

5/12/22 Thursday

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China's Zhurong Rover Finds Evidence of More Recent Water on Mars Than Previously Believed

China's Zhurong rover has been exploring Utopia Planitia, a vast dry seabed in Mars' northern hemisphere, since touching down in May 2021. The rover's mission includes analyzing the rocks and sediments to look for evidence of water - and perhaps also of life.

An analysis of Zhurong's first survey on Mars suggests that water still existed on the red planet long after it was believed to have dried up.

"The most significant and novel thing is that we found hydrated minerals at the landing site which stands on the young Amazonian terrain, and these hydrated minerals are (indicators) for the water activities such as (groundwater) activities," lead study author Yang Liu, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Sciences' State Key Laboratory of Space Weather and the academy's Center for Excellence in Comparative Planetology, [told CNN](#).

The layers of minerals suggest the planet has gone through several cycles of being wet and warm, and then dry and cold, rather than the slow, steady slide from Earth-like to seemingly barren.

The study was published in [Science Advances](#) on Wednesday.

It had previously been believed that Mars lost nearly all of its water and atmosphere about 3 billion years ago, during a period called the Hesperian period, which preceded the present Amazonian period. However, the evidence Zhurong found points to water activity in Utopia Planitia just 700 million years ago.

Moreover, the water seems to be locked inside the rock and soil, meaning not nearly as much of Mars' water was lost to space as previously believed. [Research published last year](#) by the California Institute of Technology and the US space agency NASA found that between 30% and 90% of Mars' original water is trapped in minerals in the crust.

"This is a very interesting result," Eva Scheller, a planetary scientist at CalTech who was lead author on the 2021 paper with NASA, [told Space.com about the recent](#) Chinese findings. "We have very few recorded evidences of 'young' liquid water systems on Mars. And for the ones we have, they were usually in the form of salt minerals."

Additional water exists in [Mars' polar ice caps](#), alongside solidified carbon dioxide.

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Meteorologists Warn 'Megadrought' in US Southwest is Worst in 1,200 Years

A new study has found that the 22-year-long water shortage plaguing the American Southwest and western Mexico is the region's worst in more than a millennium - a phenomenon dubbed a "megadrought."

The study, published in [Nature Climate Change](#), found that soil moisture deprivation has exceeded that of a megadrought [in the 16th century](#) that was previously the region's worst known drought.

It's so bad that University of California Los Angeles geographer Park Williams, the study's lead author, has warned it would take a prolonged shift in weather patterns to remedy things.

"It's extremely unlikely that this drought can be ended in one wet year," he said in a Columbia Climate School [news release](#).

The researchers looked at tree rings to compare the present drought's intensity with those of years past, since trees generally produce wider rings in wet years and narrower rings in drier years. They found that since 2000, the average soil moisture deficit was twice that of any drought of the past century, with nothing comparable being found until 1,200 years back.

That drought, in the 9th century CE, is [blamed for causing](#) the collapse of the Classical Maya civilization, responsible for the great stone cities of Tikal and Chichen Itza, the ruins of which are popular tourist sites today.

The region has always been quite dry, of course, with four large deserts dominating the terrain and the rest being fairly arid. Indigenous civilization was well-adapted to the precarious conditions, but modern cities have been built without respect to climate - and may soon suffer the consequences.

Reservoirs created by hydroelectric dams, like the famous Hoover Dam outside Las Vegas, Nevada, that holds back Lake Mead, are reaching historic lows. The lake provides the City That Never Sleeps with its freshwater, but has suffered steady water loss since 1983, which has accelerated in recent years, requiring modifications to Hoover Dam's turbines to allow it to continue producing electricity despite the low water level.

Recently, objects long believed hidden below the lake's surface [have begun to emerge](#), ranging from the source pipe that brings fresh water to Las Vegas to barrels containing dead bodies believed to have been killed by gangsters.

Lake Powell, which is upriver on the Colorado River from Lake Mead and is held back by the Glen Canyon Dam, is in even more dire straits. Cities like Scottsdale and Tucson, which source water from the reservoir, have already begun the process of [implementing "drought plans"](#) and Phoenix, the fifth-largest city in the United States, is expected to start one next year.

Arizona Water Resources Director Tom Buschatzke warned in a [Sunday op-ed in Arizona Central](#) that further conservation demands might be made, but said the situation is not immediately dire.

However, drier conditions also increase the danger of wildfires like those that have ravaged drought-stricken California in recent years. In New Mexico, the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire has been driven by strong winds and dry conditions to [consume nearly 200,000 acres](#). More than 1,800 firefighters and support personnel are trying to tame the blaze.

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Rwandan Genocidaire Protais Mpiranya Confirmed to Have Died in Zimbabwe in 2006

The fate of one of the central figures of the Rwandan Genocide has finally been ascertained: according to United Nations investigators, Protais Mpiranya has been dead since 2006, his body lying in a Harare grave under a false name.

Serge Brammertz, the UN prosecutor who led the 20-year manhunt, [told The Guardian](#) that finding Mpiranya's body "provides the solace of knowing that he cannot cause further harm." Mpiranya was [indicted in 2002](#) by the UN's International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, a court established in Tanzania by the UN Security Council in the wake of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide to prosecute and judge those responsible for the mass killings. He was charged with genocide, conspiracy to commit genocide, complicity in genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

As commander of the Rwandan presidential guard at the time of the genocide, Mpiranya, an ethnic Hutu, played a central role in many of the targeted killings, including the assassination of Rwandan Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana and Information Minister Faustin Rucogoza, and the capture, torture and execution of 10 Belgian peacekeeper soldiers from the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR).

The massacre of ethnic Tutsis by the Hutu government and its allies [began following the downing](#) of then-Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana's aircraft, killing him and Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira, also a Hutu, on April 6, 1994. The party responsible for shooting down the passenger jet was never determined, but Hutu extremists blamed Tutsi rebels, as well as moderate Hutu leaders who had recently signed a peace treaty with the Tutsis to end a civil war.

During the years of Belgian colonial rule, a divide-and-conquer policy was used to turn the Hutus and Tutsis against each other by claiming that the Hutus were indigenous to the region and that the Tutsis were invaders who sought to displace them. This created an atmosphere of suspicion and hatred that drove several conflicts in the region, including in neighboring Burundi, and would indirectly spark the Congo Wars to Rwanda's west.

Within hours of Habyarimana's death, leaders of the radical Hutu Power movement began assassinating Tutsi leaders and moderate Hutus using "kill lists" already drawn up by Mpiranya and others, and soldiers and police established checkpoints the next day and conducted sweeps to check people's national ID cards, which indicated the bearer's ethnicity. Those who were Tutsi were executed. Later, gangs and mobs were organized and set upon the local population.

By July 1994, up to 1.1 million people, including 800,000 Tutsis, or two-thirds of all Rwandan Tutsis, had been killed, along with one-third of the 30,000-strong Twa people. Only the steady advance of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a Tutsi militant group, and its capture of the capital of Kigali ended the killings.

In May 2021, French President [Emmanuel Macron met in Kigali](#) with Rwandan President Paul Kagame, who led the RPF at the time of the genocide, but did not apologize for France's

support for the Rwandan government at the start of the genocide. Macron did acknowledge “the magnitude of our responsibilities.”

Mpiranya fled south ahead of the RPF victory, seeking refuge in Zimbabwe, where he became a vital consultant for President Robert Mugabe after the Second Congo War broke out in 1998. In that conflict, [also called “Africa’s World War.”](#) Zimbabwe was among the nations that rallied to the defense of Congolese President Laurent-Desire Kabila and his Hutu allies. Arrayed against them were Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and a series of allied militias aiming to destroy the Hutu power base in the eastern Congo, into which they had retreated after the RPF victory and begun launching attacks into surrounding areas.

“That the Zimbabweans, at least elements of the authorities, knew he was in Harare is obvious,” a senior official involved in the investigation told the Guardian. “He was even seen meeting with Zimbabwean officials. Of course, he was trying to hide his identity from the public, but the entire reason he went to Zimbabwe is because of his relationships there.”

According to UN investigators, Mpiranya lived in Zimbabwe under a fake name until his death in 2006, caused by a heart attack brought on by tuberculosis. He was 50 years old. His grave was overgrown and he was buried under that fake name.

As early as 2012, Rwandan daily [The New Times reported](#) that the ICTR “had always believed” Mpiranya was hiding in Zimbabwe, noting the Belgian government was the first to make the accusations a year prior.

After they tracked his grave down using a critical lead found on a confiscated computer that included a hand-drawn design for Mpiranya’s tombstone, his body was exhumed and DNA tested. The results were unmistakable: it was him.

Theoneste Bagosora, who was the Rwandan defense minister at the time of the genocide and its supreme architect, [died last year in a Malian prison](#). Bagosora was serving a 35-year sentence after being found guilty of crimes against humanity.

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US Army Considering Replacing Stryker Brigade in Alaska With Revived 11th Airborne Division

The US Army’s top civilian official said recently that the Army could soon switch out a Stryker armored unit in Alaska for a second airborne infantry brigade, joining it with one already in the northerly state to reform the 11th Airborne Division after a 57-year hiatus.

“We are looking at potentially taking the Strykers out of Alaska,” Secretary of the Army Christine [Wormouth told the Senate](#) Appropriations Committee last week. “We have not made a final decision about that, but if we do that, we will basically take them and look at the ones that we can reuse elsewhere or basically use for parts.”

Wormouth told the Senate committee that the Army was “looking at reflagging the US Army Alaska Headquarters as the 11th Airborne Division, which is a division that was disestablished but has a very storied lineage.”

This, she noted, might help combat the [recent uptick in suicides](#) at US Army Alaska because “some of the soldiers there don’t feel like they have a sense of identity or purpose around why they’re stationed there.”

During a visit earlier this year to Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, a massive base in Anchorage, Alaska, that is home to both Air Force and Army forces, Wormuth said that winter combat training was more important than ever for US soldiers.

“I think right now the purpose of Army forces in Alaska is much more about creating an extreme cold weather capable formation” that could be used in Europe or the Indo-Pacific, Wormuth told [the Associated Press](#) during the visit.

“We’re trying to get to a place where we have Arctic capable forces - forces that can survive and operate in that environment,” she added.

Infantry in Alaska are expected to one day be armed with Cold-Weather All-Terrain Vehicles (CATV), a tracked vehicle [designed for snowy climates](#) that the Army is still evaluating candidates for. The winner is expected to be chosen by June, [Breaking Defense reported](#). The Army released its first-ever Arctic strategy report, titled [“Regaining Arctic Dominance,”](#) in January 2021, closely on the heels of the [Navy’s own strategy report](#). The Army report notes that as climate change melts Arctic sea ice and thaws permafrost ground, new areas of economic and political competition will open up, which the US wants to ensure Russia and China don’t dominate - by dominating them itself.

“The Arctic has the potential to become a contested space where United States’ great power rivals, Russia and China, seek to use military and economic power to gain and maintain access to the region at the expense of US interests,” the report says.

“US National Security Strategy (NDS) highlights the Arctic as a corridor for expanded strategic great power competition between two regions - the Indo-Pacific and Europe,” it continues. “The NDS identifies the erosion of the Joint Force’s competitive edge against China and Russia as a central problem the Department must prioritize while maintaining a favorable balance of power between the two theaters.”

As part of that, the US Coast Guard has also suggested [it might perform Arctic patrols](#) similar to the provocative “freedom of navigation operations” (FONOPS) the Navy uses to demonstrate its contempt for rival nations’ naval claims that Washington deems “excessive.”

The reports came in the wake of [a scathing indictment](#) of the US’ chaotic Arctic policy by Washington academics, which was described as having “no coherence.”

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Jan. 6 Panel Subpoenas GOP Leader McCarthy, Four Other Trump-Allied Congressmen
By - Evan Craighead

The House Select Committee probing the Jan. 6 insurrection is expected to begin public hearings on June 9, beginning with a broad review of its 10-month probe. The panel will likely focus on the conduct of then-President Donald Trump and GOP officials, including whether 45 and his allies pressured the DoJ to overturn the 2020 election results.

The Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the US Capitol [on Thursday announced the issuance of subpoenas](#) to House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) and four other Trump-allied US lawmakers who have previously refused the panel's request to voluntarily cooperate with the probe.

Reps. Jim Jordan (R-OH), Andy Biggs (R-AZ), Mo Brooks (R-AL), and Scott Perry (R-PA) were named alongside the House GOP leader.

The issuance marks the first time the 9-member panel has formally sought testimony from sitting members of Congress.

Both McCarthy and Brooks have been called to appear before the committee for their respective depositions on May 31, and Jordan has been called to testify on May 27. Their depositions will notably take place after both Perry and Biggs' testimonies on May 26.

Each GOP lawmaker subpoenaed on Thursday was [initially given the opportunity to voluntarily cooperate with the probe.](#)

"Regrettably, the individuals receiving subpoenas today have refused and we're forced to take this step to help ensure the committee uncovers facts concerning January 6th," Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-MS), chair of the House Select Committee investigating January 6, said in a quoted statement.

"We urge our colleagues to comply with the law, do their patriotic duty, and cooperate with our investigation as hundreds of other witnesses have done."

The committee noted that it is well aware that McCarthy was in contact with then-President Trump before, during, and after the deadly insurrection. The House GOP leader was also in constant contact with the White House in the days before and after January 6, 2021.

"Mr. McCarthy also claimed to have had a discussion with the President in the immediate aftermath of the attack during which President Trump admitted some culpability for the attack," read the panel's memo.

As for Jordan, the House Select Committee believes that his communications with Trump on January 6 are extremely relevant to the investigation, as well as reports that the US lawmaker, throughout late 2020 and early 2021, was involved in meetings and discussions on how to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.

Per the panel, Perry was "directly involved" with efforts to corrupt the US Department of Justice and install Jeffrey Clark as acting US attorney general. The lawmaker also had a number of communications with the White House around January 6, "including allegations that Dominion voting machines had been corrupted."

Former White House personnel have identified Biggs as someone who was potentially seeking a presidential pardon from Trump to clear himself of wrongdoing following efforts to convince state officials that the 2020 presidential election was stolen.

Biggs was also allegedly involved in plans to bring demonstrators to Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021, when Electoral College votes were being certified by the US Senate and then-Vice President Mike Pence.

Brooks, who spoke at Trump's rally on January 6, encouraged demonstrators to "start taking down names and kicking ass" and has publicly recounted conversations in which Trump urged him to "rescind the election of 2020" and reinstall Trump as head of state.

“The Select Committee also has evidence that Mr. Brooks’s staff met with members of Vice President Pence’s staff before January 6th and conveyed the view that the Vice President does not have authority to unilaterally refuse to count certified electoral votes,” the memo detailed. As of this article’s publication, the 9-member panel of seven Democrats and two Republicans has obtained relevant testimony from a plethora of individuals, including Trump White House special assistant [Cassidy Hutchinson](#), Ken Klukowski—who advised ex-DoJ official Jeffrey Clark—and Alexandra Preate, a press assistant for former White House strategist Steve Bannon, the sole individual to be brought up on federal charges related to the Jan. 6 insurrection.

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‘Communities Are Strapped’: Arizona Joins Texas in Busing Asylum Seekers From US-Mexico Border to DC

By - Evan Craighead

Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey (R) announced on Wednesday that the state has adopted a busing system to voluntarily transport asylum-seeking migrants from the southern US border to Washington, DC. The move, first implemented by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott (R), comes in response to the CDC’s decision to end Title 42.

Arizona’s first bus transporting asylum-seeking migrants arrived in Washington, DC, on Wednesday—two days after it departed from Yuma, Arizona, [according to the office of Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey](#).

C.J. Karamargin, Ducey’s director of communications, asserted that all 20 individuals who volunteered for the 2,500-mile (~4,000-kilometer) journey were accounted for on Wednesday and were met by non-governmental organizations “that can help them get to their ultimate destinations.”

Travelers were said to have come from Angola, Columbia, Haiti, Peru, Venezuela and Uzbekistan, and are set to be united with sponsors in Pennsylvania, Florida, New York, New Jersey, Virginia and Maine.

While it remains unclear how many asylum seekers will actually take advantage of the transportation system, Ducey’s government believes the decision is worth the extra cost. “It pales in comparison to the stress on local resources,” Karamargin said, noting that the Biden administration will receive a final bill for the associated busing costs. “Our communities are strapped.”

Arizona is presently capable of sending two to three buses a week, transporting up to 40 asylum-seekers on each. The total cost is dependent on the number of volunteers, the official pointed out.

In March, the federal government earmarked some \$150 million of the spending bill to be released to asylum-related nonprofits. A portion of the funds is intended to be used to arrange transportation for migrants needing transportation to their sponsors in the US.

Despite the federal funds in circulation, both Arizona and Texas have decided to accelerate the process. Ducey's effort is currently being funded by the Border Security Fund, coffers established in 2021 in partnership with the Arizona Legislature.

"To help local officials whose communities are being overwhelmed by hordes of illegal immigrants who are being dropped off by the administration, Texas is providing charter buses to send these illegal immigrants who have been dropped off by the Biden Administration to Washington, DC," Texas Gov. Greg Abbott announced last month during a news conference along the US-Mexico border.

Texas has assembled some 900 buses for its operation, per Texas Division of Emergency Management Chief Nim Kidd. Migrants "must volunteer to be transported and show documentation" from the Department of Homeland Security.

Like Abbott, Ducey argued this week that the federal government has overwhelmed the state, as asylum seekers "are taxing the resources, stretching the resources of nongovernmental organizations, community-based organizations."

"And this situation will only get worse if Title 42 is lifted," the Arizona governor said of the public health policy set to expire on May 23. "We decided to step up and help alleviate the burden on our NGOs and get these folks closer to where they ultimately want to be."

While it is unclear whether the Biden White House will actually pick up the bill for the border states' busing programs, the administration appears supportive of states assisting in the asylum process, despite viewing it as an "unnecessary" move in the case of the Texas state authorities.

"It's nice the state of Texas is helping them get to their final destination, as they await their outcome of their immigration proceedings and they're all in immigration proceedings," said White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki last month, responding to Texas' first bus.

However, "these actions are impacting people's jobs and the livelihoods of hardworking families in Texas and across the country," Psaki added.

As the US grapples with a [historic surge of migrant encounters at the US-Mexico border](#), the White House has announced it has begun moving US border personnel from northern to southern stations to assist with the influx. The DHS has acknowledged that the decision to not extend Title 42 could present "significant challenges" for the federal government.

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US, UK Hope to Streamline Future Spaceflight Endeavors in Landmark Commercial Partnership
By - Evan Craighead

The bilateral commercial spaceflight partnership comes ahead of the first satellite launch from the UK this summer. The space mission is expected to provide the MoD with an understanding of how the UK and its international partners can create a more capable, flexible, and cost-effective communication system.

US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and counterpart Grant Shapps, the UK's Secretary of State for Transport, have inked a landmark partnership agreeing to assist one another in future spaceflight endeavors.

Officials are hopeful that the joint effort will help produce cost-effective spaceflight operations, as well as streamline the entire process.

“The move will cut down red tape and the regulatory burden to operators resulting in greater efficiencies and a reduction in costs, resources and duplication while maintaining stringent safety standards,” per the memo.

The US-UK counterparts signed the agreement on May 11, and formally announced the partnership via news release on May 13.

“Commercial space travel is growing swiftly and it’s our responsibility to ensure that these innovations advance safely, encouraging them to develop in ways that benefit us all,” Buttigieg said in a quoted statement published by the UK.

Shapps also touted the positive impact of the “transformational partnership,” highlighting that the UK is already developing seven spaceports across the country, “injecting billions into our economy while offering high-skilled jobs.”

“As we look beyond the UK’s first planned spaceflight later this year, I look forward to seeing the innovations and opportunities skyrocket thanks to this collaboration,” said the UK Secretary of State for Transport, referring to the upcoming Prometheus-2 mission from Spaceport Cornwall in Newquay, England.

Prometheus-2, a collaboration between the UK and international partners such as the US National Reconnaissance Office, seeks to deliver two Cubesats to low Earth orbit (around 550 kilometers [342 miles] above the Earth) via Virgin Orbit’s two-stage orbital launch vehicle, LauncherOne.

The LauncherOne vehicle will be assisted by a modified Boeing 747 jet dubbed Cosmic Girl. It was revealed earlier this week that Cubesat 1 is set to include a laser detector, GPS receiver, and hyperspectral imager, allowing the miniature satellite to potentially find nearby objects or identify materials.

“The hyperspectral imager will capture multiple slivers of pictures over different wavelengths of light for higher definition images,” detailed the UK MoD in a [May 10 memo on the summer launch](#). “The GPS receiver confirms the precise time and position of the satellite over the area of the Earth to be photographed.”

As for Cubesat 2, the miniaturized satellite is equipped with two optical imaging cameras, a laser range finder, and a GPS receiver. One of its cameras will reportedly be fitted with a wide-angle lens to provide a 180-degree view of Earth’s surface, while the other camera will observe Cubesat 1, providing support for space situational awareness.

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Months Ahead of US Midterm Elections, Millions Are Being Shelled Out to Back Candidates
By - Ian DeMartino

At present, the Democrats narrowly control the US Senate, thanks to Vice President Kamala Harris' tie-breaking vote. Republicans hope to take control during the November elections, with the party out of the White House historically faring well during midterm elections.

Both the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC) are reserving millions of dollars in television time in preparation for the midterm elections in November. That is in addition to the hundreds of millions already announced by their respective Super PAC organizations.

The NRSC has earmarked \$53 million for advertising in key senatorial battles, [according to The Hill](#), with the first commercials set to air Friday in Arizona and North Carolina.

Some \$9.5 million is set to be spent by the NRSC in Georgia in an attempt to defeat Sen. Raphael Warnock, who will likely face NFL Hall of Famer Herschel Walker. Meanwhile, the Senate GOP will pour \$8 million into the race against Sen. Mark Kelly in Arizona, and another \$9 million will target Sen. Maggie Hassan in New Hampshire. The committee has also earmarked \$3 million to try and oust Catherine Cortez Masto in Nevada.

According to the latest [FiveThirtyEight tracked polls](#), Walker leads Warnock by ten points. Kelly is in a dead heat with his likely opponent, leading Mark Brnovich by two points, though that poll dates back to January.

Hassan is leading against three out of four possible Republican candidates but trails Chuck Morse by two points. In Nevada, Cortez Masto looks to be in a close race with Republican Adam Laxalt, trailing by one point.

Apart from the Arizona poll, all of the aforementioned polls were conducted in April.

The NRSC is also spending millions fighting for two Senate seats in North Carolina, where the Republican incumbents are retiring. Approximately \$9 million has been set aside to defend Sen. Ron Johnson in Wisconsin.

For its part, the DSCC plans to spend \$33 million in six states, focusing on the same states as the NRSC other than North Carolina, where they have not earmarked any money as of yet. But the money from the NRSC and DSCC represents only a fraction of what will be spent on the elections. The Republican Senate Leadership Fund PAC has designated \$141 million for the midterms and the Democratic Senate Majority PAC is planning to spend \$106 million in an attempt to maintain the Democrats' slim control of the Senate.

Currently, the Senate is split 50/50, with Vice President Kamala Harris being the deciding vote in the event of a tie.

Interestingly, the Senate Leadership Fund is spending money defending Sen. Lisa Murkowski in Alaska, who will be up against, among other candidates, the Trump-backed Kelly Tshibaka. Alaska switched to an [open-primary, ranked-choice voting system](#) in 2020 and this will be the first election that Alaskans will vote using the new system. The Republican Murkowski voted for conviction during former President Donald Trump's second impeachment trial, prompting Trump to find a candidate to back against her.

Figures have shown that 2018 was the [most expensive midterm](#) in history, exceeding \$5.7 billion in campaign and PAC spending.

