of passing the legislation, which content creators, academics and elected officials have called an assault on free speech and freedom of the press. The majority of parliamentarians from the governing Liberal Party as well as from the opposition Bloc Quebecois and New Democrat Party (NDP) voted for the legislation.

The Bill will now go to the Senate for approval and will have to receive royal assent from Chief Justice Richard Wagner, who is performing the duties of governor general following the resignation of Julie Payette, before it becomes law.

The legislation was originally introduced on November 3, by Trudeau's Minister of Canadian Heritage, Steven Guilbeault, who oversees the country's media and culture sectors.

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

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

Parliamentarians were given the opportunity to include the clause defending individual content creators, but the Conservative Party motion was defeated 117 to 200.

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Kabul Urges UN to Set Up Doha Peace Deal Monitoring Mechanism, Says Taliban Not Compliant

UNITED NATIONS, June 21 (Sputnik) - Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Haneef Atmar on Tuesday urged the international community to establish a monitoring mechanism to verify the implementation by the Taliban of the Doha peace agreement.

"In a couple of weeks, the foreign troops' withdrawal will be completed and the international community will, unfortunately, see for itself that the Taliban will not have met any of their obligations under the Doha peace agreement," Atmar said during a UN Security Council meeting on the situation in the Islamic Republic.

"A monitoring mechanism should be established by the international community to verify the implementation of the Doha peace agreement and the UN Security Council resolution 2513," he said.

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Missile Defense Tests in Poland Follow Installation of US Aegis Ashore System - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - The temporary installation and integration of the US Aegis Ashore system with missile defense batteries in Poland has allowed a series of tests prior to the system's permanent deployment, the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) said.

"The Aegis Weapon System... was unpacked and temporarily set up in a site-activation facility to create the Poland Aegis Ashore Removable Equipment Unit Integration Site for testing prior to permanent installation," the MDA said in a press release.

The integration site allowed testing of several simulated scenarios demonstrating successful Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD), engaging on remote and launching on remote multiple threats, the release said.

In addition, the installation allowed engineers to update the Aegis weapon system hardware and software and correct equipment issues which could have caused delays to the ultimate start of operations if discovered during permanent installation, the release added.

In 2018, Poland signed an agreement with the United States worth nearly \$5 billion for air and missile defense systems, the State Department said in a recently published fact sheet.

Poland's missile defense system is slated for deployment as early as 2022, according to media reports.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Blinken Tours Europe for Forums on Libya, Syria, G-20 Meeting

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken embarks on a tour of Europe to take part in the conference on Libya, attend meetings of the G-20 and coalition to fight the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia), join a multilateral discussion of Syria and hold a plethora of bilateral engagements.

In Germany, the first leg of the journey, Blinken will attend the Second Berlin Conference on Libya. The forum is viewed as a major opportunity to reinforce international support for the ongoing reconciliation process, push for the withdrawal of foreign troops and lend additional momentum for preparing national elections in December.

US diplomats say that the conference may also address concerns stemming from "destabilizing actions" of rebel groups in neighboring Chad allegedly backed by Russian private contractors. While in Berlin, Blinken is expected to meet with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Heiko Maas. US diplomats say that he will not miss an opportunity to voice America's opposition to the Nord Stream 2 gas-exporting pipeline from Russia to Europe. Another issue highlighted on the agenda of Blinken's meeting with Maas is combating anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial.

In Paris on June 25, Blinken will meet with French President Emmanuel Macron and Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian. He will also discuss international taxation initiatives with OECD Secretary General Mathias Cormann, the State Department said.

In Rome, Blinken and Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio will co-chair a meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat IS. On the margins of the meeting, Blinken will participate in a Syria Ministerial to discuss the crisis in the country and underscore the importance of meeting humanitarian needs.

He will also have bilateral meetings with President Sergio Mattarella and Di Maio, as well as visit Vatican City for talks with senior Holy See officials.

In Italian cities of Bari and Matera Blinken will join the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

According to the State Department, he will reinforce the US commitment to multilateralism, discuss continued cooperation in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing the climate crisis, and building back better with global partners, with a focus on Africa.

Previewing the trip, US officials could not immediately say if Blinken plans bilateral meetings with his counterparts from Russia and China, who will also be present at the G-20 in Italy.

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'We Lived With One Goal': Soviet Veteran on First, Last Days of Great Patriotic War

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - The news about Nazi Germany's invasion led to the highest level of patriotism among the Soviet people despite initially causing alarm, Soviet war veteran Col. Nikolai Zaitsev told Sputnik.

