

**6/2/22 Thursday**

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Afghanistan All Over Again? US Lawmakers Fret Over Accounting of Weapons Biden Sending to Ukraine

Amid the billions in weapons being shipped to Ukraine, Washington has settled for pledges of “accountability” from Kiev, including that it won’t use the weapons to attack Russian soil, although the Pentagon has no way of knowing if Ukraine is keeping its word.

Since Russia launched the special operation in Ukraine on February 24, the US has pledged a total of \$23.9 billion in military aid to Ukraine - nearly nine times what it sent to Ukraine in the entire period between February 2014, when the US-backed coup seized power in Kiev, and February 2022.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute ([SIPRI](#)), [Ukraine spent](#) just \$5.9 billion on its military in 2021.

As a result, some US lawmakers from opposite ends of the political spectrum are demanding more robust accountability of the money and equipment being sent to Ukraine, wary of the debacle that unfolded in the US’ 20-year war in Afghanistan.

Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY), a conservative known for opposing big spending bills, stalled the \$40 billion aid package until a provision creating a government watchdog for its spending was added. Meanwhile, progressive Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) sent a letter to Pentagon comptroller Michael J. McCord [that was obtained by Politico](#) in which she urged him to comprehensively tally the spending.

Warren told the outlet on Thursday that a full accounting would be “critically important for both past and future funding requests.”

“The US government is sending billions in humanitarian, economic, and military assistance to help the Ukrainian people overcome Putin’s brutal war, and the American people expect strong oversight by Congress and full accounting from the Department of Defense,” she said.

Warren said that the Pentagon already owes the Senate Armed Services Committee, on which she sits, “several years” worth of spending reports, adding that she was “getting sick of the run-around here” and that the Pentagon “has not complied with the law.”

The Pentagon on Wednesday [laid out the contents of a \\$700 million](#) tranche of weapons promised by US President Joe Biden earlier this week, which includes [HIMARS rocket artillery](#), Mi-17 helicopters once destined for Afghanistan, radars, anti-tank weapons, heavy artillery rounds and other items.

As a result of Paul’s demands, the \$40 billion spending bill passed in May - only half of which is military aid - includes increased oversight, including requiring the Pentagon inspector general’s office to review how the Department of Defense spends the money given to it, and for the Defense and State Departments to report to Congress about their own accounting mechanisms. Paul’s and Warren’s anxieties about waste stem from the disastrous US war in Afghanistan, a 20-year debacle that cost the US some \$2.26 trillion and [saw billions of dollars wasted](#), despite

the regular pleading of the Pentagon's special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, John Sopko. However, [a Reuters investigation in 2013](#) found another \$8.5 trillion of appropriations since 1996 not accounted for by the Pentagon.

Despite the expense, which included weapons given to the US-backed Afghan government as well as funding the Afghan military and police forces' payrolls and civil reconstruction efforts, the [US-backed government crumbled](#) before a Taliban\* offensive in August 2021, several weeks before US forces were scheduled to leave the country, and the very government the US invaded Afghanistan to overthrow returned to power.

When asked about accountability and Washington's record of waste on Thursday, Rep. Ruben Gallego (D-AZ) told Politico "Ukraine is a different story" because its military is well-trained. "Obviously, we always have to be on the lookout, but this is not the same scenario that we have in the past," Gallego said. "There have been agreements between our governments about [some of the weapons'] usage. And I believe so far Ukraine has abided by all of them."

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Michael Avenatti Sentenced to 4 Years in Prison for Defrauding Porn Star Stormy Daniels

A federal judge in New York has given lawyer Michael Avenatti four years in prison for defrauding adult film star Stormy Daniels while representing her in a lawsuit against then-US President Donald Trump.

Speaking in a New York courtroom on Thursday, US District Judge Jesse Furman said that some 30 months of Avenatti's sentence could potentially run concurrently with time he is already serving for another conviction.

Avenatti was convicted in February of fraud and identity theft for stealing \$300,000 of the \$800,000 advance paid to Daniels for her 2018 book in which she laid out the salacious details of her affair with Trump in the years before he became president.

The attorney was already serving 2.5 years for a previous conviction for [trying to extort \\$25 million](#) from sneaker manufacturer Nike by threatening the company with bad publicity. Last month, [Avenatti issued an apology](#) to Daniels, saying it was "obvious that I failed you in many respects."

Avenatti represented Daniels in a 2018 case against Trump alleging he had [paid her \\$130,000 in hush money](#) to stay silent about their 2006 affair. The president has denied the accusations and accused Daniels of lying, but his lawyer, Michael Cohen, made a plea deal in August 2018 to dodge charges that he facilitated the payment, making a statement substantiating most of Daniels' story. Her book, "Full Disclosure," laid out in extreme detail the nature of her relationship with the real estate mogul-turned head of state.

However, a circuit court found her liable for \$300,000 in court fees paid by Trump due to the case. Daniels has [pledged never to pay](#) the fees.

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## A Day After Ending Lengthy Lockdown, Shanghai Detects Seven New Covid Case Clusters

It seemed earlier this week that it had finally ended, and just in time for the Dragon Boat Festival on Friday. However, Shanghai could be headed for a new lockdown after health authorities detected seven new clusters of COVID-19 cases.

Shanghai officials detected seven new cases on Wednesday: three symptomatic and four asymptomatic cases in the Pudong New Area and Jing'an District, [Shanghai Daily reported](#). All had been vaccinated. All 26 close contacts of those infected have been put under quarantine, and 21 of them have tested negative for the Omicron variant of the virus.

In response, two residential compounds in Pudong and two in the Caojiadu subdistrict of Jing'an were classified as "medium risk" areas, effectively returning residents to the at-home quarantine they had just left for another 14 days.

Wu Jinglei, director of the Shanghai Health Commission, told reporters on Wednesday that "the risk of resurgence still exists, although Shanghai has been fully restoring its normal production and life." He urged strict control measures be implemented to protect the city's "hard-earned achievements."

The news comes just a day after the lockdown ended for 90% of Shanghai's 25 million people, who live in areas deemed "low risk" of infection after having no cases detected for 14 days. A "phased" revival of daily life will take place over the course of the next month, with students continuing to attend class remotely from home, the [South China Morning Post](#) reported.

Employees of the city's major factories are maintaining their "closed loop" system of quarantining workers at work to keep production going.

Residents can take public transportation or visit public venues - as many are expected to do beginning on Friday when the Dragon Boat Festival, [a national holiday in which](#) droves of people will rush to watch boat races and eat pyramidal dumplings called zongzi. Average daily railway passenger trips are expected to hit 5.4 million, [China Railway said](#) on Thursday.

The outbreak had raged in Shanghai since March, although the city did not enter a total lockdown until April 1, requiring all residents to stay home and have goods shipped to their doors as health authorities tested them for COVID-19. Amid the outbreak, some 626,600 cases were detected in the metropolis.

The rise of the ultra-transmissible Omicron variant has put never-before-seen pressure on [China's "Zero Covid" policy](#), causing major outbreaks in Shanghai as well as in Hong Kong and Jilin Province, where negligence by local health authorities allowed asymptomatic cases to go unnoticed.

Still, the policy has spared China's 1.4 billion-strong population much of the anguish, death, and chronic illness the rest of the globe has seen as one variant of Covid after another swept through the population. As a result, China has recorded [just over 5,200 deaths](#), while the United States [has seen more than 1 million](#) and India [perhaps as high as 4 million](#).

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## Israel's Lapid Says Revived Iran Nuclear Deal Wouldn't 'Apply to Us in Any Way'

Despite nearly all aspects of reviving the nuclear deal having been agreed upon, both the United States and Iran continue to say that such an agreement is “tenuous” at best.

Speaking to the Jerusalem Post for an interview published on Thursday, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said that if the US and Iran succeeded at reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), it would not affect Jerusalem’s plans to destroy Iran’s nuclear program.

“It doesn’t apply to us in any way, and we are going to do whatever is necessary to make sure Iran doesn’t become a threshold nuclear country,” [Lapid told the paper](#) about the JCPOA.

“We have told the world we are not willing to take it anymore,” he added. “Iran says we can bring the war to your doorstep, because you will never bring it to ours. This is not going to happen. This is not how it’s going to play” out.”

“I understand why they felt that this is how it worked in previous years, but it’s not going to work with this government,” the foreign minister said. “If the Iranians are bringing war to our doorstep, then they’re going to find war at theirs. If they want to avoid it, then we will avoid it as well.”

Israel has long waged an espionage war against Iran’s nuclear program, which Tehran says is only for civil purposes like electricity generation and medical research. That has included sabotage of facilities, suicide drone attacks, [theft of documents](#), and assassinations, like the [brazen daylight murder](#) of senior nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh on the freeway outside Tehran in November 2020.

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have also boasted of planning airstrikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities, [which it most recently rehearsed](#) earlier this week.

Israel and the US claim that Iran lied about giving up its ambitions to construct a nuclear weapon when it signed the JCPOA in 2015, and in 2018 the US unilaterally pulled out of the deal and reimposed “maximum pressure” sanctions on Iran. Israel was never party to the deal, but sees the Islamic Republic as [its primary adversary](#) in the region due to its staunchly anti-Zionist foreign policy.

Ironically, Israel and the US both have nuclear weapons themselves and the US is the only nation to ever use such weapons in wartime.

In response to the US’ move, Iran [began reducing its commitments](#) made under the JCPOA, increasing the quality and quantity of uranium it refined. However, those have not approached the purity needed for a viable weapon, and no parallel effort to develop a weapon has been [reported by Western intelligence](#).

After US President Joe Biden took office in early 2021, negotiations began on returning to the deal, [which were nearly complete](#) by early 2022 but which have stalled on a number of ancillary issues, such as monitoring compliance if the deal were revived. Iran has also demanded its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps ([IRGC be removed](#)) from the US State Department’s list of terrorist organizations, and the US has demanded that certain American citizens in Iranian custody be released, although neither demand was itself part of the JCPOA.

During his interview, Lapid also said that it was possible the next Arab country for which the US might facilitate normalization of relations with Israel could be Saudi Arabia, another US ally and regional rival of Iran that [disapproves of the JCPOA](#).

"With Saudi Arabia, if it will happen, it'll happen with baby steps," the Israeli foreign minister said. "But I think some of those steps are being taken. I think that the American administration is game for this process, and we appreciate that."

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Uvalde PD Threatens Media as Texas Senator Claims School Police Chief 'Did Not Receive 911 Calls'

By - Evan Craighead

Pedro Arredondo, the Uvalde school district police chief who led the response to the Uvalde mass shooting was confronted earlier this week and has since denied allegations he has been uncooperative in the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) probe on the mass shooting, claiming he has been in contact with DPS officials "every day."

A Texas state senator is attributing the delayed response to the May 24 elementary school massacre in Uvalde, Texas, to a "system failure" that occurred amid an overwhelming amount of 911 calls from panicked students who were still trapped inside the school.

Texas State Sen. Roland Gutierrez, a Democrat who represents Uvalde in District 19, was visibly emotional on Thursday as he urged the public to refrain from placing blame on a single individual or entity following last month's massacre.

