

5/4/22 Wednesday

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Federal Reserve Increases Interest Rates by 0.5% in Biggest Hike of 21st Century

US stocks stalled on Wednesday after rallying earlier in the week, with the S&P 500 taking the biggest hit, in anticipation of the Fed's decision following the end of its monthly meeting.

In a move [anticipated for weeks](#), the US Federal Reserve has increased the Effective Federal Funds Rate, which governs how much banks can lend to one another, by between 0.5% and 0.75%. It is the single largest increase since 2000 - a sign of how serious the inflation problem is.

"The Committee decided to raise the target range for the federal funds rate to 3/4 to 1 percent and anticipates that ongoing increases in the target range will be appropriate," the central bank's Federal Open Market Committee, or FOMC, said in a statement. In March, the FOMC raised the interest rate to between at 0.25 to 0.50 percentage points.

"Inflation is much too high and we understand the hardship it is causing," Fed Chair Jerome Powell told reporters at a press conference. "We're moving expeditiously to bring it back down." Powell said the FOMC anticipates ongoing increases "will be appropriate," adding that "there is a broad sense on the committee that additional 50-base-point increases" should be on the table at several upcoming meetings.

He noted that the "underlying momentum" of the US economy "remains strong" despite decreases in the first quarter of 2022. However, he noted the labor market is "extremely tight" and that wages are rising very quickly.

The Federal Open Market Committee also announced plans to reduce its balance sheet of \$9 trillion in government and other debt securities that it has bought up in recent years in an attempt to buttress the economy without further cutting interest rates. The Fed plans to slash that by \$95 billion a month, beginning in June.

Powell told reporters that the Fed would be reducing securities holdings "in a predictable manner," including Treasury securities, Treasury coupon securities, and Treasury bills, and agency mortgage-backed securities.

The aggressive rate hike comes as inflation, already hitting a 40-year high earlier this year, has continued to increase. According to [numbers released in mid-April](#) by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the price of consumer goods tracked by the Consumer Price Index increased by 8.5% over the previous 12-month period.

A number of factors have driven the dollar's value downward, including shortages and speculation caused by manufacturing and shipping interruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the US boycott of Russian petroleum products in retaliation for Russia's special operation in Ukraine, which caused gasoline prices to spike.

Prices in global markets continued to climb on Wednesday as the European Union discussed its own proposed ban on Russian imports, which supply nearly half of the bloc's energy needs. Brent Crude, the international price benchmark for crude oil, [increased by 4.47%](#) on

Wednesday, hitting \$109.4 per barrel. Natural-gas prices also rose by 4% to \$8.35 per million British thermal units. For petroleum, that is a 57% increase from a year ago, while for natural gas the increase is nearly 300%, according to [The Wall Street Journal](#). Fed chair Jerome Powell has [long tolerated inflation](#) as the price of the [US' economic recovery](#) from the catastrophic crash that heralded the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when much of the globe paused trade for several weeks and the US economy contracted by 20%. That tolerance [ended in March 2022](#), when the Fed increased interest rates by 0.25 percentage points in response to record-level inflation. The central bank is expected to continue increasing interest rates to at least 2.7% by the end of the year, in an effort to reduce inflation to below 2% per year.

"Volatility is likely to continue. Rate hikes have just begun, inflation looks sticky, many geopolitical issues have no obvious offramp, and midterm election rhetoric is just ramping up", Ross Mayfield, an investment strategy analyst at Baird, told clients earlier this week, [according to CNBC](#). "Though the domestic economy has been resilient, corporate earnings are hanging tough, and the US consumer continues to spend, instability - driven by inflation and rates - should continue in the near-term. Have we seen this year's market low? Possibly not".

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Lunar Larceny: Scientists Think Moon Stole Water From Earth's Upper Atmosphere

Because the moon and Earth formed at roughly the same time and from roughly the same materials, astronomers have looked to our only natural satellite for answers about the earliest times on Earth that were erased by its active geology long ago.

A new paper suggests a novel origin for the permafrost-locked water found on the lunar surface: what if it was captured from the upper parts of Earth's atmosphere?

The Earth's magnetosphere, which shields the planet from harmful rays blasted out by the Sun, isn't spherical but rather cone shaped, thanks to solar wind, and for about five days each month around the time of the full moon, the moon passes through the outermost tip of that cone.

[Published in Scientific Reports](#) in March, the paper argues that as the moon passes through that cone, it scoops up ions of hydrogen and oxygen - the atomic ingredients in water - which are caught in the magnetic bands. If the moon had its own magnetosphere, it would interact with Earth's as it passes through and possibly block the rogue ions, but it doesn't.

"It is like the moon is in the shower - a shower of water ions coming back to Earth, falling on the moon's surface," geophysicist Gunther Kletetschka, an associate professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and one of the authors of the study, [said in a UAF news release](#).

According to their estimates, it's no small amount of water, either: about 3,000 cubic kilometers has escaped from the Earth to the moon via this method - that's a little more than the volume of Africa's Lake Victoria.

Of course, some water has also arrived on the moon in the same way it likely did on Earth: via impacts by asteroids and comets containing large amounts of it.

Lunar water was first discovered in 1976 when the [Soviet Union's Luna 24 probe](#) delivered samples from the Sea of Crisis regolith. A two-meter columnar sample was taken, which revealed that the water amount increased with depth. However, Western scientists all but ignored this finding, leading to the US space agency [NASA claiming it had made](#) the discovery in 2020 using an infrared telescope mounted inside a Boeing 747 aircraft.

Finding a way to harvest and store lunar water will be vital to any permanent human mission on the lunar surface. Several space agencies have [floated plans to build](#) lunar bases in the coming decades and have included plans to explore lunar water in greater detail.

In addition, water is believed to exist on many other moons across the solar system, including [Saturn's moons](#) Enceladus, Titan, and Mimas; Jupiter's moon Europa; Uranus' moon Miranda; and the [dwarf planet Pluto](#).

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Candidates Backed by Biden, Trump Triumph in Ohio Primary Elections as Turner Hints at POTUS Run

In Ohio's Democratic and Republican primary elections on Tuesday, voters by and large chose candidates endorsed by either US President Joe Biden or his predecessor and rival, Donald Trump, including one who attended the January 6 insurrection by Trump's supporters.

The Republican former president played kingmaker in the GOP primary in Ohio, with [a host of candidates he endorsed](#) or who associated themselves with him defeating their rivals.

Some of those who won include [JD Vance](#), a venture capitalist and author of the hit book "Hillbilly Elogy," who has modeled his campaign, including his rhetorical style, on Trump's, and is seeking to defeat Democratic Rep. Tim Ryan. [JR Majewski](#), a believer in the Qanon conspiracy theory and attendee at the Capitol Insurrection, also won, and will try and unseat Democratic Rep. Marcy Kaptur in November.

For Vance, Trump's endorsement was decisive, lifting him from single-digit popularity in March to a narrow victory on Tuesday. His campaign also received a timely injection of \$3.5 million from billionaire Peter Thiel, the PayPal founder who also helped bankroll Trump's 2016 campaign. Thiel has [thrown his money around](#) in Trump's defense in recent races, supporting candidates running against sitting Republicans who opposed Trump's bid to retain power in the wake of the 2020 election.

Thiel had already given the then-new Super PAC [backing Vance \\$10 million](#) in 2021, before Vance had even officially declared his candidacy.

Others who won were [Madison Gesiotto Gilbert](#), a former Miss Ohio champion who beat six other Republicans thanks to a Trump endorsement; and Max Miller, who is running for Rep. Bob Gibbs' seat as the six-term lawmaker retires. Miller, a former Trump aide with his endorsement, faced no opposition after the two other GOP candidates withdrew from the race.

However, there was one major victor who triumphed without a Trump endorsement: [Governor Mike DeWine](#). While Trump hailed DeWine in the 2018 race, the Ohio governor's early recognition of Biden's victory in the November 2020 election earned him the lasting enmity of

Trump, who rejected Biden's victory as fraudulent and pushed Republican governors to ensure ballot recounts made him the winner.

On the Democratic side, Biden-backed candidates triumphed as well, despite his lagging popularity. [Rep. Shontel Brown](#) successfully defeated a challenge by Nina Turner, a former state senator endorsed by several figures from the Democratic Party's left wing, including Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY). Turner co-chaired Sanders' 2020 presidential bid, which he lost in the primary to Biden.

Turner, who also lost to Brown in a special election for the congressional seat last year, [declared on Wednesday](#), "They can't contain this Black girl magic," and suggested she was considering a presidential run in 2024, when Biden will be up for re-election and Trump is sure to challenge him.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Gazan Farmer Finds Ancient Canaanite Statue as Archeologists Uncover Intact Samaritan Lamp

Several recent archeological finds have been uncovered in the Levant dating to Biblical times, including an ancient icon statue and an oil lamp that is nearly intact.

Gaza's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities announced last week that a farmer in southern Gaza had uncovered a 4,500-year-old statue of a pre-Jewish goddess.

"The statue dates back 4,500 years and belongs to the Canaanite goddess Anat, who is the goddess of love, beauty and war, according to Canaanite mythology. The statue is currently exhibited in the Pasha Palace Museum in Gaza," Jamal Abu Rida, director of antiquities at the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities in the Gaza Strip, [told Al-Monitor](#).

The statue is nine inches tall and made of limestone, showing the head of Anat wearing a crown of snakes. She is speculated to have been equated with Antu in the ancient Akkadian pantheon and with the Greek Athena.

The area of Gaza has been recorded in history since at least 3,300 BCE, when an Egyptian fortress was built just south of present-day Gaza City, called Tell As-Sakan. The fort served as a major trade hub with the Canaanite people of the region, who spoke a Semitic language similar to Hebrew; the fort's role later shifted to Gaza, which became legendary as a metropolitan port city at the western end of the Silk Road. Although the Torah refers to Canaanites as among the peoples the Israelites were to exterminate, scholars believe their cultures were very similar and that Canaanite culture persisted into the Hellenistic Greek period.

"The numerous archaeological discoveries in the Gaza Strip, the latest of which was the discovery of the Canaanite statue, show the Palestinian people's history on their land and civilizations dating back to thousands of years," Ayoub Abu al-Aish, a resident of Gaza City, told Al-Monitor.

"Gaza still holds more secrets on its lands, which have witnessed many historical eras such as the Pharaonic, Roman, Byzantine and Assyrian, among others," he added.

Samaritan Oil Lamp

Separately, archeologists in the West Bank uncovered a nearly-intact clay oil lamp on Mount Gerizim, a mountain south of Nablus that is believed by the Samaritans to be the most sacred spot on Earth.

The lamp was found while conservation workers were clearing the area around a stone bath used by ancient Samaritans that is similar to a Jewish mikveh.

"It is great to find something even after all those years of excavation," Mount Gerizim National Park director Netanel Elimelech told the [Jerusalem Post](#). "We found a lot of clay sherds lying around, but to find something complete with signs of its use is pretty nice. You can still see the black marks of burning from when the lamp was used. It throws you back (in time.)"

While fewer than 1,000 Samaritans exist today, their people once lived across what is now the West Bank, northern Israel, and southern Lebanon. A Semitic-speaking people very closely related to the ancient Israelites, the [Samaritans split from them](#) when the leaders of the Kingdom of Judea were deported to Babylon in the 6th century BCE. By the time they returned under Persian patronage several decades later, the Samaritan and Jewish religions had become so separated that they were irreconcilable. Among their differences is the belief that Mount Gerizim, not Jerusalem's Temple Mount, was the site where God wanted his temple to be built.