"Of course, the news of the invasion [of the Soviet Union] caused consternation. I have felt that all of us somehow were confused: How are we to live now, what are we to do?" Zaitsev, who now lives in New York, said.

Zaitsev said he was a 16-year-old student in a small township near Barnaul in Siberia when Nazi Germany supported by the Axis-forces attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941.

"The director of the school gathered all our teachers and gave instructions as to who had to go to the military commissariat to enlist in the Army. It was the signal to us, students, and we lashed out there," he said.

Zaitsev recalled that just one day before the invasion, he and his classmates held their high school graduation party.

"I completed 9th grade and along with our schoolmates from the 10th and 11th grades celebrated cheerily in our school," he said.

The school administration decided to organize a joint picnic in the nearby nice forest the next day and provided a shuttle train for the trip, he noted.

"The next morning, Sunday, June 22, we gathered together awaiting the train to that wonderful place in the forest. Everybody was ready, but our director was late," Zaitsev said.

The war veteran explained that those gathered realized the school director was instructed to wait for an important telephone call from the local authorities. The school was some 200 meters

away from the railroad station and soon everybody saw him running from the door and screaming: "War! War! War!" Zaitsev said.

The school director ran to the students and struggling to catch his breath informed them the Hitlerites had treacherously invaded the Soviet Union, are bombing cities and the first battles were taking place near the western border, he noted.

"The director said that we cannot live as usual anymore, a nation-wide mobilization had been declared and everybody enlisted in the military should be ready for a new life at the front and in the rear," Zaitsev said.

SKIERS BATTALIONS AND MISSILE PREPARATION

Zaitsev said many of the young men went to the commissariat asking that they be enlisted as volunteer fighters in the so-called skiers battalions.

"We knew about those battalions, which were forming in Siberia. We grew up in the snow and knew how to ski very well," he said.

However, the commissar told the students the Army will defeat the enemy without them enlisting and they should continue their education, he said.

"This answer did not satisfy us, we continued asking, but none of us was able to stay at the commissariat to process documents that day," Zaitsev said.

Despite the given advice, the students decided education was not their major goal then and began helping local collective farms amid the new circumstances, he noted.

"We felt no panic whatsoever. All of us lived with a common goal. The war urged us to think about how to link our personal destiny to the country's fate and be helpful to the front," Zaitsev said.

When a wagon building plant was evacuated from Ukraine, he added, the students began working there and helped produce parts for missiles.

"We had to unload these machines from platforms at the railroad station and drag them to the plant," Zaitsev said.

Before the conveyor was built, the students and other young persons dragged and grinded 18-kilogram heavy missile noses under the supervision of a few adult engineers.

"We had to prepare 225 noses, half as much than the adult workers did before the evacuation. Our master came to me once and said: 'You are all great guys. You are doing more than adult men,'" Zaitsev said.

JOINING THE ARMY, ENGAGING IN BATTLE

Zaitsev said he "at last" joined the Soviet Army in August 1942 and nine months later engaged in battle as a member of a mortar regiment.

"There was an extremely difficult situation in 1943 and 1942, but in 1945 as well, when we liberated Hungary," he said. "Despite the fierce resistance from the Nazis, we took control over the city of Szombathely near the Austrian border and entered Austria."

His reconnaissance unit received an order on May 5, 1945 to cross the Danube River and meet with US troops in Czechoslovakia, Zaitsev said.

"On the night of May 9, my radio operator warned me about an important government announcement soon," Zaitsev said. "I took earphones and heard the words that I'd remember forever: 'Germany has capitulated, we won!'"

Zaitsev said he remembers vividly the emotions, the firing in the air and the "Hurray" shouts once word spread of Nazi Germany's surrender.

However, the veteran pointed out that his unit was tasked to continue moving forward. "On May 9, 1945, we were fraternizing with American soldiers near the city of Pisek not far from Prague," Zaitsev said.

Local residents greeted the Soviet and US troops and organized a big rally to celebrate the victory, he added.

"A small girl approached me and looked very seriously. My right arm was injured, but I took her on my left hand and came to that meeting with this girl and her parents. I finished the war with this girl on my arms," Zaitsev concluded.

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US Seeks to Extradite Turkish Businessman Over Money Laundering Charges - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - The US is seeking to extradite Turkish businessman Sezgin Baran Korkmaz from Austria for allegedly laundering \$133 million as part of a tax credit fraud scheme, the Justice Department said.