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These New Google Glasses Create Subtitles For The Real World at Google I/O
By - Ian DeMartino

Google's I/O event is an annual developer conference where the tech giant announces upcoming projects and products.

At Google's I/O 2022 event, the tech giant showed off new "Augmented Reality" (AR) glasses that enable near-instant translation and transcription, displaying captions and allowing two people who speak different languages to communicate naturally.

The glasses were unveiled through a short video clip showing a Google employee speaking in English to a non-English speaker wearing what CEO Sundar Pichai called an early prototype of the glasses. In the video, the Google employee speaks English and the glasses translate the words into Spanish subtitles nearly instantaneously.

The video was simulated, so we do not know how fast the translation will be in the real world, or if the interface is final, but if it is anything like the video, it will be much easier to communicate with someone with a different native language than it is today.

"These AR capabilities are already useful on phones," Google CEO Sundar Pichai explained on stage, "and the magic will really come alive when you can use them in the real world without the technology getting in the way."

Prior to showing off the glasses, Google also announced that 24 new languages are being added to Google Translate, presumably the glasses will include those as well. They also demonstrated new AR capabilities for Google Scenes, including instant review star ratings when viewing products on a shelf. Google Scenes was not mentioned as a feature of the upcoming glasses, but it does showcase where Google may be headed in regards to AR.

No release window, price, or specifications was announced for the glasses. It is [arguable](#) if they are even true AR. Today, AR glasses use cameras and computer processors to place virtual objects inside the real world. For example, if a user places a virtual globe in their living room using AR, they should be able to walk around the globe and see other sides of it.

True consumer AR glasses have a bevy of obstacles to overcome before they are likely to become mainstream. They have short battery life, give off significant heat, which is uncomfortable while on your head, and has a small field of view.

Google's prototype glasses, in contrast to Google's 2014 attempt at AR, Google Glass, look indistinguishable from normal glasses and have no visible cameras. The subtitles also do not appear to move with the user's head to stay under the person speaking, instead, they display on the side of the glasses, implying that there is no actual interaction with the real world in these glasses.

Regardless of whether these glasses reach the bar set by AR enthusiasts of being "real augmented reality," the glasses could be a major step in that direction and stand in stark contrast to Meta, who [recently unveiled](#) the AR capabilities of its next high-end Virtual Reality headset Project Cambria. That headset blocks the user's view entirely, but enables AR through full-color passthrough, displaying the real world on its built-in display.

As part of the presentation, Google also revealed the Pixel 7 and 6a phones, the Pixel Watch, and 3D immersive views on Google Maps, among [other announcements](#).

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University of Florida Researchers Grow Plants in Moon Soil

By - Ian DeMartino

NASA plans to return to the moon sometime this decade, with the goal of setting up a permanent base on the lunar surface. But shipping supplies to the moon will be extremely expensive, leading scientists to search for alternative methods to feed earth's first space colonists.

Geologists from the University of Florida [have managed](#) to grow plants in soil gathered from the lunar surface.

The plant chosen is one you have undoubtedly seen, but may not have heard of: Thale Cress (*Arabidopsis thaliana*) a weed that often grows alongside roads, in cracks along walls, and even in parking garages. It was chosen because of its hardiness and because its genome has been fully sequenced and is well understood.

It's not likely a plant on the top of anyone's dinner menu, though parts of it are edible, it is related to plants not unfamiliar to dinner tables on earth. Thale Cress is the genetic cousin of cabbages, broccoli, and rapeseed.

The "soil" gathered from the moon is not actually soil at all but regolith, a rocky substance devoid of organic material that sits on top of bedrock. It may not technically be soil, but it is the closest thing we have on the moon.

Geologists at the University of Florida have been wanting to study the efficiency of lunar soil for growing plants for a while, but the soil is in short supply. Only 842 lbs (382 kg) of soil and rocks were brought back by the Apollo missions, which may sound like a lot, but it is all we have until we go back for more.

Because of this, the research team was denied by NASA twice in their requests to obtain some of the lunar regolith, but the third time ended up being a charm. NASA sent the team 12 grams of soil from three different Apollo missions: 11, 12 and 17.

This is likely because NASA's Project Artemis is set to return astronauts to the moon sometime this decade, with the eventual goal to build a permanent settlement on the lunar surface.

The results of the study, published Wednesday in *Communications Biology*, were promising. Researchers created four cultures for each of the three sites and a control group made out of volcanic ash from the earth, each culture received one gram of soil from their respective site. Within 48 to 60 hours, every plant began to germinate and grow, though to varying degrees of success. Unsurprisingly, the control group fared the best. The worst was Apollo 11's sample, which came from its landing site, the Sea of Tranquility. The second was Apollo 12's Ocean of the Storms and the best performing lunar sample was Apollo 17's, gathered from Taurus-Littrow. This is likely because of the geological age of each site. The Sea of Tranquility is the oldest and therefore has been exposed to the Sun's radiated rays for the longest amount of time.

Taurus-Littrow is the youngest, having been exposed to the surface relatively recently through a series of meteorite impacts.

The plants in all three lunar samples struggled. There are over 1000 genes out of the 30,000 genomes in Thale Cress that can be activated to help the plant grow in difficult conditions. Each sample activated hundreds of them. The Apollo 11 sample activated 465, the Apollo 12 sample activated 235, and the Apollo 17 sample activated 113 of the stress genomes. The plants also had visible signs of ill-health, including red and black marks on the leaves.

Still, they managed to grow, which is very encouraging. Geologist and study co-author Stephen Elardo explained what future lunar colonists would be able to do to help the plants thrive in a permanent settlement. "What we could simply do in the absence of other constraining factors, is land and establish a habitat on a lunar surface that is significantly younger than the Apollo 11, 12, and 17 sites."

This is not the first time scientists have studied Thale Cress in relation to space. It was used by NASA to study [plant growth in zero gravity](#) on the International Space Station. Those plants had the benefit of specialized growth units, rather than radiated regolith, but they apparently adapted quite well.

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Laguna Niguel Fire Under Investigation as Colorado and New Mexico Battle Blazes Amid Megadrought
By - Mary Manley

Laguna Niguel's brush fire was first reported in Aliso Woods Canyon on Wednesday at 2:44 p.m. local time. That fire then spread to other parts of Laguna Niguel, an upscale city in Orange County, California. The coastal city is situated between Los Angeles and San Diego, and boasts multimillion-dollar mansions, wineries, and golf courses.

Authorities working to contain California's [Laguna Niguel fire](#) were recently forced to double down on their efforts as strong winds and humid conditions provided fuel and helped the blaze expand to more than 200 acres.

According to Orange County Fire Authority Assistant Chief of Field Operations TJ McGovern, the growing fire has destroyed at least 20 homes.

The Orange County Fire Authority (OCFA) as well as the Laguna Beach Fire Department both hastened to fight the deadly blaze even as it engulfed entire homes. At least one firefighter was injured and subsequently hospitalized, and 900 homes were still under evacuation orders as of Thursday, according to County Fire Authority Assistant Chief of Field Operations TJ McGovern. The fire, which has been dubbed the Coastal Fire, could continue to grow later Thursday due to increasing heat.

The cause of the fire remains under investigation, though the primary electricity supply company Southern California Edison (SCE), released a report on Wednesday revealing that electrical "circuit activity" occurred around the same time that the fire began.

"Our information reflects circuit activity occurring close in time to the reported time of the fire," SCE wrote in a [report](#) to the California Public Utilities Commission.

Despite this foremost hint that electrical issues played a role in the wildfire, Orange County Fire Chief Brian Fennessy noted that climate change is also to blame for enraging the fire.

"These are not Santa Ana winds. These are coastal winds that we experience, generally, every day. The big difference, and we're seeing it again, is with climate change. The fuel beds in this county, throughout Southern California and throughout the west, are so dry that fire like this is going to be more commonplace," said [Fennessy](#).

Amid the worst [megadrought](#) the US West has experienced in at least 1,200 years, more states are starting to burn. At the same time as the "Coastal Fire" began raging in Laguna Niguel, two fires broke out in [Colorado Springs](#) prompting evacuations and burning eight homes.

Meanwhile, New Mexico has been dealing with a series of wildfires for more than a month now. Authorities in New Mexico have been working to tackle a monster wildfire raging about 12 miles northwest of Las Vegas in Hermits Peaks and Calf Canyon. The fire has created costs of at least \$65 million and has yet to be contained.

To date, it is the largest ongoing blaze in the US, having burned more than 259,810 acres as of [Thursday](#) morning. The cause of New Mexico's unstoppable fire is the same as California's: dry vegetation and gusty winds.

"It's been a nightmare," Travis Regensberg, a general contractor, told CNN last [Thursday](#). "It's been really tough for us. I've been on this 17 days straight— three, four hours of sleep a night to protect the communities here. This fire is a sleeping beast. I mean, I call it the devil."

Last Thursday, President Joe Biden declared a major disaster in New [Mexico](#), unlocking federal aid that is critically needed for temporary housing and home repairs.

"This fire is going to keep growing," [officials](#) said in an update Thursday morning, noting that weather has been unfavorable for "weeks."

The frequency of large wildfires has increased in recent decades. Fires larger than 10,000 acres are now seven times more common than they were in the [1970s](#). And the West's megadrought, which is the most extreme [megadrought](#) the region has experienced in at least 1,200 years, has only exacerbated the issue.

"We're already in climate disaster mode across the planet, but in the southwestern United States, there's no word to describe the danger of not having water," New Mexico state Representative Roger Montoya told [AccuWeather](#) on Wednesday. "For the last 34 days, our communities have been devastated by these fires. They're catastrophic."

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Report: US Grand Jury Has Issued a Subpoena Into Trump-Era Docs Taken to Mar-a-Lago
By - Mary Manley

At the end of his term, former President Donald Trump appeared to violate the Presidential Records Act by transferring classified documents to his residence of Mar-A-Lago, instead of turning them over to the National Archives as all presidents are required to do at the end of their term.

The Justice Department's investigation into Trump's mishandling of White House documents is beginning to ramp up as a federal grand jury has issued at least one subpoena to the National

Archives and Records Administration to access classified documents that had been earlier temporarily transferred to Mar-a-Lago.

The probe could garner potential legal consequences for Trump and/or others who were involved in the mishandling of 15 boxes of government documents considering that mishandling classified documents is a federal crime. However, if the defense are able to prove relocating the boxes was a “mistake,” punishment may be trimmed down.

An anonymous source told [The Washington Post](#) that investigators have already begun interrogating former Trump White House aides about the incident, while another source said investigators were still filing requests for interviews.

“I can remember watching the Trumps leaving the White House and getting off in the helicopter that day, and someone carrying a white banker box, and saying to myself, ‘What the hell’s in that box?’” said David Ferriero, a former US archivist.

It is routine for the FBI to conduct investigations into whether or not classified information has been mishandled. The [Presidential Records Act](#) (PRA) is a 1978 law that was passed following President Richard Nixon’s Watergate scandal. PRA now safeguards all White House documents as US government property.

This is not the first time Trump and his administration have been ridiculed for their handling of government documents. Some of the Trump White House records, which the National Archives and Records Administration gave to the January 6 committee, appeared to have been [torn up](#) and then taped back together.

New York Times reporter Maggie Haberman’s upcoming book [“Confidence Man”](#) alleges that Trump even flushed files down his toilet in the White House.

“We had known for several years since my colleague Annie Karni broke the story that Trump was ripping up pieces of paper and that his staff was having to tape it back together for archival purposes. This is how he has handled documents and pieces of paper all his life, in terms of ripping them up, but this was something different,” said Haberman of the toilet incident.

Trump is also under [investigation](#) in the states of Georgia and New York concerning his business practices, as well as by the House select committee who are investigating his involvement in the January 6, 2021 insurrection.

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Israeli Adviser: Israel Uninterested in Military 'Solution' to Nuke Concerns With Iran
By - Mary Manley

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was an agreement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the P5+1 that would allow Iran to free itself of strict economic sanctions so long as they complied with rules limiting their nuclear program.