"I want to know specifically who was receiving the 911 call," said Gutierrez, a member of the Texas House of Representatives from 2008 to 2021, when he was elected to the upper chamber.

The Texas Democrat's comments come amid a series of child funerals and a confusing timeline of events that appear to have led to incensed calls for accountability in the wake of the Uvalde Police Department's seemingly botched response.

Additionally, Texas DPS Chief Steven McCraw has proclaimed that Uvalde School District Police Chief Pedro Arredondo made the "wrong decision" after believing the active shooter incident had morphed into a hostage situation. McCraw said that, in "hindsight," the error led Arredondo to not order responding officers to breach the classroom door.

"He's the incident commander," the lawmaker said of Arredondo, citing a discussion with the Commission on State Emergency Communications. "He did not receive [the] 911 calls."

While questions continue to emerge about the police response, Uvalde PD is not hesitating to push back when it comes to threatening journalists at Uvalde Independent School District headquarters.

"Well, I'm just gonna let you know Uvalde PD is en route," one officer told CNN's Shimon Prokupez on Wednesday. "Once they get here, they'll start issuing criminal trespasses for the property."

Another officer is overhead asserting that the department has given orders to provide members of the press with an "initial warning" before issuing criminal trespasses.

At the same time, the Texas Democrat proclaimed that Governor Greg Abbott (R) should shoulder some responsibility in association with the abysmal performance of responding authorities.

“There was error at every level, including the legislative level. Greg Abbott has plenty of blame in all of this,” Gutierrez proclaimed.

The massacre of 21 individuals—including 19 schoolchildren—is regarded as the deadliest school shooting in almost a decade.

At least 17 others have survived injuries sustained in the roughly 80-minute slaying carried out by lone 18-year-old gunman Salvador Ramos, who killed his own grandmother prior to the rampage. Ramos was killed during the shooting.

Skepticism has mounted against both law enforcement and state government officials, as both have struggled to establish a plausible timeline of events. As of this article’s publication, authorities believe that it took over an hour for Ramos to be eliminated by officers who followed the 18-year-old into the elementary school building.

The timeline is subject to change as additional witnesses are interviewed, state police noted.

“Uvalde PD was the one receiving the 911 calls for 45 minutes while officers were sitting in a hallway, while 19 officers were sitting in a hallway for 45 minutes,” Gutierrez said on Thursday.

“We don’t know if it was being communicated to those people or not.”

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US Military Operators Fear Pentagon’s SATCOM May Fall Victim to Adversaries Russia, China  
By - Evan Craighead

For the past decade, Pentagon officials have called for an increased emphasis on enhancing the defense capabilities of US orbital communications tech and infrastructure that have become vital to the nation’s armed forces and economy in recent decades. Such concerns have grown as modern warfighting requirements call for advanced SATCOM systems.

Nearly eight out of 10 US Department of Defense (DoD) employees believe future warfighting efforts will require advanced space-based networking capability to satisfy operational and mission needs, according to an annual survey conducted by the Government Business Council (GBC) and Viasat.

The GBC is the research affiliate of the Government Executive Media Group, a publication recently acquired by Chicago-based private equity firm Growth Catalyst Partners. Viasat, headquartered in Carlsbad, California, is a commercial SATCOM firm that, among other things, offers services to both the US government and military.

Researchers behind the third annual [‘State of Military Communications Technologies’](#) survey polled a random sample of 312 DoD personnel from August 2021 to January 2022 and found that 68% of respondents believe near-peer adversaries will match or exceed US military communications capabilities within five years.

However, only 19% of those surveyed said their agency or service was actively making investments in advanced satellite communications (SATCOM) systems to support modern warfighting needs.

At the same time, communications blackouts have been on a steady decline, according to study data.

“From 2019 to 2020, there was a 1 percentage point (pp) decrease in reported communications disruptions, and from 2020 to 2021, there was a 12pp decrease, suggesting growth in communications reliability,” researchers wrote in the May 10 release.

Exactly 40% of respondents said that they believe their agency or service is adequately prepared for a cyberattack targeting US defense communications tech/infrastructure. At the same time, 28% of those polled said they do not believe their sector has adequately prepared for such an event.

“Government is recognizing the need to modernize defense communications and the value of commercial capabilities,” said Viasat President Craig Miller in a quoted statement.

“But cultural change is often more difficult than technological change. DoD personnel see adversaries closing the capabilities gap and know new approaches are needed if the US is going to maintain an advantage.”

Washington has made it no secret that it believes both Russia and China pose a significant threat to US orbital infrastructure. Dan Coats, Trump’s director of National Intelligence from 2017 to 2019, [claimed in a 2018 Joint Staff intelligence directorate \(J-2\) report](#) that Beijing and Moscow “are increasingly considering attacks against satellite systems as part of their future warfare doctrine.”

Coats went on to claim that both countries “will continue to pursue a full range of anti-satellite weapons as a means to reduce US military effectiveness.”

The J-2 report warned that offensive capabilities against low-Earth orbit satellites could be in place by 2020. Coats also warned the Congressional Defense Committee that Russia has a “diverse suite of capabilities to affect satellites in all orbital regimes” and possesses an airborne laser that could be used against US satellites.

Russia, China, and the US are all members of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, established in 1959, and are tied to the Outer Space Treaty of 1967.

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‘Demonic’ DALL-E Leaves Netizens Shook as AI Appears to Create Its ‘Own Language’  
By - Evan Craighead

The DALL-E tool is a neural network “trained” by research and deployment company OpenAI to generate realistic images and art from text in natural language. Developers have previously found DALL-E capable of combining unrelated concepts in plausible ways and creating anthropomorphized versions of animals and objects

Giannis Daras, a computer science PhD candidate, took to Twitter earlier this week to share examples of what he controversially described as the AI’s “own language.”

“‘Apoploe vesrreatais’ means birds,” Daras tweeted. “‘Contarra ccetnxniam s luryca tanniounons’ means bugs or pests.”

Daras, who co-authored [academic research on the matter with Alexandros Dimakis](#), claimed that certain text prompts trigger the AI to produce images it has linked to the phrase.

“We discover that this produced text is not random, but rather reveals a hidden vocabulary that the model seems to have developed internally,” Daras and his colleague wrote.

From intrigue to talk of the Rapture being upon us, netizens had a wide range of reactions to Daras’ characterization of the AI.

“This is absolutely f\*cking wild and I love it,” [tweeted Mitchell Phillip](#) (@MGPAAlpha). “‘Our AI made up its own language’ WHAT.”

The theory was also picked apart by a number of skeptics.

“If a toddler starts to learn nonsense and speak gibberish, their parents will get worried. Some AI researchers get excited instead,” [tweeted Tiago Peixoto](#) (@tiagopeixoto), who said the theory was “specious.”

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Queen Elizabeth Pulls Out of Friday Jubilee Church Service After ‘Discomfort’ During Parade

Officially the longest-reigning British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II is presently in the midst of celebrations marking her seven decades on the throne. Although festivities for the queen’s Platinum Jubilee are expected to take place throughout 2022, an extended bank holiday in the UK has allowed for events to be scheduled through June 5.

The UK’s Queen Elizabeth II will be missing a church service at St. Paul’s Cathedral on Friday after the commonwealth’s longest-reigning monarch experienced “some discomfort” during the first day of her Platinum Jubilee celebrations.

A statement released by Buckingham Palace indicated that while the queen did enjoy the Thursday events, the “journey and activity required” for the Friday thanksgiving service would make it difficult for her to participate.

“The Queen greatly enjoyed today’s Birthday Parade and Flypast but did experience some discomfort,” the statement read. “Taking into account the journey and activity required to participate in tomorrow’s [service], Her Majesty with great reluctance has concluded that she will not attend.”

A source [relied](#) to the Telegraph that the “discomfort” had been tied to episodic mobility issues the queen had recently been experiencing, and that the decision to forgo Friday’s events is a “regrettable but sensible decision” based on the length of the journey and the required physical demands.

Despite the pullback for Friday, the queen did close out the Thursday events by participating in a beacon-lighting ceremony at Windsor Castle, albeit with a walking cane in tow.

The key event of the Thursday jubilee festivities included the annual Trooping Color ceremony, which entails a parade showing military colors and horsemanship. While Queen Elizabeth has

previously either ridden atop a horse or in a carriage during past iterations of the parade, the royal opted instead to offer her salute from the palace balcony.

Additional anticipated events are set to include the Platinum Jubilee Pageant and The Derby at Epsom Downs.

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Shooting at Wisconsin Cemetery Leaves Multiple People Injured, Police Probe Ongoing

The Wisconsin shooting comes just one day after a gunman entered a medical facility in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and killed four individuals after growing disgruntled with his surgeon following a surgical procedure.

Multiple people came under fire on Thursday as a funeral was being held at the Graceland Cemetery in Racine, Wisconsin.

Officials have not detailed an exact tally of the injured or deceased; however, unconfirmed reports have suggested at least five individuals suffered gunshot wounds.

A statement earlier released by the Racine Police Department indicates that "multiple shots" had been fired at the cemetery, which was still an "active scene and being investigated."

Although a motive remains unknown at present, the department has detailed that the shots were reported at approximately 2:26 p.m. local time.

Video footage of the scene has surfaced across social media showing first responders blocking off nearby access roads. The cemetery is located near residential areas.

[Dramatic video](#) of the shooting has also emerged online.

Local news outlet the Journal Times [reported](#) that the individuals who came under fire had been attending the funeral of Da'Shontay 'Day Day' King, who had died on May 20 after being shot by a police officer during a traffic stop.

An area resident informed the Times that they had heard between 20 and 30 shots at the time of the shooting. "It sounded like firecrackers," they recalled.

The nearby Ascension All Saints Hospital has since been placed on a temporary lockdown after victims of the shooting were transported to the facility. In a response to the development, a spokesperson explained that the lockdown was implemented "out of an abundance of caution."

An investigation into the shooting incident remains ongoing.

The shooting comes one day after an [Oklahoma gunman](#) killed four, 10 days after the [Uvalde mass shooting](#) claimed the lives of 19 children and two school teachers, and 20 days after the [Buffalo shooting](#) saw an 18-year-old gunman target and kill 10 Black Americans at a Tops supermarket.

US President Joe Biden is expected to hold a primetime national address on needed nationwide gun reforms. The speech was not previously included in the commander-in-chief's daily schedule. Biden [previously spoke](#) to the nation on the matter hours after the Uvalde shooting.

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#### UN Security Council Welcomes Extension of Truce in Yemen - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, June 3 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council on Friday issued a statement to welcome the agreement to extend the truce in Yemen for two months.

On Thursday, UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg announced the extension under the same conditions as the original document that established the truce and came into effect on April 2.

"The members of the Security Council welcomed the 2 June extension of the truce. They reiterated their appreciation for the measures taken by the parties to uphold the truce, which has led to real and tangible benefits for the Yemeni people, including a significant reduction in civilian casualties," the statement said.

