

08/05/21 Thursday

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DeSantis' Approval Rating Tanks Amid Skyrocketing COVID-19 Cases, 'Pied Piper' Label by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) director Rochelle Walensky has warned that while COVID-19 vaccines aren't 100% effective at blocking the Delta variant, its easy spread across unprotected parts of the country was turning the outbreak into a "pandemic of the unvaccinated."

A new poll shows that Floridians' approval of Governor Ron DeSantis is falling, as he ardently stands against COVID-19 safety measures amid skyrocketing cases of the ultra-infective Delta variant. His crusade has earned him a new nickname in the state: "the pied piper."

The [result of a new poll](#) by Florida analytics firm St. Pete Polls shows fewer Floridians think DeSantis is doing a good job leading the state. According to the poll, which surveyed 3,952 Florida voters on August 2 and 3, just 44% of those asked said they approved of the job DeSantis was doing, while 49% disapproved.

According to [Florida Politics](#), that's a substantial decline from May, when COVID-19 cases were way down and 55% approved of his job performance while 40% disapproved. That survey was conducted by the Florida Chamber of Commerce

However, there was a stark split along party lines: the St. Pete poll found that 74% of Democrats disapprove of Desantis' performance, while 71% of Republican approve. Independents were more evenly split, with 39% saying they approve and 51% not approving.

The change has come amid the Republican governor's adamant defiance of public health experts and open hostility to COVID-19 safety measures, even as new cases skyrocket.

On August 4, there were 20,100 new cases in the Sunshine State - the second-highest ever for the state, accounting for one in five of all new cases that day nationwide, [according to the CDC](#).

A record-high of 12,400 people in Florida were also [hospitalized for COVID-19](#) on August 4. Despite the surge, DeSantis has continued to oppose even basic safety measures such as masks, which have been advised by both the CDC and the World Health Organization to be effective barriers to the spread of the virus. Last week, he issued [an executive order](#) threatening public school systems with loss of funding if they require students to wear masks.

The St. Pete Polls pollsters also asked residents about masks in schools, finding that DeSantis' order is well out of step with the sentiment of most Floridians: 62% responded that masks "should be required for all children," while 31.9% said they were unsure.

Earlier, on July 12, as the present wave of COVID cases was rising and Florida was already leading the nation in new COVID cases, DeSantis' reelection [campaign began selling](#) beer koozies and shirts with the slogans "Don't Fauci My Florida" and "how the hell am I going to be able to drink a beer with a mask on?"

When the target of the slogan, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Dr. Anthony Fauci, was asked about DeSantis' actions, he [told ABC's Jon Karl](#), "The fact is, there

are things that are individual responsibilities that one has. And there are things that have to do with you individually, which also impact others and get the spread of infection that we're seeing now -- the surge in cases is impacting everyone in the country."

Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber was a bit less choosy with his words, telling [CNN's Ryan Nobles](#) on Sunday that DeSantis "is like the pied piper leading everybody off a cliff right now by letting them know that they don't have to like the CDC, they don't have to wear masks, that they can do whatever they want when we're in the midst of an enormous pandemic."

"We are trying to do everything we can to get around the governor's very wrong-headed desires," Gelber said. "The governor has made it as difficult as possible to make people safe."

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Indonesia Pushes Ahead With 'Jurassic Park' Project Despite Pleas Environmental Concerns by UNESCO

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Indonesia has shrugged off environmental impact concerns by the United Nations and is pushing ahead with construction of Komodo National Park, a tourist spot dedicated to the large lizards that some have labeled "Jurassic Park."

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) told a World Heritage Committee conference last month that the Indonesian government needed to provide an updated economic impact assessment for Komodo National Park, a tourism spot under construction on the home island of the large Komodo dragon.

"This project will proceed... it's been proven to have no impact," Inung Wiratno, who is director general of nature conservation and ecosystems at the Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry, [told Reuters](#) on Thursday. However, he added that a new impact assessment was in the works and would be delivered next month.

Tourism and Creative Economy Minister Sandiaga Uno [told reporters Monday](#) he was requesting a meeting with UNESCO to review their concerns "in detail and discuss it line-by-line."

The project began last year, but attracted [international ire](#) after images of Komodo dragons, some of the world's largest monitor lizards that can reach 10 feet long, wandering among construction equipment began circulating on social media.

Just 3,000 of the huge lizards are left, isolated on a handful of small islands in southern Indonesia. The unique creatures live for up to 30 years, hunt in groups and sport a venomous bite. They once occupied a much wider range, but have been all but driven from the large Flores Island to the east of their current range.

The park itself was actually established in 1980 to protect the dragons. However, last year, the government began building what it described as a "premium tourism spot" centered on Rinca, one of the three main islands in the park. Judging by a demonstration video presented last year, it includes an area-type area around which spectators would be able to sit and see the large lizards up-close.

“We want to go into the premium, world-class tourism category,” [Wiratno told Al Jazeera](#) in November 2020. “The Komodo dragon is like the panda – highly respected – and this is the only location in the world that has them.”

Aside from being a tropical theme park featuring huge lizards, the park earned the unofficial moniker of “Jurassic Park” because the demo video featured a song from the soundtrack of the 1993 film about a dinosaur theme park off the coast of Central America.

The government’s vagueness about the project has aroused concerns about environmental impact, as well as illegal fishing in the area.

Umbu Wulang, executive director of the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (WALHI) of East Nusa Tenggara province, told the Indonesian outlet [Tempo on Tuesday](#) that the government should prioritize green development and protect the island’s ecosystem.

“We ask the government to respect UNESCO’s decision, admit mistakes in the development of large-scale investor-based tourism projects, and revoke all permits for large-scale natural tourism projects in Komodo National Park,” he said.

On the other hand, at least Jakarta isn’t talking about a [velociraptor enclosure](#) on the island.

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Beijing Swipes at US ‘Pseudo-Multilateralism’ as South China Sea Code of Conduct Edges Closer

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As the US sends one top administration official after another to Southeast Asia in an attempt to woo regional nations into more pro-US stances, China’s top diplomat has sharply criticized Washington for its “external interference.” Meanwhile, a regional pact aimed at defusing tensions took a major leap forward.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi came out swinging at the annual East Asia Summit on Wednesday, accusing the United States of trying to weaponize regional powers as part of its strategic push against China.

“Individual countries such as the US are trying to take advantage of this multilateral platform and blatantly meddling in China’s domestic affairs,” Wang said, according to the [South China Morning Post](#).

Wang hailed multilateralism as the “correct path” for addressing complex issues around the globe, but warned attending foreign ministers they should “be wary of all kinds of pseudo-multilateralism and, in particular, resist the use of multilateralism to foment bloc confrontation.”

The US has no territory and makes no claim to territory in the South China Sea; its closest spot is the island of Guam, a US colony seized from Spain in 1898 that is more than 1,600 miles east of the waterway.

His words come after US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [visited several nations](#) last week, including [Singapore](#), [Vietnam](#) and the Philippines, in each case attempting to forge [new defense ties](#) and shore up their relationships with the US.

Meanwhile, US Vice President Kamala Harris is also preparing to visit Singapore and Vietnam later this month, where she will “ underscore that there should be free passage for trade throughout the South China Sea, and no single country should disrespect the right of others,” a White House [official told Reuters](#) on Tuesday.

“We do not want to see any country dominate that region or take advantage of the power situation to compromise the sovereignty of others,” the official added.

Harris’ office further noted that the core of her message would be that “America is back.” However, with the US’ history of waging major wars across the region in defense of its interests, including in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and the Philippines, some wondered if the remark [wasn’t a veiled threat](#).

Wang invoked the memory of those wars, which killed millions in the late 19th and 20th centuries, when he criticized the US for its constant meddling in Chinese internal affairs, including claiming Beijing is guilty of genocide in Xinjiang, is crushing freedoms in Hong Kong, and for the US’ backing of the government in Taiwan, which Beijing sees as a province in rebellion.

“If you want to talk about genocide, the real genocide was the massacre of Indians in the United States. It was a real crime against humanity when the United States unleashed wars everywhere, killing and injuring a large number of innocent civilians,” Wang said.

“How dare you express your so-called concern now? What is your concern? Do they want to bring Hong Kong back to chaos and turmoil? Do they want the ‘Hong Kong independence’ forces to take to the streets again? I must tell you clearly that you should give up your hope, for it is impossible to wait for that day.”

#### Progress Made on Code of Conduct

Just a day prior, China and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) checked off an important accomplishment in multilateralism: finalizing a section of the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea.

The progress in negotiations - which have been going on for more than 20 years - was reported in a Chinese [Foreign Ministry readout](#) of the ASEAN virtual summit on Tuesday. The summary said the resumed negotiation “proves that as long as we maintain the common political will to advance the consultation, no matter the pandemic or external interference, no difficulty can stop us.”

Pressure on ASEAN and China, which isn’t a member of the bloc, picked up [this past spring](#) after Beijing and Manila exchanged some harsh words amid tensions created by Chinese fishing boats anchoring near a reef in the Spratly Islands claimed by the Philippines. China has made wide claims of sovereignty over the Spratlys and several other island chains, but those claims overlap with several other nations’ claims, including the Philippines, but also Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Taiwan, as well.

Once finalized, the document will [provide a framework](#) based on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea through which the regional powers can [settle their disputes](#) in the waterway, which include fishing and drilling rights. The US has cast doubts on the code of conduct, saying it fears that China is pushing the negotiations in its favor and presenting US military might as all that stands in the way of a total Chinese takeover.

“[W]e must be vigilant that individual extra-regional countries are openly intervening in territorial and maritime disputes in the region, sowing discord between China and ASEAN countries,

sending a large number of advanced ships and aircraft to provoke around, and have become the biggest spoilers of peace and stability in the South China Sea,” [Wang said](#) at the summit. “The South China Sea is not, and should not become, a gladiatorial arena for great power games, and we cannot allow them to undermine the good situation of peace and stability in the region,” he added.

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China Pledges ‘Legitimate and Necessary Countermeasures’ to Massive US Weapons Sale to Taiwan  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A day after the Biden administration announced approval of a large new weapons sale to Taiwan, the Chinese government condemned the move and promised “countermeasures” in response to it.

“Taiwan is an inalienable part of the Chinese territory. The United States interferes in China's internal affairs and undermines China's sovereignty and security interests by selling arms to the Taiwan region,” the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a [Thursday statement](#).

“It runs counter to international law and basic principles in international relations, and violates the one-China principle and provisions of the three China-US joint communiques, especially the August 17 Communique,” the ministry said, adding that “it sends wrong signals to ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist forces, and severely jeopardizes China-US relations and peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.”

The ministry added that “China will resolutely take legitimate and necessary countermeasures in light of the development of the situation.”

China regards Taiwan as a province in rebellion, and in the three joint communiques issued by the US and China between 1972 and 1982 as part of their normalization of ties, the US acceded to Beijing’s position. The government in Taipei, formally called the Republic of China, is all that remains of the republican government after the 1949 communist victory in the Chinese Civil War. Both sides claim to be the sole legitimate representative of the Chinese people.

On Wednesday, the US Defense Logistics Agency announced the State Department had [approved the potential sale](#) of \$750 million in weapons systems to Taiwan, including forty M109A6 Paladin self-propelled artillery systems. Superficially similar to a tank, the Paladins have massive 155-millimeter cannons that can lob a shell up to 40 miles away.

The deal will still have to be approved by Congress, which typically does so once such deals are approved by the State Department. The deal will be the first under the Biden administration. administration of Donald Trump, the US sold an unprecedented number of weapons to Taiwan, including advanced F-16V “Viper” fighter jets, MQ-9 Reaper drones, missiles, torpedoes, and other equipment totaling billions of dollars.

As the Chinese Foreign Ministry noted, the US pledged in the third joint communique, also called the [August 17, 1982, communique](#), “that it does not seek to carry out a long-term policy of

arms sales to Taiwan” and that it “intends to reduce gradually its sales of arms to Taiwan, leading over a period of time to a final resolution.”

Since the Taiwan Strait at its narrowest is 81 miles across, the Paladins could only be used for defensive purposes, shelling Chinese forces during or after an amphibious assault on the island. In a Thursday editorial, the Global Times, an outlet owned by the Communist Party of China’s paper People’s Daily, dismissed the idea that the Paladins could be remotely useful in this role as “such a naïve idea.”