The archeological site where the lamp was found dates to the Persian-Hellenistic period and includes a town surrounding a temple, which included several houses and an olive oil press, which would have been vital to its economic prosperity.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Dow Jones Skyrockets 900-Plus Points After Federal Reserve Announces Interest Rate Hike
By - Evan Craighead

Earlier Wednesday, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell appeared to downplay the central bank's decision to raise its key interest rate by 50 points--two times the usual amount. While the move amounted to the biggest interest rate hike since 2000, Powell signaled that a larger, 75-point hike was unlikely.

US markets appeared to respond positively to Fed Chair Jerome Powell's remarks on Wednesday, as sharp rallies were observed in the stock indices, including a 932-point (2.8%) increase for the Dow Jones Industrial Average. Wednesday's close represented the Dow Jones' best day since November 9, 2020, [per CNN](#).

The S&P 500 held around a 3% increase by close on Wednesday, marking its best performance since May 18, 2020. [CNBC reported that all 11 S&P 500 sectors](#) were positive in the last hour of trading.

Meanwhile, the Nasdaq Composite observed its best day since February 24, 2022, growing by 3.2%.

"The market is applauding Chairman Powell's comments that the economy remains strong thanks to solid corporate balance sheets and still cash-rich consumers," Quincy Krosby, of LPL Financial, told CNBC.

"Moreover, he suggested that perhaps the worst of the sharp move in inflationary pressures may be poised to ease."

The Federal Reserve Chair expressed confidence on Wednesday when he told reporters that the central bank's decision to accelerate rate hikes would likely assist in curbing inflation, while maintaining a robust economy.

"We need to do everything we can to restore stable prices as quickly and effectively as we can," Powell said. "We think we have a good chance to do it without a significant increase in unemployment or a really sharp slowdown."

However, pandemic-related obstacles, including supply chain disruptions and the related economic fallout, still remain realistic obstacles for the Fed.



[US Federal Reserve Increases Interest Rates by 0.5% in Biggest Hike of 21st Century](#)

18 hours ago

The Fed's 50-point increase came as double the interest rate raise handed down in mid-March, which was the central bank's first rate hike since 2018.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Singer Ray J Publishes Screenshots to Prove Existence of Second Sextape Between Him, Kim Kardashian

By - Evan Craighead

Singer and entrepreneur Ray J, real name Ray Norwood, says he was inspired to speak out after ex Kim Kardashian claimed that he may be in possession of video footage that showed him "sticking a dildo in my a**." Ray J says the remarks, featured in "The Kardashians" on Hulu, painted him as a "rapist and dirty perv."

Ray J, 41, gave an exclusive interview to DailyMail Online in which he refuted claims made by ex-girlfriend Kim Kardashian, 41, and presented evidence to support claims that a second sex tape of them does exist.

"I've sat in the shadows for over 14 years allowing the Kardashians to use my name, to abuse my name, make billions of dollars over a decade-and-a-half talking about a topic I've never really spoken about," Ray J told the British tabloid.

In footage from the new Hulu show "The Kardashians," Kim is seen sobbing as she uncases what she described as "all of the sex tape."

Kim was also overheard hypothesizing about what could possibly be on footage retrieved by Ray J and handed off to Kim's ex-husband Kanye West. The bag drop-off was made to be a central moment in a recent episode.

"What if I was f**king sleeping and he stuck a dildo up my a**, I don't know," she says with a chuckle.

"I would hope you would wake up from it," retorts her sister Khloe Kardashian.

[A source for Kim later told TMZ](#) that it was simply meant to be a comedic moment in the show. However, text messages shared by Ray J showed that he was not laughing.

One image showed text in which he asserted that her comment makes him "look like a rapist and [a] dirty perv."

"If you're upset about the dildo comment it was clearly a sarcastic joke and I was laughing when I said it," Kim responded.

Ray J asserted that he, Kim, and her mother, Kris Jenner, had a "deal and a partnership" since the tape was released by adult film company Vivid Entertainment in 2007.

"I've never leaked anything. I have never leaked a sex tape in my life. It has never been a leak," he asserted. "It's always been a deal and a partnership between Kris Jenner and Kim and me and we've always been partners since the beginning of this thing."

Ray J said that he is coming clean about everything and providing his side of the story because, as a father, "It kills my soul to think my daughter would have to go through life thinking her dad was something that he wasn't."

"For the remainder of my life, I'm going to live in my truth and not in the lie that's been created by Kris Jenner and Kim."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Justice Alito Cancels Public Appearance After SCOTUS Leak on Roe v. Wade Draft

By - Evan Craighead

Earlier this week, Politico published a draft opinion authored by SCOTUS Justice Samuel Alito which suggested the SCOTUS had voted to overturn Roe v. Wade, a 1973 decision that protects a pregnant woman's liberty to elect to have an abortion without excessive government restriction. The source of the leak is now under investigation.

US Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito has canceled an upcoming speaking appearance at the 5th US Circuit Court of Appeals' judicial conference, a gathering of New Orleans-based federal appeals court judges and District Court judges from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas.

[The matter was reported by Reuters](#) and confirmed by Patricia McCabe, a spokesperson for the high court.

“We cannot allow our decisions to be affected by any extraneous influences such as concern about the public’s reaction to our work,” [Alito wrote in his draft opinion leaked earlier this week](#). The leak of Alito’s majority opinion draft has spurred a number of questions, ranging from the upcoming midterm elections to the possible undoing of women’s autonomy.

On Tuesday, Chief Justice John Roberts confirmed the authenticity of the leaked document and announced that he has directed the marshal of the court to launch a probe “into the source of the leak.”

“To the extent this betrayal of the confidences of the Court was intended to undermine the integrity of our operations, it will not succeed,” Roberts said in a statement obtained by Politico. “The work of the Court will not be affected in any way.”

A final ruling on the matter is expected to be finalized either by late June or early July.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Las Vegas Police: Body Found in Nevada’s Lake Mead Has Likely Been There for Decades
By - Ian DeMartino

Lake Mead sits about 30 miles southeast of Las Vegas, Nevada. The man-made reservoir provides water and electricity to Nevada, Arizona, California and Mexico. In late 2021, the three states and the US federal government agreed to a \$200 million deal to respond to a water shortage crisis.

Nevada’s Las Vegas police believe the body found inside a barrel in Lake Mead dates back between the mid-1970s to early 1980s and [appears to have suffered](#) a gunshot wound.

On Sunday, boaters who were enjoying the sun at Lake Mead called the authorities after finding human remains in what appears to be a 50 gallon barrel. The discovery was only possible because of Lake Mead’s plummeting water levels, which were prompted by an ongoing drought. The lake, along with the upstream Lake Powell, collectively make up the largest man-made water reservoirs in the US.

The Clark County coroner’s office is still trying to identify the corpse, a process they say may take months if it is possible at all. While internet commentators immediately started to make the logical leap to Jimmy Hoffa, the former Teamsters boss who disappeared in 1975, that speculation was quickly dashed when police initially said the death likely occurred in the 1980s.

After police determined that the shoes the man was wearing were manufactured in the middle to late 70s, they moved the timeline back to include the mid-1970s, making a Hoffa connection technically possible.

Still, it is highly unlikely that there is any connection to the disappearance of Hoffa. There are more than 17,000 open missing person cases in the US, and that does not include the hundreds of thousands more where the missing person is presumed dead, as is the case with Hoffa. Additionally, Lake Mead is a 30-hour car ride from Bloomfield Township in Michigan, Hoffa’s last known whereabouts. It’s anticipated the Hoffa link will not be completely settled at least until the coroner’s office determines the man’s identity, or at least confirms that it is not Hoffa.

Lake Mead has dropped from 1,080 feet to 1,055 feet in only a year. As the lake provides water for more than 40 million people in Nevada, Arizona, California and Mexico, not to mention the lake's agricultural uses, its rapid decline is concerning for authorities.

If the decline continues, police told Fox5 Las Vegas that it is possible they will find more bodies in the future.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Neuralink Rival Synchron Announces Enrollment of First US Patients for Brain Computer Trial
By - Ian DeMartino

Brain Control Interfaces (BCI) are seen as a potential huge market in the future, not only to help those suffering from paralysis but possibly as an augmentative device for healthy individuals as well.

Synchron Inc just enrolled its first patient in the US for a clinical trial of its BCI device called Stentrode, which is intended to help people suffering from paralysis and ultimately prove effective regardless of the cause of the condition.

But Synchron, as opposed to Elon Musk's far more funded Neuralink, is focused entirely on helping those with paralysis for now. Despite the relatively modest funding level of \$70 million in total, Synchron is ahead of Neuralink, which raised \$205 million in the last year alone and is still searching for a trial director for its brain implanted device.

The study will take place in New York and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and will involve approximately six patients. Synchron has already proven the effectiveness of its device in trials in Australia but this will mark its first trial of permanently implanting a device in a patient in the US.

Four patients have had Stentrode implanted in them in Australia, and the company says they are able to control digital devices to send email and text messages, shop online, manage finances and participate in telemedicine while only using their thoughts.

The company describes the device as "brain bluetooth."

Compared to the Neuralink device, surgery for the Stentrode implant is said to be far less intrusive. Stentrode is implanted in a blood vessel near the user's throat where it travels up to the brain and lines the brain with electrodes and sensors. The implant then listens for activity in the brain and sends the waves to a device in the user's chest. All in all, the procedure can be completed in two hours, according to the company.

As for the Neuralink device, it's implanted directly in the user's skull, potentially leading to long term inflammation of the patient's brain.

Currently, the device is only designed to focus on the part of the brain that deals with motor skills, but the plan is to eventually map the entire brain.

"Synchron's north star is to achieve whole-brain data transfer," said CEO Thomas Oxley in a press release announcing the initial approval of the trial earlier this year. "The blood vessels provide surgery-free access to all regions of the brain, and at scale. Our first target is the motor

cortex for treatment of paralysis, which represents a large unmet need for millions of people across the world.”

In addition to helping individuals suffering from paralysis gain more independence, the Synchron device may also be used to repair damaged parts of the brain and allow scientists to monitor the functional integrity of brain structures.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

California Controller Betty Yee Lands in Hot Water Over Failed COVID PPE Contracts
By - Ian DeMartino

In the early days of the pandemic, California Governor Gavin Newsom authorized no-bid contracts in an attempt to quickly procure personal protection equipment for medical professionals. At least three of those contracts have resulted in lawsuits.

The state controller of California, Betty Yee, is in hot water after text messages revealed in a lawsuit between the Blue Flame Medical LLC and its bank [showed abnormal involvement](#) of Yee in the medical start up company's procurement of a no-bid contract with the state.

Three no-bid contracts between the state and companies promising masks in the early days of the pandemic failed spectacularly, but it is the one with Blue Flame Medical LLC that is getting the most attention because of its connection with Yee.

Blue Flame obtained a \$600 million no bid contract to provide 100 million N95 masks to the Golden State, intended to provide medical and essential workers with the protection they needed during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The company was awarded a massive \$457 million downpayment, more than 76% of the total contract. But when California sent the payment to Blue Flame's bank, Chain Bridge flagged it as potential fraud. Blue Flame had just opened the account the day before.