The UN Security Council also welcomed that the truce has enabled the parties to meet directly under United Nations' auspices, but expressed concern about the grave humanitarian impact of the continued road closures around Taiz, the statement added.

The UN Security Council also praised the Yemen authorities for enabling the entry of fuel ships into the port of Hodeida and enabling flights between Sana'a and Amman and Sana'a and Cairo, according to the statement.

On April 1, a two-month ceasefire was agreed upon in Yemen under the auspices of the United Nations and supported by all parties to the conflict, including the Ansar Allah movement, also known as the Houthis.

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#### Former Trump Adviser Navarro Indicted for Contempt of Congress – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) – Former Trump economic adviser Peter Navarro has been indicted for contempt of Congress after he failed to comply with a subpoena issued by the House select committee investigating the 2021 Capitol riot, the US Justice Department said on Friday.

"Former White House advisor Peter K. Navarro has been indicted by a federal grand jury on two counts of contempt of Congress stemming from his failure to comply with a subpoena issued by the House Select Committee investigating the Jan. 6 breach of the United States Capitol," the Justice Department said in a press release.

The two counts include Navarro's alleged refusal to appear before the committee to testify and refusal to hand over documents related to his purported role in the riot, the release added.

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#### **Biden Says OPEC+ Output Boost Positive, But Does Not Know Whether It's Enough**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Friday that the latest OPEC+ decision to boost oil output is positive, but he does "not know whether it's enough" to address the problem of supply shortages.

"What I recently read when talking to my team that they [OPEC+] acknowledged that there is an oil shortage and they have made an announcement of late that they're going to increase production. So, I don't know enough to know whether it's enough but I know it's positive," Biden said during a press briefing.

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#### **Biden Says White House Working With Congress to Progress Gun Control Measures**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - White House staff is engaged with Congress to try and move forward gun control legislation in the wake of several recent mass shootings in the United States, President Joe Biden said on Friday.

"I'll do what I can to try to see if we can have some real progress," Biden also said when asked about the White House's work with lawmakers on gun control.

Biden on Thursday evening delivered a speech in which he called on Congress to move forward measures such as red flag laws and a ban on so-called "assault weapons." Biden's speech came a day after a mass shooting in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a school massacre in Texas on May 24, and a mass shooting in Buffalo on May 14.

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#### **Biden Says No Immediate Plans at Moment to Visit Saudi Arabia**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Friday he has no direct plans at the moment to visit Saudi Arabia but may go there as part of his Middle East tour.

"I have no direct plans at the moment. But let me tell you that I have been engaged in trying to work with how we can bring more stability and peace in the Middle East. And there is a possibility that I would be going to meet with both Israelis and the Arabs from Arab countries at the time, including, I expect Saudi Arabia [would] be included in that if I did go. But I have no direct plans at the moment," Biden told a press briefing.

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#### Marriott International Says to Suspend Operations in Russia

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) – American hotel chain Marriott International said on Friday it is suspending its operations in Russia due to Western sanctions.

"We have come to the view that newly announced US, UK and EU restrictions will make it impossible for Marriott to continue to operate or franchise hotels in the Russian market. We have therefore made the decision to suspend all Marriott International operations in Russia," the statement read.

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#### Desperate Situation of Afghans Receiving 'Far Less Attention' - US Special Envoy

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The desperate situation of the Afghan people has not lessened yet the world attention has been focused on the situation in Ukraine and elsewhere, US Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls and Human Rights Rina Amiri said on Friday. "As world's attention has turned to the tragedy in Ukraine, the desperate situation of the Afghan population, which is most vulnerable, has not lessened," Amiri said at an event at the US Institute of Peace.

The US Special Envoy mentioned that since the Taliban (under UN sanctions over terrorist activities) assumed power in Afghanistan, the country has experienced an economic meltdown and 97 percent of the population has become vulnerable.

Amiri pointed out that the world may be aware of the desperate situation of women and girls in Afghanistan, but it has less understanding of the plight of religious and ethnic minorities there. "The situation of ethnic and religious minority communities have received far less attention. They feel they are under an acute threat," she said.

Amiri noted that the ethnic and religious minorities in Afghanistan face physical abuse, torture, inadequate distribution of humanitarian aid as well as other challenges.

In May 2021, the Taliban launched a military operation against the Afghan government forces in connection with the announcement of the final withdrawal of the US troops from the country after 20 years of occupation. On August 15, the Taliban occupied Kabul and seized power in the country.

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#### China Reaches Out to Pentagon About Wei-Austin Meeting in Singapore This Month - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - China has formally reached out to the Pentagon about holding a meeting between Defense Minister Wei Fenghe and Secretary Lloyd Austin in Singapore later this month, Reuters reported on Friday, citing a senior US official. The United States during the meeting will focus on the issue of managing competition with China, the official reportedly said. The meeting would take place at the Shangri-La Dialogue, which takes place on June 10-12.

The Shangri-La Dialogue, convened by the Institute for Strategic Studies, is an annual event designed to allow heads of state and top defense officials to meet in person to discuss security challenges. The event did not take place in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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US, South Korea, Japan Call on DPRK to Cease 'Dangerous Behavior' – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) – The special representatives of the United States, South Korea, and Japan have condemned recent ballistic launches conducted by North Korea and urged Pyongyang to cease its "dangerous behavior" and return to dialogue, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, the diplomats met in Seoul to discuss cooperation on North Korea.

"U.S. special Representative [Sung] Kim, ROK [Republic of Korea] Special Representative Kim [Gunn], and Director General [Takehiro] Funakoshi strongly condemned the DPRK's continued ballistic missile launches, including the May 24 launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile, as destabilizing to the region and as violations of multiple UN Security Council resolutions. They called upon Pyongyang to immediately cease its unlawful and dangerous behavior and return to dialogue," Price said in a press release.

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US Adds 390,00 Jobs in May, Unemployment Unchanged at 3.6% to Embolden Fed Rate Hikes (Updates with more details, background in paras 1, 3-16; modifies headline)

WASHINGTON, June 4 (Sputnik) - Employers in the United States added 390,000 jobs in May while the unemployment rate remained steady at 3.6% for a third month in a row, the US Labor Department said on Friday in data likely to embolden the Federal Reserve to carry out more interest rate hikes to tame runaway inflation.

"Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 390,000 in May, and the unemployment rate remained at 3.6 percent," the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a unit within the Labor Department, said in a news release.

Economists polled by US media had forecast a jobs growth of around 320,000 in May, putting the reported number at around 70,000 above expectations, even as it lagged April's jobs growth of 428,000.

While the forecast for unemployment was 3.5%, the unchanged rate of 3.6% was still below the 4% defined by the Federal Reserve as maximum employment. The jobless rate has held steady since March.

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 that year. Jobs recovery has, however, been strong over the past year.

The monthly jobs report is being closely watched by the central bank to decide on the rate hikes that will be needed to contain inflation expanding faster than an economy growing at its quickest pace in four decades.

"[This will be] helping to ... push-up rates," economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on the ForexLive forum.

US inflation has been persistently running at four-decade highs since late last year, with the closely-watched Consumer Price Index (CPI) growing at an annualized rate of 8.3% as of April. After leaving rates at between zero and 0.25% for a period of two years due to the coronavirus outbreak, the US central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) raised them for the first time to 0.5% in March and subsequently to 1.0% in May.

The FOMC's target for inflation is a 2% a year and it has vowed to continually raise interest rates throughout the year, if necessary, to achieve that.

The FOMC could hike interest rates by 50 basis points, or a half percentage point, each time for three months in a row through September, the Federal Reserve Vice Chair Lael Brainard said on Thursday.

Rates will probably have to rise to as high as 2.5% by the year-end to neutralize inflation, San Francisco Fed President Mary Daly said Wednesday.

The FOMC has five rate decision meetings scheduled altogether between June and December. If each meeting ends with a half-point percentage hike, rates could be as high as 3.5% by the end of 2022.

Many economists have said they worry the Federal Reserve may tip the economy into a recession with the most aggressive interest rate hikes in a generation.

Aligning with those fears, the US economy has been on a weaker trajectory since the start of this year, experiencing a negative growth of 1.4% in the first quarter. If the economy does not return to positive territory by the second quarter, it will technically be in recession given that it takes just two straight negative quarters to account for a recession.

But some argue that the multiplier effect of rate hikes and cutback in FOMC bond holdings could do a faster job in bringing price growth to parity with interest rates and the central bank might not have to do too many rate hikes ultimately. June marks the start of what would be an accelerated pace of cutbacks on the US central bank's \$9 trillion balance sheet, as it begins rolling off tens of billions of dollars worth of Treasury and mortgage-backed securities each month.

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Sherman to Visit South Korea, Philippines, Vietnam, Laos on June 5-14 - State Dept.

(Adds details in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman will visit South Korea, the Philippines, Laos, and Vietnam on June 5-14 to follow up on recent summits between the United States and Asian allies and the launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, the State Department said on Friday.

"Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman will travel to the Republic of Korea (ROK), the Philippines, Vietnam, and Laos from June 5 to 14. The Deputy Secretary's travel to the region reflects the United States' continued commitment to the Indo-Pacific and follows last month's U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit, President Biden's visit to the ROK and Japan, the Quad Leaders' Summit in Tokyo, and the launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework," the press release read.

In South Korea, Sherman will meet with Foreign Minister Park Jin, Unification Minister Kwon Young-se, and First Vice Foreign Minister Cho Hyun-dong, the release said.

While in South Korea, the US diplomat will also meet with Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Takeo Mori and take part in a trilateral meeting with First Vice Foreign Minister Cho and Vice Foreign Minister Mori to discuss how the three countries can address the critical challenges of the 21st century.

In Philippines, Sherman is planning to meet with President-elect Ferdinand Marcos Jr. as well as with senior incoming and outgoing officials to discuss new ways of deepening the US-Philippines alliance, the release said.

In Laos, the deputy secretary will meet with Deputy Prime Minister Kikeo Khaykhamphithoune and Vice Foreign Minister Bounleua Phandanouvong and announce additional US support for surveying and clearing unexploded weaponry, according to the release.

While in Vietnam, Sherman will Deputy Prime Minister Le Van Thanh, Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son, and Vice Foreign Minister Ha Kim Ngoc to discuss bilateral relations. She will also announce additional support for surveying and clearing unexploded ordnance, the release noted.

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Musk Plans 10% Job Cuts at Tesla Due to 'Very Bad Feeling' About Economy - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) – Tesla CEO Elon Musk intends to cut every tenth job in his company because of his "super bad feeling" about the economy, Reuters reported on Friday, citing an email billionaire sent to company executives.

In a message, titled "pause all hiring worldwide," the businessman did not reveal the reasons for his "bad feeling," the report said.

The news comes two days after Bloomberg reported that Musk allegedly threatened to fire Tesla Inc. executive staff unless they resume working from the office for at least 40 hours per week.