“If an all-out war breaks out across the Taiwan Straits, the PLA will definitely carry out a saturation attack on Taiwan’s military targets,” the [Global Times wrote](#). “There’s only limited land facing the Chinese mainland on which Taiwan’s self-propelled howitzers can move around. The PLA is clearly aware of the location of every house or tree there. Against this backdrop, can self-propelled howitzers be maneuvered under the PLA’s nose? ... The armed forces in Taiwan should be clear that once a war breaks out, the only way to survive is to surrender, and all resistance is pointless.”

Last week, the American destroyer USS Benfold transited the Taiwan Strait, the seventh time this year a US warship has done so. The deliberately provocative action, intended to demonstrate US contempt for China’s claims to control the waterway, drew instant condemnation from Beijing.

“The frequent implementation of similar provocative acts by the United States fully demonstrates that the United States is the biggest destroyer of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the biggest maker of security risks across the Taiwan Strait,” [said Army Senior Colonel Shi Yi](#), spokesperson for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Eastern Theater Command.

Beijing has said such actions encourage the pro-separatist government in Taiwan, warning that if Taipei issues a formal declaration of independence, there will be war. The PLA Navy has been rapidly expanding its amphibious forces in recent years, including building three new Hainan-class amphibious assault ships. However, the US has also been more seriously considering how to defend Taiwan, including holding secretive war games with Tokyo concerning Taiwan operations.

At the beginning of his Southeast Asia tour last week, US Defense Secretary [Lloyd Austin said](#) during a speech in Singapore that China was engaged in “destabilising military activity and other forms of coercion against the people of Taiwan.” He pledged that “we will not flinch when our interests are threatened, yet we do not seek confrontation.”

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Star Football Player Lionel Messi Leaves FC Barcelona Following Contract 'Obstacles'  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Having spent years with FC Barcelona and having won numerous titles, including six Ballon d’Or awards, it wasn’t until August 2020 that it became clear the Argentine star wanted out of the team. At the time, the revelation came after the Spanish club had endured a humiliating 8-2 loss against Bayern Munich in the Champions League quarterfinals.

International football star Lionel Messi will no longer be a part of the famed FC Barcelona team after a contract renewal was blocked by a variety of "obstacles," it was confirmed by the club on Thursday.

A release issued by FC Barcelona indicates that Messi's highly-anticipated contract renewal was effectively a no-go due to "financial and structural obstacles" that emerged over the last several days during high-level discussions.

"Despite FC Barcelona and Lionel Messi having reached an agreement and the clear intention of both parties to sign a new contract today, this cannot happen because of financial and structural obstacles (Spanish Liga regulations)," reads the [release](#).

"As a result of this situation, Messi shall not be staying on at FC Barcelona. Both parties deeply regret that the wishes of the player and the club will ultimately not be fulfilled."

"FC Barcelona wholeheartedly expresses its gratitude to the player for his contribution to the aggrandisement of the club and wishes him all the very best for the future in his personal and professional life," it concluded.

Messi has not yet released a statement on the development.

Talk of the six-time Ballon d'Or winner wanting to split from the powerhouse club did not surface until August 25, 2020, when he officially sent the club a letter expressing his desire to leave amid growing conflict with the direction of the management of the team.

However, at the time, the club refused to acknowledge Messi's intended departure since the grace period for such a move had expired at the end of May, just three months before he sent his letter. If Messi wanted out, another club needed to pay his multimillion-dollar buyout clause. The famous Argentine player began his career with the FC Barcelona camp starting in late 2000, when the club approached him for the up-and-coming youth league. It wasn't until late 2003 that Messi officially made his debut with the team, eventually going on to win his first La Liga title in 2004.

In total, Messi helped secure the club 10 La Liga champions, 7 Copa del Rey titles and four UEFA Champion League trophies, among numerous other accomplishments.

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Manchester City Sign Six-Year Contract for English Player Jack Grealish, Premier League by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The 25-year-old English player became a prominent face on the pitch after having made a variety of assists that aided the England national team in reaching the Euro 2020 final, which ultimately ended with a 3-2 win for Italy.

The Manchester City Football Club officially signed English midfielder Jack Grealish onto their roster on Thursday for a six-year stint, effectively marking one of the costliest transfers in the Premier League.

The Thursday announcement came after Man City had submitted an offer and activated a hefty £100 million release clause in Grealish's contract with fellow club Aston Villa.

"I am incredibly happy to have joined Manchester City," Grealish said in a [statement](#) released by Manchester City. "City are the best team in the country with a manager considered to be the best in the world – it's a dream come true to be part of this club."

In a [statement](#) released via Twitter, Grealish thanked his Aston Villa family and fans for the 19 years of experience, underscoring that while the leave is tough, the club will be "in great hands." "I'll always be a Villa fan - I love this club with all my heart & I hope you understand my reasons for seeking a new challenge," he wrote. "The club are in great hands, the manager, the lads, the new signings coming in - it's an exciting time to be a Villa fan. I'll see you all again soon."

Prior to Grealish's transfer fee, the previous recordholder was French midfielder Paul Pogba, who transferred from Juventus to Manchester United in 2016 to the tune of £93.25 million. Grealish had been with Aston Villa since he was six years of age and enrolled in the club's academy. He did not make his debut with the team until 2014, when he played against Man City at the Etihad Stadium.

The confirmed transfer comes on the heels of [reports](#) indicating that fellow English player Harry Kane may soon be parting ways with Tottenham Hotspur and going to Manchester City for a record £160 million deal.

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On the Hunt: Texas Officials Launch Search for Missing Six-Foot Cobra Snake  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

A nationwide estimate provided by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that between 7,000 and 8,000 people are bitten by a venomous snake on a yearly basis, with about five individuals succumbing to a lethal bite. Now, American officials are on the hunt for a deadly pet snake.

Officials in Texas recently issued a citywide alert to the residents of Grand Prairie after first responders were informed by a local pet owner that their six-foot, venomous West African banded cobra was out on the loose.

A [release](#) issued by the Grand Prairie Police Department on Wednesday revealed that the snake initially went missing on Tuesday at about 5 p.m. local time, and that law enforcement officials were not made aware of the development until about an hour and a half later.

It further detailed that the owner, as well as staff from the regional animal services agency and a "venomous snake apprehension professional" all participated in a localized search mission to determine whether the cobra was still within the proximity of the home. However, their initial attempt was not successful.

"Residents who live in the area and see any type of snake believed to be the missing cobra, are asked to call 911 immediately," reads the department's statement. "Do not approach or attempt to capture the venomous snake."

The owner, identified by local station [WFAA](#) as Tre Mat, revealed that the lethal snake managed to get loose after finding its way out of an in-house aquarium container when it was not properly shut.

"It only took a couple minutes [for the snake to escape]," Mat told the station, before adding that he's "doing everything I can to help retrieve the snake."

The apologetic owner [later explained](#) to the local NBC Dallas-Fort Worth station that the snake somehow managed to get out of its enclosure when he temporarily left the home to retrieve more food for his other pets. However, he believes that the reptile may have slithered into his walls and could have either died inside or outside of the home due to the heat.

"There were simple protocols that could have, five screws could've stopped this," he told the station. "It just gives a bad look for the community, and I'm sorry too to the reptile community and my local community."

Incidentally, the Lone Star State legally allows individuals to own such venomous snakes; however, they must be in possession of a permit from the State of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. While the owner is in compliance with the regulation, officials appear to be questioning whether stricter rules need to be implemented for snake enthusiasts.

The owner further relayed to the station that the city ordered the removal of two other snakes that he had in his possession. One of those serpents was identified as a viper.

The local police department has stated that it partnered with the Grand Prairie Fire Department on the investigation, and that area hospitals have been placed on alert for a potential deadly snake bite.

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No-Go Joe - Cartoons

With COVID-19 cases on the rise and the continued calls for Americans to vax up, US President Joe Biden hasn't exactly been #1 for some Americans, especially those who aren't a fan of being sternly told to roll up their sleeves and be given one of the three approved vaccines.

A newly released [Quinnipiac poll](#) has determined that nearly half of surveyed Americans (48%) believe it would be a terrible idea for the nation if US President Joe Biden ran for reelection in 2024, proving that his handling of the pandemic is raising questions for some.

Just 37% of those polled, however, agreed that another Biden campaign could end up being "good for the country."

When asked whether they believed the commander-in-chief would in fact be in the 2024 presidential cycle, between 33% and 54% said Biden was unlikely to toss his hat into the race. Just 13% did not have an opinion on the matter.

But, when former US President Donald Trump was brought into the conversation, a similar portion of those polled agreed that he wouldn't be running in 2024, despite repeated suggestions that he would be coming on the ticket. Toppling Biden's stats, approximately 60% said it would be bad if Trump ran in 2024.

The poll, which had a margin of error of 2.7 percentage points, was conducted between July 27 and August 2.

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Kissing, Groping & Retaliation: Key Findings From the Sexual Harassment Report on Andrew Cuomo  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo has come under renewed fire after an independent probe against the governor concluded that he allegedly made a bevy of unwanted sexual advances on past and current staffers. Cuomo, meanwhile, has rejected the findings and given no indication of resigning amid the fallout that's been brewing for months.

A damning report released by the New York Attorney General's Office has laid out numerous alleged instances in which New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo is said to have sexually harassed nearly a dozen female staffers.

The report, which came after an investigation was ordered in early March, detailed that Cuomo allegedly helped to create a hostile work environment for women working under his governorship, and that in many cases, Cuomo repeatedly stepped over the line.

Allegations of sexual misconduct at the hands of Cuomo initially began to surface in late 2020 as past and current aides began to voice their accusations. One of the very first accusers was Lindsey Boylan, who previously detailed that Cuomo had sexually harassed her for years, having gone so far as to kiss her on the lips after a meeting.

Other named accusers include Anna Ruch, Ana Liss, Karen Hinton and Charlotte Bennett, who has stated that Cuomo repeatedly inquired about her sex life and whether she ever considered dating older men.

In spite of the allegations that were described in the 168-page report, Cuomo has continued to maintain that he is innocent. In fact, in a pre-recorded [video response](#) and an [85-page rebuttal](#), Cuomo explained that his up-close-and-personal embraces stemmed from "cultural" and "generational" differences, backing up his stance by sprinkling in images of his contacts with various prominent figures.

While many US lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have called for him to resign from his post, Cuomo has remained immovable, even as state officials talk up potential impeachment procedures against the governor.

Toxic Culture

The five-month probe effectively determined that the governor used his power to allegedly degrade and harass at least 11 women, and that through the brush over provided by his cabinet and close insiders, Cuomo managed to create an environment that repeatedly looked the other way or silenced claims whenever they began to trickle in.

"This culture of fear, intimidation, and retribution co-existed in the Executive Chamber with one that accepted and normalized everyday flirtations and gender-based comments by the governor," the report reads.

"A number of our complainants noted how their confluence of fear and flirtation affected how they received and responded to the governor's conduct and contributed to the overall hostile work environment."

The report detailed three additional cases that hadn't previously been made public, one of which was dubbed "Trooper #1" and described Cuomo as having harassed a state trooper who he wanted to put on his security detail. Actions taken by Cuomo ranged from him running his hand across her back, a finger down her neck while the pair were in an elevator, and an encounter where he questioned why she wasn't wearing a dress.

In another case, Cuomo allegedly ran two fingers across the chest of a contractor and then moved his hand just below her neck. The third previously unreported allegation involved a staffer with an undisclosed state-affiliated entity whose buttocks Cuomo is said to have grabbed. The unidentified trooper told investigators that no staffers dared say anything negative about the governor's behavior for fear of reprisal. "Everybody, for the most part, gets promoted because they're in the good graces of the governor. So if they stay quiet or give him information, they'll get promoted, or something good will happen to them," she underscored.

#### Retaliation Campaign

However, if someone steps out of line, the matter was dealt with promptly by Cuomo's backers in the Executive Chamber, as proved to be the case when Boylan came forward with her allegations.

The investigation specifically singled out an effort by Cuomo and his team of trusted advisers to disperse confidential personnel information about Boylan with journalists as part of a larger attempt to discredit her allegations.

In fact, in one instance, members of Cuomo's administration signed a statement that wholly disputed Boylan's claim that the governor had asked her to play strip poker on a plane ride.

And yet, that was not the only incident that unfolded. In another case, one staffer received "incessant calls and texts" from top aide Melissa DeRosa urging them to reach out to another aide who officials believed would be filing a complaint against Cuomo.

Liss, the third aide to have come forward against Cuomo, told investigators the aides protecting the governor made it clear the "rules were different" when it came to the quarters of Cuomo's office. "Though it was strange and uncomfortable and technically not permissible in a typical workplace environment, I was in this mindset that it was the twilight zone," she said.