Israeli National Security Adviser Eyal Hulata reportedly commented on Thursday that Israel is not interested in a military conflict in order to resolve its issues with Iran’s nuclear program, underscoring that it is also not seeking to involve the US in any potential dispute.

"We are not looking for a confrontation with Iran—we don't consider that to be a solution," [Hulata](#) said during a closed conference at Tel Aviv University. He added that Israel does not want to "drag" the US into a military conflict.

"We think the issue can be solved in other ways," said Hulata in reference to Iran's nuclear program. "We believe it can."

Although with little support from [Congress](#), revival of the Iran nuclear deal appears unlikely. The Biden administration has already begun discussing alternatives to reviving the 2015 deal, which was initially struck under the Obama administration.

"We want a longer and stronger deal," Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.) earlier said when asked why he supported the measure. "[I want] the best deal possible that secures the region and prevents Iran from having a nuclear weapon."

On [Tuesday](#), the UN atomic energy watchdog chief said he is "extremely concerned" about Iran's noncompliance with nuclear regulation rules.

"I am referring to the fact that we, in the last few months, were able to identify traces of enriched uranium in places that had never been declared by Iran as places where any activity was taking place," said Rafael Grossi, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"The situation does not look very good. Iran, for the time being, has not been forthcoming in the kind of information we need from them... We are extremely concerned about this," he added. Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has also spoken out about the possible renewal of Iran's nuclear deal, saying it would lead to a "more violent" Middle East. Israel continues to urge the P5+1 countries - and particularly the West - to implement stricter regulations against Iran before negotiating any further.

The JCPOA stalled out following the United States' [refusal](#) to remove Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from the US terror list, among other negotiation hiccups. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has more recently stated that he's "not overly optimistic" the nuclear deal will be signed following the Biden Administration's refusal to comply with Iran's requests.

In 2018, former President Donald Trump pulled the US out of the Iran nuclear deal after alleging that Tehran had been breaking stipulations outlined under the 2015 agreement. In response, [Iran](#) has dropped its promises to regulate its nuclear program, instead opting to increase their uranium enrichment.

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US Diplomat Meets With Olympian Brittney Griner During Moscow Court Hearing - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - A consular officer from the US embassy in Russia had a chance to meet with Olympic gold medalist Brittney Griner during a court hearing on Moscow and can confirm she is doing well, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"We are monitoring very closely this morning's court hearing in Moscow. I can confirm that a consular officer at our embassy in Moscow was able to speak to her on the margins of the hearing," Price said during a press briefing. "The officer was able to confirm that Brittney Griner

is doing as well as can be expected under what can only be described as exceedingly difficult circumstances."

Earlier on Friday, a Russian court ruled that Griner's detention will be extended until June 18 while her case is being investigated.

Griner was detained at a Moscow airport on February 18 after a police dog alerted officers to vape cartridges containing cannabis oil in her luggage.

The Biden administration has said it considers Griner to be wrongfully detained in Russia.

Griner was playing for the Russian basketball club UMMC Yekaterinburg during the off-season at the Women's National Basketball Association in the United States.

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US Consumer Sentiment at Near Decade Lows Amid Choking Inflation - UMich Survey

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US consumer sentiment has fallen to near decade lows as soaring prices put a chokehold on buying in an economy dominated by daily purchases, the University of Michigan (UMich) said on Friday as it published the latest results of its closely-followed consumer poll.

"Consumers' assessment of their current financial situation relative to a year ago is at its lowest reading since 2013, with 36% of consumers attributing their negative assessment to inflation," UMich Surveys of Consumers Director Joanne Hsu said as the reading for the Consumer Index Sentiment came in at 59.1 points.

Aside from everyday purchases, buying conditions for bigger-ticket durable items reached lows since UMich began its monthly surveys in 1978, Hsu said.

"These declines were broad based--for current economic conditions as well as consumer expectations, and visible across income, age, education, geography, and political affiliation--continuing the general downward trend in sentiment over the past year," she added. After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by the coronavirus pandemic measures, the US economy expanded by 5.7% in 2021, growing at its fastest pace since 1982.

But inflation has grown just as fast as the economy and faster. The Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, an inflation indicator closely followed by the Fed, rose by 5.8% in the year to December and 6.6% in the 12 months to March. Both readings reflected the fastest growth since the 1980s. The Consumer Price Index and the Producer Price Index, two other key gauges for inflation, rose 8.3% and 11%, respectively, in the year to April.

The surfeit in inflation has unnerved the Federal Reserve, which has a tolerance of 2% per year for price growth. The central bank has already raised rates back to back in March and May, the first time since the pandemic. It has also indicated that a total of seven rate hikes - the maximum allowable under the central bank's calendar of meetings this year - were on slot for 2022.

The Federal Reserve has said more interest rate adjustments could follow in 2023 until a return to the 2% inflation target is achieved.

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Russia Plans to Activate Biological Weapons Convention to Probe Ukraine Biolabs - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, May 13 (Sputnik) - Russia plans to activate Articles 5 and 6 of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) to investigate the bio-laboratories in Ukraine, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said during the UN Security Council meeting on Friday.

"We have already accumulated lots of materials that directly indicate that the United States and Ukraine are violating the BWC. We continue to collect these materials and analyze them," Nebenzia said. "Given that the American party refuses to engage in any constructive discussion on this subject, we plane to utilize the mechanisms stipulated in Articles 5 and 6 of the BWC." Nebenzia noted that as soon as all the necessary the materials are collected, Russia will present them to the United Nations for investigation.

Article 5 of the BWC stipulates that "The states, parties to this Convention, undertake to consult one another and to co-operate in solving any problems which may arise in relation to the objective of, or in the application of the provisions of, the Convention. Consultation and co-operation pursuant to this Article may also be undertaken through appropriate international procedures within the framework of the United Nations and in accordance with its Charter."

Article 6 says "Any state party to this Convention, which finds that any other state party is acting in breach of obligations deriving from the provisions of the Convention, may lodge a complaint with the Security Council of the United Nations. Such a complaint should include all possible evidence confirming its validity, as well as a request for its consideration by the Security Council."

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US Working to Clarify Turkey's Position on Finland, Sweden NATO Membership - Donfried

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is working to clarify Turkish President' Recep Erdogan's comments in opposition to Sweden or Finland joining NATO, US Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said on Friday.

"We're working to clarify Turkey's position," Donfried said.

Earlier in the day, Erdogan said Turkey cannot view favorably the accession of Finland or Sweden to NATO and added that the Scandinavian countries are too soft on terrorism. Erdogan also referenced Turkey's discontent with Greece's participation in NATO military activities starting in 1980, calling it a mistake that should not be repeated.

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Blinken Discusses Security, Ukraine in Call With S. Korean Counterpart - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke by telephone with South Korean Foreign Affairs Minister Park Jin and discussed security issues such as North Korea and efforts to assist Ukraine, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday. "The Secretary emphasized our ironclad, mutual commitment to the defense of the ROK [South Korea] and our shared goal of the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as well as the importance of trilateral cooperation with Japan in support of peace and security in the Indo-Pacific. Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Park condemned recent DPRK [North Korea] ballistic missile launches," Price said in a statement.

The call came on the heels of a series of recent North Korean test missile launches. North Korea has conducted 16 test missile launches so far in 2022.

Blinken and Park also discussed the US and South Korean efforts to provide Ukraine with military and other aid amid Russia's special operation in that country, as well as the ways to hold Kremlin officials accountable, Price added.

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US Monitors Environmental Situation in Ukraine Amid Russia's Special Operation - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - A group of officials from 21 US federal agencies is closely monitoring the environmental situation in Ukraine amid Russia's special military operation, Axios reported on Friday.

The main task of the interagency group is to assist the Ukrainian government with tracking and mitigating potential environmental hazards, including those that could last past the end of the conflict, the report said, citing unnamed senior US officials.

The group was created about a month ago at a request of the Ukrainian government and includes representatives from the US Environmental Protection Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, US Forest Service, US Geological Survey, Defense Department and NASA, the report said.

Within the apparatus of the State Department, the group is known as the "Interagency Working Group on Environmental Damage in Ukraine" and focuses on air pollution, wildfires, waste and debris management and biodiversity loss, among other issues, the report said.

According to the officials cited in the report, Ukraine is seeking to use data collected by the US interagency group to hold Russia accountable for the alleged environmental damage as a result of the special operation.

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.

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Trump Slams Biden's Giant Ukraine Aid Bill, Urges Europe to Pick Up the Check

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump in a statement slammed the United States for working to provide more than \$40 billion in assistance to Ukraine amid Russia's special military operation and urged Europe to do more to deal with its regional concerns.

"Why are we giving more than \$40 Billion to Ukraine while Europe, by comparison, is giving very little, and they are greatly more impacted by a Russian invasion, obviously, than the US," Trump said in a statement on Thursday.

Trump said he was able to get European countries to pay their fair share to NATO and the Biden administration should do the same.

Trump added that China and others are "smiling all the way to the bank" with respect to the billions of dollars the United States is sending to Ukraine since February.

The United States will have authorized roughly \$60 billion in total for Ukraine in recent years if the \$40 billion Ukraine aid bill passes the Senate next week.

US Senator Rand Paul said earlier on Thursday that only the top five countries in the world spend more than \$60 billion on military expenditures and the figure almost equals that spent by Russia.

The United States will have to borrow the money from China in order to give it to Ukraine, the Republican senator added.

The \$60 billion total is more than that spent on cancer research or collected in gas taxes, and exceeds the budgets of the Department of Homeland Security and Energy Department, Paul said.

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Musk Wants 'Less Divisive' Candidate Than Trump in 2024, Slams Biden's Bid to Transform US

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - SpaceX founder and Tesla CEO Elon Musk said he prefers a less divisive candidate in the 2024 election than former President Donald Trump and that President Joe Biden was wrong to assume the country wanted dramatic changes.

"Even though I think a less divisive candidate would be better in 2024, I still think Trump should be restored to Twitter," Musk wrote on Twitter on Thursday evening. "Biden's mistake is that he thinks he was elected to transform the country, but actually everyone just wanted less drama." Musk did not elaborate on Biden's mistake, however, the sitting US president has been criticized by his opponents for his handling of the US economy, immigration, and energy.

Trump has said he will not return to Twitter, where he had 88 million followers when his account was suspended in light of the January 6 riot at the Capitol building. Moreover, Trump has not

officially announced he will run for re-election in 2024, but he has held numerous rallies since being out of office and hinted a White House bid.

Musk said earlier this week that Twitter's decision to ban Trump was a mistake and he would reverse it if his acquisition of the social media company is successful.

Twitter recently agreed to be acquired by Musk in a deal worth \$44 billion, although it is still subject to shareholder approval.

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US Coast Guard Says at Least 11 Dead After Vessel Capsizes Near Puerto Rico

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The US Coast Guard said in a statement that at least eleven people died after a vessel capsized near Desecheo Island, Puerto Rico.

"There are 11 deceased and 31 survivors, 11 female and 30 male," the Coast Guard said via Twitter on Thursday evening.

The Coast Guard said in a separate statement that it is undetermined how many people are in the water and it suspects the vessel may have been carrying illegal migrants. The Coast Guard launched multiple helicopters to the area for the mass rescue operation, the statement said.

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Austin, Ukraine Counterpart Discuss US And Global Efforts to Support Kiev - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his Ukrainian counterpart Oleksii Reznikov discussed over the telephone the latest developments on the battlefield in Ukraine, including US and global efforts to provide security assistance to Kiev, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke with Ukrainian Minister of Defence Oleksii Reznikov to discuss the situation on the ground in eastern Ukraine and provide an update on US and international security assistance efforts," Kirby said in a press release on Thursday. The two officials also shared perspectives on the next virtual Ukraine Defense Contact Group, Kirby added.

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Soft Landing of US Economy May Depend on Factors Beyond Federal Reserve's Control - Powell

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - Achieving a soft landing for the US economy from the Federal Reserve's interest rate hikes will depend on factors beyond the central bank's control, Chairman Jerome Powell said in an interview.