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Two Women Killed in Shooting Outside Church in Iowa - Police

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - An adult man shot and killed two young women near the Cornerstone Church in Ames, Iowa, and then took his own life, police and the church said. According to the Story County Sheriff's Office, at 6:51 p.m. (23:51 GMT) on Thursday they received multiple 911 calls reporting that a male individual had shot two people. "At this time, the Story County Sheriff's Office can confirm that there are three people deceased, one of them being the male identified as the shooter," the office said. The church confirmed the shooting involving "two young members" of the Cornerstone Church community. "It is believed that an adult male shot these two victims and then took his own life," it said. The shooting took place in the parking lot of the church.

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Sherman to Visit South Korea, Philippines, Vietnam, Laos on June 5-14 - State Dept.

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US Adds 390,000 Jobs in May, Unemployment Rate Stays at 3.6% - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 4 (Sputnik) - US employers added 390,000 jobs in May, some 70,000 above economists' expectations, while the jobless rate remained unchanged at 3.6%, Labor Department data showed on Friday.

"Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 390,000 in May, and the unemployment rate remained at 3.6 percent," the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a unit within the Labor Department, said in a news release. An unemployment rate of 4% or below is defined by the Federal Reserve as maximum employment.

Economists polled by US media had forecast a jobs growth of around 320,000 in May, versus the April level of 428,000.

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RPT - Ex-US Police Officer Says 'Hardening' Schools Will Not Prevent More Uvalde-Style Massacres

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - Enhancing school security measures is not the answer to protecting students from shooters as Republicans have been arguing in the wake of the massacre in Uvalde, Texas, former Washington, DC police officer Ron Hampton told Sputnik. Since an AR-15-wielding gunman killed nineteen students and two teachers at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde last week Republican officials have argued that boosting security and improving mental healthcare are the keys to preventing such incidents, as opposed to stricter gun control laws.

"Schools don't need to be hardened... they don't need to put more cops in schools," said Hampton, former executive director of the National Black Police Association. "One officer couldn't stop an AR-15. That's why we don't need school resource officers in schools... this is a solution that doesn't work against assault weapons."

The actions of the police officers on the scene, who waited for more than an hour before storming the classroom, has been under intense scrutiny. At a news conference days after the shooting, Texas Public Safety Director Steven McCraw admitted that the commander's call to have officers wait for a tactical team before entering the classroom was the "wrong decision." Texas authorities have said the school resource officer was not onsite, contrary to earlier reports that claimed an officer did engage the shooter before he entered the building.

"This was a total and complete failure by the police to stop the massacre. There were 19 police in the hallway for more than 40 minutes," said Hampton, who served as a DC police officer for 23 years. "This illustrates the bankruptcy of the arms race concept. More money, more weapons, SWAT teams, all that bulls\*\*t."

Hampton also hammered what he called weak politicians who are beholden to the National Rifle Association and the gun lobby. In some ways, Hampton said, it is imperative that the country needs to see through the lies of the NRA and the GOP. He also said Americans need to understand the destructive power of AR-15s.

"They just ripped through the bodies which left the children unidentifiable. The authorities needed to get DNA samples from parents to identify the children," he said. "It was tough on me."

The first thing I thought of was my daughters. I thought about how cold and callous the killer was. He's evil. Evil enough."

On Wednesday, media reported that Republican and Democratic senators were making progress on hammering out "red flag" legislation which would enable law-enforcement officials to seize firearms from those a court deems a threat to themselves or other people.

"My ultimate hope is that they'll agree on red flag laws... and move the age up so that anyone seeking to buy a gun isn't 18 years old. We really need to do something," Hampton said.

The Uvalde massacre was the 27th school shooting in the United States in 2022 and so far, there have been 214 mass shootings in America since the beginning of the year, according to Gun Violence Archive data.

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Biden in Primetime Address on Gun Violence Presses Congress to Pass Assault Weapons Ban (Adds context, background, details in paras 6-11)

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden during a national address urged lawmakers to take immediate action to pass new gun control laws that may help curb the trend of mass shootings in the United States.

Biden's comments came a day after a mass shooting in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a school massacre in Texas on May 24, and a mass shooting in Buffalo on May 14.

"I know that we can't prevent every tragedy, but here's what I believe we have to do: ban assault weapons and high capacity magazines," Biden said during remarks at the White House Thursday night.

Biden said if that is not possible the US should raise the age to purchase a gun from 18 to 21, strengthen background checks, and enact safe storage and red flag laws. He also called for repealing immunity that protects gun manufacturers from liability while addressing the mental health crisis. The president said he respects lawful gun owners but the second amendment that grants US citizens the right to own guns is "not absolute."

Biden noted that there have always been limitations to what weapons US civilians can own, such as machine guns that have been federally regulated for nearly 90 years.

Red flag laws, he added, would allow a parent, teacher or counselor to flag for a court those exhibiting violent tendencies that pose a threat to classmates or themselves.

Earlier, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the chamber will vote on gun control legislation next week that includes measures such as raising the legal age to obtain a centerfire rifle or shotgun to 21 years, requiring all firearms be traceable, mandating safe storage of firearms and closing the so-called "bump stock loophole."

US senators have said they were making progress and there is growing momentum on bipartisan legislation to counter gun violence.

Previous efforts to tighten gun laws have been struck down in the Senate because of the so-called filibuster, which requires 60 votes in the 100-seat chamber. The so-called nuclear option, removing the filibuster, would allow Democrats to use their slight majority to pass something, but a couple lawmakers within their own party have refused to approve such a tactic.

On Wednesday, a shooting in Tulsa, Oklahoma resulted in five deaths including the gunman. The suspect in the deadly shooting at a hospital campus in Tulsa, Oklahoma, bought his AR-15 style semiautomatic rifle on the day of the massacre in order to kill Dr. Preston Phillips who had performed surgery on him and whom he blamed for enduring pain, Tulsa Police Chief Wendell Franklin said on Thursday.

On May 24, an 18-year old gunman wielding an AR-15 entered an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas where he shot and killed nineteen students and two teachers. On May 14, an 18-year-old gunman killed ten people and injured three others in a supermarket in Buffalo, New York. The FBI qualified the incident as a racially motivated hate crime.

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**Shooting at Cemetery in US State of Wisconsin Leaves Multiple Victims - Police**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - There are multiple victims following a shooting that occurred during a funeral in Racine, Wisconsin, local police said in a statement.

"There were multiple shots fired at Graceland Cemetery," the Racine Police Department said via twitter on Thursday. "There are victims but unknown how many at this time. The scene is still active and being investigated."

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel newspaper reported that the shooting happened at the burial service for Da'Shontay King Sr., a Black man who was fatally shot by police during a traffic stop on May 20.

Witnesses told the newspaper that they heard up to 30 gunshots. The report said a local hospital in Racine, Ascension All Saints Hospital, went on lockdown, a day after a man killed four people at a hospital in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with an assault rifle.

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#### **SOUTHCOM Chief Says US Sanctions Have Impact on Brazil, Paraguay**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US sanctions imposed on Russia are affecting Brazil's ability to acquire fertilizer and cutting off one of Paraguay's key importers of beef, US Southern Command Commander Gen. Laura Richardson said at a virtual panel.

"Some of the sanctions that we have against Russia impact some of the countries in my region - Brazil being able to get fertilizer for their country, Paraguay [selling] beef," Richardson said during a virtual panel discussion with the Institute of the Americas on Thursday.

Richardson said Russia had been consuming 30 percent of Paraguay's beef exports, but now is unable to pay for it.

Last month, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said new banking restrictions and fear of violating sanctions have caused delays or even terminations of transactions between Russia and trading partners in many countries, including Western farmers who are dependent on Russian and Belarusian fertilizers. Hence, Nebenzia said there is no point in discussing sanctions exemptions.

On May 19, Brazilian Ambassador to the United Nations Ronaldo Costa Filho, during a United Nations Security Council meeting on global food insecurity issues, said that it is undeniable that the West's unilateral sanctions imposed on Russia have a secondary impact on the operation of markets, resulting in an increase of costs and in hampering the availability of foodstuffs and fertilizers.

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#### **US Lawmakers Launch Probe Into Saudi's \$2Bln Investment in Jared Kushner's Firm**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - US House Committee on Oversight and Reform Chair Carolyn Maloney has initiated a probe into Saudi Arabia's \$2 billion investment in a firm owned by Jared Kushner, former US President Donald Trump's son-in-law and adviser, the committee said in a press release.

"Today, Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney, Chairwoman of the Committee on Oversight and Reform, sent a letter to Jared Kushner, son-in-law of former President Trump and former senior White House

adviser, requesting documents on a major investment in his firm, A Fin Management, LLC (Affinity) by the Saudi Government,” the press release said on Thursday.

The committee is trying to establish whether Kushner’s personal financial interests had an impact on US foreign policy in the Middle East when Trump was in the office and sent him a letter to that effect, the release said.

“The Committee on Oversight and Reform is investigating whether you have improperly traded on your government position to obtain billions of dollars from the Saudi government and whether your personal financial interests improperly influenced US foreign policy during the administration of your father-in-law, former President Trump,” the letter said.

In the letter, Maloney is asking Kushner and Affinity to provide an array of documents, including personal communications and records, no later than by June 16.

It is alleged that Kushner secured a \$2 billion investment from the Saudi Public Investment Fund six months after Trump ceased to be the President of the United States in January of 2021. The major investment is expected to bring Kushner a gain of about \$25 million from annual asset management fees, according to the release.

In April, Kushner was interviewed by the US House committee investigating the January 6 Capitol riot for more than six hours.

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#### Oil Prices Rise on US Draws; Traders Await Impact From OPEC Exports Boost

NEW YORK, June 3 (Sputnik) - Oil prices rose on Thursday after data showing strong processing by US refiners aiming to meet projected summer demand, although OPEC+’s decision to raise exports in a bigger way from July could weigh on the market.

London-traded Brent, the global benchmark for crude oil, settled up \$1.32, or 1.1%, at \$117.61 for a barrel, after a 0.6% gain a day earlier.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate, the benchmark for US crude, settled up \$1.61, or 1.4%, at \$116.87 per barrel, extending the previous session’s 0.5% gain.

Prices rose after the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) reported a crude stockpile drop of 5.07 million barrels last week, the most since an 8.02 million drawdown during the week to April 15.

US oil processing remained near 93% of capacity as refiners ran at full tilt to manage demand anticipated for the summer, the EIA said.

Inventories of gasoline, the main automobile fuel, fell by 711,000 barrels, extending a streak of declines dating back to the week ended April 1.

With distillate stockpiles, there was a drop of 530,000 barrels last week, the first since a decline of 913,000 barrels during the week to May 6. Distillates are required for making the diesel needed for trucks, buses, trains and vessels, as well as the fuel for jets.

But the bigger story hanging over the market - and likely to matter as soon as the euphoria over the EIA report fades - was the OPEC+ decision to raise output by 648,000 barrels per day (bpd)

in July and 648,000 bpd in August. Insiders in the global oil exporters alliance broke it down to the media as the group basically putting out three months' worth of production within two. OPEC+ groups the original 13 members of the Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), with ten non-OPEC oil producers steered by Russia. For more than a year now, OPEC+ has ensured that the countries in the alliance provided less crude than needed by the market in order to maintain optimum prices for a barrel - despite repeated pleas for more oil from major consuming countries such as China, the United States and India.