Korkmaz was arrested in Austria last Saturday after a federal grand jury returned an indictment charging him with conspiracy to commit money laundering, wire fraud, and obstruction of an official proceeding.

"The United States will seek to extradite Korkmaz to the United States so that he can appear before US District Judge Jill Parrish of the District of Utah to face these charges," the department said in a statement.

Korkmaz is accused of laundering over \$133 million in fraud proceeds through foreign bank accounts in a scheme that involved filing false claims for over \$1 billion in refundable renewable fuel tax credits for the production and sale of biodiesel by their Utah-based company, the release said.

He and his co-conspirators allegedly used proceeds from the fraud to acquire a Turkish airline, hotels in Turkey and Switzerland, a yacht, and a villa and apartment in Istanbul, according to the Justice Department.

Should he be convicted, Korkmaz will face a maximum penalty of 225 years in prison for the crimes, being eligible to receive 20 years for the money laundering and each of the wire fraud counts, in addition to five years for the obstruction count, the release added.

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US Sees Berlin Conference as Opportunity to Bolster Elections in Libya - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will use the upcoming Berlin Conference on Libya to reaffirm the Biden administration's support for elections

scheduled in the country for December, Special Envoy for Libya Richard Norland said during a briefing.

"There needs to be a constitutional basis and a legal framework established, approved by either the parliament or by the LPDF [Libyan Political Dialogue Forum], basically in July, according to the election commission, in order for the elections to take place in December, and this process has been delayed, we think it needs urgent attention and this conference is an opportunity to reinforce that message," Norland said on Monday.

On Thursday, Blinken spoke with his Libyan counterpart Najla Mangoush and underscored the importance of the upcoming elections in the country. In addition, the matters of a ceasefire and troop withdrawal are also expected to be on the conference's agenda.

The Berlin Conference is one item on Blinken's itinerary for his European trip, which will also include bilateral meetings with German, French and Italian officials.

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Gay Rights Flag to Fly Over State Dept., Approved for All US Embassies - Blinken

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - The gay rights' flag will be flying later this month over the State Department and will also be doing so over US embassies around the world, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

"One thing that I can actually announce today for the first time is that we'll be flying the progress flag, a symbol that encompasses the diversity and intersectionality of LGBTQI [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning and intersex], persons and communities around the world at the State Department later this month," Blinken told an Atlantic Council podcast on Monday.

Blinken explained that US ambassadors and other chiefs of missions throughout the world had already been given authority to fly the gay pride flag at their offices and buildings.

"Every single country where we're represented, our chiefs of mission, our ambassadors, our charges - whoever's in charge - have the authority to fly the pride flag on an exterior, external-facing pole at the embassy," he said.

The gay rights flag would be flown from June 26 to June 28, Blinken added.

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Some 18,000 Helpers Seeking to Flee Afghanistan Before US Troops Pull Out - Blinken

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - Around 18,000 Afghans who have assisted US forces in Afghanistan are seeking to leave the country before the United States' withdrawal is completed by September 11, but only half of them have so far filled out the necessary paperwork, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

"There are about 18,000 people who have expressed interest – or more – in using this program to come to the United States," Blinken told an Atlantic Council podcast on Monday. "In other words, 18,000 people who worked directly with our soldiers, with our diplomats in Afghanistan." Blinken said half of that number had already completed the necessary bureaucratic processes but the other half was just starting them.

"About 9,000 of those are just in the beginning of the process. They've expressed interest, they're looking at it, they haven't filled out the forms. Another 9,000, though, have filled out the

forms. They're working through the process, and we've got a number of them that are awaiting approval by our embassy in Afghanistan and others who are actually in the immigration process itself," he said.

The State Department had added 50 officials to those dealing with the Special Immigrant Visas required by those individuals and they had already succeeded in eliminating some backlogs that had existed in the process, Blinken said.

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Russia's Ambassador Met China's Counterpart on First Day in US

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov met with his Chinese counterpart Cui Tiankai on the first day in office after a lengthy and politically charged absence for consultations in his home country, the Embassy said in a statement.

"On June 21, Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the United States Anatoly Antonov held a friendly meeting with the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to the United States Cui Tiankai on the occasion of the latter's final departure from the United States," the Embassy said via Facebook.