"Whether we can execute a soft landing or not, it may actually depend on factors that we don't control," Powell said in an interview with the Marketplace publication on Thursday. "I will also say that the process of getting inflation down to 2% will also include some pain."

After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by the coronavirus pandemic measures, the US economy expanded by 5.7% in 2021, growing at the fastest pace since 1982.

But inflation has grown just as fast as the economy and faster. The Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, an inflation indicator closely followed by the Federal Reserve, rose by 5.8% in the year to December and 6.6% in the 12 months to March. Both readings reflected the fastest growth since the 1980s. The Consumer Price Index and the Producer Price Index, two other key gauges for inflation, rose 8.3% and 11%, respectively, in the year to April.

The central bank's own tolerance for inflation is 2% per year. Powell has indicated in the past that a total of seven interest rate hikes - the maximum allowable under the central bank's calendar of meetings this year - were on slot for 2022. More rate adjustments could follow in 2023 until a return to the 2% inflation target is achieved, he said.

Some economists, however, doubt that the Federal Reserve will be able to pull off a soft-landing for the economy.

They fear that the economy, finally on the path to resilience after the damage wrought by the two-year long coronavirus pandemic measures, will head for recession again from the central bank's actions.

Powell, in response, acknowledged the challenges by the central bank in trying to balance interest rate hikes with economic growth.

"And it's quite challenging to accomplish that right now, for a couple of reasons. One is just that unemployment is very, very low, the labor market's extremely tight, and inflation is very high," he said.

The Federal Reserve, however, was willing to err on the side of high rate hikes rather than allowing higher inflation, which "would mean a much deeper downturn," Powell added.

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US Army Orders More Javelin Missiles For Latvia, Norway, Albania Thailand - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The Raytheon and Lockheed Martin Javelin joint venture has won a more than \$71.4 million US Army modification contract to manufacture more Javelin anti-tank missile systems, the US Defense Department said.

"Raytheon/Lockheed Martin Javelin JV [Joint Venture] (in) Tucson, Arizona was awarded a \$71,412,090 modification ... contract for the Javelin Missile System," the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.

Work on the contract will be performed in Tucson in the US state of Arizona, with an estimated completion date of February 28, 2025, the release added.

Fiscal 2022 missile procurement Army funds and Foreign Military Sales to the nations of Thailand, Norway, Albania and Latvia funds in the amount of \$71,412,090 were obligated at the time of the award, according to the release.

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Austin, Jordanian King Meet to Discuss Security Cooperation in Mideast - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin met with King Abdullah II of Jordan to discuss security cooperation between the two countries on matters of mutual interest in the Middle East, the Defense Department said in a press release.

"Today at the Pentagon, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III met with His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan to discuss regional security cooperation," the release said on Thursday.

"Secretary Austin thanked the King for his leadership throughout the region, and in particular his efforts to advance a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

Austin and King Abdullah II also underscored the importance of deepening the close partnership between the two countries and working together to confront regional threats, the release said.

At the start of the meeting earlier on Thursday, Austin said that Ukraine would also be a topic of discussion during the meeting, the release added.

Austin also mentioned that the United States and Jordan will continue to cooperate to counter activities by Iran and its proxies in Iraq, Syria and other regions, according to the release.

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US Interest Rate Increase of 50 Basis Points 'Appropriate' in Next 2 Rounds - Powell

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - It would be "appropriate" for the Federal Reserve to raise interest rates by just 50 basis points in June and July, Chairman Jerome Powell said amid speculation that the US central bank may opt for a 75-basis point hike.

"If the economy performs about as expected ... it would be appropriate for there to be additional 50-basis point increases at the next two meetings," Powell told the Marketplace publication in an interview on Thursday.

The Federal Reserve raised interest rates by 50 basis points at its May meeting, after an earlier 25-basis point increase in March.

Some economists, however, say the central bank's actions might not be enough to overcome inflation growing at the fastest pace in 40 years. That has resulted in speculation that it might consider a 75-basis point increase at its June meeting, in order to hasten the central bank's objective of bringing price pressures under control.

After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by the coronavirus pandemic measures, the US economy expanded by 5.7% in 2021, growing at its fastest pace since 1982.

But inflation has grown just as fast as the economy and quicker. The Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, an inflation indicator closely followed by the Federal Reserve, rose by 5.8% in the year to December and 6.6% in the 12 months to March. Both readings reflected the fastest growth since the 1980s. The Consumer Price Index and the Producer Price Index, two other key gauges for inflation, rose 8.3% and 11%, respectively, in the year to April. The Federal Reserve's own tolerance for inflation is 2% per year. Powell has indicated in the past that a total of seven rate hikes - the maximum allowable under the central bank's calendar of meetings this year - were on slot for 2022. More rate adjustments could follow in 2023, until a return to the 2% inflation target is achieved, he said.

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US Global COVID-19 Summit Raises Over \$3Bln in New Commitments - NSC Health Chief

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - The United States raised more than \$3 billion in new funding commitments during its 2nd Global COVID-19 Summit, National Security Council (NSC) Health Security Director Raj Panjabi said during a press briefing.

"We also heard commitments in this regard. Overall, the summit raised over \$3 billion, \$3.2 billion precisely, in new commitments - these have not previously been announced - towards the global fight against COVID-19," Panjabi said on Thursday.

The funding will be put toward efforts to ensure vaccination campaigns, treatment access, pandemic preparedness and global health security, Panjabi added.

The summit was convened by the United States, Belize, Germany, Indonesia and Senegal to bring together world leaders and international organizations to address global COVID-19-related issues.

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Biden Unveils \$150Mln to Deepen US-ASEAN Ties, Boost Indo-Pacific Security - White House

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden announced a range of initiatives worth \$150 million to deepen relations between Washington and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) during a summit in the US capital with a large portion dedicated to maritime security and law enforcement in the Indo-Pacific, the White House said in a fact sheet. Biden is hosting his counterparts from the ASEAN countries this week for a special summit. The leaders are expected to discuss the security concerns and economic opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region, including other urgent matters related to Myanmar and Ukraine.

"Today, the United States and ASEAN will inaugurate a new era of partnership, guided by the complementary objectives of the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. In that spirit, President Biden is announcing over \$150 million in

initiatives that will deepen US-ASEAN relations, strengthen ASEAN centrality, and expand our common capacity to achieve our shared objectives," the White House said on Thursday. About 40% of the investment will go to security cooperation, supporting ASEAN partners conduct law enforcement activities in the Indo-Pacific, and to boost their capacity in the region, the White House said.

"The United States is committed to supporting implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific's Maritime Pillar," the release said. "Today we are announcing \$60 million in new regional maritime initiatives, most of which will be led by the US Coast Guard (USCG)."

The US Department of State, the US Department of Labor, and the US Coast Guard will also launch new efforts to help ASEAN countries counter illegal and unregulated fishing in the Indo-Pacific, and to prevent forced labor in the fishing industry, the release said.

In addition, the United States will expand US Coast Guard training to ASEAN partners' law enforcement agencies, which will include enhancing their readiness, institutional development, sustainment of equipment, and workforce professionalization, the release said.

Moreover, the US Coast Guard will deploy a cutter to Southeast Asia and Oceania to participate in security operations and to conduct training.

The United States is also going to invest \$40 million to mobilize \$2 billion of blended financing for clean energy infrastructure in Southeast Asia through the Smart Power Program. The investment aims at decarbonization and strengthening of the region's power system as well as the deployment of clean energy technologies, according to the release.

One of the initiatives is launching of a US-ASEAN Climate Solutions Hub to provide technical assistance to ASEAN member-states in order to accelerate low-emission development and resilience strategies, the release said.

The list of joint initiatives also includes space cooperation, reduction of methane emissions, the US-ASEAN transportation dialogue partnership, and investment in climate-smart infrastructure, the release said.

The ASEAN member states include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The White House said it did not invite the Myanmar junta and the outgoing Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte decided to skip the summit.

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Canada to Deploy General, 6 Staff Officers to Latvia to Boost NATO Capabilities - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) - Ottawa will deploy a general and six staff officers to Latvia to strengthen NATO defenses, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told reporters.

"Today, I am very pleased to announce that we will be deploying a general and six staff officers to NATO's multinational division north headquarters in Adazi," Trudeau said on Thursday.

"They'll be part of a first of its kind unit in the northern Baltic Sea region to help plan, coordinate and integrate regional military activities. It will serve as a continued important part of our enhancements to NATO's defense and deterrence capabilities."

The Canadian prime minister made the announcement during a joint press conference with Latvian Prime Minister Arturs Krisjanis Kariņš.

Trudeau said currently 695 Canadian armed forces are deployed in Latvia.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 13 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * There is "no question" of the United States providing nuclear weapons to Ukraine, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Thursday.
- * Russia's deputy envoy to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Thursday that he sees no diplomatic option for solving the situation in Ukraine and that there was no way to prevent the special military operation.
- * Russian air defense systems defending Kherson shot down two missiles of the Ukrainian forces over the northern outskirts of the city, a Russian security source told Sputnik.
- * Neo-Nazis, together with Ukrainian security officials, are conducting punitive raids in the Kharkiv region, looking for pro-Russian citizens, arresting them and taking them away in unknown locations, the head of the Russian National Defense Control Center Mikhail Mizintsev said.

FINLAND, SWEDEN NATO MEMBERSHIP

- * Sweden and Finland would potentially become targets for the Russian military and force Moscow to take action if they are admitted in NATO, Russian representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyansky said on Thursday.
- * NATO will discuss the plans by Finland and Sweden to join the alliance during ministerial meeting scheduled to take place this weekend in Berlin, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said.
- * German Chancellor Olaf Scholz promised Finnish President Sauli Niinisto support on his country's way to NATO, the German government said following a phone conversation between the leaders.
- * The expansion and approaching of NATO to the Russian borders does not make the Eurasian continent more stable and secure, and Finland's accession to NATO certainly threatens Russia's security, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

ENERGY SITUATION IN EUROPE

- * Russian energy giant Gazprom has been banned from using the Polish section of the Yamal-Europe pipeline owned by EuRoPol Gaz for gas transit, Gazpromj spokesman Sergey Kupriyanov said on Thursday.

* The German authorities will give financial guarantees to Gazprom subsidiaries that have fallen under Russia's sanctions for the purchase of gas from other suppliers, the prices of which may be higher than before, German Economy Minister Robert Habeck said.

SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The European Union is likely to decide in the coming weeks on whether to ban the imports of Russian oil, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said on Thursday.

* Germany cannot now implement the gas embargo against Russia, German Economy Minister and Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck, said at a briefing.

NORTH KOREA MISSILE TEST

* North Korea launched an unidentified ballistic missile in the direction of the Sea of Japan, the Joint Chiefs of Staff of South Korea said on Thursday.

* North Korea has launched three short-range ballistic missiles from the area of Pyongyang Sunan International Airport towards the Sea of Japan, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said.

GLOBAL COVID-19 SUMMIT

* The United States will share vital COVID-19 technologies through the World Health Organization (WHO) Technology Access Pool, President Joe Biden announced on Thursday

* The United States and the European Union have agreed to cooperate on pathogen monitoring and vaccine research, Biden and European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said.

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Oil Prices Change Little as Fear of Recession in US Limits Rally or Market Upside

NEW YORK, May 12 (Sputnik) - Crude prices settled little changed on Thursday amid investor worry that aggressive interest rate hikes designed to beat the worst inflation in the United States in 40 years could instead send the US economy into a recession.

Brent crude, the London-traded global benchmark for oil, settled down 6 cents, or 0.01%, at \$107.45 a barrel, after rallying by more than \$1 earlier in the day.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, the benchmark for US crude, settled up 42 cents, or 0.4%, at \$106.13 after falling as much as \$3 earlier.