The generous boost to OPEC+ exports comes amid the increasing squeeze applied by the West on Moscow, the latest being the denial of shipping insurance for Russian oil and gas exports. "It certainly isn't in OPEC's interests to send the world into a recession," Jeffrey Halley from the online trading platform OANDA said. "It's amazing how US gasoline prices and mid-term elections focus the mind."

US President Joe Biden has tried to show a greater connection with the dismay of Americans over inflation as his Democratic Party heads for mid-term elections in November. Americans have been getting increasingly disillusioned with the Biden administration's inability thus far to control prices from making a bigger dent on their earnings each month.

The average price of gasoline at US pumps hit all-time highs near \$4.72 a gallon this week, up from \$3.04 a year ago. Diesel averaged \$5.56 a gallon, up from \$3.19 a year ago.

"These prices are stinging consumers, and forcing them to change their habits," Fox News said in a gas station roundup on Thursday, noting that while the Automobile Association of America had projected a travel surge for this summer, it still expected fewer trips and miles driven due to record fuel prices.

Demand for gasoline for the four weeks ending the third week of May was down 2.6% compared with last year, and down 6.7% compared with pre-pandemic years of 2016-2019, Andy Lipow, president at Lipow Oil Associates, told Fox News, citing EIA data.

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**US Federal Watchdog Opens Probe Into FDA's Role in Baby Formula Recall - Statement**

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Inspector-General (OIG) is going to assess the role that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) played in overseeing the production of baby formula at the Abbott plant up to its recall across the United States in February, the OIG said in a statement.

The US has been suffering from a baby formula shortage since Abbot initiated a product recall in February over concerns that bacterial contamination at a facility in Michigan may have contributed to the death of two infants and several other cases of illnesses.

"We will determine whether FDA followed the inspections and recall process for infant formula in accordance with Federal requirements," the OIG said on Thursday.

The OIG said it would "review the FDA's actions leading up to the infant formula recall at the Abbott facility in February 2022 to determine whether FDA followed applicable policies and procedures."

The FDA was required under federal law to conduct inspections of the manufacturing facility and oversee Abbott's initiation of the infant formula recall, the statement noted.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, June 3 (Sputnik) -

#### ARMS CONTROL

\* The United States is prepared to consider a new round of strategic dialogue with Russia but wants to see evidence Moscow will engage in good-faith negotiations, Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control Mallory Stewart said on Thursday.

\* The United States finds it important to expand arms control to cover theater range weapons alleging that Russia is likely to threaten or use them during a potential conflict, Stewart said.

\* The United States would like to see limits beyond 2026 on Russian weapons systems covered under the New START treaty and on new kinds of nuclear systems Moscow is developing now, Stewart said.

\* The United States and Russia must return to arms control dialogue as soon as possible if for nothing else then to ensure their crisis communications efficacy, UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu said.

#### GLOBAL FOOD SITUATION

\* Russia is ready to allow safe passage for ships with Ukrainian grain, but Kiev must clear the sea from mines, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia told reporters on Thursday.

\* Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin discussed in Moscow with UN Under-Secretary-General Martin Griffiths the humanitarian situation in Ukraine and the issue of grain exports, stressing that Russia does not block Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea, the Russian Defense Ministry told reporters.

\* Turkey, Russia, Ukraine and the UN have prepared a roadmap to provide a corridor for the withdrawal of ships with grain, Anadolu agency reported, citing diplomatic sources.

\* Turkey, Russia, Ukraine and the United Nations will discuss creating of a control mechanism to control the exit of ships with grain in Istanbul during a technical meeting in the next few days, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said.

#### ENERGY MARKETS

\* Oil production in Russia rose in May after a decline in April and will further grow in June, reaching an equilibrium that meets current conditions, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said.

- \* European consumers will primarily suffer from the embargo on Russian oil, and a large shortage of petroleum products in Europe is not ruled out, Novak said.
- \* OPEC+ will increase oil production by 648,000 barrels per day in July and August, the next meeting will be held on June 30, OPEC said.
- \* The United States applauds the OPEC+ decision to increase oil production by over 200,000 barrels per day in July and August, White House spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre said.
- \* Commitments under the OPEC+ oil output cut deal are voluntary, the alliance does not exclude countries from this initiative, Mines and Hydrocarbons Minister of Equatorial Guinea Gabriel Mbagha Obiang Lima told Sputnik, commenting on reports on Russia's exclusion.

#### SYRIA

- \* A militant attack in the Deir ez-Zor province in eastern Syria killed three civilians and injured 21 more on Thursday, state news agency SANA reported.
- \* US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield plans to meet with Russian envoy Vassily Nebenzia to discuss aid deliveries into Syria from Turkey, Reuters reported.
- \* The United States opposes Turkey's new operation in northern Syria and believes it will undermine efforts to fight the Islamic State (banned in Russia) terror group, Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield told Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister Sedat Onal.

#### WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA, BELARUS

- \* The United States on Thursday sanctioned Russia's steel and mining company Severstal and 15 other entities, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said in a statement.
- \* Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that the US decision to include her in the sanctions list is "another performance," adding that she does not have bank accounts or real estate abroad.
- \* The United States targeted with sanctions the Russian ministers of economy, transport and construction.
- \* The US Commerce Department added 71 parties in Russia and Belarus to its entity list, cutting them off from US-origin items.
- \* The United States has introduced a new round of Russia-related sanctions, the US Treasury Department announced.

#### UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- \* Holding referendums in Donbas republics on joining Russia is difficult under current conditions, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday, adding that it is necessary to ensure their security first.
- \* NATO will not be telling Ukraine what conditions it should accept or not accept in negotiations with Russia, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.

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## SOUTHCOM Chief Says US Must Counter China's Belt-Road Initiative in South America

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The United States must figure out how to deal with China's influence in South America through its Belt and Road Initiative, US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) head Gen. Laura Richardson said on Thursday.

"[China's Belt and Road Initiative] is absolutely something that we need to deal with and we need to counter and we need to figure it out or it's just going to continue to cause insecurity and instability, not just in my region but the entire globe," Richardson said during a virtual panel discussion with the Institute of the Americas.

Twenty-five of the 31 countries in the South America region have One Belt One Road Initiative infrastructure projects that are ongoing, and 21 of the 31 countries have signed up for China's Belt and Road Initiative, Richardson said.

Richardson pointed out that the US Army Corps of Engineers is also working on projects in South America that can offer an alternative to Chinese-funded infrastructure projects.

The Army Corps of Engineers is working with Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, on a water resources database for the La Plata River Basin, which affects all five of those countries, Richardson said.

In Chile, the Army Corps is providing expert exchanges on issues related to illegal and unregulated fishing, Richardson said. Ecuador, Honduras, Argentina, Peru, and the Dominican Republic are also receiving some type of assistance from the Army Corps, Richardson added.

The Belt and Road Initiative is China's international project seeking to promote cooperation between Beijing and over 60 of its trading partners in Asia, Africa and Europe. In February, Argentina announced it will join the Chinese Belt and Road trade initiative and receive funding worth \$23.7 billion for various projects from Beijing.

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## US Commerce Department Publishes Names of 71 Blacklisted Russian Entities - Notice

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The US Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) issued a notice on Thursday in which it published the names of 71 newly blacklisted Russian entities, including aircraft and shipbuilding companies.

"In response to the Russian Federation's (Russia's) further invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Department of Commerce is amending the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) by adding 71 entities... to the Entity List. These entities have been determined by the US government to be acting contrary to the national security interests or foreign policy of the United States," the BIS notice said.

The sanctioned entities include the Chkalov Novosibirsk Aviation Plant, Irkutsk Aviation Plant, St. Petersburg Shipbuilding Institution Krylov 45, Far Eastern Shipbuilding and Ship Repair Center and the All Russian Research Institute of Experimental Physics, among others.

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#### Federal Reserve Needs Time to Ensure Inflation in US on Downward Path - Official

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The US central bank needs time to be certain that inflation in the United States is indeed heading down from the current four-decade highs and its tendency until then may be to raise interest rates, Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland President Loretta Mester said on Thursday.

"It's going to take some time to be convinced that inflation is on a downward path," Mester said in a live-streamed speech. "Inflation has not yet peaked, we need to see several months of sustained downward readings to conclude that. We cannot say today how much interest rates will need to go. We need to get rates up to longer run neutral."

"Neutral" is Federal Reserve-speak for inflation being at par with interest rates.

Inflation in the United States has been persistently running at four-decade highs since late last year, with the closely-watched Consumer Price Index (CPI) growing at an annualized rate of 8.3% as of April.

After leaving interest rates at between zero and 0.25% for a period of two years due to the coronavirus outbreak measures, the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) raised them for the first time to 0.5% in March and subsequently to 1.0% in May.

The FOMC's target for inflation is 2% per year and it has vowed to continually raise interest rates this year and, if necessary, slow down the economy to achieve that.

Earlier on Thursday, Federal Reserve Vice Chair Lael Brainard said the FOMC could hike interest rates by 50 basis points, or a half percentage point, each time for three months in a row through September.

Rates will probably have to rise to as high as 2.5% by the year-end to neutralize inflation, Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco President Mary Daly said on Wednesday.

The FOMC has six rate decision meetings scheduled altogether between June and December. If each meeting ends with a half-point percentage hike, rates could be as high as 3.5% by the end of 2022.

Economists have said they worry the Federal Reserve may tip the economy into a recession with the most aggressive interest rate hikes in a generation.

Aligning with those fears, the US economy has been on a weaker trajectory since the start of this year, experiencing a negative growth of 1.4% in the first quarter. If the economy does not return to positive territory by the second quarter, it will technically be in recession given that it takes two straight negative quarters to account for a recession.

But some argue that the multiplier effect of rate hikes and cutback in FOMC bond holdings could do a faster job in bringing price growth to parity with interest rates. June marks the start of what would be an accelerated pace of cutbacks on the central bank's \$9 trillion balance sheet, as it begins rolling off tens of billions of dollars worth of Treasury and mortgage-backed securities each month.

Mester acknowledged the potential impact of the FOMC's joint actions in fighting inflation, saying higher interest rates and cutbacks in bond holdings will lead to demand reduction for goods and services that slows price growth.

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#### Firearm Suicides Among US Youth at Highest Level in 20 Years – Everytown for Guns Safety

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) – More US youths are committing suicide with firearms than at any point in the past 20 years as gun sales in the country reach "unprecedented" levels, a new report from the gun safety group Everytown for Gun Safety said on Thursday.

"Firearm suicide is having a devastating impact on American youth. Over the past decade, the firearm suicide rate among young people has increased faster than among any other age group," researchers said in the report. "Today, youth firearm suicide has reached its highest rate in more than 20 years."

The report noted that the dramatic increase in firearm suicides among youths coincides with "an unprecedented surge in gun sales in the US." People in the US bought around 22 million guns in 2020, following almost 19 million gun purchases in 2021.

"Roughly 30 million American children now live in homes with firearms — up 7 million since 2015," the report said.