That set off a chain of lawsuits, with Blue Flame suing financial institution Chain Bridge, Chain Bridge suing California's bank JP Morgan Chase and JP Morgan Chase in turn suing California for damages it spent in unraveling the fiasco.

Before the deal fell apart, Yee played a significant role in helping the medical start up secure its deal with the state of California.

In a text message to Blue Flame co-founder John Thomas, Yee promised to pressure Governor Gavin Newsom to approve the contract. "Got it. Will press governor's folks," Yee wrote in response to a text from Thomas thanking Yee for her help.

Yee also discouraged Thomas, who is also a Republican strategist, from disclosing how much the company would be profiting from the deal. "If you share info with State, it may ... become a matter of public record and make headlines," Yee told Thomas after he asked if he should reveal the company's profit margin to ease concerns about price gouging.

Blue Flame was set to make \$134 million from the deal while charging the state a 20-30% markup.

After the bank flagged the transaction as potential fraud, Yee asked Thomas to “cease to keep me in the loop; it is not helpful,” telling him that he has a “credibility problem” that he needed to solve.

The state controller is not supposed to vet contracts, just cut checks for contracts already made, something that the office’s chief counsel Rick Chivaro pointed out in his deposition.

“[Yee] was merely trying to ensure that we had the face masks that we needed and other PPE to protect the nurses and the doctors that were handling these COVID cases.” Chivaro stated. “Her job was not to vet Mr. Thomas in any way, shape or form.”

Yet her involvement before the contract’s signing also goes against her job. The state controller is only supposed to work with companies to iron out the final details of payment, not help negotiate deals. Yee was introduced to Thomas through her political fundraiser, according to Chivaro.

Two other no-bid contracts for masks in California have also resulted in failures and lawsuits. Alabama firm Bear Mountain was contracted immediately after Blue Flame, but California canceled the contract after Bear Mountain missed its initial deadline and then, according to the state, only provided 2% of the order. Bear Mountain is suing the state of California, claiming it canceled the deal without warning.

Santa Clara-based firm Advoque Safeguard promised to provide California N95 masks at the cost of \$2.25 each, at a time when the state was paying \$5 to \$12 to other providers; however, its masks failed to meet federal regulations and had to be recalled. Advoque Safeguard agreed to pay back \$18.7 million to California but has yet to make any payments. Three companies are suing Advoque Safeguard, saying the company also sold them faulty masks.

Yee does not appear to be involved with negotiations of the Advoque Safeguard or Bear Mountain contracts.

When the state lawmakers demanded an explanation of the Blue Flame contract, it resulted in a lengthy public session explaining the situation but Yee’s name was never mentioned. Yee was elected to controller in 2014 and won her reelection bid in 2018. There is an election coming up for the position in November of this year but Yee will not be running due to term limits.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Report: Donald Trump Jr. Testified Before Capitol Riot Panel on Tuesday

By - Ian DeMartino

On January 6, 2021, a mob of Trump supporters stormed the US Capitol in an apparent attempt to prevent then candidate Joe Biden from being named the next president of the United States. The special committee looking into the events that day has been interviewing members and associates of the Trump family.

Donald Trump Jr., the son of former US President Donald Trump, reportedly testified before the January 6 House select committee, a Wednesday report has detailed.

Citing two individuals familiar with the events, [Politico reported](#) Trump Jr.’s interview was given on the condition of anonymity and marks the latest Trump family member to testify before the

January 6 committee. The interview comes after those involving Trump Jr.'s fiancée Kimberly Guifoyle, Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and Trump's daughter Ivanka Trump, who have all testified in front of the committee.

The meeting is said to have lasted several hours on Tuesday and despite the condition of anonymity, it was highly suspected he would talk to the panel since its launch. [ABCNews reported](#) last month that a meeting was imminent.

The goal of the meeting with Trump Jr. is to discover exactly what Trump had planned for January 6. Trump Jr. was reportedly in the Oval Office with his father the morning of the riot and a private schedule obtained by the committee indicates that Trump called then Vice President Mike Pence shortly after Trump Jr. and other family members arrived as part of a last ditch effort to get Pence to overturn the election results.

Amid the deadly riot, Trump Jr. sent a text message to then-White House chief of staff Mark Meadows, urging the official to tell his father to condemn the violence.

Trump Jr. also reportedly sent a text message to Meadows in the days before the riot, laying out a plan to have Pence refuse to count the Electoral College votes that would confirm Joe Biden as president.

Unlike his fiancée, Trump Jr. agreed to talk to the panel without being subpoenaed.

At the 'Stop the Steal' rally that took place immediately before the Capitol riot, Trump Jr. took to the stage, urging the crowd to "stay in this fight, stay loud, don't be suppressed, don't be put in your corner."

To date, the House select committee has carried out interviews with more than 800 individuals since the panel's inception in 2021. While some have willingly presented themselves before the lawmakers, others have not gone so quietly, such as former Trump adviser Steve Bannon, who was indicted on a contempt charge for not appearing before the body.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

1,000-Year-Old Native American Cave Art Discovered in Alabama Thought to be Largest in US
By - Mary Manley

An undisclosed cave in Alabama has revealed 1,000-year-old cave paintings, some of which are now thought to be the largest in the United States. Until recently, the mud glyphs were lost to the naked eye after mud naturally accumulated on the cave's walls in the millennium that followed its creation.

Jana Simek and his team of archeologists published a research paper on Tuesday in the journal [Antiquity](#), detailing an exciting discovery of cave art found in Alabama that is at least 1,000 years old. The paintings were created by indigenous North Americans prior to the Spanish invasion of the area in 1565.

The Alabama cave— which remains unnamed to protect its location and contents— was first recognized to contain cave art in 1998. Now using 3D photogrammetry, a technique "that produces digital models that can be manipulated in virtual spaces," researchers have discovered some of the largest known Native American cave art to date.

"This methodology allows us to create a virtual model of the space that we can manipulate," says Simek, a professor of anthropology at the University of Tennessee. "In this particular case, the ceiling of the cave is very close to the floor. So your field of vision is limited by your proximity to the ceiling. We never saw these very large images because we couldn't get back far enough to see them."

The mud glyphs were etched into a thin mud veneer on the cave ceiling that was then protected by condensation corrosion.

Archeologists assume that the drawings were made using either human fingertips or a tool made up of "several parallel, rounded elements." Some of the images were also drawn using what the team assumes is a flat-edged tool.

The cave is a treasure trove for archeologists; it holds hundreds of cave paintings and is now considered the most plentiful location for Native American cave art in the United States. According to Simek, the cavern is made up of more than five kilometers of underground passageways. The ceiling where the mud glyphs were inscribed is barely a meter from the floor in some areas. In order to navigate the area, a person would either have to crouch or crawl. While much of the art consists of abstract shapes and "swirling lines," recognizable figures including serpents, insects, birds, and anthropomorphs were also drawn on the cave's walls. At least five large glyphs that were previously either too big or too faint to be seen are now being revealed. They include three humanlike beings dressed in regal garments, a twisting figure with a rattlesnake-like tail and a long serpent with scales. The drawings are between .93 meters and 3.37 meters long— making the larger artworks the biggest in [North America](#). Native Americans who lived in this area at that time are referred to as Woodland Native Americans and inhabited village settlements, constructed large earthen mounds for religious worship and traded across the south, east, and mid-west of North America. They continued existing in that area until they were forcibly removed by the US government by the late 1800s following the Indian Removal Act signed into law by then President Andrew Jackson on May 28, 1830.

The images discovered in this Alabama cave may be linked to the "underworld," as caves during that time were representative of the underworld. The drawings are also similar to images found on Woodland-style pottery. The researchers consulted with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians whose homeland includes the area where the cave exists.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Judge Accepts Derek Chauvin's Plea Deal, Will Sentence Ex-Cop 20 to 25 Years in Prison
By - Mary Manley

In December 2021, former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin pleaded guilty in the federal civil rights case of the State of Minnesota v. Derek Michael Chauvin. Chauvin was tried and convicted of murdering George Floyd, a 46 year-old Black man whose death in May 2020 sparked mass protests.

Judge Paul Magnuson, the Minnesota federal judge presiding over the criminal case in which Derek Chauvin, 46, was tried for violating the civil rights of George Floyd, has accepted his plea deal and will sentence him to 20 to 25 years in prison.

Chauvin was first sentenced to prison in June of 2021 and faced up to life in [prison](#) on the federal count for violating Floyd's rights. However, prosecutors said they would agree to 25 years if he signed a plea deal.

Chauvin pleaded guilty in [December](#) to two violations of a federal civil rights statute, admitting for the first time that he deprived Floyd of his constitutional rights, resulting in both his injury and death.

"Defendant Chauvin has pleaded guilty to two federal civil rights violations, one of which led to the tragic loss of George Floyd's life," said Attorney General Merrick B. Garland in 2021. "While recognizing that nothing can repair the harm caused by such acts, the Justice Department is committed to holding accountable those who violate the Constitution, and to safeguarding the civil rights of all Americans."

Chauvin would serve the new sentence concurrently with his 22.5-year sentence for his murder conviction in Minnesota court, which he is attempting to [appeal](#).

"The defendant held his left knee across Mr. Floyd's neck, back, and shoulder, and his right knee on Mr. Floyd's back and arm," the [plea agreement](#) reads.

"As Mr. Floyd lay on the ground, handcuffed and unresisting, the defendant kept his knees on Floyd's neck and body, even after Mr. Floyd became unresponsive. This offense resulted in bodily injury to, and the death of George Floyd," it adds.

Chauvin held his knee on Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes, even as onlookers begged him to stop and even while Floyd begged for his mother. Floyd's death triggered mass protests against police brutality and racism— particularly racism perpetrated against members of the [Black community](#).

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Videos: Powerful Tornado Causes Massive Damages to Oklahoma Town, No Injuries Reported By - Mary Manley

Although property damages have been reported across the Oklahoma state, authorities on the scene have not yet reported any injuries or fatalities caused by the powerful storms.

On Wednesday night, a tornado ripped through the town of Seminole, Oklahoma, leaving behind massive damage in the heart of its downtown area. The town, located just 57 miles southeast of Oklahoma City, has a population of roughly 8,000 people.

There have been no reported injuries following a tornado which struck the heart of the city of Seminole, Oklahoma, according to Seminole County Undersheriff Matt Haley, although it's still too early to definitively say whether any occurred.

Some 14,000 people in the state of Oklahoma have been left without power as of 10 p.m. CT following the tornadoes, which were first reported at 7 p.m. Most of the power outages were in the county of Seminole, where about 23,500 people live, as well as its neighboring county of Hughes.

Twitter user @brianemfinger shared shocking video of the tornado as it destroyed buildings and power lines in Seminole.

According to The Weather [Channel](#), a “broad circulation” along a “warm front” moved through the region producing several tornadoes.

Seminole Public Schools announced their closure for Thursday following the city’s severe weather. The city’s public charter school— The Academy of Seminole— sustained extreme damage from the twisters, according to a post on their Facebook page.

“TAOS families, our school took a direct hit from the tornado this evening. We will be accessing the damage over the next few days. Please do not come to the school: it is extremely dangerous. Everyone who was at the school is safe,” the social media [post](#) reads.

“We will begin organizing volunteer efforts and will be reaching out to families to see how we can help one another,” the school added.

Meteorologist Michael Seger shared images of the tornado’s damaging effects in Seminole on Twitter.