#### Brotherly Advice

And then there's brother Chris, who serves as a prominent CNN anchor and also happened to provide his older sibling with advice on how to "[express contrition](#)" after Bennett came forward with her allegations.

The report noted that Chris was "actively consulted" in response to the sexual harassment allegations, a finding that backed past reports that surfaced in May and raised questions about Chris' own credibility as a journalist.

It's worth noting that Chris did acknowledge that his participation in the "contrition" issue was a conflict of interest in May, stating at the time that he "can be objective about just about any topic, but not about my family."

However, in the end, the CNN anchor was not the only person to assist in the Cuomo scandal, not by a long shot.

Investigators concluded that "when faced with allegations of sexual harassment brought against the governor, the inner circle of confidantes brought in to control and direct the response included a number of individuals with no official role in the Executive Chamber."

That [inner circle](#) appears to also include Human Rights Campaign President Alphonso David, Legal Defense Fund head Roberta Kaplan and Tina Tchen, who heads the Time's Up group, among other individuals.

In total, investigators involved in the bombshell Cuomo report interviewed 179 people - 41 of whom were questioned under oath - and involved the issuance of more than 70 subpoenas. While no criminal probe has yet been launched, at least four district attorneys within New York state have submitted requests to the New York Attorney General's Office for evidence.

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Photo: Prime Minister of St. Vincent and The Grenadines Injured During Protests in Kingstown by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Protests in St. Vincent and the Grenadines recently emerged after proposals by the Caribbean government to impose an order making it mandatory for state employees to be vaccinated against COVID-19 in order to work in specified frontline job posts.

Ralph Gonsalves, who serves as prime minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, was struck by a stone on his head during protests in Kingstown on Thursday, local media reported.

The prime minister was reportedly injured as he tried to walk through a crowd of angry protesters, who took to the streets against amendments to health legislation. The new changes will effectively require mandatory vaccination against COVID-19 for a number of civil servants working for the Caribbean government.

Photo shared of the aftermath shows Gonsalves' wearing a bloodstained shirt while be medically checked.

Sehon Marshall, who serves as a spokesperson for Gonsalves, told Jamaica-based outlet Nationwide News that it's not believed that his injuries are life-threatening, and that it is "something that needs to be addressed by health officials."

Media reported later that Gonsalves was sent to Barbados for medical examination.

The Caribbean New Service [reported](#) that that riot police were called to the scene to quell protesters amid reports that some demonstrators managed to breach security barriers that were installed along the parliamentary building.

[Data](#) provided by the World Health Organization indicates that the rate of COVID-19 cases within the Caribbean state have been somewhat low, having reported a few new COVID cases over the last several days. The islands last underwent a significant spike in mid-June, when officials reported nearly 50 new cases in a single day. Approximately 27,589 COVID-19 vaccines have been administered since July 30.

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## White House Observes 'Significant' Uptick in COVID Vaccinations as Fauci, Moderna Stress Boosters

by [Evan Craighead](#)

The US, as well as Germany, France and Israel, have all conveyed they will not oblige the World Health Organization's (WHO) request for wealthier nations to halt administering COVID-19 vaccine boosters until September. The WHO said that, even with the raging Delta variant, it "cannot accept" the current inequality with the global vaccine supply.

As cases of the highly transmissible variant continue to surge in the US, White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients revealed on Thursday that more than 864,000 COVID vaccine doses were administered the day prior, amounting to the US' highest national vaccination rate since July 3.

Approximately 585,000 individuals received their first jab on Wednesday, which suggests that most of the individuals were new to the vaccination process.

For the fourth week in a row, we've increased the 'daily average number of Americans newly vaccinated,'" Zients said during a COVID response briefing.

"Importantly, we're seeing the most significant increases in states with the highest case rates," he added, noting the US states of Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Alabama, Oklahoma and Mississippi have recorded vaccination rates that have not been seen since April.

Tennessee was also lauded by the White House COVID Response Coordinator for observing a 90% uptick in first jabs within the past two weeks.

The rise in Tennessee's first-time vaccine doses comes just a few weeks after the [controversial termination of Dr. Michelle Fiscus](#), who served as head of the Tennessee Department of Health's vaccine-preventable diseases and immunization program, over allegations that she was inappropriately promoting the COVID-19 vaccine to teens and other minors. Additionally, vaccine outreach programs for all diseases were canceled by the department at the time.

"Clearly Americans are seeing the impact of being unvaccinated and unprotected," Zients said on Thursday, "and they're responding by doing their part, rolling up their sleeves and getting vaccinated."

As vaccination efforts continue in the US, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's leading infectious disease expert, claimed during the same news conference that the Biden administration intends to procure COVID-19 vaccine booster shots for immunocompromised Americans "as quickly as possible."

"It is extremely important for us to move to get those individuals their boosters," [Fauci said](#), noting that immunocompromised people are "vulnerable."

"And we are now working on that and will make that be implemented as quickly as possible ... it is a very high priority."

According to White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, the WHO's call for a booster moratorium [will not be respected because](#) the US believes it can supply every American with access to both a COVID-19 vaccine and related booster shot.

Moderna CEO Stéphane Bancel fueled talks of a forthcoming booster jab during a [Thursday interview on Fox Business "Mornings with Maria."](#) Bancel told host Maria Bartiromo that the company has already produced human-tested boosters of the South Africa strain and Beta variant. However, more time is needed to develop the Delta booster.

"[W]e've announced this morning that we're also working on the delta booster and so that data is going to come together in the coming months," he said.

"And so it's important that people who are vaccinated a long time ago, especially with vaccines that have had lower efficacy, be protected so they are not hospitalized this fall and winter," Bancel explained.

Moderna's booster could be available for some demographics in the US "as soon as September," according to the CEO.

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Texas GOP Official Dies From COVID, Less Than a Week After Publishing Anti-Vaxx Sentiments

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Dickinson City councilmember H. Scott Apley, an elected member of the Texas State Republican Executive Committee, was hospitalized on Sunday and subsequently placed on a ventilator after first testing positive for COVID-19.

Apley, 45, died from COVID-19-related complications early Wednesday morning, prompting the late politician's GOP colleagues to issue a number of remembrances in his honor.

"Please join me in lifting the Apley family up in prayer," said Texas Republican Party Chairman Matt [Rinaldi in a same-day statement](#). "We will miss Scott deeply but find comfort knowing he is at peace in the arms of our Savior."

Dickinson Mayor Sean [Skipworth described Apley to The Daily News](#) as "somebody who cared a lot," noting that he called and wrote to a local fireman who was injured amid the Texas power crisis earlier this year.

The 45-year-old is survived by his wife and five-month-old child - both of whom have also tested positive for COVID-19.

Although the State Republican Executive Committee remembers Apley as someone "who had a long history of conservative political activism," it appears users on Facebook will remember him as an anti-masking source of misinformation and memes.

Five days before his death, the 45-year-old reposted a screenshot of a tweet that grossly mischaracterized the progression of knowledge regarding the COVID-19 vaccine.

"In 6 months, we've gone from the vax ending the pandemic—to you can still get covid even if vaxxed—to you can pass covid onto others even if vaxxed—to you can still die of covid even if vaxxed—to the unvaxxed are killing the vaxxed," the screenshot read.

"Science is real. It's selfish for people to strain our hospitals and others have to suffer bc people don't want to take the necessary precautions," commented [Facebook user Christopher Fasola](#), while [Robert Schumacher declared](#) the situation "another preventable death due to denial and political stupidity."

It is unclear whether Apley and his family were vaccinated against COVID-19, but the 45-year-old did make it clear on social media that he was not a fan of wearing masks.

"I wish I lived in the area!" Apley said in a May post, [referencing an invitation](#) to a "mask burning" event at a pub.

Though the comment section was somewhat divided, a majority of the netizens posting on the late politician's personal page were dismissive and even made light of his death, citing retaliation for Apley's spreading of misinformation.

"The problem is not that he harmed himself by spreading anti-mask and anti vaccine disinformation, but that people like him are directly responsible for the sickness and death of countless others," commented a Facebook user who goes by Cherry Garcia. "Sad that he had to die and people still refuse to learn this lesson, and so a pandemic which could have been under control much sooner if more people wore masks and got vaccinated continues on."

As folks like Gail Dammuller continue to blast the late politician for his "ignorance," more than 400 individuals have contributed to a GoFundMe started by a John Barton to cover medical and funeral expenses.

As of this article's publication, the fundraising campaign has surpassed its initial \$30,000 limit. Donors have now raised more than \$34,200 out of a new \$50,000 goal.

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United Airlines Requires All Employees Get Vaccine Against COVID-19 by October 25 – CEO

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) – United Airlines has become the first US air carrier to require all its employees to get a vaccine against the coronavirus by October 25 amid growing infections with the Delta variant, United CEO Scott Kirby and President Brett Hart said in a staff memo on Friday.

"We know some of you will disagree with this decision to require the vaccine for all United employees," the memo said. "But, we have no greater responsibility to you and your colleagues than to ensure your safety when you're at work, and the facts are crystal clear: everyone is safer when everyone is vaccinated."

United Airlines is the first US air carrier to mandate all its 67,000 employees to provide documentary proof they are fully vaccinated in order to keep their jobs while about 90 percent of United pilots and 80 percent of flight attendants have already been vaccinated, according to a report by CNBC.

United is not the first US company that has introduced stricter rules with respect to the vaccination against COVID-19. On Thursday, CNN fired three employees for coming to the company's offices without being vaccinated and postponed employees' return to the office to the middle of October.

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US Adds 943,000 Jobs in July, Unemployment Rate Dips to 5.4% - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, Aug 5 (Sputnik) - US employers added 943,000 jobs in July, the Labor Department announced on Friday, beating forecasts, while the unemployment rate stood at 5.4 percent in a job market still underperforming 17 months into the coronavirus pandemic. "Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 943,000 in July, and the unemployment rate declined by 0.5 percentage point to 5.4 percent," the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a unit within the Labor Department, said in a statement. "The department announced 850,000 job additions for June, and an unemployment rate of 5.9 percent. Economists polled by US media had forecast an average jobs growth of 870,000 for July.

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RPT: PREVIEW - UN Security Council to Meet Friday Morning to Address Violence in Afghanistan

UNITED NATIONS, August 5 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will hold a public meeting on Friday to address the escalation of hostilities in Afghanistan amid the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country.

The UN Security Council will meet a week after the attack on the United Nations compound in Herat during which an Afghan security guard was killed and several other people were injured. On Tuesday, the UN Security Council condemned the attack in the strongest terms and called on both the Afghan government and the Taliban opposition movement (banned in Russia) to engage in an inclusive peace process to achieve a political settlement and a ceasefire.

The meeting on Thursday will, for the first time, see the participation of the new Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations, Ghulam Isacqai. The diplomat will also make a press statement following the council's discussions.

The gathering will also take place against the background of a massive offensive operation in Lashkar Gah, the capital of the southern province of Helmand, launched Wednesday by the Afghan military against the Taliban militants.

The fighting in Lashkar Gah reportedly picked up on Sunday. Several TV and radio stations in the province were shut down. On Tuesday, the Afghan national army called on residents to leave Lashkargah so that an operation can be carried out to clear the city of Taliban militants. The United Nations expressed its grave concern about the fate of thousands of Lashkar Gah residents trapped by the ongoing fighting.

In recent weeks, fighting between the Afghan government forces and Taliban has intensified and the latter have seized about 85 percent of Afghanistan and launched attacks on major cities.

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RPT: PREVIEW - 76th Anniversary of Hiroshima Atomic Bombing

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - Friday marks 76 years since US President Harry Truman ordered the use of the first nuclear weapon in war in 1945 to get Japan to surrender and bring World War II to a close.

An atomic bomb, nicknamed "Little Boy," was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, instantly killing 80,000 Japanese, mostly civilians. The total death count increased to 129,000 as a result of side effects the Japanese suffered from the fallout of the bomb.

Three days later, the United States dropped a second atomic bomb, "Fat Boy," on Japan. This time the bomb targeted Nagasaki, killing some 40,000 people instantly, but reaching a death count of 226,000 over the years due to the side effects.

Japan surrendered on August 15, putting an end to World War II.

The United States is the first and only country to use nuclear weapons in a war.

The attacks came not long after testing. On July 16, 1945, the United States detonated the world's first nuclear device in Alamogordo, New Mexico.

President Joe Biden in a statement last month said the bombings "marked the end of World War II but opened our eyes to the truth that a nuclear war must never be fought."

Several anti-nuclear advocacy groups and Japanese forums will be holding vigils and remembrances from Friday through Monday in the United States.