The researchers also expressed concern that the firearm suicide rate will continue to rise because the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened a sense of loneliness and anxiety among young people.

Gun safety advocates, experts and researchers contend that all suicides, including suicides caused by a firearm can be prevented.

"We know that removing access to firearms, a particularly lethal means, is the easiest and quickest intervention," the report said. "We can save lives by implementing policies that limit easy and immediate access to firearms, increasing awareness of suicide risk factors, improving access to culturally appropriate mental health care, and supporting America's youth."

The vast majority of youth suicides by firearm happen in or near a home, and more than 80 percent of such incidents involved a gun which belonged to one of that young person's family members, the report noted.

Everytown said possible solutions to the rash of firearm suicides include limiting easy and immediate access to firearms and encouraging gun owners to securely storing their guns.

The experts also advocated red flag laws, which would allow relatives to identify a person at risk and prevent them from having guns; a waiting period between purchase and possession of a gun; and permit-to-purchase laws, which along with background checks, would include prohibitions blocking those who are not legally allowed to own a gun.

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## Pelosi Says US House to Vote on Gun Control Legislation Next Week

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will vote on gun control legislation next week following a series of high-profile mass shootings in the United States, Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Thursday.

"Today, Chairman [Jerry] Nadler and the Judiciary Committee are holding a markup of the bold Protecting Our Children Act. This package, which we will vote on next week, will make an enormous difference in our fight against gun violence," Pelosi said in a press release. The legislation includes measures such as raising the legal age to obtain a centerfire rifle or shotgun to 21 years, requiring all firearms be traceable, mandating safe storage of firearms and closing the so-called "bump stock loophole."

The US House will also vote next week on a bill to implement a nationwide extreme risk law to try and prevent firearms from being obtained by those who purportedly pose a threat to themselves or others, Pelosi said.

Consideration of the gun control measures comes following several recent mass shootings in the United States, including shootings at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York that resulted in ten people being killed, and at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas that killed 21.

US President Joe Biden is scheduled to deliver remarks Thursday evening on the recent shootings and his belief in the need for Congress to act by passing so-called "commonsense" gun control measures.

The Second Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees the right of Americans to keep and bear arms.

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## Suspect in Buffalo Shooting Charged With Domestic Terror, Hate Charge - District Attorney

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - Payton Gendron, the white supremacist suspected of killing ten people at a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, faces 25 charges, including for domestic terrorism motivated by hate, Erie County District Attorney John Flynn said on Thursday.

"He [Gendron] was arraigned on 25 counts of violation of New York State penal law, the highest charge is domestic act of terrorism motivated by hate in the first degree," Flynn said during a press conference. "This is a relatively new charge in New York State. It's only been on the books since November 1 of 2020. It is the first time in the history of New York state that this domestic terrorism charge, motivated by hate in the first degree has been filed."

Flynn said that if Gendron would face life a sentence of life in prison without parole if convicted on the domestic terrorism charge.

Gendron, 18, pleaded not guilty to the charges in the arraignment. The judge scheduled his next court appearance on July 7.

Gendron is believed to have written a manifesto describing white supremacist beliefs as motivation for going on a rampage in the Buffalo supermarket and killing ten Black people. The

FBI qualified the shooting as a racially motivated hate crime and President Joe Biden referred to the incident as domestic terrorism.

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**Biden Tells NATO Chief He Will Support Rapid Accession of Finland, Sweden**

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden told NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on Thursday he will support his effort to accelerate the accession of Finland and Sweden to the bloc.

Earlier in the day, Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris received Stoltenberg in Washington. They discussed preparations to the NATO summit in Madrid, scheduled for June 29-30.

"They also welcomed the applications by Finland and Sweden for NATO membership, and President Biden conveyed his strong support for efforts by Secretary General Stoltenberg to facilitate a rapid accession process that addresses the security concerns of all Allies," the White House said.

They also discussed "implications" of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine for transatlantic security and "the importance of strengthening NATO's deterrence and defense."

On May 18, Sweden and Finland submitted their NATO membership applications, abandoning decades of neutrality and citing a shift in the security situation in Europe caused by the Ukraine crisis. Turkey has expressed opposition to their NATO entry.

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**US Not Involved in OPEC+ Decision to Boost Production - White House**

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is not involved in OPEC+ decisions to boost oil production, White House spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, the OPEC+ committee recommended increasing the oil production by 648,000 barrels per day in July and August, instead of the planned 432,000.

"That is a decision that OPEC+ makes on their own, that is not something that we decide on, or that we are involved in," Jean-Pierre told a briefing, when asked what role Washington played in pushing the alliance to increase production.

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**Canada, Indigenous Nation Sign Historic \$1Bln Land Claim Settlement - Trudeau**

OTTAWA, June 2, (Sputnik) - Canada signed a historic land claim settlement worth C\$1.3 billion (\$1.03 billion) with Siksika Nation over the federal government's wrongful seizure of 115,000 acres of land in the early 1900s, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said at a press conference alongside Chief Ouray Crowfoot at Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park in Alberta.

"Today, we right a past wrong committed by the government of Canada. This agreement is the culmination of over 60 years of relentless advocacy and leadership by Siksika Nation, whose people have fought to right this historic wrong. It is also an opportunity to look forward as we build a better future together - one that is based on nation-to-nation dialogue, partnership, and respect," Trudeau said while addressing Chief's and leaders of Indigenous communities. Members of the Siksika Nation voted last December to accept a one-time settlement payment of \$1.03 billion from the federal government over a wrongful land surrender of 115,000 acres from their reserve dating back to 1910, the prime minister's office said in a statement. The \$1.03 billion land claim settlement is one of the largest agreements of its kind reached in Canada, the release added.

Autochthonous communities are engaged in numerous legal procedures regarding land rights, financial reparations, and the recognition of genocide committed by the Canadian government. Canada still has a very conflicting history with its Indigenous nations, being forcefully assimilated over the centuries. In the last years, numerous mass graves with remains from indigenous children were found at the location of former Catholic Church boarding schools. Many First Nations people still live in marginalized communities with little or no access to public services such as education and healthcare and drinkable water.

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State Dept Confirms US to Join Allies in Push for IAEA Resolution Urging Iran to Cooperate

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) – The United States is planning to join the United Kingdom, France, and Germany in their push for an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) resolution calling on Iran to fully cooperate with the agency, the State Department confirmed on Thursday. "We are currently consulting closely on the reports recently issued by the Director General [Rafael Grossi] in advance of the Board of Governors meeting next week, and we can confirm that we plan to join the UK, France, and Germany and seeking a resolution focused on the need for Iran to fully cooperate with the IAEA," spokesman Ned Price told a press briefing.

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Canada Sanctions Unable to Undermine Russian Economy, Change Security Policy - Envoy

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - Canada sanctions are unable to undermine Russia's economy or shatter its determination to achieve the objectives of its special military operation in Ukraine, Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov said in an opinion piece on Thursday. "The Embassy curiously observes how Ottawa is amassing sanctions against Russian citizens and entities. Our position remains the same: besides their Russophobic symbolism, these unfriendly gestures have neither sane meaning nor practical effect," Stepanov said. "It's not a

big deal for those persons sanctioned by Canada to miss local touristic opportunities. And Trudeau's cabinet banning or discouraging Canadian companies from working in the Russian market harms only Canadian business interests. Restrictions cannot undermine Russia's economy or compel Russia to change its sovereign national security policy."

On Tuesday, Canada targeted 22 individuals and four entities in a new portion of Russia sanctions. Among them are Management Company of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, Russian Agricultural Bank, former gymnast Alina Kabaeva, and daughters of Alfa-Group co-founder Mikhail Fridman.

"On a broader scale, set aside Foreign Minister Joly's peculiar words about purposeful efforts 'to suffocate the regime' (obviously using this euphemism to avoid publicly saying that the real goal is to suffocate Russia) and looking at the situation through the lenses of realpolitik, there is a clear path to achieve a diplomatic solution to the Ukrainian crisis if such declarations of Canadian government are sincere," Stepanov said.

Canada, the ambassador went on, should convince Kiev to order the Ukrainian armed forces and militant formations to lay down arms, voluntarily agree to denazification and demilitarization and adopt "permanent non-changeable constitution" that sets Ukraine as a neutral and nuclear-free state with equal rights for all ethnic groups and the equal state status of the Russian and Ukrainian languages.

Ottawa should use its influence to convince Kiev to recognize the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics as well as Crimea's reunification with Russia, according to Stepanov.

Pumping Ukraine with more and more Western weapons will only protract the crisis with "dire consequences" for the authorities in Kiev, the Russian diplomat warned.

"By all means, Russia will attain the objectives of the special military operation. Our determination will never falter, no matter sanctions or weapons supplies to Ukraine," he stated.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help in defending themselves from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian forces. The United States and its allies have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow.

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**UN Official Says NPT Parties Should Agree to Set of Measures to Reduce Risk of Nuclear War**

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The member states in the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty should agree to a set of measures to reduce the risk of nuclear war, UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu said on Thursday.

"State parties should agree to a set of measures to reduce the risk of nuclear war including at the nexus between technology and nuclear weapons," Nakamitsu said during the Arms Control Association's annual conference in Washington.

Moreover, Nakamitsu said the review conference next year for the Chemical Weapons Convention arms control treaty will be an important milestone in the life of the treaty because it will provide an opportunity to strengthen the norm against chemical weapons use and also set

the strategic direction for the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons for the next five years.

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Latvia Invites Canada, Ukraine to Three Seas Summit in Riga - Foreign Affairs Official

OTTAWA, June 2, (Sputnik) - Canada and Ukraine are invited to attend the next Three Seas Summit to be held in Riga later this month, Latvian Parliamentarian Secretary for Foreign Affairs Zanda Kalniņa-Lukasevica said at a press conference alongside Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly and Baltic counterparts in Quebec City on Thursday.

"Latvia will host the next Three Seas initiative Summit and Business forum in Riga on the 20 and 21st of June, and we have also invited Canada to support the initiative by participating," Kalniņa-Lukasevica said. "We also invited Ukraine to be present in this summit."

The announcement comes as Baltic diplomats are in Canada holding talks with Joly on energy, defense, and food security related issues.

During the presser, Joly stressed Canada's continued support for an overhauled defense on NATO's Eastern flank amidst increasing tensions with Russia.

The Three Seas Summit initiative is a political and commercial platform whose goal is to improve connectivity between twelve EU Member States allocated between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black seas.

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Guterres Welcomes Extension of Truce in Yemen

UNITED NATIONS, June 2 (Sputnik) - The United Nations welcomes the agreement to extend the truce in Yemen, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Thursday.

"I welcome the agreement by the Government of Yemen and the Houthis to renew the truce in Yemen for an additional two months under the same terms as the original agreement," Guterres said in a statement.

Earlier in the day, UN special envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg announced the truce extension. The renewed agreement was extended under the same conditions as the original document, which came into effect on April 2.