The tornadoes were not the only major weather event to hit the south central region of the US. Hail larger than 2 inches was reported on Wednesday afternoon in southwest Oklahoma, as well as the Texas Panhandle, where 70 mph wind gusts and tornadoes are also threatening the area on [Thursday](#).

Oklahoma’s Red Cross announced on their [Twitter](#) page that they have opened a shelter at Seminole State College for those who have been affected by the tornado and are asking for those in need to share and call their number.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Senate Judiciary Committee Advances 'NOPEC' Bill Allowing Lawsuits Against OPEC

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Judiciary Committee on Thursday passed backed the No Oil Producing and Exporting Cartels Act (NOPEC) that provides the legal grounds to file lawsuits against the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Seventeen members of the Judiciary Committee supported the bill during the panel's meeting, while four opposed it.

"The bill will be favorably reported to the floor," Judiciary Committee Chairman Dick Durbin said after the vote.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US OKs Certain Transactions Related to Patents, Copyrights With Sanctioned Russia Entities

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The United States has authorized certain transactions related to patents, trademarks and copyrights with sanctioned Russian entities, the Treasury Department announced on Thursday.

"Authorizing Certain Transactions Related to Patents, Trademarks, and Copyrights (a) Except as provided in paragraph (b) of this general license, the following transactions ... are authorized: (1) The filing and prosecution of any application to obtain a patent, trademark, copyright, ... (2) The receipt of a patent, trademark, copyright, or other form of intellectual property protection; (3) The renewal or maintenance of a patent, trademark, copyright, (4) The filing and prosecution of any opposition or infringement proceeding," the statement said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Allows Transactions With Sberbank Subsidiaries in Kazakhstan, Europe Through July 12

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The United States will allow wind-down transactions with Russia's Sberbank subsidiaries in Kazakhstan and Europe through July 12, the Treasury Department announced on Thursday.

"Authorizing the Wind Down of Transactions Involving Joint Stock Company SB Sberbank Kazakhstan, Sberbank Europe AG, or Sberbank (Switzerland) AG (a) Except as provided in paragraph (b) of this general license, all transactions ordinarily incident and necessary to the wind down of transactions involving Joint Stock Company SB Sberbank Kazakhstan, Sberbank Europe AG, or Sberbank (Switzerland) AG (collectively, 'the blocked Sberbank subsidiaries'), or any entity in which the blocked Sberbank subsidiaries own, directly or indirectly, a 50 percent or greater interest, that are prohibited by Executive Order (E.O.) 14024 are authorized through 12:01 a.m. eastern daylight time, July 12, 2022," the statement said

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Waives Russia Sanctions on Overflight Payments, Emergency Landings - Treasury

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The United States has waived sanctions imposed on Russia regarding overflight payments, emergency landings and air ambulance services, the Treasury Department said in a statement on Thursday.

"Authorizing Overflight Payments, Emergency Landings, and Air Ambulance Services (a) Except as provided in paragraph (c) of this general license, all transactions ordinarily incident and necessary to the receipt of, and payment of charges for, services rendered in connection with overflights of the Russian Federation or emergency landings in the Russian Federation by aircraft registered in the United States or owned or controlled by, or chartered to, US persons that are prohibited by the Russian Harmful Foreign Activities Sanctions Regulations, 31 CFR part 587 (RuHSR), are authorized.," the statement said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US State Department Names Special Envoy for Global Food Security

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has appointed a special envoy for food security to address recent disruptions to global supply chains caused by climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"Cary Fowler, a noted agriculturalist, has joined the Department of State as US Special Envoy for Global Food Security," Blinken said in a statement. "The mission of the Special Envoy for Global Food Security is to advance US food security, global hunger, and nutrition objectives, through diplomatic engagement with allies and partners in bilateral, regional and multilateral fora."

Blinken noted that Fowler is taking the post — which has existed but not since 2016 — at a time of "unprecedented stress on global food systems."

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, Russia and Ukraine were among the top global exporters of various types of staple foods, including wheat and corn, in 2021, while Russia was also a leading exporter of nitrogen fertilizers, the second major supplier of potassium fertilizers and the third largest supplier of phosphorous fertilizers.

The organization has noted that Ukraine's food production is being threatened by factors such as disruption of logistics, loss of access to agricultural lands, labor shortages, damage to crops due to hostilities, and destruction of food system assets and infrastructure.

In addition, Western sanctions on Russia have undermined the country's sales of agricultural products abroad and prompted Moscow to retaliate by freezing fertilizer exports.

As a result, global food prices soared to record highs in March, and the International Monetary Fund warned in April that global food prices would likely rise further in the future due to the conflict in Ukraine, sanctions against Russia and Belarus, and climate issues.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Admin. to Buy 60Mln Barrels of Oil This Fall to Refill Emergency Reserve - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration plans to buy 60 million barrels of crude oil this fall in an initial bid to replace more than three times as much supply that was drawn from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR), whose stockpile has declined to 20-year lows, CNN reported on Thursday.

This will be the first time since the early 2000s that the Energy Department has purchased large quantities of oil for the SPR, the report said.

Refilling the SPR will, however, take time, CNN said, adding that delivery of the first tranche of 60 million barrels will take place in "unspecified future years", and paid for with revenue received from ongoing emergency sales from the reserve.

President Joe Biden authorized his first major SPR withdrawal in November as oil supplies began tightening amid rapid recovery in demand from the coronavirus crisis that pushed up both crude and US fuel prices.

Over the past two months, the administration has taken 3 million barrels on the average out of the SPR every week to help meet domestic refiners' demand for crude in a market seeing a surfeit in fuel consumption amid strong economic recovery from the two-year long pandemic. Western sanctions on Russia, which have impeded supply from one of the world's largest oil producers, have added to the supply tightness in oil.

The administration's biggest SPR releases commence this month onward when it will issue a total of 180 million barrels from the reserve.

The US Weekly Petroleum Status Report released on Wednesday showed that SPR inventories stood at 550 million barrels during the week ended April 29. That was the lowest level of stockpiles in the reserve since December 2001.

Tight oil supplies pushed the global price of crude to 14-year highs of almost \$140 a barrel in March and the pump price of US gasoline to a record high of above \$4.30 a gallon. In Thursday's trade, London-traded Brent crude, which serves as the global benchmark for oil, hovered above \$111 a barrel while gasoline retailed at \$4.25 a gallon on the average across US pumps.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ukraine Asking US for Anti-Ship Missiles - Congressman

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Ukraine has asked the Biden administration to provide it with anti-ship missiles, more drones and multiple rocket launcher systems, Rep. Jason Crow, who visited Kiev last week as part of a congressional delegation, said.

"They need ground-based anti-ship missiles, the Harpoon or something like it, because one of the biggest challenges they face right now is getting their food exported," Crow told NBC News. Volodymyr Zelenskyy personally conveyed this request to the US delegation, who then relayed the wish list to President Joe Biden directly, according to the report. Ukraine needs anti-ship missiles to free up the use of its ports that have been blocked by the Russian navy, the Democratic lawmaker stated.

"They're sitting on 12 million tons of foodstuff, wheat grains, sunflower oil, and this food needs to get out both for the Ukrainian economy but also to prevent famine and starvation in Africa and the Middle East, in particular. If it doesn't get out in the next couple months, it will go bad. We'll see hunger spike throughout the world," Crow added.

US President Joe Biden has recently requested from Congress approximately \$33 billion in emergency supplemental funding for Ukraine, including \$20 billion for military assistance. US

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Monday that he expects bipartisan cooperation to pass the legislation quickly.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help in defending themselves from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. Russia has said that the aim of the special operation is to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine and that it is targeting the country's military infrastructure only.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Jobless Claims Up 1st Time in 3 Weeks Amid Consolidating Market - Labor Dept. Data

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims rose last week for the first time in three weeks, the Labor Department reported on Thursday amid data suggesting that employment in the world's largest economy may be cooling somewhat after months of record demand for workers.

"In the week ending April 30, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 200,000, an increase of 19,000 from the previous week's revised level," the Labor Department said in its weekly report.

Data from the department showed the last time jobless benefits rose in the United States was three weeks ago, when it rose to 185,000 during the week ended April 9 versus 167,000 in the week to April 2.

The update on jobless claims came during a week of mixed signals from labor monitoring services in the country.

Job cuts in the United States rose for a second month in a row in April as employers assessed costs and the growing risk of inflation in a labor market that has mostly seen record demand for workers over the past year, data from employment tracker Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc showed on Thursday.

Prior to that, payrolls processor ADP said on Wednesday that private sector employers in the United States added 247,000 jobs in April, just about half of March levels and the smallest in two years as the labor market hovered at full employment.

The Labor Department itself will be issuing on Friday the all-important non-farm payrolls report for April, which analysts expect to show a jobs growth of 391,000 for the month and an unemployment rate of 3.5%. A jobless rate of 4% or below is regarded by the Federal Reserve as maximum employment.

Joblessness among Americans reached a record high of 14.8% in April 2020, with the loss of some 20 million jobs in the aftermath of the coronavirus breakout that year. Jobs recovery has, however, been stellar over the past year, with the unemployment rate moving down to 3.6% at the end of March.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Job Cuts Up in April for 2nd Month in Row as Employers Assess Risks - Report

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Job cuts in the United States rose for a second month in a row in April as employers assessed costs and the growing risk of inflation in a labor market that has mostly seen record demand for workers over the past year, employment tracker Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc showed on Thursday.

US employers announced 24,286 cuts in April, a 14% increase from the 21,387 tracked in March and up 6% from the 22,913 cuts monitored in April 2021, the firm's latest monthly report showed. It was also the first time in a year when job cuts were higher than the corresponding month a year earlier.

"Job cut plans appear to be on the rise, particularly as companies assess market conditions, inflationary risks, and capital spending," Andrew Challenger, senior vice president of Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc, said in the company's report. "Despite this, job openings are still at record highs. Workers who are being cut will have lots of opportunities and will likely land quickly."

While job cuts rose for a second month in a row, the number of layoffs — 79,982 — were the lowest recorded in total between a January to April period, the data showed.

Separately, private payrolls processor ADP reported on Wednesday that private employers in the United States added 247,000 jobs in April, just about half of March levels and the smallest in two years as the labor market hovered at full employment.

The Challenger report on job cuts came ahead of Friday's all-important US non-farm payrolls report for April from the Labor Department, which is expected to cite a jobs growth of 391,000 last month and an unemployment rate of 3.5%. A jobless rate of 4% or below is regarded by the Federal Reserve as maximum employment.

Joblessness among Americans reached a record high of 14.8% in April 2020, with the loss of some 20 million jobs in the aftermath of the coronavirus breakout. Jobs recovery has, however, been stellar over the past year, with the unemployment rate moving down to 3.6% at the end of March.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

CORRECTION - Blinken Reassures Sweden's Linde US Backs NATO Open Door as Stockholm Preps Application

(Fixes lede to signify if was a meeting, not a phone call)

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a meeting with Swedish counterpart Ann Linde discussed the United States' support for NATO's open door policy, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

Sweden may apply for NATO membership later this month or in June while Finland is reportedly considering to apply to join the alliance on May 12, media reported.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met today with Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde in Washington, DC," Price said in the release on Wednesday. "Secretary Blinken underscored the

importance of the Transatlantic relationship to European security and reaffirmed our commitment to NATO's Open Door policy."