Antonov briefed him on last week's Geneva summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden. Both top diplomats underscored the importance of developing the strategic partnership between Russia and China as well as maintaining friendly relations between their embassies in Washington, DC, the statement said.

On Sunday, Antonov came back to the US after three months of consultations in Russia. His American counterpart John Sullivan is expected to travel to Moscow later this week following an agreement reached by Putin and Biden to return ambassadors in both capitals.

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US Economy Doing Well But Not Enough for Stimulus Tapering - Federal Reserve Official

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - The US economy is recovering rapidly from the coronavirus pandemic but the progress is not enough for the Federal Reserve to withdraw the support it has been extending, Federal Reserve Bank of New York President John Williams said.

"It's clear that the economy is improving at a rapid rate and the medium-term outlook is very good," Williams said on Monday. "But the data and conditions have not progressed enough for the FOMC [Federal Open Market Committee] to shift its monetary policy stance of strong support for the economic recovery."

The FOMC said last week that it was studying for an appropriate exit for its stimulus program while signaling the first post-coronavirus pandemic US interest rate hike at the end of 2023. Since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020, the Federal Reserve has been keeping US interest rates at between zero and 0.25 percent buying \$120 billion of assets each month to keep the economy afloat.

The Federal Reserve's inflation benchmark, the Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, increased to a multiyear high of 3.6 percent in April compared to the same month of 2020. The central bank has officially forecast a 6.5 percent growth for all of 2022, with some of its more optimistic bankers projecting a 7 percent expansion.

Williams said the inflation spike in recent months was mostly reflected by the temporary effects of a rapidly recovering economy.

"We must keep in mind that many of these increases are simply reversals of the large declines we saw last year when the pandemic first took hold. Once these prices have fully adjusted to the reopened economy, they shouldn't continue to increase at recent elevated rates, and their effect on overall inflation should subside," he added.

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US Stocks Stage Broad Rally Despite Concerns Over Federal Reserve Stimulus Tapering

NEW YORK, June 21 (Sputnik) - US stocks rallied on Monday as equity investors regained their appetite for risk after last week's plunge triggered by the Federal Reserve's announcement that it was seeking an appropriate exit time for its pandemic-era stimulus programs.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, finished at 33,877, up 1.8 percent on the day. Last week, the Dow plunged 3.5 percent, its most since the week ended October 23.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, closed at 4,225, up 1.4 percent on the day. For the week, the S&P500 lost 1.9 percent, its most since the week to February 19.

The Nasdaq Composite index, which includes high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google, finished at 14,141, up 0.8 percent. Nasdaq was a relative outperformer last week compared with the Dow and S&P500, losing just 0.3 percent.

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Blinken to Underscore Nord 2 Stream Opposition in Talks With German Leaders - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will emphasize the Biden administration's opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project during upcoming

meetings with the German leadership, Acting Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Phillip Reeker said.

"We will certainly underscore our belief that the pipeline is a Russian geopolitical project that threatens Europe's energy security and certainly undermines the security of Ukraine and other Eastern countries," Reeker said during a briefing on Monday.

Reeker also said there is a "very low likelihood" the pipeline will remain offline despite Blinken's continued efforts to urge Germany to halt the project.

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Trump Not Considering Becoming Next House Speaker in 2022

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) – The former US President Donald Trump said on Monday he was not considering vying for the role of the House of Representatives in 2022 though he is aware of the mounting rumors.

"I have heard the talk and it's getting more and more. But it is not something that I would have considered, but certainly there is a lot of talk about it," Trump said in an interview with conservative outlet Real America's Voice.

The former US President also noted that he has a good relationship with the House minority leader Kevin McCarthy, who can potentially become the next speaker if the Republicans win back the majority after the midterm elections in the last quarter of 2022, and hopes "to do everything traditionally."

In a recent interview to Fox News on Saturday McCarthy confirmed that Trump was considering to run for the speaker chair and become the first unelected official in the position.

In early June, in another interview, Trump said he was interested in the idea of becoming the House speaker to come back to the American big politics before 2024 when the next presidential elections will take place.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) -

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan will return to Moscow later this week, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

* The United States expects follow-up contacts with Russia in the coming weeks on the strategic stability issues after the two countries' leaders who agreed to launch the dialogue during their summit in Geneva, the White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters.

* The United States cannot cover up its non-competitiveness with new statements on the Russia-led Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project, Zakharova said.

* Russia and the United States are launching contacts to normalize the operation of embassies, but they now have to discuss working groups' format, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Evgeniy Ivanov said.

* Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov departed for Washington in working spirit, but he has many things to do there, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

IRAN ELECTION

* The United States has no intention to seek a summit with Iran's new president, the White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Monday.

* Tehran has no intention to extend the nuclear deal to cover regional issues and the missile program, as proposed by the United States, President-elect Ebrahim Raisi said.

* Raisi said that he has no plans to meet with US President Joe Biden and discuss sanctions relief.

* Iran does not intend to continue negotiations on return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) if the nuclear agreement will not serve Tehran's interests, Raisi said.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST BELARUS, NORTH KOREA

* US President Joe Biden extended for another year the national emergency declared with respect to North Korea in 2008, a legal basis for multiple sanctions over the country's nuclear program, the White House said on Monday.

* US Treasury Department has designated 16 persons and five entities from Belarus, including the State Security Committee (KGB) and press secretary of the Belarusian President, as part of the new sanctions package following the Ryanair incident in May and alleged human rights violations.

* The foreign ministers of the European Union have agreed to impose sectoral sanctions on Belarus, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said.

* The new EU sanctions list on Belarus includes relatives of President Alexander Lukashenko, statesmen, large businessmen, as well as security officials and Belarusian companies.

* Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs Marc Garneau has imposed sanctions on 17 Belarusian officials and five entities in the fourth round of sanctions against the republic in the past ten months, Global Affairs Canada said.

* The UK joined the US, Canada and the European Union in imposing sanctions on Belarus following the forced landing of the Ryanair commercial airplane in Minsk on May 23 and the arrest of an opposition figure Roman Protasevich.

TERRORIST ATTACK IN MALI

* Three French servicemen, taking part in the Barkhane anti-insurgent operation, were injured in the attack in Mali, Agence France-Presse reported on Monday, citing Mali's military and local officials.

* French servicemen and Malian civilians were injured in the car bomb blast in the West African country, the French General Staff told Sputnik.

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Biden Extends Sanctions Against North Korea By 1 Year – White House

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden extended for another year the national emergency declared with respect to North Korea in 2008, a legal basis for multiple sanctions over the country's nuclear program, the White House said on Monday.

"The existence and risk of the proliferation of weapons-usable fissile material on the Korean Peninsula and the actions and policies of the Government of North Korea continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States... I am continuing for 1 year the national emergency declared in Executive Order 13466 with respect to North Korea," the presidential notice said.

Without prolongation, the national emergency was set to expire on June 26, 2021.

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US Begins to Prepare Strategic Stability Dialogue with Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - US officials are beginning to prepare a strategic stability dialogue with Russia following US President Joe Biden's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said during a briefing on Monday.

"As directed by President Biden, we are preparing a strategic stability dialogue with Russia. We're in the process of scheduling the first meeting," Price said.

The two leaders agreed last week to launch a strategic stability dialogue between the US and Russia in order to address issues such as arms control and conflict risk reduction. Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov, who recently returned to his post in Washington, told Sputnik on Sunday that implementing strategic stability is among his "main tasks."

Price added that a "high-level" State Department official will be leading the US delegation. The officials plan on discussing the next step in nuclear arms control agreements between the two powers.

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US Defense Leadership Met With Israeli Counterpart to Discuss Middle East Security

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley met with their Israeli counterpart Aviv Kochavi on

Monday to discuss issues of mutual interest, including the security situation in the Middle East region, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said.

"The Chairman of the [US] Joint Chiefs General [Mark] Milley hosted today his counterpart in the Israeli Defense Forces, Chief of the Israeli General Staff Lieutenant General Aviv Kochavi at the Pentagon. The two leaders discussed several issues of mutual concern including the current security environment throughout the Middle East," Kirby said during a press briefing. "Secretary [of Defense Lloyd] Austin did attend part of the meeting."

General Milley has reaffirmed the US commitment to its relationship with Israel as a key partner as regards peace and security in the region, Kirby also said.

Israel and Hamas, which governs the Gaza Strip, were locked in armed conflict for 11 days until a ceasefire was announced on May 20. The hostilities were preceded by days of clashes between Palestinians and the Israeli police in East Jerusalem over an Israeli court's decision to evict several Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood.

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US Charges Five in Plot to Export Imaging Scopes, Night Goggles to Russia - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - The US government has charged five individuals for conspiring to unlawfully export thermal imaging rifle scopes and night-vision goggles without a license to Russia, the Justice Department said on Monday.