While crude prices have largely traded in the positive since the start of 2022, with both the benchmarks up about 40% on the year. But oil bulls have also struggled to reprise WTI's peak of \$130 a barrel and Brent's high of almost \$140 seen during the height of the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

This is due to several factors, among them China's renewed clampdowns on COVID-19 outbreaks, which have hurt demand for oil in the world's largest importer of the commodity; persistent concerns that the US economy might be headed for a recession; fear of demand destruction in oil from US gasoline at record highs of nearly \$4.50 per gallon and diesel at well

above \$6; and the 20-year highs in the US dollar, which has weighed on commodity prices across the board.

"Oil prices remain a volatile trade as the crude demand outlook grows more uncertain," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "Inflation remains uncomfortably high and has accelerated global growth concerns."

The Producer Price Index, or PPI, which measures what retailers pay for goods at the wholesale level, rose 11% in the year to April, after an 11.2% rise in the 12 months to March, the Labor Department said on Thursday.

A day earlier, the department reported that the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, expanded 8.3% growth in the year to April - versus 8.5% rise in the 12 months to March - as fuel and food prices stayed near record highs.

Prior to PPI and CPI readings, the Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, or PCE, which is closely followed by the Fed, rose by 5.8% in the year to December and 6.6% in the 12 months to March.

The Federal Reserve, whose own tolerance for inflation is a mere 2% per year, has been alarmed by these numbers and is determined to bring the PPI, PCE and CPI readings back to benign levels.

To do this, officials at the central bank are debating the viability of a 75-basis point (bps) interest rate hike in June, after the 50-bps and 25-bps increases at their May and March meetings, respectively. A 75-bps hike would represent the largest upward adjustment in rates since 1994. Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell has also indicated that a total of seven rate hikes - the maximum allowable under the central bank's calendar of meetings this year - were on slot for 2022, and more could follow in 2023, until a return to the annual 2% inflation rate is achieved.

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US Ready to Assist Probe Into Killing of Al-Jazeera Reporter - White House

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - The United States stands ready to assist Israel and the Palestinian Authority in their investigations into the killing of Al-Jazeera veteran journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, but neither side has requested help, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"We stand ready to assist either party in any way that we can, neither side has asked for our assistance at this time," Psaki said during a press briefing.

The 51-year-old Palestinian-American was shot in the head on Wednesday while covering an Israeli raid in the occupied West Bank. Reporters on the scene said they were targeted by Israeli snipers when the group was alone in the streets of Jenin and were clearly identifiable as being members of the press.

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US Does Not Have Plans to Share COVID-19 Vaccines With North Korea - White House

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - The United States does not currently have plans to send COVID-19 vaccines to North Korea amid reports of the first novel coronavirus cases in the country, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"We do not the United States does not currently have plans to share vaccines with the DPRK [the Democratic People's Republic of Korea]. We do continue to support international efforts aimed at the provision of critical humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable North Koreans," Psaki said during a press briefing.

North Korea reported its first set of coronavirus cases in Pyongyang on Thursday after several patients tested positive for the Omicron BA.2 variant over the weekend.

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RPT - White House Encourages Senate to Promptly Pass Ukraine Aid Bill, Says Oversight Sufficient

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - The White House encourages all US senators to immediately pass the \$40 billion aid bill for Ukraine and believes it already contains sufficient oversight measures to prevent any misuse of the funds, Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"Well, I would say that we agree oversight is critical, that's why the package already includes millions of dollars to support additional oversight measures, including additional funding for existing inspectors general, and we encourage all senators to promptly pass the bill as it stands," Psaki said during a press briefing. "We feel what's in there is sufficient."

US Senator Rand Paul earlier in the day delayed a Senate attempt to fast track the \$40 billion Ukraine aid bill, citing concerns over government spending, debt and inflation. Paul has demanded an amendment to the legislation that would provide for further federal oversight of the money and weapons being sent to Ukraine.

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White House Encourages Senate to Promptly Pass Ukraine Aid Bill, Says Oversight

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US Senator Paul Blocks Swift Passage of \$40Bln Ukraine Aid Bill, Citing Economic Concerns

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - US Senator Rand Paul on Thursday delayed the expedited passage of \$40 billion Ukraine aid bill, citing concerns over government spending, debt and inflation.

"We cannot save Ukraine by dooming the US economy," Paul said during a speech on the Senate floor. "Congress should evaluate the costs of continuing down this path. The biggest threat to the United States today is debt, and inflation, and the destruction of the dollar."

Paul said the United States cannot afford to be the world's policemen and continue deficit spending.

The United States will have authorized roughly \$60 billion in total for Ukraine in recent years if the legislation passes, Paul said. Only the top five countries in the world spend more than \$60 billion on military expenditures and the figure almost equals that spent by Russia, he said.

The United States will have to borrow the money from China in order to give it to Ukraine, Paul said.

The \$60 billion total is more than that spent on cancer research or collected in gas taxes, and exceeds the budgets of the Department of Homeland Security and Energy Department, Paul also said.

Paul attempted to add to the legislation an amendment that would authorize federal oversight of the funding provided in the Ukraine aid legislation, which was rejected by Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer.

In response, Paul objected to a prior compromise between Schumer and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell that would have moved forward the legislation, delaying the House-passed measure from reaching President Joe Biden's desk.

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US Would Support NATO Application by Finland, Sweden Should They Apply - White House

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - The United States would support the application by Finland and Sweden to become members of NATO if they chose to apply, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

"The United States would support a NATO application by Finland and Sweden should they choose to apply. We, of course will respect, whatever decision they make. Both Finland and Sweden are close and valued defense partners of the United States and of NATO. I would note that even without them being members of NATO, our militaries have worked together for many years," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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US Continues to Support Exiled Myanmar Government of National Unity - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman met with representatives from Myanmar's exiled National Unity Government (NUG) and reiterated the United States' "robust" support for it, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Thursday.

"Deputy Secretary Sherman met today in Washington with NUG representatives, including Zin Mar Aung," Price said. "The Deputy Secretary underscored robust US support for the people of Burma in the face of the regime's brutal crackdown."

Sherman pledged to continue providing support to all those working peacefully toward the restoration of Myanmar's path to inclusive democracy, Price said.

"Noting the many Southeast Asian leaders in Washington for the US-ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] Special Summit, the deputy secretary highlighted that the United States would continue to work closely with ASEAN and other partners in pressing for a just and peaceful resolution to the crisis in Burma," Price said.

Sherman also condemned the escalating regime violence that has led to a humanitarian crisis and called for unhindered humanitarian access to assist all those in need in Myanmar, Price also said.

Sherman then thanked Zin Mar Aung for her courage and dedication to the people of Myanmar and offered US support for an inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous democracy, Price added.

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Democrat-Run Committee on US Capitol Riot Subpoenas 5 Republican Congressmen - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - Five Republican members of Congress, including US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, have been subpoenaed to appear before the exclusively

Democrat Select Committee investigating the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, the probe announced on Thursday.

"The Select Committee has subpoenaed Representatives Kevin McCarthy, Scott Perry, Jim Jordan, Andy Biggs, and Mo Brooks for deposition testimony as part of the committee's investigation into the January 6 attack on the US Capitol and its causes, the investigation announced in a series of Twitter messages.

The five members include those who participated in meetings at the White House, those who had direct conversations with President Trump and those who were involved in the planning and coordination of other activities on and before January 6, the Select Committee said.

"Before we hold our hearings next month, we wished to provide members the opportunity to discuss these matters with the committee voluntarily," the Select Committee added.

The five Republican members of Congress receiving the subpoenas had previously refused to voluntarily testify before the committee, according to the Select Committee.

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US Lawmakers Ask Social Media Firms to Archive Evidence of 'Russian War Crimes' - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - A group of Democratic lawmakers sent letters to the CEOs of YouTube, TikTok, Twitter and Facebook (banned in Russia as an extremist organization) asking them to archive content on their platforms that could be considered evidence of alleged Russian war crimes in Ukraine, NBC News reported on Thursday.

Russia has repeatedly said that Ukrainian troops torture and maim captured Russian soldiers and intelligence officers. In March, a footage of Ukrainians mistreating Russian soldiers appeared on the Internet, including one showing them being shot in the legs and left to bleed. Russia's Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin has ordered investigations into all circumstances of mistreatment and executing of Russian soldiers in Ukraine.

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Russia's Position on Kiev Joining EU Changed - Polyanskiy

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - Moscow's position on Kiev joining the European Union has now changed and is similar to Russia's stance on Ukraine's ascension to NATO, Deputy Envoy to the UN Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Thursday.

"[At Istanbul talks] we were not worrying about the situation but it changed after Mr. [EU Commissioner] Josep Borrell's statement that this war should be won on the battleground. I think our position on Ukraine joining the European Union is now more similar to NATO," he said.

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US Navy Fleet Too Small to Handle 2 Simultaneous Conflicts - Chief of Naval Operations
WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - The US Navy's fleet is currently too small to effectively handle two simultaneous conflicts, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"Right now the force is not sized to handle two simultaneous conflicts," Gilday told the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

The Navy is currently capable of fighting one conflict while keeping a second adversary in check, Gilday said.

The Navy would be challenged to meet its operational requirements in the European theater if had to withhold forces in the Pacific theater in order to deter Chinese activities, Gilday also said.

US submarines, aircraft carriers, amphibious ships and destroyers would be the most high demand vessels if the Navy had to fight conflicts in Europe and in the Pacific at the same time, Gilday added.

The Navy currently has 298 ships, but Gilday suggested that the size of the force increase to a 500-ship hybrid fleet by 2045. Gilday also suggested that US allies in Europe should invest more in submarines.

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Polyanskiy Says Russia Saw No Diplomatic Option for Solving Ukraine Crisis

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - Russia's deputy envoy to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Thursday that he sees no diplomatic option for solving the situation in Ukraine and that there was no way to prevent the operation.

"Nobody wants military activity and we would prefer another option. A diplomatic option. But there was no way to stop the war," he said.

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Sullivan, S. Korean Counterpart Discuss Pyongyang Missile Tests, Biden Seoul Trip - WH

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and South Korean counterpart Kim Sung-han discussed Pyongyang's recent ballistic missile launches and details of President Joe Biden's visit to Seoul in a phone conversation earlier on Thursday, the White House revealed in a readout.

Earlier in the day, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said North Korea launched three short-range ballistic missiles from the area of Pyongyang Sunan International Airport towards the Sea of Japan.

"They also condemned the DPRK's ballistic missile launches, including the launches today, as a violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions and committed to maintain close coordination to address the threats posed by the DPRK and to advance our shared objective of the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," the readout said.

Sullivan congratulated Kim on his appointment, the release added, and the two officials jointly noted that the upcoming meeting between Biden and President Yoon Seok-youl is an opportunity to highlight the strength and breadth of the modern alliance.

The White House announced at the end of April that Biden would visit Korea and Japan from May 20-May 24 to further deepen US relations and economic ties with both countries.

"Mr. Sullivan and Mr. Kim also conferred on additional details about the President's visit to the ROK and strengthening our cooperation across a range of shared foreign policy priorities," the release said.

Thursday's launch marked the 16th launch conducted by North Korea this year. The previous launch was conducted on May 7. Then, Pyongyang did not officially announce the missile launch and did not explain what kind of projectile it was.

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Finland, Sweden Would Become Possible Targets for Russia if Admitted to NATO - Polyansky

UNITED NATIONS, May 12 (Sputnik) - Sweden and Finland would potentially become targets for the Russian military and force Moscow to take action if they are admitted in NATO, Russian representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyansky said on Thursday.

"If there are NATO detachments in these territories, these territories will become a possible target for a strike," Polyansky said during an interview with the YouTube channel UnHerd.

Russia will also have to make other military moves in the situation that the two countries join NATO, Polyansky said, adding that Moscow is ready to face the threat of NATO.

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Inflation Remains Biden's Biggest Hurdle But Can Be Overcome Without Recession - Yellen

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - Inflation is the biggest hurdle for the Biden administration now but the Federal Reserve can overcome this problem without landing the US economy in recession, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"Clearly inflation is a very substantial, legitimate issue ... that it is really the number one economic issue that faces the administration and the nation," Yellen told the US House Financial

Services Committee. "It's having a substantial adverse impact on many vulnerable households, and we're laser-focused on addressing inflation."