Sweden and Finland have both expressed concerns about being vulnerable to Russia during the application period, which Linde alluded to during an interview after the talks with Blinken.

"Naturally, I'm not going to go into any details, but I feel very sure that now we have an American assurance," Linde told Swedish TV on Wednesday as quoted by Reuters. "However, not concrete security guarantees, those you can only get if you are a full member of NATO." According to the report, Linde, however, declined to say what assurances she had received from Blinken.

"They would mean that Russia can be clear that if they direct any kind of negative activities against Sweden, which they have threatened, it would not be something that the US would just allow to happen... without a response," she said as quoted in the report.

Earlier in the day Linde met with Senators Chris Coons and Mike Rounds, both members of the newly expanded US Senate NATO Observer Group. Linde in a tweet said she and Coons discussed Russia's operation in Ukraine "and implications for Europe and Sweden's neighborhood and security."

Croatian President Zoran Milanovic said on Tuesday that he would block the admission of Sweden and Finland at the NATO summit in Madrid if he is the one representing Croatia. However, if the decisions are made at the North Atlantic Council by NATO ambassadors, Milanovic said he was not sure he could persuade the Croatian ambassador to embrace his position but added that "I will be chasing the sinful souls of every parliament member who votes in favour like the devil."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UPDATE 2 - Blinken Reassures Sweden's Linde US Backs NATO Open Door as Stockholm Preps Application

(Adds more details on Linde's trip to Washington in para 8)

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a telephone call with his Swedish counterpart Ann Linde discussed the United States' support for NATO's open door policy, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

Sweden may apply for NATO membership later this month or in June while Finland is reportedly considering to apply to join the alliance on May 12, media reported.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met today with Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde in Washington, DC," Price said in the release on Wednesday. "Secretary Blinken underscored the importance of the Transatlantic relationship to European security and reaffirmed our commitment to NATO's Open Door policy."

Sweden and Finland have both expressed concerns about being vulnerable to Russia during the application period, which Linde alluded to during an interview after the talks with Blinken.

"Naturally, I'm not going to go into any details, but I feel very sure that now we have an American assurance," Linde told Swedish TV on Wednesday as quoted by Reuters. "However, not concrete security guarantees, those you can only get if you are a full member of NATO."

According to the report, Linde, however, declined to say what assurances she had received from Blinken.

"They would mean that Russia can be clear that if they direct any kind of negative activities against Sweden, which they have threatened, it would not be something that the US would just allow to happen... without a response," she said as quoted in the report.

Earlier in the day Linde met with Senators Chris Coons and Mike Rounds, both members of the newly expanded US Senate NATO Observer Group. Linde in a tweet said she and Coons discussed Russia's operation in Ukraine "and implications for Europe and Sweden's neighborhood and security."

Croatian President Zoran Milanovic said on Tuesday that he would block the admission of Sweden and Finland at the NATO summit in Madrid if he is the one representing Croatia. However, if the decisions are made at the North Atlantic Council by NATO ambassadors, Milanovic said he was not sure he could persuade the Croatian ambassador to embrace his position but added that "I will be chasing the sinful souls of every parliament member who votes in favour like the devil."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken Reassures Sweden's Linde US Backs NATO Open Door as Stockholm Preps Application

(Adds Linde's quotes on protection against Russia in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a telephone call with his Swedish counterpart Ann Linde discussed the United States' support for NATO's open door policy, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

Sweden may apply for NATO membership later this month or in June while Finland is reportedly considering to apply to join the alliance on May 12, media reported.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met today with Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde in Washington, DC," Price said in the release on Wednesday. "Secretary Blinken underscored the importance of the Transatlantic relationship to European security and reaffirmed our commitment to NATO's Open Door policy."

Sweden and Finland have both expressed concerns about being vulnerable to Russia during the application period, which Linde alluded to during an interview after the talks with Blinken.

"Naturally, I'm not going to go into any details, but I feel very sure that now we have an American assurance," Linde told Swedish TV on Wednesday as quoted by Reuters. "However, not concrete security guarantees, those you can only get if you are a full member of NATO."

According to the report, Linde, however, declined to say what assurances she had received from Blinken.

"They would mean that Russia can be clear that if they direct any kind of negative activities against Sweden, which they have threatened, it would not be something that the US would just allow to happen... without a response," she said as quoted in the report.

Croatian President Zoran Milanovic said on Tuesday that he would block the admission of Sweden and Finland at the NATO summit in Madrid if he is the one representing Croatia.

However, if the decisions are made at the North Atlantic Council by NATO ambassadors, Milanovic said he was not sure he could persuade the Croatian ambassador to embrace his position but added that "I will be chasing the sinful souls of every parliament member who votes in favour like the devil."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken Reassures Sweden's Linde US Backs NATO Open Door as Stockholm Preps Application

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a telephone call with his Swedish counterpart Ann Linde discussed the United States' support for NATO's open door policy, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

Sweden may apply for NATO membership later this month or in June while Finland is reportedly considering to apply to join the alliance on May 12, media reported.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met today with Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde in Washington, DC," Price said in the release on Wednesday. "Secretary Blinken underscored the importance of the Transatlantic relationship to European security and reaffirmed our commitment to NATO's Open Door policy."

Croatian President Zoran Milanovic said on Tuesday that he would block the admission of Sweden and Finland at the NATO summit in Madrid if he is the one representing Croatia. However, if the decisions are made at the North Atlantic Council by NATO ambassadors, Milanovic said he was not sure he could persuade the Croatian ambassador to embrace his position but added that "I will be chasing the sinful souls of every parliament member who votes in favour like the devil."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Sullivan, Romanian Counterpart Discuss Efforts to Diversify Energy Sources - White House

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan discussed with his Romanian counterpart Ion Oprisor Bucharest's efforts to diversify the country's energy supplies away from Russian sources, National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said in a press release.

"National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan spoke by phone today with Romanian Presidential Security Adviser Ion Oprisor," Watson said in the release on Wednesday. "He also conveyed US support for Romania's efforts to further diversify its energy supplies away from Russian sources while assisting neighbors like Moldova in doing the same."

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in earlier remarks that the United States supports the European Union's proposal to ban Russian oil but it is up to the bloc to finalize the move.

On Wednesday, European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen announced the sixth package of anti-Russia sanctions, targeting Sberbank and three big Russian state-owned broadcasters as well as high-ranking military and individuals involved in the operation in Ukraine.

The package also includes a gradual oil embargo. Some European countries that heavily depend on the Russian oil, such as Hungary and Slovakia, have already obtained an exemption from the embargo.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Covid Death Toll Surpasses 1 Million - NBC News

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - More than one million Americans have died from the novel coronavirus since the first case was detected in the United States in early 2020, NBC News reported citing its own tally of the death count.

The report said on Wednesday that the United States has the world's highest recorded death count from the disease.

The Johns Hopkins University COVID-related death count stands at 996,430 as of Wednesday evening.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Third Member of Oath Keepers Pleads Guilty to Seditious Conspiracy Charge - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, may 5 (Sputnik) - William Todd Wilson, a regional leader of the Oath Keepers, pleaded guilty to the charge of seditious conspiracy and obstruction of an official proceeding for his actions during the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, the Justice Department said.

"Wilson and fellow conspirators were in contact in the weeks before Jan. 6 often using encryption on an app called 'Signal,'" the Justice Department said in a release. "In one post, on Dec. 14, 2020, Wilson wrote, 'It is time to fight!' In another, on Dec. 30, 2020, he posted, 'Things are about to get real... and we need to be ready as ever!'"

Wilson, a military and law enforcement veteran, acknowledged that he agreed with other protesters to work together to "use force to prevent, hinder, and delay the execution of the laws of the United States governing the transfer of presidential power," the release said.

Wilson and others used encrypted and private communications, armed themselves with a variety of weapons and put on combat and tactical gear, the release also said.

Nine other Oath Keepers members, including founder and leader Elmer Stewart Rhodes, have been charged with seditious conspiracy in an indictment returned on January 12, but they pleaded not guilty.

Wilson could receive a prison sentence of 20 years on the seditious conspiracy charge and up to 20 years for the obstruction of an official proceeding charge.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Senators Urge TV Ratings Board to Update Criteria Over LGBT Concerns - Letter

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - A group of US Senators sent a letter to the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board asking it to update the guidelines to reflect recent parental concerns about lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT) content for children's television. "In light of parents raising legitimate concerns on sexual orientation and gender identity content on children's TV shows, we expect the Board to fulfill its responsibility in updating the TV Parental Guidelines to reflect these concerns. In updating the TV Parental Guidelines, please consider precedent on how the Board has rated sexually related, violent, and obscene materials to ensure it is applied without ideological bias," the letter said on Wednesday.

The Senators cited as evidence of their concerns a recent video of a Disney Corporation executive expressing support for LGBT characters in stories, as well as an article from a Disney content creator acknowledging that every TV writer knows about "modeling behavior" through scripts.

The motivations of pushing sexualized entertainment on young audiences are "suspect at best and predatory at worst," the lawmakers said in the letter.

The Senators requested a reply from the Board on its plan to update the guidelines no later than May 18. In addition, the lawmakers requested an in-person briefing with members of the Board to give them an opportunity to present their findings and answer questions, according to the letter.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Less Than Quarter of US Adults Rate Economy as Even 'Somewhat Good' - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - Less than a quarter of US adults rate the economy as being even somewhat good amid increasing inflation, supply chain issues and post-pandemic recovery, according to a new CNN poll conducted by SSRS survey research.

A total of 23% of respondents rated economic conditions in the United States as even "somewhat good," down by 14 percentage points from December and down by over 30 percentage points since last April, the poll, released on Wednesday, said.

Only 2% of those surveyed rated the economy as being in "very good" condition, according to the poll. Almost one-third of US adults, 30%, rated the current economic condition as "very poor," the poll also said.

However, the poll also showed that US adults report hearing bad news about the economy at a nearly 4-to-1 ratio to good news.

A majority of the surveyed US adults, 55%, reported that they believe President Joe Biden's policies to have worsened economic conditions in the country, the poll said. Two-thirds of respondents said that they disapprove of Biden's handling of the economy, the poll added. CNN said the last time the public's perception of the economy was this poor was in November 2011, when 18% called economic conditions good.

The poll data come amid rising inflation in the US, caused largely by supply chain difficulties, attributed by the Biden administration in part to the situation in Ukraine and lingering COVID-19 pandemic recovery.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Senator Paul Says US Federal Government Biggest Propagator of Disinformation

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US Senator Rand Paul said during a congressional hearing that the new Disinformation Governance Board established by the Biden administration cannot be trusted at all because the federal government is the biggest propagator of disinformation in the history of the world.

"I think you've got no idea what disinformation is and I don't think the government's capable of it," Paul told Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas during the hearing on Wednesday. "Do you know who the greatest propagator of disinformation in the history of the world is? The US government."

Paul supported his point by highlighting the Pentagon Papers and former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's role in involving the United States in the Vietnam war, President Ronald Reagan lying during the Iran-Contra affair and former President George W. Bush lying about the existence weapons of mass destruction to justify the invasion of Iraq.

Paul also brought up the Steele dossier, which was used to fabricate allegations of collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian government. Russia repeatedly denied having ties to the Trump campaign and Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation eventually found there was no collusion.