"According to court documents, Elena Shifrin, 59, of Mundelein, Illinois, and Vladimir Pridacha, 55, of Volo, Illinois, were arrested June 17 for their roles in a nearly four-year scheme in which the defendants purchased dozens of thermal imaging devices, most of which cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000," the department said in a press release. "The other three defendants named in the indictment are: Boris Polosin, 45, of Russia; Vladimir Gohman, 52, of Israel; and Igor Panchernikov, 39, an Israeli national."

The defendants allegedly obtained many of the items using aliases, falsely assuring the sellers that they would not export the items from the United States. The thermal imaging devices were then exported to co-conspirators in Russia using aliases and false addresses to conceal their activities, the Justice Department said.

"As alleged, the defendants hid the thermal imaging devices among other non-export-controlled items when exporting them to Russia, and they falsely stated on export declarations that the contents of their exports were non-export-controlled items with values of less than \$2,500," the release explained.

All five defendants are charged with conspiring to violate the Arms Export Control Act and face up to 20 years in federal prison if convicted. They are also accused of conspiring to smuggle thermal imaging devices from the United States and file false export information to conceal their activities, the Justice Department said.

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Latest Round of Iran Nuclear Talks to Resume in Vienna in 'Coming Days' – State Department

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) – The United States and Iran will resume talks in Vienna aimed at reviving the nuclear deal in the coming days, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

"The seventh round of direct negotiations with the Iranians [on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action] we expect will take place in Vienna in the coming days," Price told reporters.

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US Ambassador to Russia Sullivan to Return to Moscow This Week - State Department

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) – US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan will return to Moscow later this week, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

Sullivan and Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov traveled to their home countries for consultations this spring. During a summit in Geneva, presidents Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden agreed on the ambassadors' return.

"[Ambassador Sullivan] will return to Moscow this week," Price told reporters, noting that the United States is committed to having open channels of communications with Russia.

Price added that the State Department welcomes Antonov's return to Washington.

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US Oil Refinery Suspended Over Health Concerns to Shut Down For Financial Reasons

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) – The controversial Limetree Bay Energy plant in the US Virgin Islands announced on Monday its plan to shut down indefinitely because of the serious financial problems after a month of dead time due to significant health safety issues.

The refinery came back to business last winter after almost ten years of closure. However, the Environment Protection Agency (EPA) ordered to shut it down in early May after a series of incidents when the plant sprayed neighborhoods with a petroleum mist.

“Limetree Bay Energy (“Limetree Bay” or the “Company”) today announced that it is suspending its plans to restart the refinery indefinitely, due to severe financial constraints,” the company said in a statement.

Last Wednesday, EPA gave the company two weeks to provide a plan to establish an air monitoring system.

“Regrettably, the Company has been unable to secure the necessary funding and will be required to reduce the refinery’s workforce by approximately 271 employees, effective September 19, 2021,” Limetree Bay said.

Oil storage terminal, operated by the same company, will continue operating, the statement read.

The refinery provided more than 400 jobs to residents, according to the company’s website.

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UN Verifies 26,425 Grave Violations Against Children in Armed Conflict in 2020 - Report

UNITED NATIONS, June 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations verified at least 26,425 grave violations against children in armed conflict during 2020, including instances of killing, recruitment and sexual violence, a report by the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres revealed on Monday.

“In 2020, the situation of children in armed conflict was marked by a sustained high number of grave violations,” the report said. “The United Nations verified 26,425 grave violations, of which 23,946 were committed in 2020 and 2,479 were committed earlier but verified only in 2020.”

The highest number of violations was the recruitment of some 8,521 children, the killing of 2,674 and maiming of 5,748 children, as well as over 4,000 incidents of humanitarian access denial, the report said.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen had seen the highest numbers of grave violations against children.

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US Expects Follow-Up Contacts on Strategic Dialogue with Russia in Weeks Ahead – Psaki

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) – The United States expects follow-up contacts with Russia in the coming weeks on the strategic stability issues after the two countries' leaders who agreed to launch the dialogue during their summit in Geneva, the White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Monday.

"We have launched the strategic stability talks. Part of their discussion was the fact that there will need to be a lot of follow-up on a level that is below the two leaders. Some of that could be on the Secretary of State's, some that could be... underneath that. Those discussions will be happening or beginning in the weeks ahead," Psaki said during a daily briefing.

