

6/17/22 Friday

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'No Doubt or Ambiguity': Hawkish US Senators Want Dramatic Upgrade to Taiwan Support

The launching of Russia's special operation in Ukraine has been exploited by hawkish US politicians to further increase support for Taiwan, claiming China is preparing its own operation to reunite the island with the mainland.

Two US senators introduced a bill on Friday to overhaul Washington's relationship with Taiwan, including dramatically increasing military aid to the autonomous island and designating it a "Major Non-NATO Ally."

"As Beijing continues to seek to coerce and isolate Taiwan there should be no doubt or ambiguity about the depth and strength of our determination to stand with the people of Taiwan and their democracy," US Sen. Bob Menendez, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said in a [Friday news release](#). The bill is co-sponsored by Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC).

Taiwan's de facto foreign ministry [thanked Washington for the bill](#), calling it a "flagship" proposal.

The so-called [Taiwan Policy Act of 2022](#) would provide a total of \$4.5 billion in military aid to Taiwan over the next four years and loosen the requirements for that aid from the present requirement that the weapons be useful only in a "defensive manner" to "arms conducive to deterring acts of aggression by the People's Liberation Army (PLA)," China's military.

The bill would also designate Taiwan a "Major Non-NATO Ally," a status given to 20 countries around the globe opening up substantial military perks, including the ability to cooperate with the Pentagon on research, to buy restricted weapons like depleted uranium rounds, permission to use [Foreign Military Financing \(FMF\)](#) money set aside by Congress to buy US weapons, and the right to store American War Reserve Stocks of Pentagon-owned equipment that's pre-staged outside US military bases in places where the US expects to use them.

The bill would require the US to push harder for Taiwan to be included in international organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations, and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB).

Finally, the bill would amend the 2019 Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act, a bill that already pushed the US to advocate for Taiwan's inclusion in international organizations, to include a passage stating that the UN General Assembly "did not take a position" on the issue in [its 1971 resolution](#) recognizing the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the only lawful representatives of the Chinese people at the UN. It would also add the clause to the TAIPEI Act that "The United States opposes any initiative that seeks to change Taiwan's status without the consent of the people of Taiwan."

Washington's Pressure Point Against Beijing

The government on Taiwan is all that remains of the old Republic of China, which ruled all of China from the time the last emperor abdicated the throne in 1912 until the communist victory in the civil war in 1949. Both governments claim to be the real Chinese government, but only a

handful of small, US-dominated nations continue to recognize the Taipei government as such. The US switched its recognition in 1979 in an attempt to further divide China from the Soviet Union, but has maintained open but informal support for Taipei.

Beijing sees Taiwan as a Chinese province in rebellion that's destined to be reunited with the mainland under a "one country, two systems" framework similar to how Macau and Hong Kong, two former European colonies seized from China long ago, were returned to Chinese sovereignty. US support for Taiwan is seen as a serious infraction of Chinese sovereignty and interference in China's internal affairs.

Since 2016, US support for Taiwan has grown steadily stronger, thanks to a pro-separatist faction taking power in Taipei and a shift in US global strategy away from the War on Terror and toward so-called "great power competition" with Russia and China. Massive new weapons sales and visits to the island by high-profile politicians have followed, and US President Joe Biden has been forced to walk back several claims that Washington is obligated to defend Taiwan in case of attack.

However, for some US lawmakers, it still isn't enough: Menendez also [introduced a bill in February](#) to change the name of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) in Washington, DC, Taiwan's de facto embassy, to the Taiwan Representative Office. Last November, a group of Republican senators introduced a bill to [set aside \\$2 billion](#) in FMF annually from 2023 until 2032, provided Taipei commits to matching spending on a dollar-for-dollar basis.

That drive has only increased since Russia launched its special operation in Ukraine in February, with American commanders and politicians [further pushing Taiwan](#) to buy defensive weapons, including asymmetric weapons, and become "as prickly as possible" to deter a Chinese attack, as Mara Karlin, assistant secretary of defense for strategy, plans and capabilities, put it.

Following [reports in the Taiwanese press](#) that Taipei had shelled out millions for US lobbyists to push its interests in Washington, the Chinese Foreign Ministry on Friday asked if the US government would treat this "political infiltration" as seriously as it has reacted to accusations of such attempted influence operations by other nations.

"We've noticed that the Taiwan authorities only admitted to this and disclosed the figures after being probed by the press," spokesperson [Wang Wenbin told reporters](#). "In fact, this is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the big bucks paid to the US. According to media reports, US politicians like former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pocketed \$150,000 for a four-day visit to Taiwan. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham openly asked the Taiwan authorities to buy Boeing airplanes worth \$8 billion while visiting Taiwan."