The Department of Homeland Security recently formed a new Disinformation Governance Board to coordinate ways to challenge and contradict misinformation about homeland security, with a special concentration on Russia and irregular migration. Opponents have likened the new body to an Orwellian ministry of Truth.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Stocks Jump as Investors Take Biggest Rate Hike in Over 20 Years in Stride

NEW YORK, May 5 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street jumped with the broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Index posting its largest one-day gain since November 2020, as investors took in stride the largest US rate hike in more than two decades.

The Dow and two other major US equity indexes - the S&P 500 for the top 500 stocks and tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite - closed up by an average of 3% on Wednesday, extending their more than 1% climb in two prior days. Before that, concerns that aggressive rate hikes might land the US economy into recession sent stocks reeling, with the Dow falling 2.8%, the S&P 500 3.6% and Nasdaq 4%.

The Federal Reserve, at its monthly policy meeting, approved its first 50-basis, or half-percentage, point rate hike since 2000 and indicated at least two more increases of such a nature in its upcoming meetings.

The central bank's chairman Jerome Powell, however, expressed confidence that the economy was strong and unlikely to slip into recession even if the Fed approves a couple more rate hikes of such magnitude to beat the worst inflation since the 1980s.

"Wall Street still believes the Fed will be able to deliver a soft landing and that is good news for equities," said Ed Moya, equities analyst at online trading platform OANDA.

In Wednesday's session, the Dow settled up 932 points, or 2.8%, at 34,061. For the year though, it remains down 6%.

S&P 500 finished up 125 points, or 3%, at 4,300. For the year, it was down almost 10%.

Nasdaq, which groups Big Tech names such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, and Google, closed up 401 points, or 3.2%, at 12,965. It remains down 17% for the year.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Embassy in Havana Restarts Immigrant Visa Processing - State Dept. Official

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The US Embassy in Havana is starting to process a limited number of immigrant visas for Cubans, US Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian Nichols said in a statement.

The US embassy in Cuba diminished some services in 2017 over concerns of the so-called Havana syndrome attacks.

"We are pleased that our limited restart of immigrant visa processing in Havana has begun well," Nichols wrote on Twitter on Wednesday. "We look forward in the future to processing many more immigrant visas and continuing to expand our consular services in Havana."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Over 300 Civilians Evacuated From Mariupol, Other Cities in Ukraine - UN Coordinator

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - More than 300 civilians have been evacuated from the cities of Mariupol, Manhush, Berdiansk, Tokmak and Vasylivka, the United Nation's humanitarian coordinator for Ukraine Osnat Lubrani said in a statement.

"A new safe passage operation to evacuate civilians stranded in Mariupol and other communities has been completed today," Lubrani said in a press release on Wednesday. "Over 300 civilians from Mariupol, Manhush, Berdiansk, Tokmak and Vasylivka are now receiving humanitarian assistance in Zaporizhzhie."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken Tests Positive for COVID-19 - US State Department
(Adds White House comments in paras 4-5)

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has tested positive for the novel coronavirus, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken tested positive for COVID-19 this afternoon via a PCR test," Price said on Wednesday. "The Secretary has not seen President Biden in person for several days, and the President is not considered a close contact according to guidelines by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Price said Blinken has been fully vaccinated and boosted and is experiencing only mild symptoms and added that the Secretary of State will isolate at home and will work virtually. Blinken has not seen US President Joe Biden in several days and is not considered a close contact, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said during a press briefing. Biden most recently tested negative for COVID-19 on Tuesday, Psaki added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Preparing Equally for Either Scenario in Iran Nuclear Deal Talks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) - The United States is preparing equally for both, positive and negative results of the talks on the Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Because the mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA is very much an uncertain proposition, we are now preparing equally for either scenario," Price said during a press briefing on Wednesday. "We are also preparing with our allies and partners for a scenario in which there is not a JCPOA and we will have to turn to other tactics and other approaches to fit."

Price added that the Biden administration remains committed to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

Negotiations are underway in Vienna to renew the JCPOA and lift Washington's sanctions against Tehran imposed after the Trump administration exited the United States' from the deal. The eighth round started on December 27, 2021.

In 2015, the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, China, Russia, France, the European Union and Iran signed the JCPOA, which involved limiting Iran's nuclear program in exchange for a gradual lifting of sanctions.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 5 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * The talks are ongoing with Ukrainian, Russian authorities, as well as the Red Cross on the evacuation in Mariupol, UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Wednesday.
- * There is no progress in the negotiation process between Russia and Ukraine, with Moscow recording messages about Kiev's desire to withdraw from the talks, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- * The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) units entered the village of Staryi Saltiv in the Kharkiv region and are taking away pro-Russian residents in an unknown direction, a source in the military-civilian administration of the liberated territories told Sputnik.
- * The Russian forces will open humanitarian corridors for evaluation of civilians from Mariupol's Azovstal plant from May 5-7, Russia's interdepartment center for humanitarian response said.

ENERGY MARKETS

- * The ban of Russian oil imports will destroy the European Economy, Slovak Energy Minister Karol Galek has told Politico.
- * The European Union's plans to cut off Russian oil imports could result in higher global oil prices, but the United States is determined to work with Europe on ensuring needed supplies, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said.
- * Germany stopped the physical reverse of Russian gas to Poland via Yamal-Europe natural gas pipeline on May 2, but a virtual reversal from Italy and France arose, Gazprom's spokesman Sergey Kupriyanov said.
- * Hungary could support the EU embargo on Russian oil subject to an exemption for pipeline supplies, Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Peter Szijjarto said.

SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- * The Biden administration's decision to sanction Russia's central bank was not one that was taken lightly, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Wednesday. The Biden administration's decision to sanction Russia's central bank was not one that was taken lightly, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Wednesday.
- * The United States is always ready to impose more sanctions on Russia and will discuss next steps with G7 allies this week, President Joe Biden said.
- * The European Union plans to finalize the work on the sixth package of sanctions against Russia by May 9 the latest, Bloomberg reported, citing diplomats.

* The United Kingdom has added 63 Russian individuals and companies to the sanctions list, according to a document updated by the UK government.

* The United Kingdom will ban Russia from access to the island country's services in fields of management consulting, accounting and PR, the UK Foreign Office said.

WESTERN MILITARY SUPPORT TO UKRAINE

* More than 90% of the 90 howitzers that were pledged to Ukraine are actually in Ukrainian hands, a senior US Defense Department official said.

* The United States has seen no indications that any Western aid intended for Ukraine has been impeded, or even struck, a senior defense official said.

STATE OF US ECONOMY

* The Federal Reserve said on Wednesday it anticipated more rate hikes to bring US inflation target back to its target rate, after announcing a 50-basis point hike for the second US monetary tightening since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

* The US Federal Reserve could institute at least another two 50-basis point rate hikes at its upcoming meetings after approving on Wednesday the first increase of such a measure to clamp down on inflation, Chairman Jerome Powell said.

* US inflation has surprised over the past year and more surprises are possible unless the central bank acts appropriately and in advance to quell price pressures, Powell said.

* The US economy is strong and there is no indication the country is headed for a recession despite a slowdown in gross domestic product in the first quarter and higher interest rates imposed by the Federal Reserve, the Powell said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Says Wants to See Prolonged Ceasefire as Some Civilians Evacuated Azovstal- State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Wednesday that every time when a person utilizes a humanitarian corridor is a good thing, however, the United States wants to see a prolonged ceasefire in Ukraine.

Price's comment comes as some civilians were evacuated from the surrounded steel plant Azovstal plant in Mariupol while the Ukrainian troops and foreign mercenaries remain in the facility.

"Every time an individual is able to take advantage of humanitarian corridor or humanitarian pause to reach safety, that is a good thing," Price said. "What we want to see happen however is a prolonged humanitarian corridor, prolonged humanitarian access."

On Monday, the Donetsk People's Republic's territorial defense staff reported that 101 people were evacuated from the territory of the Azovstal plant in Mariupol to Bezymennoye.

The Russian Defense Ministry reported on Sunday that thanks to the initiative of Russian President Vladimir Putin, 80 civilians who were held by Ukrainian extremists were rescued from

the territory of Azovstal. Russia has consistently tried to open humanitarian corridors throughout the territories in Ukraine affected by its special operation.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Believes Future of Western Balkans Lies 'Squarely' With EU - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that the future of what it calls the Western Balkans, including the future of Macedonia and Albania, is "squarely" with the European Union, US State Department Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"The United States has long been a strong supporter of North Macedonia and Albania's integration into the EU. We believe the future of the Western Balkans is squarely with the EU. The enlargement process promotes long term peace, stability, prosperity throughout the region," Price said during a press briefing.

The United States sees the European Union's March 2020 decision to open accession negotiations with Macedonia and Albania as a positive step, Price added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Backs EU Proposal to Ban Russian Oil But Up to Bloc to Finalize Move - White House

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States supports the European Union's proposal to ban Russian oil but it is up to the bloc to finalize the move, White House spokesperson told reporters on Wednesday.

"We, of course broadly support Europe's efforts to deny Putin revenue... with the EU's new proposal, but it will be up to them to finalize," Psaki said during a press briefing.

The United States understands that circumstances are different for many countries in Europe, Psaki said.

Psaki said the United States will continue to engage with countries to diversify their energy supplies but she doesn't have any specific diplomatic engagement to readout on this matter.

On Wednesday, European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen announced the sixth package of anti-Russia sanctions, targeting Sberbank and three big Russian state-owned broadcasters as well as high-ranking military and individuals involved in the operation in Ukraine.

The package also includes a gradual oil embargo. Some European countries that heavily depend on the Russian oil, such as Hungary and Slovakia, have already obtained an exemption from the embargo.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Supports Federal Reserve's Decision to Recalibrate Interest Rates - White House

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden supports the Federal Reserve's decision to raise interest rates in an effort to rein in inflation in the United States, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.

"The President has said in the past that it's appropriate and he supports their decision to recalibrate, so that remains his view today," Psaki said during a press briefing when asked about the rate hike.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Federal Reserve announced a 50-basis point, or a half-percentage point, interest rate raise in the second US monetary tightening since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic two years ago.

Inflation stayed under the Federal Reserve's 2% target range for years before the COVID-19 upended US supply chains and spurred heavy government spending.

Inflation, measured by various gauges, is 8.5% at present although some economists say it is probably double that number. The 50-basis point hike by the Federal Reserve is the highest in more than 20 years, with the central bank saying it will keep up with monetary tightening through 2023 if necessary to bring inflation back to its 2% target.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Fed Hikes US Rates by Most in 20 Years, Says Economy Nowhere Near Recession

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve on Wednesday raised US interest rates by their most in 20 years, saying the economy was strong and unlikely to slip into recession even with a couple more rate hikes of such magnitude to beat the worst inflation since the 1980s.

"It's a strong economy, nothing about it suggests that it's close to or vulnerable to a recession," Powell told reporters after chairing the Fed's monthly policy meeting, where the central bank approved its first 50-basis, or half-percentage, point rate hike since 2000 and indicated at least two more increases of such nature in its upcoming meetings. "I think we have a good chance to restore price stability without a recession."

US gross domestic product contracted by 1.4% over the first three months of the year. If there's negative growth in the second quarter as well, the United States would technically be in recession.

Powell, however, averted discussion on the technical definition for a recession, citing instead the inherent strength of the economy, particularly a jobs market hovering at full employment and seeing record demand for labor month after month since rebounding from the depths of the 2020 coronavirus crisis.