Last Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart Joe Biden agreed to embark on the strategic stability dialogue between both countries in an attempt to devise future arms control and risk reduction measures.

Psaki said that she has no specific updates on follow-up engagements and suggested that some announcements may be forthcoming from the State Department.

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One-Third of Canadians View Their Country as Racist - Poll

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - One-third of Canadians say their country is racist, an Angus Reid Institute poll revealed on Monday.

The study comes amid a discussion on race relations in Canada following the discovery of the remains of 215 children on the territory of a former boarding school for indigenous Canadians and an allegedly premeditated car attack on a Muslim family in London, Ontario.

"Fully one-in-three (34 percent) say 'Canada is a racist country.' Among those who believe this most keenly: visible minorities (42 percent of whom say so) and women, particularly those under the age of 35, who are much more likely than men to hold this view (54 percent)," the study found.

However, respondents were in overwhelming agreement - 86 percent - that diversity makes Canada a better country and more than three-quarters said they feel at home in Canada and within their communities.

Furthermore, 87 percent of Canadians say all races are equal, with 87 and 89 percent of indigenous and white respondents agreeing with the statement, however, visible minorities were most likely - 18 percent - to say that some races are superior to others.

The country is more divided on perception of racism in Canada, the poll showed. Fifty-nine percent of respondents said denial of racism is a bigger issue than vice versa. Forty one percent

- led by indigenous and Western Canadian respondents - said exaggeration of racism is the bigger issue in Canada.

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US Air Force, Federal Aviation Body Agree on Space Safety Commerce Standards - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) – The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the Department of the Air Force have concluded a commercial space agreement to protect public safety during commercial space activities carried out by or under the supervision of the US Space Force, the FAA said on Monday.

"The FAA and the Department of the Air Force signed an agreement aimed at eliminating red tape while protecting public safety during commercial space activities at ranges operated by the US Space Force," the statement said.

The agreement recognizes common safety standards for FAA-licensed launch and reentry activities that occur on, originate from, or return to Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in Florida and Vandenberg Space Force Base in California, the statement explained.

"The two ranges each have four FAA-licensed commercial space transportation companies authorized to conduct launch operations. In 2020, the FAA licensed 39 commercial space launches, the most in the agency's history. Of those, 24 occurred at, and were supported by, these two US Space Force ranges," the statement said.

The new agreement also removes duplicative processes and approvals for the US commercial space sector, the statement added.

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No Plans in US to Seek Meeting with Iran's President-Elect – Psaki

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) – The United States has no intention to seek a summit with Iran's new president, the White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Monday.

Earlier in the day, Iranian president-elect Ebrahim Raisi, a hardline Muslim cleric who is under US sanctions, said Iran does not plan to meet with US President Joe Biden.

"We don't currently have diplomatic relations with Iran or any plans to meet at the leader level. So it's unclear that anything has actually changed on that front," Psaki said during a daily briefing.

Psaki was asked for comments on Raisi ruling out any meeting with his US counterpart.

"I will say that the President's view and our view is that the decision-maker here is the Supreme Leader. That was the case before the election. It is the case today. It will be the case probably moving forward," she added.

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US Interest Rate Hike Can Wait But Talk on Stimulus Tapering Must Start - Bullard

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve might not be toying with a US interest rate hike until 2023 but will likely have to reduce or withdraw the COVID-19 stimulus it has been providing the economy to prevent a further overrun in inflation, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis President James Bullard said on Monday.

"The Fed will need to be ready to make changes to tapering," Bullard said, referring to the central bank's monthly purchase of \$80 billion in Treasury bonds and \$40 billion in mortgage-backed securities. "If you wait too long to taper and your imbalances worsen, you may find yourself needing to take extra steps down the line."

The Federal Reserve said during its policy meeting last week that it was studying an appropriate exit for its stimulus program and indicated the an interest rate hike will be instituted at the end of 2023.

Bullard has projected inflation to be at around 2.5 percent this year, well above the Federal Reserve's long-term target of keeping annual price growth at around 2 percent.

"This is not a setting where tapering could be put on automatic pilot," he said. "The tapering discussion is open. I didn't want to discuss tapering until the pandemic was evidently under control, but we've arrived there now."