The Nichibei.org Japanese-American community hub is preparing to mark the event with a virtual remembrance on Friday. The second annual online event will focus on the stories of hibakusha, or survivors of the atomic bombings of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the group said on its website, and will be held on Monday, August 9.

The Physicians for Social Responsibility will hold a silent vigil at the War Memorial Flagpole in New Haven, Connecticut on Friday to remember the Hiroshima bombing and a similar one at the Amistad Statue on Monday for Nagasaki.

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US Pipeline Company to Pay \$35Mln in Penalties Over Spill of Waste Water From Fracking  
WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - A US pipeline company will pay \$35 million in criminal and civil penalties after 29 million gallons of waste water from fracking leaked into the environment for nearly five months, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"The Department of Justice today filed criminal charges under the Clean Water Act against Summit Midstream Partners LLC, a North Dakota pipeline company that discharged 29 million gallons of produced water from its pipeline near Williston, North Dakota, over the course of nearly five months in 2014-2015," the release said on Thursday.

The spill contaminated land, groundwater, and more than 30 miles of streams of the Missouri River, the release said, adding that it is possibly the largest inland spill in the history of the United States.

Environmental groups are vehemently opposed to fracking, which is the process of extracting fossil fuels, like oil and gas, from shale basins by injecting a mixture of water, salt, and thousands of toxic chemicals into the earth.

Environmentalists say the chemicals used are toxic pollutants that have been linked to cancer, mutations, and other adverse impacts on human health, and are destructive to aquatic life and ecosystems.

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US Regrets Restrictions Preventing OSCE From Observing Russia's Elections - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - The United States regrets restrictions that prevented the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) from observing the Duma

elections scheduled for September, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

Russia's Foreign Minister earlier in the day said it regrets the OSCE's decision earlier this week not to send observers to monitor parliamentary elections in September.

"The United States regrets that restrictions imposed by Russian authorities will prevent the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly from independently observing the Duma elections in September," Price said in the release on Thursday.

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State Dept. Allows Voluntary Departure of US Government Family Members From Russia - Alert

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - The State Department in a travel advisory said it allowed voluntary departure of family members of US government personnel in Russia.

"On August 05, 2021, the Department allowed for the voluntary departure of US government family members," the release said Thursday.

The State Department maintained the advisory at Level 4 - advising travelers not to travel to Russia, the release added.

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PREVIEW: UN Security Council to Meet Friday Morning to Address Violence in Afghanistan

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The UN Security Council will meet a week after the attack on the United Nations compound in Herat during which an Afghan security guard was killed and several other people were injured. On Tuesday, the UN Security Council condemned the attack in the strongest terms and called on both the Afghan government and the Taliban opposition movement (banned in Russia) to engage in an inclusive peace process to achieve a political settlement and a ceasefire.

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The fighting in Lashkar Gah reportedly picked up on Sunday. Several TV and radio stations in the province were shut down. On Tuesday, the Afghan national army called on residents to leave Lashkargah so that an operation can be carried out to clear the city of Taliban militants. The United Nations expressed its grave concern about the fate of thousands of Lashkar Gah residents trapped by the ongoing fighting.

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US Acted 'Honorably' in Extradition Pursuit of Meng, No Intent to Mislead Court - Lawyer

TORONTO, August 5 (Sputnik) - US prosecutors made no effort to mislead a Canadian court in their bid to extradite Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou, a lawyer for the Canadian government argued in a British Columbia courtroom.

On Thursday, Meng's legal team argued that US government attorneys, acting in "bad faith," repeatedly misled Canada's legal system on several key issues pertinent to the extradition proceedings against the executive.

"The authorities are clear that such allegations require cogent evidence to be proved, evidence of a quality that we say is not before this court," Monika Rahman, representing the Attorney General of Canada (AGC), said addressing the assertions made by Meng's legal team.

"In our respectful submission, there is no evidence of anything other than what is presumed an extradition proceeding, which is that foreign officials involved in preparing the records [of the case] proceeded in good faith and we stand by our submissions that the requesting state acted honorably, fairly and reasonably throughout these proceedings," Rahman added.

The Canadian Justice Department attorney admitted that while the United States is bound by the duty of candor, which requires attorneys to be honest and forthright with courts, it is not obliged to present evidence favorable to the defense.

Rahman also made the case that a Huawei PowerPoint presentation, which was the only item from the trove of HSBC documents unsealed by the High Court of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region adduced to the proceedings, revealed that the Chinese technology giant misled the multinational bank regarding its relationship with Skycom and business dealings in Iran.

The US Justice Department alleges that Meng committed fraud by misleading HSBC into approving more than \$100 million in transactions that contravened US sanctions on Iran from 2010 to 2014. Tehran-based Skycom is alleged to have acted as the shell company for Huawei in its transactions with Iran.

The PowerPoint shows that Huawei purported itself to be only a business partner of Skycom, divesting from the company at some point before 2013, and claimed that the company was committed to compliance with "internationally accepted rules."

Meng, the daughter of Huawei founder and CEO Ren Zhengfei, was arrested on December 1, 2018 at Vancouver International Airport during a layover stop at the request of the US government.

Meng remains under house arrest in Vancouver, although is free to traverse the region in the company of state-imposed guards outside of her 11:00 p.m to 6:00 a.m. curfew.

The final arguments in the 18-month-long extradition process are expected to wrap up on August 20.

Holmes is expected give her recommendation on the United States' extradition request to AGC and Justice David Lametti later in the fall. Lametti has the final say on the request and has the right to refuse extradition in exceptional circumstances.

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Biden Signs Bill to Award Congressional Medals to Officers Who Defended Capitol January 6  
WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has signed legislation passed by Congress to award four Congressional Gold Medals to law enforcement officers who defended the US Capitol building during the January 6 riot.

"Today, I'm going to sign into law the bill you sent to me that awards the Congressional Gold Medal to the United States Capitol Police, the Washington DC Metropolitan Police Department and other law enforcement for their service and defense of our democracy on January 6," Biden said during remarks at the White House ceremony on Thursday.

The medals will be displayed in four different locations in Washington: the US Capitol Police Department, the Washington Metropolitan Police Department, the Smithsonian Museum and the Capitol building, Biden added.

On January 6, a group of supporters of former President Donald Trump entered the US Capitol in a bid to protest the lawmakers certifying the 2020 election results from several states Trump said were fraudulent. One protester was shot dead during the incident and federal law enforcement authorities have charged more than 500 people for their participation in the unrest.

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Bipartisan 9/11 Transparency Act Targets Release of Documents on Saudi Role - US Senator

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - US intelligence officials would be required to review and declassify documents on any involvement by the government of Saudi Arabia or any Saudi individuals in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States under the bipartisan 9/11 Transparency Act announced by Senator Robert Menendez.

"This bill would direct and require the director of national intelligence, the attorney general and the director of the CIA to conduct a timely review of all the relevant documents and declassify them as appropriate," Menendez said on Thursday.

If the agencies do not declassify a document they would be required to provide Congress with an explanation "so we will at least know that a document or a record exists."

Menendez spoke in front of the Capitol, flanked by families of victims in the September 11 terrorist attacks. Many of the families of the victims held photos of the loved ones for whom they have mourned and sought accountability for the past 20 years.

"If the United States government is sitting on any documents that may implicate Saudi Arabia or any individual or any country in the events of September 11, these families and the American people have a right to know," Menendez said.

The legislation enjoys bipartisan support. Senate Majority leader Chuck Schumer spoke at the event. The bill's cosponsors include senior Republican Senators Chuck Grassley and John Thune.

The legislation is modeled on a 2014 declassification of documents on the US raid that killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, Menendez said.

Fifteen of the 19 terrorists hijackers who crashed four jetliners into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a field in rural Pennsylvania were Saudi nationals.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) -

#### US-UKRAINE TALKS

\* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken underscored Washington's commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity during a meeting with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and Head of the Presidential Office Andriy Yermak, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

\* Prior to the meeting, Blinken said the United States is working with Ukraine to help the country address challenges from both within and without, including pursuing reforms that would strengthen its democracy and economy.

#### AFGHANISTAN

\* The Afghan government invited the European Union to observe the negotiations between the Afghan government delegation and the Taliban movement (recognized as terrorist and banned in Russia) in Doha, this proposal was accepted, a EU spokesperson told Sputnik.

#### US-IRAN RELATIONS

\* The Biden Administration would welcome Iran's steps to advance diplomatic solutions to the bilateral relations after Ebrahim Raisi becomes the country's new president, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

\* If Raisi wants to see sanctions against Tehran lifted, then the offer is on the table at the upcoming round of talks in Vienna on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Price said.

#### ELECTIONS INTERFERENCE IN RUSSIA

\* The campaign to discredit the Russian elections began long before the coming September, but a politically blind or crafty person does not see or feel it, Central Election Commission (CEC) chairwoman Ella Pamfilova said in an interview with Sputnik.

#### CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

\* Thousands of Parisians have joined a rally outside the French Constitutional Council, which approved an extended usage of so-called "health passes" earlier on Thursday, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

\* Italy will mandate a "sanitary pass" with a QR code for travel on certain types of long-distance trains, airplanes, ships, ferries and interregional buses, Sustainable Infrastructure and Mobility Minister Enrico Giovannini said on Thursday.

\* The Biden administration has not yet made a decision on the vaccination requirement for foreign travelers seeking to enter United States but the respective policy is being worked out, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients said.

\* Government employees in the US states of Virginia and Maryland will now be required to receive coronavirus vaccines or be subject to regular testing, governors Ralph Northam and Larry Hogan announced.

\* The Canadian government is considering making vaccination against the novel coronavirus mandatory for federal employees, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said.

#### US-SOUTH KOREA TALKS

\* US Deputy Special Representative for North Korea Jung Pak met for the first time with South Korean officials to discuss the situation on the Korean Peninsula, the State Department said on Thursday.

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**Blinken Confirms US Commitment to Ukraine Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken underscored Washington's commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity during a meeting with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and Head of the Presidential Office Andriy Yermak, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price revealed in a readout on Thursday.

"Secretary Blinken emphasized the United States' commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russia's ongoing aggression in Ukraine," Price said. "The Secretary and his Ukrainian counterparts also discussed opportunities to deepen cooperation between Ukraine and the United States during President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's planned visit to Washington, DC on August 30."

Prior to the meeting, Blinken said the United States is working with Ukraine to help the country address challenges from both within and without, including pursuing reforms that would strengthen the country's democracy and economy.

Also prior the meeting, Kuleba said that he hopes the meetings between Zelenskyy and Biden will bring UK-Ukraine relations "to the next level," adding that the Ukrainian government has had a "very dynamic dialogue" with the Biden administration so far.

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#### Wall Street's S&P, Nasdaq Hit Record Highs as US Jobs Data Awaited

NEW YORK, August 5 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's Big Tech and blue chip stocks hit record highs on Thursday while the broader market rose as well on optimism that the US July jobs report due on Friday could show strong employment gains signaling a recovering economy.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, hit an all-time high of 4,430 before settling at a touch below that at 4,429 for a 27-point, or 0.6 percent, gain.

The tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite, which includes names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, hit an all-time high of 14,896 before also finishing the session a touch lower at 14,895 for a 115-point, or 0.8 percent, gain.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, did not hit a record. But managed to recoup most of Wednesday's 0.9 percent decline, which was its sharpest drop in 2 weeks. In Friday's session, the Dow closed up 272 points, or 0.8 percent at 34,793.

Stocks rose after data from the Labor Department showed US jobless claims dipped below the key 400,000 mark last week, suggesting labor market recovery amid the coronavirus pandemic. The latest weekly reading on employment also raised expectations for job gains in July's non-farm payrolls report due on Friday. Economists said they were expecting the economy to have added 870,000 jobs last month, following through with June's 650,000 jobs.

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#### Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill to Add \$256Bln to US Deficit Over 10 Years - Budget Office

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - The bipartisan infrastructure bill currently making its way through the US Congress would increase the country's projected deficit by \$256 billion over the next decade, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) said on Thursday.

"The Congressional Budget Office estimates that over the 2021-2031 period, enacting Senate Amendment 2137 to H.R. 3684 would decrease direct spending by \$110 billion, increase revenues by \$50 billion, and increase discretionary spending by \$415 billion. On net, the legislation would add \$256 billion to projected deficits over that period," CBO said in a report.

The infrastructure bill, which passed the House of Representatives and is currently under consideration by the Senate, would impose mandates including new regulatory and administrative requirements for railcar manufacturers and passenger rail companies, new

vehicle safety standards, and requirements for commercial vehicle and car manufacturers to install equipment using certain new technology.