"I think we have a good chance to restore price stability without a recession, without a severe downturn and without materially higher unemployment," he said. "I see a very strong labor market for example. Businesses can't find the people to hire. They can't find them. Typically in a recession you would have unemployment. Now you have surplus demand."

Joblessness among Americans reached a record high of 14.8% in April 2020, with the loss of some 20 million jobs in the aftermath of the coronavirus breakout.

Jobs recovery has, however, been stellar over the past year, with the unemployment rate moving down to 3.6% at the end of March. A jobless rate of 4.0% or below is regarded by the Federal Reserve as maximum employment.

Powell said that the Fed will keep up with monetary tightening through 2023, if necessary, to bring inflation back to its annual target of 2%. Inflation, measured by various gauges, is as high as 8.5% now.

"Inflation has obviously surprised the upside over the past year, and further surprises could be in store," the Fed chair said, adding that the central bank had to act appropriately and in advance to quell price pressures. "We therefore will need to be nimble in responding to incoming data and the evolving outlook."

Aside from a sterling job market, the economy was supported by strong household and business balance sheets, Powell said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Would Respect Pope's Possible Decision to Hold Talks With Putin - White House

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden would respect Pope Francis' possible decision to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.

"I have not discussed that with him, but I would suspect that he would respect the decision of the Pope to make any travel or engagements that he so chooses," Psaki said during a press briefing when asked about the possible meeting between Putin and the Pope.

Earlier this week, the Pope said in an interview with the Corriere della Sera that he is ready to meet with Putin in Moscow to help with the settlement of the Ukraine conflict. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said there are currently no agreements for such a meeting.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

White House Says Date of Biden's Trip to Israel Not Scheduled Yet

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The date of US President Joe Biden's planned trip to Israel has not been scheduled yet, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.

"We haven't quite locked in the date yet, and so I don't have any further detail at this point," Psaki said during a press briefing when asked if Biden will visit Israel during his trip to the Middle East in June.

On Tuesday, Axios reported citing Israeli officials that the Biden administration is considering holding a regional leaders' summit during the US president's trip to the Middle East in late June. In April, the White House said Biden had accepted Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's invitation to visit Israel.

During a meeting at the White House last week, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and his Israeli counterpart Eyal Hulata raised the possibility of holding a regional summit as part of Biden's upcoming trip to the Middle East.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Tears, Hugs as US Crew Hands Over ISS Command to Russian Cosmonaut - NASA

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US astronauts and Russian cosmonauts cried and hugged each other as returning commander Tom Marshburn handed over formal command of the International Space Station to Roscosmos Flight Engineer Oleg Artemyev on Wednesday. "Oleg, I know we'll be leaving the space station in good hands with you," Marshburn said. "I relinquish control of the space station to you."

Marshburn is scheduled to return to earth on Thursday on the SpaceX Dragon Endurance with his NASA crew mates Raja Chari, Kayla Barron and European Space Agency (ESA) astronaut Matthias Maurer from Germany, ending a mission that began in November 2021, the US space agency said.

Artemyev, too, paid tribute to his colleagues.

"It was an unbelievable time together, brothers, sister for me, Sergey (Korsakov) and Denis (Matveev). Peace between our countries. Thank you for friendship," he said.

Artemyev will lead Expedition 67 until returning in late summer this year. The four departing US and European astronauts are due to splash down in the Atlantic Ocean off Florida. They have already been replaced by NASA astronauts Kjell Lindren, Bob Hines and Jessica Watkins with Samantha Cristoforetti from the ESA.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken Tests Positive for COVID-19 - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has tested positive for the novel coronavirus, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken tested positive for COVID-19 this afternoon via a PCR test," Price said in a statement. "The Secretary has not seen President Biden in person for several days, and the President is not considered a close contact according to guidelines by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Price noted that Blinken has been fully vaccinated and boosted and is experiencing only mild symptoms and added that the Secretary of State will isolate at home and will work virtually.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Economy Strong, Nothing Suggests It's Close to or Vulnerable to Recession - Fed Chief

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The US economy is strong and there is no indication the country is headed for a recession despite a slowdown in gross domestic product in the first quarter and higher interest rates imposed by the Federal Reserve, the central bank's chairman Jerome Powell said Wednesday.

"It's a strong economy; nothing about it suggests that it's close to or vulnerable to a recession," Powell told reporters after chairing the Fed's monthly policy meeting, where the central bank approved its first 50-basis point rate hike in more than two decades and indicated at least two more increases of such nature in its upcoming meetings.

"I think we have a good chance to restore price stability without a recession," Powell added. US GDP contracted 1.4% over the first three months of the year. If there's negative growth in the second quarter as well, the United States would automatically be in recession. The Fed has said that it will keep up with monetary tightening through 2023 if necessary to bring inflation back to its annual target of 2%. Inflation, measured by various gauges, is as high as 8.5% now.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Guterres Says No Solution to Food Crisis Without Ukraine, Russia, Belarus Back in Markets

UNITED NATIONS, May 4 (Sputnik) - There is no true solution to the global food security crisis without bringing Ukraine, Russia and Belarus back into world markets, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday.

"There is really no true solution to the problem of global food security without bringing back the agricultural production of Ukraine and the food and fertilizer production of Russia and Belarus into world markets, despite the war. I am determined to do everything to facilitate a dialogue that can help achieve this objective," he said during a press conference with Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari.

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Russia and Ukraine were among the top global exporters of various types of staple foods, including wheat and corn, in 2021, while Russia was also the leading exporter of nitrogen fertilizers, the second major supplier of potassium fertilizers and the third largest supplier of phosphorous fertilizers.

The organization has noted that Ukraine's food production is threatened by factors like disruption of logistics, loss of access to agricultural lands, labor shortages, damage to crops due to hostilities, and destruction of food system assets and infrastructure.

Meanwhile, the Western sanctions on Russia have undermined the latter's sales of agricultural products abroad and prompted Moscow to retaliate by freezing fertilizer exports. As a result, the global food prices hit the highest ever levels in March, while the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned earlier in April that global food prices will likely rise further in the future due to the conflict in Ukraine, sanctions against Russia and Belarus, as well as climate issues.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Inflation Has Surprised Over Past Year, Further Surprises Possible - Fed Chair

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US inflation has surprised over the past year and more surprises are possible unless the central bank acts appropriately and in advance to quell price pressures, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said Wednesday.

"Making appropriate monetary policy in this uncertain environment requires a recognition that the economy often evolves in unexpected ways, inflation has obviously surprised the upside over the past year, and further surprises could be in store," Powell told a news conference held after the central bank's monthly policy meeting. "We therefore will need to be nimble in responding to incoming data and the evolving outlook."

Powell also said the Fed could institute at least another two 50-basis point rate hikes at its upcoming meetings after approving on Wednesday the first increase of such a measure to clamp down on inflation. Inflation, measured by various gauges, is as high as 8.5% now. The 50-basis point hike by the Fed is the highest in more than 20 years and the central bank has said it will keep up with monetary tightening through 2023 if necessary to bring inflation back to its 2% target for a year.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Powell Expects 50-Basis Point US Rate Hikes on Table at Next Two FOMC Meetings

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Reserve could institute at least another two 50-basis point rate hikes at its upcoming meetings after approving on Wednesday the first increase of such a measure to clamp down on inflation, Chairman Jerome Powell said.

"There is a broad sense in the FOMC that additional 50 basis point increases should be on the table at the next couple of meetings," Powell told a news conference.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) of the Fed announced a half-percentage point hike in the second US monetary tightening since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Federal Reserve Says Ongoing Increases In US Rate Hikes Will Be "Appropriate"

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve said on Wednesday it anticipated more rate hikes to bring US inflation target back to its target rate, after announcing a 50-basis point hike for the second US monetary tightening since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

"With appropriate firming in the stance of monetary policy, the Committee expects inflation to return to its 2 percent objective and the labor market to remain strong," the central bank's Federal Open Market Committee said in a statement. "In support of these goals, the Committee decided to raise the target range for the federal funds rate to 3/4 to 1 percent and anticipates that ongoing increases in the target range will be appropriate."

The Fed had inflation at under its 2% target range for years before it got out of control with the advent of the COVID-19 that upended US supply chains, sending prices of oil, metals, grains and other raw materials soaring. Inflation, measured by various gauges, is as high as 8.5% now. The 50-basis point hike by the Fed is the highest in more than 20 years and the central bank has said it will keep up with monetary tightening through 2023 if necessary to bring inflation back to its 2% target.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Repairman of Hunter Biden Laptop Files Defamation Lawsuits Against CNN, Politico - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The repairman of Hunter Biden's laptop filed lawsuits against corporate media outlets CNN, Politico and The Daily Beast as well as US Congressman Adam Schiff for purposely and wrongly accusing him of spreading Russian disinformation.

"After fighting to reveal the truth, all I want now is for the rest of the country to know that there was a collective and orchestrated effort by social and mainstream media to block a real story with real consequences for the nation," John Paul Mac Isaac, a computer repairman in the US state of Delaware, told the New York Post.

Isaac told Fox News his life was ruined after his name was leaked to the public and he was painted as being part of an alleged Russian disinformation campaign.

Hunter Biden abandoned his laptop at Isaac's repair shop in 2019, while his father Joe Biden was running to become a US president, the contents of which were later made public.

Several US intelligence officials, including Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and former CIA Directors Mike Hayden, Leon Panetta and John Brennan signed a letter expressing suspicions that emails recovered from the laptop belonging to Hunter Biden were part of a Russian disinformation operation.

The emails were confirmed as legitimate by The New York Times in March 2022.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Federal Reserve Raises Rates by 50 Basis Points in Second Pandemic-Era Interest Rate Hike

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve announced on Wednesday a 50-basis point, or a half-percentage point, interest rate hike in the second US monetary tightening since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic two years ago.

"The Committee decided to raise the target range for the federal funds rate to 3/4 to 1 percent and anticipates that ongoing increases in the target range will be appropriate," the central bank's Federal Open Market Committee, or FOMC, said in a statement.

In March, the FOMC raised the interest rate to between at 0.25 to 0.50 percentage points.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Coca-Cola May Completely Exit Russia If Ukraine Crisis Becomes Protracted - CEO

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - Soft drink manufacturer Coca-Cola may discontinue business in Russia if the special military operation in Ukraine continues for too long, CEO James Quincey said on Wednesday.

Coca-Cola's business in Russia could "disappear completely at some point" if the conflict in Ukraine becomes protracted, Quincey said during an interview at the Wall Street Journal's CEO Council Summit.

Coca-Cola has been criticized for not suspending business in Russia sooner in response to Moscow launching the special military operation in late February, Quincey questioned whether such moves have any decisive influence.

Coca-Cola's Competitor PepsiCo in March announced it would suspend the sale of its soft drink products in Russia. However, the company also said it has a responsibility to continue to offer its other products on the Russian market, including milk and baby food.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Families of Detained Americans Overseas Gather to Urge Biden to Negotiate Their Release

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - About a dozen family members of Americans detained in Iran, Russia, Venezuela and other countries, gathered in front of the White House on Wednesday to urge the Biden administration to do more to negotiate their release.

"Today, what I came to say for my family is we need action from the president and we're here asking for a meeting with him so we can talk about this hardship," Alexandra Zambrano, whose father and uncle are part of the group of CITGO executives detained in Venezuela, said.