"The truce has also enabled the parties to meet directly under UN auspices to commence negotiations for the reopening of roads in Taiz and other governorates and the implementation of nationwide military de-escalation mechanisms. I strongly urge the parties to complete the full implementation of the terms of the truce without delay in order to uphold the interests of all Yemenis, who continue to suffer from one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world," Guterres stated.

The past two months under the truce have seen significantly lower civilian casualties, an increase in fuel deliveries through Hudaydah port while Sanaa International Airport has seen first commercial flights after almost six years of closure.

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US, Russia Need to Return to Arms Control Dialogue at First Opportunity - UN Official

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The United States and Russia must return to arms control dialogue as soon as possible if for nothing else than to ensure their crisis communications efficacy, UN Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu said on Thursday.

"The United States and the Russian Federation need to return to dialogue at a first available opportunity, if only to ensure the efficacy of crisis communication," Nakamitsu said at a conference on arms control.

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US House Judiciary Committee Considers Gun Control Package After Series of Mass Shootings

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives' Judiciary Committee on Thursday began consideration of a bill that would enact an array of gun control measures in response to several recent mass shootings in the United States, including a supermarket shooting in New York and elementary school shooting in Texas.

The lawmakers debated H.R. 7910, known as the Protecting Our Kids Act, which includes measures such as raising the legal age to obtain a centerfire rifle or shotgun to 21-years old, requiring all firearms be traceable, mandating safe storage of firearms, and closing the so-called "bump stock loophole."

Republicans on the committee including Ranking Member Jim Jordan argued that the bill was rushed and does not offer real solutions to the problems at the core of mass shootings.

Republicans also expressed concerns about the legislation's constitutionality given the Second Amendment's guarantee of the right to keep and bear arms.

Democrats called the legislation overdue, not rushed, arguing that such measures have been discussed following mass shootings going back decades. Democrats also argued that the proposed measures have solid legal standing despite Republican concerns.

Lawmakers also debated whether empowering "good guys" with firearms, including arming teachers or other individuals to defend schools, would be an effective measure.

Consideration of the gun control measures comes following several high-profile mass shootings in the US recently, including shootings at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York that killed 10 people and an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas that killed 21.

Biden on Thursday evening is scheduled to deliver remarks on recent shootings and his belief in the need for Congress to act by passing so-called "commonsense" gun control measures.

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US Court Sentences Attorney Michael Avenatti to 4 Years for Fraud - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 02 (Sputnik) - A US federal court in Manhattan sentenced attorney Michael Avenatti to four years in prison after he was found guilty in February of having engaged in fraud and identity theft of his client and pornography star Stormy Daniels, the Justice Department said Thursday.

"Lawyers have a duty to be loyal and advocates for their clients. Far from being a loyal advocate for his client, Michael Avenatti stole his client's identity and her money in order to line his own pockets. Now, Avenatti will serve a substantial prison sentence for his brazen crimes and betrayal of his client," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Avenatti met Daniels in February 2018, when she was seeking an attorney to assist her with respect to a non-disclosure agreement that she had earlier signed with President Donald Trump, the release said.

Daniels later signed a book deal to publish her memoirs, and Avenatti, pretending to act as her attorney and in her interests, stole a portion of the advance on that deal by directing her literary agent to send the money to a bank account he controlled, the release added.

The Justice Department said Avenatti stole \$279,000 that represented two installments of Daniels' book advance. He then created a fraudulent and unauthorized letter supposedly from Daniels with her signature on it that directed future payments to a bank account controlled by him, the release said.

While pretending to be acting on Daniels' behalf, Avenatti pushed the publisher to send the portion of the payment early and used the \$148,750 for his personal and business use, the release also said.

When Daniels repeatedly pressed him about the missing payment, he lied that the publisher had not made the payment and ignored her requests to get the money, the release added.

Avenatti was also sentenced to three years of supervised release, as well as restitution and forfeiture. He is already serving a 30-month sentence for extorting Nike, Inc., according to the release.

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US Cancels \$6Bln in Federal Loans for Students Scammed by Corinthian Colleges - Harris

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Education has canceled \$6 billion in federal loans for students who were scammed by the for-profit college company Corinthian, Vice President Kamala Harris said on Thursday.

"I am proud to announce, together with the leaders on the stage that the Department of Education will cancel all remaining federal student loans for former Corinthian students," Harris said during a press conference. "This will benefit more than half a million people who still have loans, and it will add up to almost \$6 billion in debt relief for former students."

The move by the Biden administration will benefit some 560,000 former Corinthian students, according to the Education Department.

Corinthian has been under multiple investigations over allegations that the company exploited students.

The Education Department said in a statement that Corinthian engaged in widespread and pervasive misrepresentations of student employment prospects and provided students with misstatements about whether they would be able to transfer credits.

In addition, Corinthian falsified public job placement rates, the statement added.

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**Tulsa Shooting Suspect Bought Rifle on Day of Massacre to Kill His Doctor - Police**

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The suspect in the deadly shooting at a hospital campus in Tulsa, Oklahoma, bought his AR-15 style semiautomatic rifle on the day of the massacre in order to kill Dr. Preston Phillips who had performed surgery on him and whom he blamed for enduring pain, Tulsa Police Chief Wendell Franklin said on Thursday.

The shooting incident took place on Wednesday and resulted in five people being killed, including the gunman.

"We know through the help of our ATF and their gun tracing that at 2 p.m. on June 1 Mr. Louis purchased a semiautomatic rifle from a local gun store. That semiautomatic rifle was an AR-15 style rifle. We know that Mr. Louis purchased a semiautomatic handgun, a 4.0-caliber Smith & Wesson pistol, on May 29 from a local pawn shop," Franklin said during a press conference. Franklin provided the timeline of the incident, which started with a 911 call by someone who was on a video call with a doctor at the hospital.

When law enforcement officers came to the hospital building and were making their way to the second floor, they heard a shot when the suspect took his life, he said.

"We have also found a letter on the suspect which made it clear that he came in with the intent to kill Dr. Phillips and anyone who got in his way. He blamed Dr. Phillips for the ongoing pain following the surgery," Franklin said.

On May 19, the gunman went to the hospital for a back surgery that was performed Dr. Phillips and was released on May 24, he said.

Following his release, Louis called the hospital several times over several days complaining of pain, and on May 31 the doctor saw him for additional treatment, Franklin said.

However, the gunman called again complaining of back pain and wanting additional assistance, Franklin also said, noting that the authorities recovered multiple casings from the crime scene.

The other victims were in the hospital awaiting medical services and stood in the way of the gunman, he added.

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US Oil Inventories Extend Weekly Declines as Peak Summer Demand Dawns - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - US crude oil and fuel inventories are tumbling in sync with heightened driving activity as the peak summer demand for travel dawns, data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed on Thursday.

Crude oil inventories fell their most for a week in seven while stockpiles of gasoline, the main automobile fuel, slumped for a ninth week in a row, the EIA said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report.

Balances of distillates, the oil variant required for making the diesel needed for trucks, buses and trains, as well as the fuel for jets, fell for the first time in four weeks, the EIA report showed. "The numbers are bullish across the board for both crude oil processing by refiners and public consumption of fuel at the pump as the peak summer season for travel dawns upon us," John Kilduff, founding partner of the New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, said. "Yet, with gasoline and diesel prices hitting new record highs each week, one wonders whether it's just a matter of time before we see demand destruction set in."

The average price of gasoline at the pump in the United States hit all-time highs near \$4.72 per gallon this week, up from \$3.04 a year ago. Diesel averaged \$5.56 per gallon, up from \$3.19 a year ago.

"These prices are stinging consumers, and forcing them to change their habits," Fox News said on Thursday, noting that while the Automobile Association of America, or AAA, had projected a travel surge for this summer, it still expected fewer trips and miles driven due to record fuel prices.

The EIA reported a crude stockpile drop of 5.07 million barrels last week, the most since an 8.02 million drawdown during the week to April 15. Oil processing remained near 93% of capacity as refiners ran at full tilt to manage demand anticipated for the summer.

Gasoline inventories fell by 711,000 barrels, extending a streak of declines dating back to the week ended April 1.

With distillate stockpiles, there was a drop of 530,000 barrels last week, the first since a decline of 913,000 barrels during the week to May 6.

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UN Sees Positive Statements on Possible Meeting on Ukrainian Grain Transport - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The United Nations sees many "positive statements" over the possible meeting with representatives of Russia, Ukraine and Turkey on the issue of securing a corridor for ships to carry grains, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said earlier in the day that Turkey, Russia, Ukraine and the United Nations will discuss creating a control mechanism to control the exit of ships carrying grain during a technical meeting in the next few days in Istanbul.

"We have seen a lot of positive statements coming from various capitals. We also very much appreciate the role that Turkey is playing in all of this," Dujarric said during a press briefing. At the same time, Dujarric declined to provide any additional details, saying there is nothing more to share at present.

"Once we have something concrete to announce, we will do so," he added.

Dujarric pointed out that United Nations officials maintain high-level contacts with interested parties. UN Under Secretary-General Martin Griffith is currently meeting with Russian officials, while the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Secretary-General Rebeca Grynspan recently returned from a trip to Moscow.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to help defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian forces. The United States and its allies have responded by imposing comprehensive sanctions against Russia.

World leaders and international organizations have expressed concern the sanctions - and the mining by Ukraine of its territorial waters - may cause large-scale food crisis. Ukraine and Russia account for an estimated 30% of global exports of wheat, 20% of maize and 76% of sunflower products.

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Russia Ready to Give Safe Passage to Ships With Ukrainian Grain if Kiev Demines - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, June 2 (Sputnik) - Russia is ready to allow safe passage for ships with Ukrainian grain, but Kiev must clear the sea from mines, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia told reporters on Thursday.

"We are ready to provide the safe passage. But they have to demine," Nebenzia said.

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US Imposes New Sanctions on 17 Russian Officials, Businessmen, 16 Entities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The United States has introduced a new round of Russia-related sanctions targeting 17 individuals and 16 entities, including Russian Foreign

Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, two yachts allegedly linked to Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia's steel and mining company Severstal, the Department of the Treasury said on Thursday.

"The US Department of State imposed sanctions on five of Russia's oligarchs and elites, including Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Alexey Mordashov, the leader of Severgroup and one of Russia's wealthiest billionaires; and family members and entities associated with the oligarchs and elites," the Treasury Department said in a press release.

The United States also sanctioned Russian Economic Development Minister Maxim Reshetnikov, Russian Construction and Housing Minister Irek Envarovich Faizullin, and Russian Transportation Minister Vitaly Savelyev, the release said.

The Treasury department noted that Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitriy Grigorenko has also been designated as has Sergei Pavlovich Roldugin, who is allegedly a close friend of Putin, and his wife and opera singer Elena Yuryevna Mirtova.

The new wave of sanctions also targeted several Russian businessmen and their firms, including on Yury Slyusar, who is president of United Aircraft Corporation, and on Russia's steel and mining company Severstal and its Chairman Alexey Mordashov, the release said.

In addition, the US government designated seven vessels, including the Sea Rhapsody, Flying Fox, Shellest, Nega, Imperial Yachts and two yachts allegedly linked to Putin - the Graceful and the Olympia, the release said.