CBO added that enacting the bill would create macroeconomic effects that cause budgetary feedback, but that they have not estimated those effects or their budgetary consequences. They have also yet to determine whether enacting the legislation would increase on-budget deficits by more than \$5 billion in the four decades following 2032.

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Russian Crime Syndicate Released 1Mln US, Global Credit Cards on Dark Web - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - A Russian crime syndicate has released around 1 million US and global credit cards on the dark web, the Q6 cybersecurity company has warned, according to US media reports on Thursday.

The criminal group, which calls itself "All World Cards," is now offering stolen credit card information to other criminals, Q6 warned, according to a report from CNBC.com.

The report advised credit card users to freeze their credit reports, which usually blocks outside access to your file.

Such actions prevent scammers from using an individual's personal information to get a loan or establish credit, because the potential lender cannot then check the credit report to approve the application, the report said.

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Biden Pledges Reversal of Trump Rollback of Auto Fuel Efficiency Standards

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden pledged a new set of fuel efficiency standards for a broad class of vehicles from cars to heavy duty trucks, reversing a series of Trump administration rollbacks even as the nation strives to electrify half of vehicles sold by 2030.

"We have a playbook and its going to work," Biden said in a speech on the South Lawn of the White House. "First and following through on a campaign commitment to reverse the previous administration's shortsighted rollback of vehicle and emissions and efficiency standards."

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of Transportation are "beginning to work on the next round of standards for a broad class of vehicles, for cars, SUVs, pickup trucks, medium and heavy duty vehicles," Biden added.

The Obama administration, in which Biden served as vice president, set standards to roughly double average fuel efficiency of new vehicles to about 50 miles per gallon by 2025. The Trump administration nixed those standards, claiming they were unrealistic.

Biden offered little detail on new mileage targets for vehicles powered by internal combustion engines. Instead, he focused on a goal for half of all cars and trucks sold in 2030 being powered by batteries instead of gasoline and diesel oil.

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**Biden OKs \$3.46Bln Boost to FEMA Climate Change Disaster Aid Funds – Homeland Security**

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden has approved a more than \$3.46 billion spending package to increase US national resilience to the impacts and damage caused by ongoing climate change across the United States, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Thursday.

"President Biden today approved more than \$3.46 billion to increase resilience to the impacts of climate change nationwide," the DHS said in a press release. "This significant investment will be available for natural hazard mitigation measures across the 59 major disaster declarations issued due to the COVID-19 global pandemic."

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) within the DHS will use the aid package in its Hazard Mitigation Grant Program provide funding to states, tribes, and territories for mitigation projects to reduce the impacts of climate change, the release explained.

"Every state, tribe, and territory that received a major disaster declaration in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will be eligible to receive four percent of those disaster costs to invest in mitigation projects that reduce risks from natural disasters," the DHS said.

The investment represents a 23 percent increase in the funding made available for declared disasters since the program's inception. Over the past 30 years, it has made more than \$15 billion available to states, tribes, and territories to reduce risks from future disasters, the DHS said.

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**CNN Fires 3 Employees Who Come to Office Unvaccinated - Senior Reporter**

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - CNN has fired three employees for coming to the company's offices without being vaccinated against the novel coronavirus and postponed employees return to the office to the middle of October, senior media reporter Oliver Darcy said on Thursday.

"[CNN President] Jeff Zucker adds in his memo to CNN staff: 'In the past week, we have been made aware of three employees who were coming to the office unvaccinated. All three have been terminated. Let me be clear - we have a zero-tolerance policy on this,'" Darcy said via Twitter.

Zucker's memorandum to CNN staff cited by Darcy notes that it was a hard decision to move the reopening date from September 7 to mid-October and asks CNN staff to stay tuned for updates.

Tech giant Apple made a similar decision in July when it announced that it was postponing its offices reopening to October amid the increase in coronavirus cases.

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#### New York State Assembly Tells Cuomo Lawyers to Provide Evidence Against His Impeachment

NEW YORK CITY, August 5 (Sputnik) - The New State Assembly has told Governor Andrew Cuomo's lawyers to provide evidence they may have in his favor in impeachment proceedings scheduled to begin next week against the governor accused of sexually harassing nearly a dozen women co-workers.

"We write to inform you that the Committee's investigation is nearing completion and the Assembly will soon consider potential articles of impeachment against your client," said a statement from the New York State Assembly, quoting the advice relayed by its Judiciary Committee Chair Charles Lavine to Cuomo's lawyers through the independent counsel Davis Polk & Wardwell.

It said the Judiciary Committee is scheduled to meet in Albany on Monday, August 9.

"Accordingly, we invite you to provide any additional evidence or written submissions that you would like the Committee to consider before its work concludes," the statement said. "To the extent that you wish to share any such materials with the Committee, please do so by no later than 5:00 pm on August 13, 2021."

The impeachment proceedings come after New York State Attorney General Letitia James announced on Tuesday that a months-long investigation into allegations against the 63-year-old Cuomo concluded that he harassed at least 11 women colleagues, including younger ones, in violation of state and federal law. The investigation also revealed that he and a senior aide attempted to retaliate against the victims.

President Joe Biden, a fellow Democrat and long-time political ally of the governor, has led calls by a growing number of lawmakers and party officials that Cuomo must resign.

A Marist poll released on Wednesday also showed that nearly two-thirds of New York State residents wanted Cuomo to step down.

Cuomo, in office for a decade, has refused to resign. He denies the allegations of wrongdoing and inappropriate conduct, claiming that the investigation weaponized his "everyday interactions".

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#### Fourth Vaccinated US Congress Member Tests Positive For COVID-19 – Statement

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) – Congressman Ralph Norman of South Carolina became the fourth vaccinated member of the US Congress to test positive for COVID-19, he announced on Thursday.

"After experiencing minor symptoms this morning I sought a COVID-19 test and was just informed the test results were positive," Norman, a Republican and a real estate developer, said in a Twitter message.

Norman added that his symptoms remained minor.

"Thankfully I have been fully vaccinated and my symptoms remain mild. To every extent possible I will continue my work virtually while in quarantine for the next ten days," he said. In all, 128 representatives and senators have either isolated themselves because they had COVID-19, self-quarantined after exposure or took other action or no action after exposure, GovTrack.US said. Of those, 71 representatives and senators have been diagnosed with COVID-19 either through testing or symptoms, the website said.

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Virginia, Maryland Require State Government Workers to Get Vaccinated - Governors

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - Government employees in the US states of Virginia and Maryland will now be required to receive covoravirus vaccines or be subject to regular testing, governors Ralph Northam and Larry Hogan announced separately on Thursday.

"Effective September 1, employees in 48 state facilities will be required to show proof of vaccination, or adhere to strict face covering requirements and submit to regular, ongoing COVID-19 testing," the office of Maryland Governor Hogan said.

Virginia Governor Northam likewise said his state's 122,000 government employees will be required to "show proof that they are fully vaccinated or be tested for COVID-19 every week."

Both governors cited concerns over the rising number of cases caused by the coronavirus Delta variant, which Hogan said accounts for "nearly 100 percent" of new cases reported in Maryland. Northam echoed the concern, saying the variant is driving up cases across Virginia too.

Maryland's protocols will only apply to state employees working in "congregate settings" such as those working for the state Health Department, Department of Juvenile Services, Department of Public Safety and Corrections and Department of Veterans Affairs.

The affected Maryland state employees will need to receive their first vaccine dose by September 1, Hogan's office said, adding that anyone attempting to provide false proof of

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US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Meets Top Latvia General for Security Talks - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley held talks with visiting Latvian armed forces commander Lieutenant General Leonids Kalnins at the Defense Department, Joint Staff spokesperson Col. Dave Butler said on Thursday.

"Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Mark Milley met with Latvia's Chief of Defense Lieutenant General Leonids Kalnins today at the Pentagon," Butler said in a readout of the conversation.

"The leaders discussed a range of issues including bilateral cooperation, capabilities and areas of mutual interest in the Baltic region."

General Milley also reinforced international commitments to maintaining readiness, Colonel Butler said.

Latvia was a key NATO ally and shared a strong partnership with the United States around

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Majority Support Vaccine Requirements for Health Care Workers But Not Other Groups - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) – A 60 percent majority of US adults support requiring healthcare workers to receive COVID-19 vaccinations, but the margin evaporates for other groups such as college students, restaurant patrons and business employees, according to a Quinnipiac University poll on Thursday.

"Six in ten Americans (60 percent) support requiring health care workers to receive a COVID-19 vaccine while 35 percent oppose it," a press release explaining the poll said.

Democrats back a healthcare worker vaccine mandate by a 91-7 percent margin, as do independent voters 58-37 percent. But Republicans say "no" to such a requirement by a 58-35 percent margin, the release said.

Americans express different levels of support for other vaccine rules.

For government employees, 53 percent support while 42 percent oppose; for universities requiring their student vaccinations, 48 percent support while 49 percent oppose; for businesses requiring their employees, 45 percent support while 50 percent oppose, the release said.

When it comes to requiring proof of a COVID-19 vaccination: for passengers on airlines, 52 percent support while 45 percent oppose; at large sport and entertainment events, 49 percent support while 47 percent oppose and for restaurant customers just 37 percent support while 59 percent oppose, the release added.

The poll coincides with a surge in COVID-19 infections due to the virus' delta variant, which has prompted many jurisdictions to impose indoor mask mandates for both vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals in line with the latest guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

Some 61 percent think indoor masking for everyone is a good idea, while 34 percent think it's a bad idea. On the CDC's recommendations that all public school students, staff, and teachers wear masks in school, regardless of vaccination status, 55 percent think that it's a good idea, while 41 percent think that it's a bad idea, according to the release.

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US Concerned Over Reports of Ethiopian Forces Harassing Tigray Residents - State Dept. WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned about reports that residents of Ethiopia's Tigray region have been being harassed by the national security forces and urges all parties to establish a comprehensive ceasefire and increased humanitarian access, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"We are concerned by reports of Ethiopian security force harassment and arbitrary detention of ethnic Tigrayans in regions of Ethiopia beyond Tigray. Security force harassment and detention on the basis of ethnicity is unacceptable," Price said during a press briefing. "Any effort to change Ethiopia's internal boundaries by force is unacceptable."

The United States also calls on the government of Ethiopia to reach an agreement that allows the ceasefire to include all parties and facilitate humanitarian access as well as on the government of Eritrea to withdraw its forces from Tigray, consistent with commitments by both countries, Price said.

Fighting in the province of Tigray broke out in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party - Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) - of attacking a regional military base to hijack weapons and arm the anti-government militia. In late 2020, TPLF leader Debretsion Gebremichael said that Eritrea, which was technically at war with Ethiopia until 2018, had sent troops across the border in support of Ethiopian government forces.

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Fighters in Cameroon's Anglophone Regions Cut Fingers of 5 Students for Writing Exams - UN

UNITED NATIONS, August 5 (Sputnik) - Armed groups in Cameroon's Anglophone regions cut the fingers of five students to punish them for writing final examinations, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said on Thursday.

"Attacks against schools and students continue as non-state armed groups cut the fingers of five students to punish them for writing their end-of-cycle exams," OCHA said in its latest report on the situation in northwestern and southwestern regions of the African country.

With the start of the Common Entrance Examinations in Cameroon, non-government armed groups have "significantly" intensified their attacks on schools and children abducting students who are taking or preparing for exams and burning school premises, OCHA said.

In one of such incidents at the end of June, non-state armed actors fired sporadic gunshots in the air nearby three schools in the city of Mamfe and destroyed examination papers, which prevented the continuation of the exams. In another attack, On 16 June, in Bui division, fighters abducted three girls from the residence of a school.

Cameroon's two anglophone regions have been marred by violence since 2017 when the government declared war on separatists who sought independence for the English-speaking territories.

Violence in the regions has affected 2.2 million people displacing more than 700,000 and killing over 3,000 individuals, according to the United Nations. UN Children's Fund estimated that more than 1.1 children are missing out on education as parents fear sending them to school.

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**US Aviation Agency Says Boeing 737 MAX Planes May Have Potential Fire Suppression Issue**

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued a directive on Thursday warning that Boeing's 737 MAX aircraft may have a potential fire suppression issue.

"The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued an immediately adopted Airworthiness Directive (AD) for all Boeing 737-8, 737-9, and 737-8200 (MAX) airplanes; and certain Model 737-800 and 737-900ER series airplanes," the agency said in a statement. "This AD addresses potential issues with reduced fire suppression capabilities in the cargo hold of airplanes operating with a failed electronic flow control of the air conditioning packs."