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UN Peace Operations Chief to Travel to Moscow for Int'l. Security Conference June 22-24

UNITED NATIONS, June 21 (Sputnik) - UN Under-Secretary General for Peace Operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix will visit Moscow this week to represent Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the IX Moscow Conference on International Security and meet with senior Russian officials, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"The Under-Secretary General for Peace Operations, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, will represent the Secretary-General at the IX Moscow Conference on International Security, which is taking place from the 22nd to the 24th of June," Dujarric said during a press briefing. "While in Moscow Mr Lacroix will hold meetings with senior Russian officials at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense and Interior. This will provide an opportunity to thank Russia for its support and contributions to peacekeeping."

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UN Chief Travels to Brussels Tuesday to Meet with EU Officials, Belgian Authorities

UNITED NATIONS, June 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will travel to Brussels, Belgium, on Tuesday to meet with European leaders and Belgian authorities, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Monday.

"Tomorrow, the Secretary-General will fly to Brussels," Dujarric said. "In his meetings with the European Commission and in a session with heads of state and government of the European Council, the Secretary-General will have exchanges on a broad range of issues, including collaboration between the European Union and the United Nations."

"During the trip in Brussels, he is scheduled to have a private audience with King and Queen of the Belgians. The Secretary-General will also meet with Belgium's Prime Minister Alexander De Croo, as well as the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sophie Wilmes," the spokesman added.

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US Inflation to Overshoot 2% Annually in 2022 - Federal Reserve Officials

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - US inflation is likely to average 2 percent and above in 2022 fulfilling the Federal Reserve's long-term target as the low price pressures of the previous decade are unlikely to continue, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas Robert Caplan and Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis President James Bullard said Monday.

"I expect 2.5 percent core PCE inflation for 2022," St. Louis Fed President Bullard said during a live-streamed discussion on the economy, referring to the Personal Consumption Expenditure Index. "We're in a new era where inflation is above target. The Fed stated it would tolerate an overshoot on inflation and it appears as if we are going to get an overshoot."

The PCE Index expanded at 3.6 percent in the year to May, stunning the Fed, which has not seen such price pressures for years in its benchmark tool for inflation. The central bank has a long-term target of maintaining inflation at around 2 percent a year but has never quite hit that mark for a decade now.

Growth in the PCE is one of the key determinants for the Fed to raise US interest rates, which the central bank has kept at a record low of between zero and 0.25 percent since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

The Fed says this year's overshoot in inflation is due to price pressures arising from bottlenecks in US supply chains struggling to cope with demand in an economy reopening after months of pandemic-related suppression. But some of the central bank's top officials led by Chairman Jerome Powell also say current price pressures are "transitory" and will fade as the economy makes a full recovery from COVID-19.

Kaplan, who is Dallas Fed President, said anticipated inflation for all of 2021 to be at 3.4 percent, above the current rate of 2.4 percent predicted by the bank.

"No one really knows how this is all going to unfold, but we have to be ready for the idea that there's an upside risk to inflation, it could go higher than what we've outlined here and we have

to be ready on both sides," said Bullard. "I think to be able to react to that the contingent is to be nimble."

The Fed signaled at its June policy meeting last week that it might for two rate hikes before the end of 2023.

The central bank said it is also seeking data on when to start scaling back on the \$80 billion in Treasuries and \$40 billion in mortgage bonds it has been buying each month since the COVID-19 outbreak to shield credit markets and the economy from the worst impact of the pandemic.

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UN Under Secretary General for Peace Operations to Represent Guterres at Moscow Conference on International Security June 22-24 - spokesman

US to Share With Other Countries 55Mln Coronavirus Vaccine Doses - White House)

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is going to share with countries throughout the world some 55 million coronavirus vaccine doses, the White House said on Monday.

"Today, the Biden-Harris Administration is announcing the distribution list for 55 million of the 80 million doses of America's own vaccine supply President Biden has pledged to allocate by the end of June in service of ending the pandemic globally," the White House said in a statement said.

Senior officials have pledged to distribute 80 million vaccine doses by the end of June and the US government has begun shipping first 25 million of them earlier this month, the statement said.

"For these 80 million doses, the US will share 75percent through COVAX and 25 percent will be targeted to help deal with surges around the world," the statement said.

The White House said the US government will share approximately 41 million doses to numerous states in Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa.

"Approximately 14 million - or 25 percent of these 55 million vaccines - will be shared with regional priorities and other recipients, such as: Colombia, Argentina, Haiti, other CARICOM countries, Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Panama, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Cabo Verde, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Yemen, Tunisia, Oman, West Bank and Gaza, Ukraine, Kosovo, Georgia, Moldova, and Bosnia," the statement said.