In early March, the Venezuelan authorities released US citizens Jorge Fernandez and Gustavo Cardenas, who was one of six CITGO executives arrested in Venezuela in 2017.

Elizabeth Whelan, sister of Paul Whelan, who is serving a 16-year sentence in Russia for espionage, said there are more than 55 Americans detained in about 18 countries. She added that the United States needs to establish a more robust solution to address the problem of the Americans detained abroad.

The family members of Americans detained in Iran, Emad Shargi, Morad Tahbaz, and US legal permanent resident Shahab Dalili, also participated in the demonstration to pressure the Biden administration to negotiate their release.

The family members urged foreign governments not to use their imprisoned family members as a political tool to get concessions from the United States.

Joey Reed, father of Trevor Reed, who was recently part of a prisoner exchange with Russia, said keeping these stories in the news will pressure the White House to do more to negotiate the release of detained Americans overseas.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Sees No Indication Belarus Intends to Get Involved in Ukraine - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States has seen no indication that Belarus intends to get involved in Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, a senior Defense Department official said on Wednesday.

"We have seen no indication that Belarus has shown an intention to involve themselves in Ukraine," the official said during a press briefing.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Belarus Defense Ministry announced a sudden inspection of its army's response capabilities. The Defense Ministry said the purpose of the inspection is to assess the readiness and ability of personnel to quickly respond to the possible emergence of crisis situations.

With regard to the Defense Ministry announcement, the official said the US Defense Department has no information about the exercise or which units are engaged in it.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure with the goal of demilitarizing and de-Nazifying the country.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Kerry Traveling to Norway, UK for Climate Talks – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration's special envoy for climate, John Kerry, is heading to Norway and the United Kingdom for talks with government counterparts, the State Department said Wednesday.

"John Kerry will travel to Oslo from May 6-7 and London from May 8-11 to engage with government counterparts to accelerate cooperation to address the climate crisis, including ocean-climate linkages such as green shipping, conserving and restoring forests, reducing global methane emissions, and scaling up private sector finance for climate action across energy, land, and other sectors," the press release said.

Kerry will meet with representatives from the Sustainable Markets Initiative, the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero and emissaries from the business and finance sectors, and government officials in both countries.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Sherman Discusses Climate, Security Issues With South African Ministers - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman discussed climate and regional and global security issues during a meeting with South African ministers in Pretoria on Wednesday, the State Department said.

"Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman had warm and productive meetings with South African Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Naledi Pandor and Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Alvin Botes today in Pretoria," the press release said.

"Sherman and Minister Pandor discussed the importance of the U.S.-South Africa partnership and shared priorities including health, climate, and regional and global peace and security."

Sherman also met and conferred with Trudi Makhaya, economic advisor to President Cyril Ramaphosa. They discussed the burgeoning partnership between the two countries, including investment, trade and infrastructure, according to the department.

Sherman also expressed condolences for the lives lost and considerable destruction caused by heavy rains, severe flooding and landslides which killed 435 people in KwaZulu-Natal in April.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Crude Reserves at 20-Year Low Amid Drawdowns to Feed Supply-Starved Market - EIA Data

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The stockpile of the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR), which stores the nation's emergency oil supplies, is down to its lowest level in 20 years as the

Biden administration continuously makes withdrawals to feed a supply-starved market, Energy Information Administration (EIA) data revealed on Wednesday.

SPR inventories stood at 550 million barrels as of the week that ended on April 29, after a withdrawal of 3.1 million barrels during the week, the EIA's Weekly Petroleum Status Report showed. Historical EIA data also showed the stockpile level to be at its lowest since December 2001.

The Biden administration has taken 3 million barrels on average out of the SPR every week over the past two months to help meet domestic refiners' demand for crude in a market seeing a surfeit in fuel consumption amid the economic recovery from the two-year long coronavirus pandemic. Western sanctions on Russia, which have impeded supply from one of the world's largest oil producers, have added to the supply tightness in oil.

"The SPR stock situation is likely to continue dropping in the foreseeable future unless the global supply situation for oil gets better," John Kilduff, a partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, said.

President Joe Biden authorized his first major SPR withdrawal in November as oil supplies began tightening amid rapid recovery in demand and the global growth that pushed up both crude and fuel prices. The Biden administration's biggest SPR releases will commence from this month when it issues a total of 180 million barrels from the reserve. Another 60 million barrels are due to be released into the world market in May by US allies and member countries in the International Energy Agency.

Tight oil supplies pushed the global price of crude to 14-year highs of almost \$140 per barrel in March and the pump price of US gasoline to a record high of above \$4.30 a gallon. In Wednesday's trade, the London-traded Brent crude, which serves as the global benchmark for oil, hovered at \$108 a barrel while gasoline retailed at \$4.23 per gallon on average at the pump across the United States.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Pentagon Trained Over 23,000 Ukrainian Armed Forces Since 2015 - US General

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States has trained over 23,000 of Ukraine's armed forces between 2015 and January 2022, US Brig. Gen. Joseph Hilbert said on Wednesday.

"Since the beginning of that mission [the Joint Multinational Training Group Ukraine] up until January 2022, we have trained a total of 23,000 plus armed forces of Ukraine soldiers from 17 Different battalions and 11 different brigades. They participated in training there at the Combat Training Center Yavoriv," Hilbert said during a press briefing.

Since the beginning of that mission in 2015, the Pentagon invested \$126 million into the training of Ukrainian military personnel, Hilbert added.

The United States is currently training the second group of about 50 Ukrainian military trainers on how to operate howitzers, radars and armored vehicles pledged by the United States to Kiev

amid Moscow's special military operation in the country. The training sessions are taking place in a number of locations outside of Ukraine.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Hosts Team USA at White House Following Olympic, Paralympic Games in Tokyo, Beijing

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden hosted at the White House several hundred US Olympic and Paralympic athletes and praised them and their performance during the most recent summer and winter Olympic games in Tokyo and Beijing.

The athletes helped unite the nation due to common pride in Team USA and regardless of existing divisions, Biden said in remarks during the gathering.

US bobsledding medal winner Elana Meyers Taylor also spoke briefly at the event. Taylor was selected to serve as US flag bearer for the 2022 Olympic team but was unable to attend because she contracted the novel coronavirus.

Taylor and several other athletes presented Biden, First Lady Jill Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff with Team USA apparel.

The United States at the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo - held in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic - won the first place by earning a total of 113 medals. Team USA also won 104 medals during the 2020 Paralympic Games.

In addition, Team USA won a total of 25 medals at the 2022 Winter Olympics and 20 medals at the 2022 Winter Paralympics, both held in Beijing.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UN Says Talks Ongoing With Ukraine, Russia, Red Cross on Mariupol Evacuation

UNITED NATIONS, May 4 (Sputnik) - The talks are ongoing with Ukrainian, Russian authorities, as well as the Red Cross on the evacuation in Mariupol, UN Spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Wednesday.

"Discussions are going on with Ukrainian, Russian authorities, the Red Cross... discussions involved Mariupol and Mariupol area," he said when asked about evacuations.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Will Respond Strongly to Nations Devaluing Currencies to Gain Trade Benefits - Yellen

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is ready to respond strongly to attempts by other nations to devalue their currencies for the sake of trade advantages, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Wednesday.

"I believe in market-based value for the dollar," Yellen stated. "When countries are taking actions designed to purposely push their currencies down to gain an unfair vis-à-vis the United States, the United States is prepared to respond strongly to purposeful attempts of other countries to devalue their currencies."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Yellen Says US Decision to Sanction Russia's Central Bank Not Taken Lightly

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's decision to sanction Russia's central bank was not one that was taken lightly, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Wednesday.

"We have only rarely, I believe in the case of Iran and North Korea, imposed sanctions on a country's central bank, and the decision to do that to Russia is not one that was undertaken lightly," Yellen said during a virtual panel discussion organized by the Wall Street Journal.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

EU's Move to Cut Off Russian Oil Imports Could Lead to Higher Global Oil Prices - Yellen

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The European Union's plans to cut off Russian oil imports could result in higher global oil prices, but the United States is determined to work with Europe on ensuring needed supplies, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Wednesday.

"We need to see the conditions exactly how this is going to be accomplished because it could lead to higher global oil prices as well," Yellen said. "We clearly want to work with Europe to make sure that they have the energy supplies that are needed."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Over 90% of 90 Howitzers Pledged by US Already in Ukrainian Hands - Defense Official

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - More than 90% of the 90 howitzers that were pledged to Ukraine are actually in Ukrainian hands, a senior US Defense Department official said on Wednesday.

"I can tell you that more than 90% of the 90 howitzers that were pledged to Ukraine in the last two presidential drawdown authorities are actually in Ukrainian hands," the official said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Pentagon Says No Indications That Any Western Aid for Ukraine Has Been Impeded

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States has seen no indications that any Western aid intended for Ukraine has been impeded, or even struck, a senior defense official said on Wednesday.

"We've seen no indications that any of this Western aid has been impeded, or even struck. We just don't have any evidence of that happening," the official told a briefing.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US to Rely on Cyber Operations, Space for Most of Its Intelligence Collection - NSA Chief

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The US intelligence community is going to increasingly rely upon cyber operations and space for most of its intelligence collection, National Security Agency (NSA) and Cyber Command head Gen. Paul Nakasone said on Wednesday.

"The nature of conflict is changing. We will rely on cyber operations and space for most of our intelligence collection," Nakasone told an intelligence gathering summit at Vanderbilt University. Nakasone explained that the US intelligence community needed to recruit an entire new generation of academics, linguists, technicians and cyber security experts to face the challenges ahead.

"We need a generation of experts, linguists in at least five languages - Chinese, Russian, Farsi, Korean and Arabic. ... We require insights and initiatives," Nakasone said.

Intelligence collection and analysis would also have to rely far more on machine learning, artificial intelligence and big data, he added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russia Could Not Attend UN Information Committee Meeting Due to US Visas - Deputy Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, May 4 (Sputnik) - The Russian delegation could not participate in the meeting of the UN Committee on Information because the US government was late in granting

the necessary visa to Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Russia's deputy envoy to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Wednesday.

"Because of the actions of the American side, participation in the session of the committee of the Russian delegation from the capital was actually disrupted," Polyanskiy said. "The head of our delegation, Director of the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, received a visa only yesterday afternoon. The other two experts do not have visas at all."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ransomware Groups Not Playing Significant Role in Russia's Ukraine Operation - US Official
WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - Criminal ransomware groups are not playing a significant role in aiding Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, US Deputy National Security Advisor for Cyber and Emerging Technology Anne Neuberger said on Wednesday.

"We're not seeing those criminal ransomware groups playing a significant role buttressing Russia's capabilities in and around the Russia-Ukraine conflict at this moment in time,"

Neuberger said during an interview at the Wall Street Journal's CEO Council Summit.

However, Neuberger said the United States has seen an integrated combination of physical and cyber strategies used by Russia in Ukraine.

The Biden administration is prepared to respond if Russia conducts disruptive cyber attacks on US critical infrastructure, Neuberger added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Says US Always Open to More Russia Sanctions, Will Speak to G7 This Week

WASHINGTON, May 4 (Sputnik) - The United States is always ready to impose more sanctions on Russia and will discuss next steps with G7 allies this week, President Joe Biden said on Wednesday.

"With regards to additional sanctions, we are always open to additional sanctions," Biden said.

"I'll be speaking with the members of the G7 this week about what we are going to do or not do."