The FAA directive prohibits operators from carrying items in the cargo hold of aircraft that may be experiencing issues with reduced fire suppression capabilities. However, the cargo hold may be able to transport items that are non-flammable and non-combustible, the agency said.

The directive affects some 663 airplanes registered in the United States and about 2,204 other aircraft around the world, the agency said.

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**US Working With Ukraine to Reform, Strengthen Its Democracy, Economy - Blinken**

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - The US is working with Ukraine to help them address challenges from both within and without, including pursuing reforms that would strengthen the country's democracy and economy, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"We're working together to stand for a strong Ukraine that can defend itself against external aggression, but also pursue the vitally important process of reform to strengthen even more its democracy and its economy," Blinken said during a press event alongside Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba.

The two leaders are meeting today in order to discuss the upcoming visit of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the White House later this month, as well as issues including the security and sovereignty of Ukraine.

Kuleba said that he hopes the meetings between Zelenskyy and Biden will bring UK-Ukraine relations "to the next level," adding that the Ukrainian government has had a "very dynamic dialogue" with the Biden administration so far.

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### US Waiting to See What Happens Next After Iran's New President Took Office - White House

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration waiting to see what happens next with the Iran nuclear talks following President Ebrahim Raisi's inauguration, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, Raisi was sworn in as the Islamic Republic's president, succeeding Hassan Rouhani.

"The timeline is not endless... but right now we are open to returning to the seventh round of negotiations, the inauguration is today so we will see what happens from here," Psaki told reporters.

The Biden administration believes it is in the best interest of the United States to pursue a diplomatic path forward with Iran, even though there are issues with Tehran's actions in the global community, Psaki said.

Having visibility into their nuclear capabilities is in the national interest of the United States, Psaki added.

Raisi addressed the issue of sanctions imposed on Iran during his inauguration speech, saying he will support any diplomatic mechanism to lift sanctions on Iran. He also emphasized that building nuclear weapons is not in the country's defense strategy.

Raisi, 60, was born in Mashhad to a Persian clerical family of Sayyids, descendants of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. At the age of 15, he enrolled in the Qom Seminary — the largest Shi'a seminary in Iran. For 40 years of his life, the newly-elected Iranian president worked in the judiciary. He was appointed as Tehran prosecutor in 1989, the head of the General Inspection Office in 1994, prosecutor-general of Iran in 2014, and chief justice in 2019.

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### Ukraine Has 'Dynamic Dialogue' with Biden, Hopes to Take Relations to Next Level - Kuleba

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - Ukraine has a very "dynamic dialogue" with the Biden administration and hopes to use the upcoming visit of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to Washington to bring US-Ukraine relations to the next level, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Thursday in Washington.

"We have a very dynamic dialogue with the Biden administration. I came here, as [Blinken] pointed out, to prepare the visit of my president to Washington. We want this visit to be productive, we have many deliverables which will bring our relations to the next level," Kuleba said during a press event alongside US State Secretary Antony Blinken.

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### Biden Admin Unsure if Foreigners With Russian, Chinese Vaccines Covered Under New Policy

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has yet to decide whether foreign visitors to the US with a Russian or Chinese COVID vaccine will be eligible for entry under a policy that would mandate vaccines for foreigners entering the country, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"It's a really great question, we're just not at a point where the process has concluded. When it concludes, we will provide more details to everyone about what they would need to expect, and what they would require, and what they would need," Psaki said in response to a question about whether visitors with Chinese and Russian vaccines are covered.

White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients said earlier on Thursday that the vaccination requirement for foreign travelers has yet to be entirely worked out, but that it will be a phased approach.

A spike in cases caused by the emergent Delta variant of the virus has caused lawmakers to begin reconsidering new public health policies as it relates to vaccines, masks, and social distancing. Employees and contractors across the federal government have recently been asked to either attest to vaccination status or wear a mask upon returning to offices.

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### US Investment in Electric Vehicle Market Aimed at Outcompeting China - White House

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's new investment in the US electric vehicle industry is partly aimed at outcompeting China, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said during a press conference on Thursday.

Biden is set to announce new steps aimed at advancing the impact of the Build Back Better investments to address the climate crisis.

"It's a historic investment in EV charging stations, and also as part of the investment is efforts to reduce the cost of purchasing electric vehicles, so I would say the president's commitment to making electric vehicles the vehicle of the future – further incentivizing the direction of the industry, which is already where it's headed, making us more competitive as it relates to China – is reflected both in the bill and the bill that's working its way through the Senate, also in announcements like the one that was made today," Psaki said.

The US Energy Department announced a strategy to secure the domestic supply chain for electric battery manufacturing, as well as financing for electric vehicle battery supply chains back in June.

Biden will also sign an executive order later on Thursday that sets a target for half of the new vehicles sold in 2030 to be zero-emission.

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## US Justice Dept. Probing Phoenix Police Over Deadly Force, Abuse of Homeless People

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department is probing Phoenix police over deadly force and abuse of homeless people, the department announced on Thursday.

"This investigation will assess all types of use of force by PhxPD officers, including deadly force. The investigation will also seek to determine whether PhxPD engages in retaliatory activity against people for conduct protected by the First Amendment; whether PhxPD engages in discriminatory policing; and whether PhxPD unlawfully seizes or disposes of the belongings of individuals experiencing homelessness," the statement said.

The probe will also assess the city's systems and practices for responding to people with disabilities.

"One of the highest priorities of the Civil Rights Division is to ensure that every person in this country benefits from policing that is lawful, effective, transparent, and free from discrimination. Police officers across the country must use their authority in a manner that adheres to the Constitution, complies with federal civil rights laws and respects human dignity," Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke said.

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## US Voters Say Public Health Should Outrank Individual Liberty During Pandemic - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - A 52 percent majority of likely US voters believe that public health should take precedence over individual liberty during the coronavirus pandemic, a Rasmussen Reports poll said on Thursday.

"In dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, 52 percent of voters believe protecting public health is more important than protecting individual liberty. Forty percent (40 percent) disagree, and say protecting liberty is more important," a press release explaining the poll said.

About 30 percent of US adults have yet to be vaccinated, according to the Centers for Disease Control. While many fear the vaccine, resistance also stems from a distrust of government mandates by libertarian-minded voters as well as the potential side-effects of the injections. The poll indicates the two perspectives are somewhat intertwined.

Democrats (70 percent) are much more likely than Republicans (39 percent) or voters not affiliated with either major party (45 percent) to think protecting public health is more important than protecting individual liberty in dealing with the pandemic, the release said.

On whether COVID-19 jabs are safe and effective, Democrats (54 percent) are more likely than Republicans or unaffiliated voters (both 35 percent) saying they are "Very Confident" in coronavirus vaccine efficacy, the release added.

The survey of 1,000 US likely voters was conducted on August 2-3, 2021 by Rasmussen Reports. The margin of sampling error is +/- 3 percentage points with a 95 percent level of confidence.

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State Dept. Says if Iran's Raisi Seeks Sanctions Lifted, Offer on Table in Vienna

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - If Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi wants to see sanctions against Tehran lifted, then the offer is on the table at the upcoming round of talks over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in Vienna, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday at a daily briefing.

"If president Raisi is genuine in his determination to see the sanctions lifted, then it is precisely what is on the table in Vienna," Price said.

Since April, Vienna has been hosting sessions of the JCPOA joint commission, as well as informal meetings in different formats aimed at preventing the Iran nuclear deal from falling apart after the United States withdrew from the agreement. The sixth round of the talks finished on June 20. Tehran said that the negotiations should resume after President-Elect Ebrahim Raisi took office on August 5.

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US Settles Voting Rights Lawsuit With State of New Jersey - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - A proposed consent decree would settle a federal lawsuit accusing New Jersey of violating US voter laws by failing to provide transportation to registration sites for disabled Americans, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"Under the parties' consent decree - and subject to approval by the federal district court in New Jersey - New Jersey will designate NJ Transit Access Link and Community Transportation as voter registration agencies," the Justice Department said in a press release.

New Jersey will also conduct robust implementation and oversight efforts and will afford supplemental voter registration opportunities to existing Access Link clients, the release said.

The US National Voter Registration Act ensures that citizens with disabilities have convenient and accessible opportunities to register to vote, the release added.

The release praised New Jersey officials for working with the Justice Department to comply with the law.

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Canada Exploring Mandating Coronavirus Jobs for Federal Employees - Trudeau

TORONTO, August 5 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government is considering making vaccination against the novel coronavirus mandatory for federal employees, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday.

"I've asked the Clerk of the Privy Council, who is responsible for the federal public service to look at mandatory vaccinations for federal employees. And we're also looking at federally-regulated industries, to encourage or perhaps even to mandate vaccinations for those industries," Trudeau said during a press briefing as quoted by CTV News.

To date, Trudeau has largely stayed out of discussions concerning mandatory vaccinations and vaccine passports, saying that such matters fall within provincial jurisdiction.

However, Trudeau has spoken amid an increase in cases from the coronavirus Delta variant. Canada's Chief Public Health Officer Theresa Tam claimed the majority of the cases are among those who have not received coronavirus vaccines.

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US Wants Iran to Seize Chance to Advance Diplomacy After Raisi Sworn In – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) – The Biden Administration would welcome Iran's steps to advance diplomatic solutions to the bilateral relations after Ebrahim Raisi becomes the new president, the US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"We hope that Iran seizes the opportunity now to advance diplomatic solutions," Price said at a press briefing. "We are waiting to see, as I have said before, the approach that the new government in Iran will take."

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US, S. Korean Officials Hold First Meeting on Situation on Korean Peninsula - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Special Representative for North Korea Jung Pak met for the first time with South Korean officials to discuss the situation on the Korean Peninsula, the State Department said on Thursday.

"US Deputy Special Representative for the DPRK [North Korea] Dr. Jung Pak hosted the first interagency US-Republic of Korea... meeting with Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Unification, and Blue House officials, along with National Security Council, Treasury, and Defense participants on August 4," the State Department said in a statement. "The two sides discussed the current situation on the Korean Peninsula; prospects for humanitarian cooperation; and coordination on DPRK issues."

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### Inspector General Report Cites 6 in FBI for Media Contacts in 2016 Presidential Campaign

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - Six FBI employees face possible disciplinary action over unauthorized contacts with reporters during the 2016 presidential campaign, the US Justice Department's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) said in a report released on Thursday. "The OIG is referring six additional employees to the FBI for it to determine if their media contacts during this time period warrant disciplinary or other corrective action," the report said. The report follows a series of OIG reports on leak investigations seeking sources of non-public information related to a 2016 FBI investigation of emails on an unsecured system belonging to then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

The six cited in Thursday's report - the latest in at least three OIG reports on 2016 campaign leaks - are in addition to three senior FBI officials earlier cited for unauthorized disclosures of non-public information.

Thursday's report also rehashed earlier OIG efforts to determine the source of leaks to Rudi Giuliani, an adviser to the Trump campaign in 2016.

During the campaign, Giuliani appeared to hint in public statements that he had advance knowledge of FBI plans to re-open a probe of the thousands of emails Hillary Clinton destroyed then after using a private server and electronic devices for official business.

An October 2016 announcement by then FBI Director James Comey of a new Clinton email investigation played what many consider an outsized role in the subsequent upset victory by then-candidate Donald Trump.

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### Pakistan Disappointed at Rhetoric Coming Out From Afghanistan - Security Advisor

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - Islamabad is disappointed at the rhetoric coming out of Afghanistan toward Pakistan given the contribution the latter has made to the peace process, Pakistan National Security Advisor Moeed Yusuf said on Thursday.

"We have been very disappointed as a country, extremely disappointed at what the kind of rhetoric, the kind of attitude that is coming out of Kabul towards Pakistan. No other country has done more," Yusuf said at the US Institute of Peace.

Fighting has surged in Afghanistan in recent weeks as the Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) has intensified the offensive to recapture Afghanistan since the foreign forces began to withdrawing from the country. Meanwhile, Kabul has repeatedly accused Islamabad of supporting the Taliban and preventing the Afghan forces from carrying out military operations against the terror group.

The relations between the Afghan government and Pakistan took another hit after the daughter of the Afghan ambassador to Pakistan was kidnapped on in Islamabad on July 16. She was reportedly released after several hours of being subjected to torture.

Kabul subsequently recalled its ambassador and senior diplomats from Pakistan and has demanded those responsible for the incident to be punished. The Pakistani Foreign Ministry called the decision unfortunate and regrettable.