Yellen pointed out that the Federal Reserve, which is tasked with ensuring price stability and full employment in the United States, is capable of overcoming the inflation situation without causing negative growth in the economy.

"A strong job market and household balance sheet, low debt costs and a strong banking sector ... all of those things suggest that the Fed has a path to bring down inflation without causing a recession," she said. "And I know it will be their objective to try to accomplish that."

Yellen's remarks came on the heels of new data that suggested little let up in inflation, which has been expanding at the fastest pace in four decades in the United States.

Earlier on Thursday, the US Labor Department said the Producer Price Index, or PPI, which measures what retailers pay for goods at the wholesale level, has risen 11% in the year to April, after an 11.2% rise in the 12 months to March.

A day earlier, the Labor Department reported that the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, expanded 8.3% growth in the year to April - versus 8.5% rise in the 12 months to March - as fuel and food prices stayed near record highs.

Prior to the PPI and CPI readings, the Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, or PCE, which is closely followed by the Fed, rose by 5.8% in the year to December and 6.6% in the 12 months to March.

The Federal Reserve, whose own tolerance for inflation is 2% per year, has been alarmed by these numbers and is determined to bring the PPI, PCE and CPI readings back to benign levels. To do this, officials at the central bank are debating the viability of a 75-basis point interest rate hike in June, after the 50-bps and 25-bps increases at their May and March meetings, respectively. A 75-bps hike would represent the largest upward adjustment in rates since 1994. Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell has also indicated that a total of seven rate hikes - the maximum allowable under the central bank's calendar of meetings this year - were on slot for 2022, and more could follow in 2023, until a return to the annual 2% inflation rate is achieved.

Economists said they fear that the US economy will head for a recession again as a result of the Federal Reserve's actions.

Powell said he disagrees with that notion, saying the Federal Reserve has a good chance to restore price stability without a recession, without a severe downturn and without materially higher unemployment, attributing this largely to a labor market that has been at maximum employment since December.

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Nebenzia Criticizes Pseudohistory, Anti-Russian Lessons in Ukrainian School Curriculum

UNITED NATIONS, May 12 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia criticized the Ukrainian school curriculum during a UN Security Council meeting on Thursday, saying it contains pseudohistorical and anti-Russia lessons.

"We have analyzed more than 300 school textbooks and manuals from Ukraine, and this has shown that there is targeted work going on to create a chain that distorts history and historic truth," Nebenzia said. "I'm talking about the fact that in modern Ukrainian education, the aim is to orient Ukrainian young people against Russia from the earliest ages."

Nebenzia showed the Security Council an eighth grade geography textbook from Ukraine that claims the forefathers of the French, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish and Jewish populations are descendants of Ukrainians.

It is Russia's hope that Ukrainian children are ultimately able to continue education under a normal curriculum, Nebenzia added.

The UN Security Council meeting focused on the challenges faced by children in Ukraine amid Russia's special military operation there.

UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Deputy Executive Director Omar Abdi claimed during the meeting that schools continue to be used for military purposes as well as attacked.

Russia continues to take in child refugees from Ukraine and is working closely with authorities in the Donbass region on advancing efforts to adopt orphaned children, Nebenzia said.

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US Producer Prices Up 11% in Year to April, Adds to Inflation Woes - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - US producer prices, a measure of what retailers pay for goods at the wholesale level, rose 11% in the year to April, the Labor Department said on Thursday in latest data that showed little let up in inflation pressure.

"On an unadjusted basis, final demand prices moved up 11% for the 12 months ended in April," the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a unit within the Labor Department, said in its monthly reading of the Producer Price Index, or PPI.

The data comes on the heels of Wednesday's reading of the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, from the Labor Department that showed an annual 8.3% growth for April versus the 8.5% rise in the 12 months to March.

Economists had predicted an annual growth of 10.7% for the PPI and 8.1% for the CPI in April, just below what was reported.

"These numbers ... indicate no let-up in pipeline inflation pressures in April," economist Adam Button said in a post on the ForexLive forum. "What worries me is that producers and buyers are starting to get accustomed to having to accept and pass on price increases. That's the kind of thing that the Fed wants to avoid."

The central bank has been closely watching inflation numbers that have been trending at four-decade highs since late last year as the US economy expanded from the coronavirus pandemic.

After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by the pandemic, the economy expanded by 5.7% in 2021, growing at its quickest pace since 1982.

But inflation grew even faster. The Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, or PCE, which is followed by the Fed, rose by 5.8% in the year to December and 6.6% in the 12 months to March. Both readings also represented the fastest growth since the 1980s. The CPI's annual expansion matched 40-year highs as well.

The Federal Reserve's own tolerance for inflation is 2% per year and is determined to bring the PPI, PCE and CPI readings back to benign levels.

To do this, officials at the central bank are debating the viability of a 75-basis point (bps) interest rate hike in June, after the 50-bps and 25-bps increases at their May and March meetings, respectively. A 75-bps hike would represent the largest upward adjustment in rates since 1994. Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell has also indicated that a total of seven rate hikes - the maximum allowable under the central bank's calendar of meetings this year - were on slot for 2022 and more could follow in 2023, until a return to the annual 2% inflation rate is achieved.

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US Senate Leaders Urge Colleagues to Pass \$40Bln Ukraine Aid Package on Thursday

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - Minority Leader Mitch McConnell urged his colleagues during remarks on the Senate floor to approve the US House-passed \$40 billion Ukraine aid bill later on Thursday.

"I strongly support the next package of lethal military assistance which the House has passed," McConnell said. "I hope the Senate can reach an agreement to consider and pass this legislation today. The Ukrainians need it. We need to do it today."

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer during his remarks on the Senate floor said there is no reason not to get Ukraine funding approved immediately and urged Republicans to work with Democrats to pass the bill.

On Tuesday, the US House of Representatives passed the legislation, dubbed the Additional Ukraine Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2022, moving forward on President Joe Biden's original request for a \$33 billion aid package.

The request included \$20.4 billion in military aid, \$8.5 billion in economic aid, and \$3 billion in humanitarian assistance. The US House added \$3.4 billion in defense aid and \$3.4 billion in humanitarian assistance on top of Biden's initial request.

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US House, Senate Hold First Meeting to Reconcile Competition Bill - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - US lawmakers from the Senate and House of Representatives are holding their first meeting on Thursday to reconcile each chamber's version

of a bill that addresses the United States' competitiveness in a number of key areas, including on semiconductors manufacturing, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said.

"Right now, as we gather here, the COMPETES Act conference committee is having its first meeting," Pelosi said during a press conference. "We are focused on sending this cost-cutting legislation to the President as soon as we can."

The legislation, dubbed the United States Innovation and Competition Act (USICA) or the America COMPETES Act, addresses US competitiveness in areas such as technology and communications, foreign relations and national security, domestic manufacturing, education and trade.

The House of Representatives and Senate passed their own versions of the legislation but both sides need to agree on a final version of the bill that they will vote on again and send to President Joe Biden to be signed into law.

This legislation is designed to ease supply chain bottlenecks on items like semiconductors and bring back manufacturing jobs to the United States, authorizing \$45 billion to improve US supply chains and prevent shortages of critical goods by ensuring more are made in the country.

The bill would also direct the Biden and subsequent administrations to submit a six-month review identifying areas of potential dialogue between the Chinese and US governments on ballistic, hypersonic, nuclear, space and cyber issues.

It similarly directs the US administration to develop a concrete plan to engage in arms control talks with China, and alternative plans to address arms control concerns should efforts to enter negotiations with Beijing fail.

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NATO to Discuss Finland, Sweden Membership During Ministerial Meeting - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - NATO will discuss the plans by Finland and Sweden to join the alliance during ministerial meeting scheduled to take place this weekend in Berlin, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said in a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"We right now are waiting on Finland and Sweden to officially apply for NATO membership and our expectation ... is that that is likely to happen very quickly," Donfried told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "[C]ertainly this is going to be a topic of conversation at the NATO foreign ministerial this weekend where both the Finnish and Swedish foreign ministers will be there."

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US Jobless Claims Up 2nd Week in Row Amid 'Maximum Employment' Situation - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims edged higher for a second week in a row, the Labor Department reported on Thursday, as job openings appeared limited by a so-called maximum employment situation.

"In the week ending May 7, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 203,000, an increase of 1,000 from the previous week's revised level," the Labor Department said in a news release. In the previous week to April 20, jobless claims rose by 2,000. Economists had anticipated 192,000 claims for the week ending May 7, bringing the reported number some 4,000 higher than forecast.

Claims are "marginally higher from [their] lows, but still at 200,000 [are] at very low levels," economist Greg Michalowski said in a comment posted on the ForexLive platform.

Unemployment in the United States 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 strong over the past year, with the unemployment rate steady at 3.6% for both March and April this year. The Federal Reserve defines a jobless rate of 4% and below as "maximum employment."

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, private payrolls processor ADP said on Wednesday.

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US to Incentivize States to Move Away From Russian-Made Military Equipment - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - The United States is willing to start incentivizing its allies and partners to move away from using Russian-made military equipment amid concerns about spare parts and technical assistance while offering US weapons instead, Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Jessica Lewis said on Thursday.

"We will encourage partners to diversify their equipment inventories away from Russian systems. This could include support for select partners providing equipment to Ukraine and other incentives to donate additional systems. It could also include strategically timed grant assistance to support procurements of US platforms instead of Russian systems," Lewis said in a prepared testimony for the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Lewis said she sees the current period of international relations as an opportunity for the United States to procure its military equipment in place of the Russian weapons.

At the same time, Lewis said it is imperative to ensure that any potentially emerging global military capability gaps as a result of moving away from Russian equipment are not filled by China.

To accelerate the process, the United States intends to use funding to incentivize select countries' diversification of equipment inventories away from Russian systems, Lewis added. 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.

In response, the United States and its allies implemented comprehensive sanctions against Russia and supplied Ukraine with offensive and defensive weapons, including a range of Soviet-made equipment.

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'No Question' of US Providing Nuclear Weapons to Ukraine - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - There is "no question" of the United States providing nuclear weapons to Ukraine, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"The United States is providing security assistance and weapons to Ukraine, but there's no question of the United States providing nuclear weapons to Ukraine," Donfried told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

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US to Commit Additional \$200M In to World Bank Fund to Prevent Pandemics - Official

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - The United States will commit an additional \$200 million to the World Bank's fund to prevent pandemics during the virtual global covid summit that will take place Thursday morning, a senior US administration official told reporters.

"We'll be providing additional funding for the global health security and pandemic preparedness fund at the World Bank," the official said during a conference call. "Building on our initial seed pledge of \$250 million to establish that fund, we'll be increasing our pledge by an additional \$200 million for a total of \$450 million."

The World Bank's fund will provide sustained financing for improving local, national and global capacity to prevent, detect and respond to pandemics and other disease or infectious disease threats, the US official said.

The United States will co-host the virtual COVID-19 global summit alongside Belize, Germany, Indonesia, and Senegal, the official said.

The summit will emphasize two points: the need for the global community to redouble efforts to control the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic and to ensure the world is prepared to respond to another pandemic.

Moreover, the official said there are three issues the international community needs to prioritize, including the need to address new sub-variants of the novel coronavirus that continue to emerge and continuing to fund global vaccination efforts, preventing deaths among the most vulnerable, and preventing future variants and pandemics.

The summit will be attended by representatives of world governments, multilateral organizations, philanthropies, businesses, and civil society leaders, the official said. A US official said the United States did ask Russia to join the United States and its partners to combat and prevent infectious diseases.

The summit will call on countries to invest in the World Bank's new global pandemic preparedness and health security fund.

The Biden administration will emphasize during the summit that there is an urgent need for the US Congress to approve President Joe Biden's requested \$22.5 billion in emergency funding to continue its novel coronavirus response, the US official said.