Moreover, the Treasury Department said in the release that it designated the Madame Gu yacht and the 3A-MGU helicopter housed on the yacht as well as the private airplane P4-MGU.

Other entities and individuals hit by the new US sanctions include SRL Skyline Aviation and its aircraft T7-OKY, Ironstone Marine Investments, JSC Argument, and O'Neill Assets Corporation, Imperial Yachts CEO Evgeniy Borisovich Kochman, entities OOO Nord Marine, OOO Yakht-Treid, OOO Bilding Management, and OOO Nord Marin Inzhiniring, SCF Management Services Cyprus Ltd, Non-Profit Partnership Revival of Maritime Traditions (Revival of Maritime Traditions) and its Russian subsidiary Limited Liability Company Gelios, according to the release.

The US Department of Commerce said it is adding 71 additional parties located in Russia and Belarus that will be cut off from US-origin items.

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US Ready to Consider New Round of Strategic Talks With Russia - State Dept. Official

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to consider a new round of strategic dialogue with Russia but wants to see evidence Moscow will engage in good-faith negotiations, Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control Mallory Stewart said on Thursday. "It's very hard now to understand how we can acknowledge and accept that they would be willing to engage with us in good faith with such a demonstration of inability to absorb what we are trying to work with them on ... I think if there were some way to indicate good faith on their

side, to indicate that the dialogue would be more meaningful than just another meeting in Geneva, we could consider something, but at this point ... its very hard to figure out how we can sit," Stewart said during the Arms Control Conference in Washington.

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US Wants to Expand Arms Control to Cover Russian Theater Range Weapons - Senior Official WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The United States finds it important to expand arms control to cover theater range weapons alleging that Russia is likely to threaten or use them during a potential conflict, Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control, Verification and Compliance Mallory Stewart said on Thursday.

"Expanding arms control to cover these theater range weapons is critically important, since Russia is more likely to threaten or actually use these weapons during a conflict," Stewart said during a talk organized by the Arms Control Association.

A theater range weapon is any weapon system with a range of up to 3,500 kilometers or 2,200 miles.

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US Wants to Sustain Limits on Russian Arms Systems Under New START Beyond 2026 - Official

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) – The United States would like to see limits beyond 2026 on Russian weapons systems covered under the New START treaty and on new kinds of nuclear systems Moscow is developing now, Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance Mallory Stewart said on Thursday.

"We want to sustain limits beyond 2026 on the Russian systems covered under New START. We want to limit the new kinds of nuclear systems Russia is developing and we want to address all Russian nuclear weapons including theater range weapons," Stewart said during a talk organized by the Arms Control Association.

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US Private Sector Jobs See Smallest Post-Pandemic Growth in May - Payrolls Processor ADP

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - US private sector jobs rose by just 128,000 in May, private payrolls processor ADP said on Thursday as it reported the smallest growth for a month in the near two-year long post-pandemic labor market recovery.

"Under a backdrop of a tight labor market and elevated inflation, monthly job gains are closer to pre-pandemic levels," ADP's Chief Economist Nela Richardson said in a statement accompanying the data. "The job growth rate of hiring has tempered across all industries, while small businesses remain a source of concern as they struggle to keep up with larger firms that have been booming as of late."

ADP data showed that small businesses with fewer than 50 workers took the biggest hit in May as they reduced payrolls by 91,000.

Leisure and hospitality, the sector originally hit most by COVID-19 restrictions before becoming the biggest growth component of the labor market, saw just 17,000 new hires last month.

The ADP data was in contrast to three other employment-related reports that surfaced this week.

US jobless claims fell for a second straight week, the Labor Department said earlier Thursday. Filing for unemployment insurance fell to 200,000 for the week ended May 27, a decrease of 11,000 from the previous week which itself saw a decline of 8,000. Jobless claims rose in three prior weeks to that.

Private employment surveyor Challenger, Gray & Christmas also said on Thursday US-based employers announced 20,712 cuts in May, a 14.7% decrease from the 24,286 announced in April. When compared to a year ago, last month's cuts were 15.8% lower than the 24,586 announced in May of 2021, Challenger said.

The employment surveyor also said that for January through May, US-based companies slashed 100,694 jobs, down 48% from the 192,185 cuts carried out through the same period in 2021. It was the lowest number of job cuts recorded in the first five months of the year since the firm began tracking monthly job cut announcements in 1993.

In a separate report issued Wednesday, the Labor Department said US job openings fell in April from the previous month's record high, but there were still nearly two vacancies for every jobless person that suggested continued difficulty among employers in finding and retaining workers.

The mixed reports on employment came ahead of Friday's all-important US non-farm payrolls report, which is expected to cite a total of 325,000 new jobs versus April's 428,000 and an unemployment rate of 3.5% versus the previous 3.6%.

Unemployment among Americans reached a record high of 14.8% in April 2020, with the loss of some 20 million jobs in the aftermath of the coronavirus breakout that year. Jobs recovery has, however, been stellar over the past year, with the unemployment rate 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."

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US Sanctions 6 Leaders of Mexican Drug Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generacion - Treasury

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The US government has imposed sanctions on six leaders of the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generacion (CJNG) in Mexico, the Department of the Treasury announced in a press release on Thursday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated six individuals pursuant to Executive Order 14059 because of their support for, or actions on behalf of CJNG, a violent Mexico-based organization that traffics a significant proportion of the fentanyl and other deadly drugs that enter the United States," the release said. The sanctions followed a collaboration between the Treasury Department, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) with support from the US Customs and Border Protection agency (CBP) and the Mexican government, the release said.

Among the six sanctioned individuals are Severo Flores Mendoza, police chief of Ameca in Jalisco; Julio Cesar Montero Pinzon who is alleged to be a member of a violent CJNG enforcement group based in Puerto Vallarta; and Montero Pinzon, the release added.

The US government also sanctioned Saul Alejandro Rincon Godoy, a senior member of CJNG who recently died in Puerto Vallarta following a confrontation with the Mexican authorities, according to the release.

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#### White House Says Will Pay Interns for First Time in History

WASHINGTON June 2 (Sputnik) – The Executive Office of the US President has launched a paid internship program that will pay young people working at the White House and 14 other offices, the White House said Thursday.

"We are thrilled to announce that for the first time in history, participants in the White House Internship Program are paid. This is consistent with President Biden's commitment to removing barriers that prevent hardworking and talented students and professionals from participating in federal career advancement opportunities, particularly for low-income and first-generation students and professionals," the press release read.

Stipends are disbursed in two installments: participants will receive the first payment at or around the start of the program and the final payment after the successful completion of the program. Interns will receive a stipend of \$6,000 for participation in the summer program. Participants will be paid \$750 a week. All summer internships are located in Washington, D.C. and are full-time.

The Biden administration had been under increasing pressure since coming into office to pay interns who live and work in one of America's most expensive cities. The internship has never provided any money for housing or cost of living expenses provided which meant that it limited those who didn't have the means to work for free.

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#### Biden Welcomes Extension of Truce in Yemen

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The US government welcomes the agreement to extend the truce in Yemen, President Joe Biden said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, UN special envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg announced the truce extension. The renewed agreement was extended under the same conditions as the original document, which came into effect on April 2.

"The US welcomes the announcement today of a continuation of the truce in the Yemen conflict," Biden said in a statement. "The last two months in Yemen, thanks to the truce brokered in April, have been among the most peaceful periods since this terrible war began seven years ago. Thousands of lives have been saved as fighting receded."

For the first time in seven years, Yemenis are able to fly from Sanaa to destinations outside the country and additional fuel ships are now moving through the port of Hudaydah, helping ease Yemen's fuel crisis, the president noted.

Biden further urged all parties to move expeditiously toward a comprehensive and inclusive peace process, vowing that "our diplomacy will not rest until a permanent settlement is in place."

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**Ukrainians Arriving in Canada Can Apply for \$2,400 One-Time Payment – Government**

OTTAWA, June 2, (Sputnik) – Ukrainians arriving in Canada are now eligible for a single payment of 3,000 Canadian dollars (about \$2,400) per adult and 1,500 Canadian dollars per child, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) announced on Thursday, as the country has received over 35,000 Ukrainian nationals since the beginning of the year.

"These funds will help Ukrainian nationals and their family members meet their basic needs—such as transportation and longer-term housing—as they arrive in communities across Canada and find a job. The benefit will consist of a direct, one-time payment of \$3,000 per adult and \$1,500 per child (17 years and under)," the IRCC said.

Eligibility criteria for the assistance range from Ukrainians needing a valid work, study, temporary residence permit, or a record under the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel (CUAET), to them having a Canadian banking account and unique client identifier number.

Canada is also offering settlement services to "help Ukrainians adjust to their new life in Canada."

The services include language training, help with adapting to life in Canada, such as assistance with enrolling children in school or opening a bank account, as well as information and services to help find a job.

About 35,500 Ukrainian nationals arrived in Canada between January 1 and May 22, the Canada Border Services Agency reported. The country has also received 259,014 temporary visa applications between March 17 and May 22, with over 120,000 applications approved. According to the UN, over 6.8 million people have left Ukraine since Russia began its special military operation in February.

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US Accuses China, Russia, Ukraine of Violating Religious Rights - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is accusing the authorities in Russia, China and Ukraine of violating the religious rights of believers, the US State Department said in its annual report on international religious freedom published on Thursday.

The US government this year repeated its accusations that the Russian authorities have allegedly engaged in improper acts against religious minorities in Russia.

"Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported the authorities continued to investigate, detain, imprison, torture, physically abuse persons and/or seize their property because of their religious belief or affiliation or membership in groups designated 'extremist,' 'terrorist' or 'undesirable,'" the report said.

Members of Jehovah's Witnesses, Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Church of Scientology, Falun Gong, Protestants and other groups faced oppression, the report said. US diplomats in Russia have tried to advocate for greater religious freedoms in Russia and have highlighted the government's alleged misuse of the law on extremism to restrict the peaceful activities of religious minorities, the report said.

"According to the international religious freedom NGO Forum 18, the government used increasingly strict legislation on 'foreign agents' and 'undesirable organizations' to curtail, complicate, or prohibit the activities of organizations that promote human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, and to monitor their violation," the report said.

With respect to Ukraine, the State Department said the government there violated the religious rights of different groups, including of the Jehovah's Witnesses and Jews. The report also accused the authorities in the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics (DPR and LPR) of discriminating against religious minorities.

The report also recognized the challenges between the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), created by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew but not recognized by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and many other churches. However, the State Department avoided confirming UOC's claims over seizing parishes and forcing clergy and flock to move to the OCU.

"According to the International Center for Law and Religious Studies, the government at times continued to try to balance tensions between the OCU and UOC-MP," the report said, adding that the ROC and UOC continued to label the OCU as being a "schismatic" group.

The State Department also said the Chinese government has continued to limit religious freedom in the country and persecute believers.

"The NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers estimated the government imprisoned 2,987 individuals for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief as of December 7," the report added.

Christians, Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists and Falun Gong practitioners reported severe societal discrimination in employment, housing, and business opportunities, according to the report.