Meanwhile, Pakistan is participating in the so-called extended Troika format along with Russia, China and the United States that acts as a mediator in the Afghan conflict.

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UN Looks Forward to Working With Iran's Raisi on Shared Interests - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, August 5 (Sputnik) - The United Nations looks forward to cooperating with Iran's new President, Ebrahim Raisi, on a wide range of coinciding interests, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, Raisi was sworn in as the Islamic Republic's president, succeeding Hassan Rouhani who served eight years in office.

"We look forward to working with the new president of Iran on a host of issues that are of interest to both the United Nations and Iran," Dujarric said.

On Tuesday, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei endorsed Raisi as the 13th president of Iran. Following his inauguration, Raisi will present a list of new cabinet ministers.

Raisi won the June 18 presidential race in Iran with nearly 62 percent of the vote.

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Pakistan, India Have Prospects for Movement on Relations - Security Advisor

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - India and Pakistan have prospects to improve their relations, Pakistani National Security Advisor Moeed Yusuf said on Thursday at a conversation organized by the US Institute of Peace.

"There is every prospect of movement and Pakistan does want to live like a civilized neighbor," Yusuf said when asked about the prospects for movement on India Pakistan relations.

He added that Pakistan still insists that India reverses its takeover of the Kashmir region.

India and Pakistan, considered the same territory under the colonial British Raj, have long been at odds over and fought three wars over Kashmir. Occasional clashes on the contact line have been a regular occurrence, but tensions escalated in August 2019, when the Indian government annulled the special autonomous status of its Jammu and Kashmir state and divided the region into two union territories under the government's direct control. India controls only the southern part of the Kashmir region, while Pakistan and China occupy the northwestern and northeastern parts, respectively.

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#### Trudeau Says 'Hopeful' Border Staff Strike Can be Settled at Bargaining Table

TORONTO, August 5 (Sputnik) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday that he is hopeful an impending strike by Canadian border agents and staff can be averted through negotiations at the bargaining table.

The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and the Customs and Immigration Union (CIU) served the government of Canada a strike notice on Tuesday, according to a joint statement from the trade organizations, citing the lack of redress for "toxic" working conditions and the absence of contracts for unionized workers for over three years.

"We are hopeful we are going to be able to settle this at the bargaining table," Trudeau told reporters at a campaign-style stop in Montreal, citing that the government's ability to renegotiate contracts with several groups of public sector workers in recent years.

The two sides are currently in mediation trying to hammer out a last-minute deal before job action is set to begin on early Friday morning, according to Trudeau.

The unions have warned travelers to brace for long lineups and lengthy delays beginning on Friday, which could be accentuated by the influx of Americans, who will be allowed to enter Canada for discretionary purposes as of August 9.

Throughout the potential strike, border services employees will be operating on a work-to-rule basis - only carrying out duties they were trained and mandated to do - at all Canadian airports, land borders, commercial shipping ports, postal facilities and headquarters locations.

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#### UN Urges to Avoid Escalatory Actions After Israel Threat to Strike Iran Over Tanker Attack

UNITED NATIONS, August 5 (Sputnik) - The United Nations called on Iran and Israel to avoid any action that could escalate the already tense situation over last week's attack on the tanker Mercer Street in the Arabian Sea, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

Earlier, Israel warned it was prepared to strike Iran over its alleged responsibility for the attack on the tanker off the coast of Oman in which two people were killed.

"What is important for all of the parties involved or interested in this to avoid any escalatory action or rhetoric that could make the tense situation worse," Dujarric said.

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### Amazon Postpones Employee Return to Office Until January 2022 - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - Amazon has postponed the date for its employees to return to their offices until January 22 due to the spread of the Delta variant of the novel coronavirus, Amazon Human Resources chief Beth Galetti said in an email to employees on Thursday.

"As we continue to closely watch conditions related to COVID-19, we are adjusting our guidance for corporate employees in the US and other countries where we had previously anticipated our employees would begin coming in regularly the week of Sept. 7," Galetti said. "We are now extending this date to Jan. 3, 2022."

The Delta variant of the novel coronavirus is believed to be the most prevalent and fastest spreading mutation in the world albeit not as deadly. The variant was first reported in India in October 2020 and has already become the predominant strain in a number of countries, including the United States.

Delta variant accounts for more than 93 percent of all new cases in the United States, according to data published by the US Centers of Disease Control and Prevention.

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### US Coronavirus Cases Up 43%, Hospitalizations Up 41% From Week Before - CDC

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - The US authorities have reported a 43 percent increase in the number of new coronavirus cases, hospital admissions and deaths over the past seven days, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Thursday.

"Yesterday, CDC reported 103,445 new cases of COVID-19. Our seven day average is about 89,463 cases per day. This represents an increase of 43 percent from the prior seven day average," Walensky said during a press briefing.

Walensky said the seven-day average of hospital admissions is about 7348 per day, an increase of about 41 percent from the prior seven day period.

"And seven day average of daily deaths have also increased to 381 per day, an increase of more than 39 percent from the previous seven day period," she added.

Florida and Texas accounted for about one third of the new coronavirus cases while more than a third of new hospitalizations in the country were in the seven states alone - Florida, Texas, Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients said during the briefing.

The surge in all three key indicators is due to the more transmissible Delta variant that has recently become the most prevalent and fastest spreading mutation in the United States, he added.

On Wednesday, CDC published new data that showed that over the second half of July, the prevalence of the Delta variant along with its sub-lineages reached 93.4 percent, while in the

region of the United States encompassing Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska, it reached 98.4 percent.

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US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Leaders Issue Joint Statement on Tunisian Crisis

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - US Senators Bob Menendez and Jim Risch, Chairman and Ranking Member of the Foreign Relations Committee respectively, issued a joint statement on Thursday that called upon the Tunisian government to recommit to democracy amid the country's ongoing political crisis.

Mass anti-government protests began on July 25, sparked by Saied's decision to dismiss Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, suspend the parliament for 30 days, and freeze the legal immunity of lawmakers.

"Today, however, we are deeply concerned by the growing tension and instability in Tunisia. President Saied must recommit to the democratic principles that underpin U.S.-Tunisia relations, and the military must observe its role in a constitutional democracy," the joint statement said. Menendez and Risch added that the US and Tunisia can work together to keep building upon the "remarkable gains" made by Tunisia since it transitioned to democracy following the 2011 Arab Spring.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke with Saied earlier this week, during which time the two discussed the Biden administration's strong support for democracy in Tunisia and the need to swiftly form a new "honest" government.

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US, South Korea Discuss Cybersecurity Defense at IT Planning Conference - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - United States and South Korean defense officials discussed command, control and communications (C3), cybersecurity and information technology (IT) issues during their first bilateral communications planning conference, the Defense Department said on Thursday.

"The leaders discussed areas of mutual interest including cybersecurity; defense information technology; command, control and communications and data," the Defense Department said in a press release.

Leaders from the US Defense Department Chief Information Office (CIO) and the South Korea's Office of Planning and Coordination met on Wednesday at the Information and Communication Technology Cooperation Committee Forum, the release said.

Acting Defense Department CIO John Sherman and South Korean Deputy Defense Minister Hyun Su Han of the South Korea's Ministry of Defense for the forum, the release noted. The forum is expected to become an annual event with the next meeting in 2022, it said.

"The forum was conducted virtually, and represents the two nations' commitment to maintain the strongest dialogue and cooperation. The leaders discussed areas of mutual interest including cybersecurity; defense information technology; command, control and communications and data," the release said.

US Acting Defense Department CIO John Sherman and South Korean Deputy Defense Minister Hyun Su Han signed a governing Terms of Reference confirming the United States' commitment to broaden its ability to coordinate military technology development with allies, the release added.

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Digital Dollar Possible If US Congress Wills It - Fed Governor Waller

WASHINGTON, Aug 5 (Sputnik) - A digital dollar backed by the US central bank will happen if Congress wills it, Federal Reserve Governor Christopher Waller said Thursday amid the ongoing debate on the safety and need for such a payment mode outside of conventional banking.

"If Congress directs the Federal Reserve to act on a CBDC [Central Bank Digital Currencies], we will," Waller told a live-streamed discussion on the subject. "Congress must determine whether the Fed should be required to repay the expenditures of constructing a CBDC."

Waller is the latest high-ranking US financial official to weigh in on the idea of a CBDC as central banks, including the Fed, explore the idea of issuing their own cryptocurrencies.

On Tuesday, Securities and Exchange Commission Chairman Gary Gensler described cryptocurrency trading and lending platforms as akin to the "Wild West" of the alternative currency world, in the damage they could inflict on investors. He also pushed Congress to exert more authority in policing such tools.

Most central banks agree that the monetary system of the future could be dictated by digital currencies. But they are also wary of the highly speculative value of such money and the illegitimate activities arising from them, including the hacking of information systems for ransom. Bitcoin, the progenitor of digital coins, has shown exceeding volatility this year, rallying more than 800 percent at one point from a year ago before losing almost half its value. Bitcoin is completely banned by India and heavily restricted by China's government. US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has also called Bitcoin an "inefficient" payment system that was too volatile for the average user or investor and is often misused for illicit finance.

Waller said financial innovation will certainly lead to faster and cheaper payments in the future but it was unclear if a CBDC was required at this point to make foreign payments more affordable.

Trust could also be an issue, he added, as US consumers "trust bank accounts and are unlikely to switch to a CBDC easily."

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US Not Decided On Vaccination Requirement for Foreign Travelers - White House

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has not yet made a decision on the vaccination requirement for foreign travelers seeking to enter United States but the respective policy is being worked out, White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeffrey Zients said on Thursday.

"Part of that [foreign travel opening] planning is a phased approach that foreign nationals traveling to the United States may, there is still policy work being done here, may need to have some type of a vaccine requirement but that's not a decision at this point," Zients said during a press briefing.

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US Reports \$1.2Bln in Diverted Development Funds Returned to Malaysia - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - The US government has successfully returned more than \$1.2 billion in development funds to Indonesia that had been illegally diverted, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"The Justice Department announced today that it has repatriated an additional \$452 million in misappropriated 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) funds to the people of Malaysia, bringing the total returned to over \$1.2 billion," the Justice Department said in a news release. According to court documents, the funds from 1MDB, formerly Malaysia's Investment Development Fund, were laundered through major financial institutions worldwide, including in the United States, Switzerland, Singapore and Luxembourg, the release said.

"Beginning in 2016, a landmark effort encompassing 41 civil forfeiture actions filed in the US District Court for the Central District of California and one in the US District Court for the District of Columbia by the Money Laundering and Asset Recovery Section (MLARS) of the Justice Department's Criminal Division led to the seizure of over \$1.7 billion in stolen assets," the release added.

As alleged in the civil forfeiture complaints, from 2009 through 2015, more than \$4.5 billion in funds belonging to 1MDB were allegedly misappropriated by high-level officials of 1MDB and their associates through a criminal scheme involving international money laundering and embezzlement, according to the release.

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### Canada Hopes to Resettle 'Several Thousand' Afghans Who Assisted War Efforts - Minister

TORONTO, August 5 (Sputnik) - Ottawa is hoping to resettle several thousand Afghans through special immigrant programs designed for those who assisted Canadian military efforts in the war-torn country, Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino said on Thursday.

The first flight carrying Afghan refugees touched down in Toronto late Wednesday evening, carrying an unspecified number of people.

"We are on safe ground in saying that the program will, hopefully, resettle several thousand Afghans, who qualify," Mendicino told reporters.

The minister refused to divulge any details regarding the number of Afghans who were airlifted from Kabul yesterday, citing operational safety and remained tight-lipped about future timelines and targeted number of refugees.

"We want to get this operation done as quickly as possible," Medicino said, noting that Wednesday's flight was "not the last flight" with more to come in days and weeks ahead. Mendicino also thanked Canadian veterans' groups, some of whom have undertaken direct action to help translators parallel to or in conjunction with the efforts led by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Global Affairs Canada and the Department of National Defense.

However, reaction to news of the first flight from veterans' group was lukewarm, according to reports, with those involved in the US-led mission saying that the operation is moving too slowly and not addressing the safety concerns of those at greatest risk.

According to reports, the flight was half-full and consisted predominantly of those who worked with the Canadian embassy in Kabul.

Canada, as well as other countries including the United States, are working to assist interpreters and other Afghans facing imminent danger amid the US withdrawal from the war-torn country.

The Taliban terror group (banned in Russia) views facilitator of the US-led mission as traitors and has vowed retribution should it reclaim control of the country. Projections show the terror group is on track to reclaim control of Afghanistan after the withdrawal of foreign troops is completed.