US President Joe Biden, US Vice President, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield, US Secretary of Health and Human Services Xavier Becerra, USAID Administrator Samantha Power, US Deputy National Security Adviser Daleep Singh, and White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Dr. Ashish Jha will participate in the summit, the US official said.

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RPT: PREVIEW - US-ASEAN Leaders to Discuss Security, Economic Matters in Region, Ukraine

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and his counterparts in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will discuss during the ASEAN summit this week the security concerns and economic opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region, including other urgent matters related to Myanmar as well as to Ukraine, a senior Biden administration official said during a conference call.

The ASEAN member states include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines. The White House said it did not invite the Myanmar junta and the outgoing Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte decided to skip the summit.

During their stay in Washington, the ASEAN leaders will meet with congressional leaders on Capitol Hill on Thursday, the Biden administration official said but did not disclose details about the topics of the planned discussions, the official said.

The ASEAN leaders will attend a meeting with senior US trade officials and business leaders and CEOs to discuss strengthening trade ties, the official said.

The ASEAN leaders will also attend a dinner hosted by Biden that will offer an opportunity for the US president to hear about what the group's goals are and how the United States can help achieve them, the official said.

The official pointed out that Biden and his ASEAN counterparts will also have broad discussions about Ukraine and Russia, including what next steps the United States may take to address the matter.

Myanmar will also be a subject of intense deliberation in all of the meetings during the US-ASEAN Summit, the US official added.

US media previously reported that there will be no planned private meetings between Biden and each of the ASEAN leaders, but the US official mentioned that Biden will have quick and private discussions with each of the ASEAN leaders in at the summit.

On Friday, US Vice President Kamala Harris and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will meet ASEAN leaders to discuss matters on maritime cooperation, pandemic recovery, and health security, according to the official. Harris will also host a separate meeting with ASEAN leaders and Biden administration officials that will focus on climate, clean energy, and sustainable development.

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US Attorney General Boosts Security for Supreme Court Justices Amid Abortion Protests

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - US Attorney General Merrick Garland ordered more security support to ensure the safety of judges sitting on America's highest court, Justice Department spokesman Anthony Coley said in a statement as abortion protests have been raging near the justices' homes.

Dozens of demonstrators have gathered near the homes of right-leaning Supreme Court judges after a memo was leaked suggesting the court would reverse the Roe v. Wade case, thereby putting an end to constitutional protections for abortion.

"Attorney General Garland continues to be briefed on security matters related to the Supreme Court and Supreme Court Justices. The Attorney General directed the US Marshals Service to help ensure the Justices' safety by providing additional support to the Marshal of the Supreme Court and Supreme Court Police," Coley said on Wednesday.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle criticized the protests which have gradually escalated. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin, the second ranking Democrat in the chamber, on Tuesday called the protests "reprehensible."

The leaked document was confirmed to be authentic but does not represent the court's final decision in the case.

The Supreme Court ruled in the Roe v. Wade case to extend constitutional protection of women's rights to undergo abortion without undue government restrictions. The 1992 decision in the case of Planned Parenthood v. Casey upheld the high court's ruling.

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US Draft Guidance Bans Sharing Intel Ukraine Could Use to Attack Russian Leaders - Reports
WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - The United States drafted guidance that would prohibit sharing intelligence with Kiev that could help Ukraine attack Russian leaders or other targets outside Ukraine's borders, The Washington Post reported citing officials.

The prohibition, however, does not extend to Russian military officers, the report said on Wednesday. The US also wants to prevent become a party to attacks that Ukraine might launch inside Russia, the report added.

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US Defense Secretary, UK Counterpart Reaffirm Relationship, Discuss Ukraine - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and UK counterpart Ben Wallace met in Washington to reaffirm the United States-United Kingdom defense relationship and discuss Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said in a readout of the conversation.

"The leaders discussed the importance of transatlantic cooperation and regional security in light of Russia's unprovoked and brutal attack on Ukraine," Kirby said on Wednesday. "They also discussed ongoing efforts to support Ukraine, including through the provision of security assistance."

Austin and Wallace also said they look forward to meeting again next month at the NATO Defense Ministerial meeting, Kirby added.

NATO is scheduled to hold a high-level leaders summit in Madrid, Spain, on June 29-30.

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US Congress to Hold Hearing on Infant Formula Shortage Crisis - Committee Chair

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - The US House Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee will hold a hearing into the shortage of infant formula across the United States, the chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee announced in a press release.

"Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr. announced ... that the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee will hold a hearing on Wednesday, May 25, on infant formula shortages," the release said on Wednesday.

The focus of the hearing will be on understanding the causes of the shortage, the actions taken to increase production and supply and on the additional needs to ensure access to safe infant formula across the country, the statement said.

"The nationwide infant formula shortages are increasingly alarming and demand Congress' immediate attention. ... Ensuring the safety and well-being of our nation's children, including safe and nutritious formula, is one of our most important collective responsibilities," Pallone said.

The Biden administration acknowledged the crisis earlier this week when White House spokesperson Jen Psaki announced the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was working "around the clock" to try and end the supply chain crisis.

On Tuesday, the FDA said it was cooperating with US-based companies to expand production and was also seeking to accelerate rapid expanding imports of formula from other nations.

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US House Passes Legislation to Isolate Russian Officials, Economy

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a number of bills designed to isolate the Russian government and economy from the global community, including legislation to exclude Russia from international meetings and to bolster existing sanctions. House lawmakers on Wednesday passed legislation requiring US Treasury Department and other officials to take steps to exclude Russia from certain international meetings of organizations such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the G20 group of nations.

The House also passed bills requiring US companies to expand their Russia and Belarus sanctions enforcement to entities and individuals under their control and prohibiting the Treasury Department from engaging in Special Drawing Rights transactions involving the two countries, as well as requiring them to advocate for other IMF members to do the same.

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US Urges Cambodia to Implement ASEAN 5-Point Consensus on Myanmar - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) – During a bilateral meeting in Washington earlier in the day, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman urged Foreign Minister of Cambodia Prak Sokhonn to seek the swift implementation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

“Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman met today in Washington with Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn to discuss United States support for Cambodia’s year as ASEAN Chair,” the statement said on Wednesday. “She urged Deputy Prime Minister Prak Sokhonn, in his role as ASEAN Special Envoy on Burma, to seek swift and full implementation of the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus, including an immediate cessation of violence and dialogue with all parties concerned.”

Sherman expressed US concerns about fundamental freedoms in Cambodia, including the prosecution of Kem Sokha and restrictions on civil society leaders in advance of the June 2022 commune elections and 2023 national elections, according to the statement.

On February 1, the Myanmar military assumed power after it accused the then-ruling National League for Democracy party of rigging the November 2020 general election. The military coup triggered a civil protests, resulting in the death of several hundred people.

In April 2021, the ASEAN held an emergency summit on Myanmar in Jakarta, reaching a Five-Point Consensus on immediate cessation of violence, dialogue establishment and humanitarian assistance. The consensus proved to be unsuccessful as the Myanmar military

continued to crack down on civilian protests. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners Burma, the Myanmar military has killed more than 1,300 people and arrested more than 10,000 people.

The ASEAN member states include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines.

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US Senate Rejects Democrats' Bid to Advance Abortion Protection Bill

(Updates with more details in para 3)

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - The US Senate failed to advance a measure advocated by Democrats to protect abortion rights in the United States, as the Supreme Court appears poised to overturn *Roe vs. Wade*.

The Senate rejected the Democrats' bid on Wednesday in a 49-51 vote, short of the 60 votes needed to make it past the procedural hurdle.

US President Joe Biden, in response to Senate Republicans blocking passage of the bill, said his administration will continue to explore the measures and tools available to protect access to women's reproductive care. Biden also suggested to US voters to elect more "pro-choice" senators during the midterm elections in November so the abortion rights protection bill can be passed and signed into law.

Last week, media published a rare leaked document from the US Supreme Court - a draft majority opinion by justice Samuel Alito - revealing that the high court is poised to vote 5-4 to overrule its 1973 decision in the *Roe v. Wade* case. The decision guarantees federal protection of women's access to abortion.

The leaked document was confirmed to be authentic but does not represent the court's final decision in the case. The Supreme Court has launched an investigation into the unprecedented leak but the culprit has so far not been found.

The Supreme Court ruled in the *Roe v. Wade* case to extend constitutional protection of women's rights to undergo abortion without undue government restrictions. The 1992 decision in the case of *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* upheld the high court's ruling.

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US House Passes Legislation Seeking Ukraine Debt Relief on World Stage

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - US House lawmakers overwhelming passed a measure requiring Treasury Department officials to advocate for debt relief for Ukraine on the world stage, including at international financial institutions and through bilateral and multilateral frameworks.

The House of Representatives moved forward the legislation on Wednesday afternoon with by a margin of 362-56. The measure requires US representatives to international financial institutions to advocate for the immediate suspension of all debt service payments owed by Ukraine and to provide them with concessional financial assistance.

The bill also calls on the Treasury Department to immediately pursue debt payment relief for Ukraine from other governments and commercial creditor groups through bilateral and multilateral frameworks.

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Wall Street Resumes Nosedive After 1-Day Respite, Tech Stocks Down Almost 30% on Year

NEW YORK, May 12 (Sputnik) - Wall Street resumed its nosedive on Wednesday after a one-day respite, with Big Tech stocks showing a year-to-date loss of almost 30% amid fear the Federal Reserve will tip the US economy into a recession with high interest rates to beat inflation.

The Nasdaq Composite Index - one of the three major US stock indices which groups top technology names such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google - tumbled 3.2% after a rebound of nearly 1% in the previous session.

Tuesday's close was the only positive one for the Nasdaq in the last five sessions.

Week-to-date, the tech indicator is down 6.4%, heading for its sixth straight weekly decline.

Year-to-date, it is off by 27.5%.

The latest thumb-down for stocks came after the Labor Department reported that the US Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 8.3% in April versus an annual growth of 8.5% in March. The modest growth aside, the number was still higher than the 8.1% CPI growth expected by economists in the 12 months to April. That meant inflation was elevated and not far from the 40-year highs seen in recent months.

"Today's headlines were supposed to be that inflation peaked in March, not plateaued," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "Wall Street thought it was going to be done with inflation rearing its ugly head but that does not appear to be the case. Inflation is still expected to decelerate over the next few months, but it won't be sharp given the rising prices on gas, hotel, airfares, and possibly a wide-range of goods that will be impacted by China's COVID lockdowns."

The Federal Reserve has said it is determined to bring inflation back down to its target of 2% per year and has embarked on a regime of increasing interest rates to achieve that.

The central bank officials said they are now debating the viability of a 75-basis point (bps) interest rate hike in June, after the 50-bps and 25-bps increases at their May and March meetings, respectively. A 75-bps hike would represent the largest upward adjustment in rates since 1994.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell has also indicated that a total of seven rate hikes - the maximum allowable under the central bank's calendar of meetings this year - were on slot for 2022, with more to follow in 2023, until a return to the annual 2% inflation rate is achieved.

Economists fear that the US economy, finally on the path to resilience after the damage wrought by the two-year long coronavirus pandemic, will head for recession again from the Fed's actions.

Aside from the Nasdaq, other major stock indexes on Wall Street as fell in Wednesday's trade. The S&P 500 Index, which groups the top 500 US stocks, closed down 1.7%.

Week-to-date, the S&P 500 is down 4.6%, heading to its sixth straight weekly decline like the Nasdaq. Year-to-date, it is off by 17.5%.

The broad-based Dow Jones Industrial Average Index bucked the positive trend, settling down about 1%.

Week-to-date, the Dow is down 3.2%, heading to its seventh straight weekly decline.

Year-to-date, it is down 12.4%.

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China Will Not Support US Draft UN Resolution on Sanctions Against N. Korea - Envoy

WASHINGTON, May 12 (Sputnik) - Beijing will not support Washington's draft UN resolution on sanctions against North Korea, Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jun told reporters.

"We will not support the current US draft resolution," the envoy said on Wednesday. "We have proposed the other options and discussions are still going on. We certainly hope that we can find a solution avoiding a confrontation in the Security Council."