The Canadian military, which was primarily active in Kandahar, exited the Afghan war in 2014.

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#### Six in 10 US Parents Say COVID-19 Child Care Duties Hurt Their Careers – Poll

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) – A 62 percent majority of parents with children under age 18 believe their child care and virtual schooling duties during the pandemic have negatively impacted chances to advance in their careers, a poll by the American Staffing Association (ASA) said on Thursday.

"Work-life balance became a thing of the past for many parents during the COVID-19 pandemic," ASA President Richard Wahlquist said in a press release. "Parents are feeling left behind in their careers and in their workplaces."

The findings are based on an ASA commissioned Harris Poll of 2,066 U.S. adults, including 1,070 parents and 605 parents of children under 18, the release said.

The survey found that minorities are especially impacted, with seven in 10 Black parents and 62 percent of Hispanic parents concerned that child care and virtual schooling duties hurt their opportunities for career advancement, the release added.

Similar concerns were expressed by 51 percent of White parents, according to the release.

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#### US Advocacy Group Sues Texas Governor to Block Order on Banning Transportation of Migrants

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - A lawsuit against Texas Governor Greg Abbott seeks to halt enforcement of an executive order requiring police to stop cars suspected of transporting migrants, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said on Thursday.

"The governor of Texas cannot veto federal decisions about who can live in this country. And state police cannot be stopping drivers and impounding cars they suspect of carrying asylum seekers," the ACLU said in a press release.

The lawsuit follows a court ruling on Tuesday in a separate Justice Department challenge, in which the judge paused the enforcement of the executive order for ten days, the release said. The ACLU lawsuit differs from the Justice Department because it names as plaintiffs several charitable organizations that operate shelters and provide other services for migrants, asylum seekers and their families in border communities, the release added.

Plaintiffs include Annunciation House, one of the largest shelter providers on the border, Angry Tias & Abuelas of the Rio Grande Valley, a volunteer organization that aids migrants; Jennifer Harbury, a humanitarian volunteer who frequently drives migrants; and FIEL Houston, an immigrants' rights organization.

The ACLU noted that the Texas governor's order would prevent migrants from traveling from border regions to join family members in other parts of Texas and other states.

Texas and other border states face an unprecedented surge of hundreds of thousands of migrants crossing the border in a bid for US residency, typically by seeking political asylum.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims at 385,000 as COVID Headwinds Ease Slightly - Labor Dept

WASHINGTON, Aug 5 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims dipped below the key 400,000 mark last week according to Labor Department data on Thursday that suggested a modest labor market recovery amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending July 31, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 385,000, a decrease of 14,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a statement.

The 4-week moving average for claims decreased by 366,000.

Economists polled by US media had anticipated 385,000 claims for the week ended July 31, putting what the Labor Department reported right on target.

More importantly, the latest weekly reading sets expectations for employment numbers for all of July that will be reported by the Labor Department on Friday via the closely-watched non-farm payrolls report.

"Last month, the nonfarm payroll number show(ed) job gains of 850K," economist Greg Michalowski wrote in a post on ForexLive. "The estimate for tomorrow is 870K."

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

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. More than 7 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020. This year though, growth has been quite dynamic, with a 6.5 percent rebound for the second quarter though that was still below the 8.5 percent expected by economists.

The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent economic growth for all of 2021. But Chairman Jerome Powell says he does not expect "full employment" — defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower — to occur anytime soon. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 5.9 percent in June.

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Space Engineers Still Probing Mystery Readings on Boeing Starliner Spacecraft - NASA  
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WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - NASA and Boeing engineers are trying to find out what caused an anomalous reading on the new Starliner spacecraft, delaying again its launch from Cape Canaveral, Florida, this week, the US space agency said on Thursday.

"NASA and Boeing are continuing to work through steps to determine what caused the unexpected valve position indications on the CST-100 Starliner propulsion system," the space agency said.

The United Launch Alliance Atlas V rocket with the Starliner spacecraft on top was scheduled to return to its Vertical Integration Facility at the Cape Canaveral Space Force Station on Thursday where engineers will have direct access to it for continued troubleshooting, NASA said.

"The data will drive any corrective measures that may be necessary to ensure Starliner is ready for launch. When NASA's Commercial Crew Program and Boeing Space agree the issue is resolved, a new launch opportunity will be selected, taking into account the readiness of all parties involved," the space agency said.

Early in the launch countdown for the scheduled launch of Starliner's second, unmanned test flight to the International Space Station on Tuesday, engineers detected indications that not all of its propulsion system valves were in the proper configuration, NASA added.

Engineers have described the again-delayed mission as being of "crucial importance" to the Starliner program following the failure to achieve all objectives on the spacecraft's first test flight in December 2019 when it failed to successfully rendezvous with the International Space

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US Urges Mekong River Nations to Hold Myanmar Regime Accountable – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has taken part in the Friends of the Mekong ministerial meeting and called upon the 14 participating nations to hold the military regime in Myanmar accountable to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) five-point consensus, the State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

Deriving its name from the principal river that ties the traverses most Southeast Asian nations, Friends of the Mekong include the United States, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Australia, the European Union, South Korea, Japan, New Zealand, the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and the Mekong River Commission Secretariat.

"On August 5, Secretary Blinken chaired the tenth anniversary meeting of the Friends of the Mekong ministerial," Price said in a press release. "Secretary Blinken urged the Friends of the Mekong to take immediate action to hold the Burmese military regime accountable to the

ASEAN five-point consensus. He called for joint action to press the Burmese military regime to end the violence, release those unjustly detained, and restore Burma to the path to democracy." During the meeting the participating countries also discussed joint efforts to combat the coronavirus pandemic, advance economic recovery, support sustainable water supply, and natural resource management, the release said.

On February 1, the Myanmar military overthrew the civilian government and declared a year-long state of emergency. The coup triggered mass protests, which were quashed with deadly violence, resulting in the death of over 700 people in six months. Additionally, about 3,000 protesters were detained, according to rights activists.

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Blinken Holds Talks With Afghan Reconciliation Council Head - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with the head of Afghanistan's High Council for National Reconciliation about the Biden administration's intention to reach a political settlement to end the war in the country, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Afghan High Council for National Reconciliation Chairman Abdullah Abdullah today to reiterate the US commitment to seek a just and durable political settlement that ends the war in Afghanistan," Price said.

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UN Human Rights Chief Urges Immediate Ceasefire in Syria's Daraa - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, August 5 (Sputnik) - UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michele Bachelet on Thursday called for an immediate ceasefire between government forces and armed rebels in Syria's southern province of Daraa.

The most serious confrontation since 2018 in the province escalated at the end of July. It has already displaced 18,000 people and resulted in the death of at least eight civilians, according to the United Nations.

"There needs to be an immediate ceasefire to alleviate the suffering of civilians in Daraa," Bachelet said in a statement. "I also call on the parties to the conflict to allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded access for humanitarian relief."

According to the UN human rights office (OHCHR), hostilities in Daraa followed weeks of growing tension, during which government forces imposed tighter controls on roads in and out of the neighbourhood of Daraa al-Balad and strengthened their military positions, stationing tanks in residential areas.

Rebels in response have launched counter-attacks on several areas in rural Daraa governorate. At least one mortar launched by unidentified armed individuals hit and damaged the Daraa National Hospital, the OHCHR said.

"I remind the parties to the conflict of their obligations under international humanitarian law, in particular as regards the protection of civilians, and under international human rights law," Bachelet said..

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US June Trade Deficit Hits Record High at \$75.7Bln - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, Aug 5 (Sputnik) - The US international trade deficit rose by \$4.8 billion from a month earlier to reach a record-high of \$75.7 billion in June, the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis said on Friday.

"It's a new record high, after the previous trade deficit peak of \$75.025 billion in March," BEA spokesman Thomas Dall told Sputnik.

A news release by the BEA said exports in June were at \$207.7 billion. But imports grew even more, to \$283.4 billion, resulting in the deficit.

Among international trading partners, the United States' largest deficit was with China, at \$27 billion. On a monthly level though, the deficit with China shrank by \$200 million from May.

The European Union region accounted for the second-largest US trade deficit in May, at \$19.6 billion, while Mexico came in third, at \$7.2 billion.

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Biden Signs Memorandum Giving Temporary Safe Haven to Hong Kong Residents - White House

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has signed a memorandum that provides a temporary safe haven to the residents of Hong Kong, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki announced on Thursday.

"Today, President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. signed a memorandum directing the deferral of removal of certain Hong Kong residents who are present in the United States, giving them a temporary safe haven," Psaki said in a statement.

The move demonstrates Biden's "strong support for people in Hong Kong in the face of ongoing repression by the People's Republic of China (PRC), and makes clear we will not stand idly by as the PRC breaks its promises to Hong Kong and to the international community," the statement said.

The US State Department also issued a statement affirming Biden's decision to defer enforced departure for Hong Kong residents in the United States for 18 months. The State Department said the Biden administration is joining US partners and allies in offering safe haven should

residents fear returning to Hong Kong after China fundamentally altered its institutions and suppressed residents' freedoms.

Meanwhile, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said the Department of Homeland Security will temporarily defer removal from the United States for eligible individuals. "Hong Kong residents in the United States whose removal has been deferred may also seek employment authorization through US Citizenship and Immigration Services. The United States stands with the people of Hong Kong in support of rights and freedoms," Mayorkas said. The Biden administration has repeatedly criticized Chinese and Hong Kong officials for systematically undermining Hong Kong's democratic institutions, delaying elections, disqualifying elected lawmakers from office and forcing officials to take loyalty oaths to keep their jobs. China has denied the accusations and described them as outside meddling in its internal affairs.

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#### Moderna Says COVID-19 Booster Likely Necessary This Fall – Financial Statement

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) – Moderna Inc. in a financial statement on Thursday said it believes the booster shot will be necessary as early as this fall while predicting we are going to see more breakthrough Delta infections in vaccinated people.

"We believe a booster (dose 3) is likely to be necessary this fall, particularly in the face of Delta," the statement said. "We believe that increased force of infection resulting from Delta, non-pharmaceutical intervention (NPI) fatigue, and seasonal effects (moving indoors) will lead to an increase of breakthrough infections in vaccinated individuals."

In the statement, Moderna claims its vaccine remains highly effective (about 93 percent) over a period of 6 months after an individuals get their second dose.

Moderna's revenue in the second quarter of 2021 made \$4.4 billion with \$4.2 billion coming from COVID-19 vaccine sales, according to the statement.

On Wednesday, the World Health Organization (WHO) called for a moratorium on booster COVID-19 vaccine shots until the end of September to ensure equitable access to vaccines around the globe. The White House said that such a moratorium would be a "false choice" as both goals, helping poor countries with vaccines and booster vaccination, can be accomplished simultaneously.

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#### US Intelligence Digging Through Genetic Data to Uncover Origins of COVID-19 - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 5 (Sputnik) - The US intelligence agencies are investigating the genetic data that could be a key to revealing the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, CNN reported on Thursday, citing multiple people familiar with the matter.

In May, US President Joe Biden directed the US Intelligence Community to redouble efforts to investigate the origins of COVID-19 and to report their findings to him in 90 days. The intelligence services that have insisted that there is insufficient evidence to assess whether COVID-19 came from human contact with an infected animal or from a laboratory leak, are expected to reach out to China on this issue.

According to CNN, the data contain the genetic blueprints drawn from virus samples that were studied at the lab in Wuhan, and some of the officials believe that these samples may have been the source of the outbreak. It is yet unclear how the US intelligence agencies acquired the data, which is still to be deciphered, the report said. Sources say that there is a possibility that the data were hacked.

To analyze such a huge amount of data, the US intelligence is reportedly using supercomputers at the National Labs with the Department of Energy. They also employ the help of Mandarin-speaking specialists since the data are in Chinese.

"Obviously there are scientists who are [security] cleared. But Mandarin-speaking ones who are cleared? That's a very small pool. And not just any scientists, but ones who specialize in bio? So you can see how this quickly becomes difficult," one source familiar with the intelligence said.

In March, the WHO issued the first report of its fact-finding mission to China, which came to the conclusion that the possibility of the virus having leaked from a state laboratory in Wuhan was very low. The experts said that there was a high possibility that the virus was transmitted to humans from bats through another animal.

China has denied claims of a lab leak and urged the US and its allies to stop politicizing the issue. Beijing has also affirmed its commitment to finding the truth behind the origins of the virus with global partners based on a scientific approach.