"How much of Taiwan people's hard-earned money have the DPP authorities squandered for such activities? The DPP authorities wouldn't even dare disclose a complete list of payments. The US says others are engaged in political infiltration against the US. What then is the US's attitude over these activities? Will it take punitive action against them?"

The topic of Menendez's and Graham's bill did not arise at the presser, since it was held before the bill was introduced on Friday.

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DR Congo Says Rwanda 'Will Have a War' If It Wants One, Severs All Bilateral Agreements

The Congolese government has moved to sever ties with Rwanda as relations continue to deteriorate, accusing Kigali of controlling Tutsi rebels in Congo's North Kivu Province. President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) Felix Tshisekedi convened the country's Supreme Defense Council on Wednesday, following the capture of the town of Bunagana, on the border with Uganda, by forces from the M23 militia.

Speaking late that day, Congolese Minister of Communication [Patrick Muyaya said the council](#) "has taken the following measures: first, it demands that Rwanda immediately withdraw its troops, operating under the cover of the terrorist M23 group, from Congolese territory; secondly, it requests that the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo suspends all protocols of agreements, accords and conventions concluded with Rwanda."

Among those deals that would be suspended is one from June 2021 allowing the Congolese state-owned mining company Sakima SA and Rwandan firm Dither, Ltd. to mine and refine gold and coltan in the eastern Congo "in order to deprive the armed groups of the revenue from this sector," [according to Kenya's The Nation](#) daily. It also includes an agreement of combating tax evasion and double taxation and another promoting safe investment, and comes after Kinshasa banned Rwanda's flag carrier airline RwandAir from landing in its territory earlier this month. Kigali has [denied that it supports M23](#), a Tutsi group in North Kivu that has fought for years against Hutu Power groups connected to the [1994 genocide of Tutsis](#) in Rwanda, the most recent of which is the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR). Rwanda was previously granted permission to enter Kivu in 2009 to hunt down the FDLR, which was ultimately unsuccessful.

According to the [Project on Violent Conflict](#), a US Department of Homeland Security-funded project, "The relationship between the FARDC [The Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo] and the FDLR oscillates between open conflict and covert cooperation."

For years, M23 had been pacified by a peace deal with Kinshasa, but the group rebelled late last year, claiming agreements underpinning its demobilization had not been honored. Last month, tensions began rising after [a series of incidents](#) in North Kivu, including several rockets fired by a Congolese BM-21 system that landed in Rwanda, injuring several people, and the kidnapping of two Rwandan soldiers patrolling the border by the FDLR. Their [release was negotiated](#) by Angolan President Joao Lourenco.

"Rwanda does not like us. We are not afraid of it and we will fight it," Congolese Gen. Sylvain Ekenge, spokesman for the military governor of North Kivu province, [said on Tuesday](#), following M23's seizure of Bunagana.

"If it wants war, it will have war," he said of Rwanda, adding, "No one will occupy a single centimeter of our territory."

Most recently, an FARDC soldier on Friday crossed the border and reportedly began firing indiscriminately at Rwandans nearby, injuring two police officers. The soldier was shot dead

about 25 meters inside Rwandan territory and his body returned to the Congo later that day, [according to local media](#).

Lourenco, along with Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, have tried to ease tensions between their neighbors, wary of a return to the violence of the late 1990s, when much of the continent was sucked into a catastrophic conflict widely referred to as “Africa’s World War.” That war, too, was born out of Hutu Power militias in the eastern DR Congo, which Rwanda invaded to destroy in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide. The war brought down the government of then-Zaire before seeing the newly born DR Congo fracture into tribal fighting as different groups, backed by foreign powers, vied for control over valuable mineral resources. Some 5.4 million people died between 1996 and 2008, most of whom died due to disease or hunger.

On Thursday, Kenyatta, who chairs the regional East African Community (EAC), [called for the EAC’s](#) peacekeeping force to be deployed to Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu provinces “to stabilize the zone and enforce peace in support of the DRC security forces and in close coordination with MONUSCO,” the 14,000-strong United Nations peacekeeping force in the eastern Congo.

Meanwhile, [Tshisekedi has tried to outflank](#) Rwandan President Paul Kagame, urging UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson to “leverage his influence” over Kagame in the wake of them signing a deal for London to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda earlier this year.

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Human Space Junk Isn’t Just a Problem in Orbit, It’s All Over Mars, Too

With 15 human spacecraft sent to the Martian surface, there is an increasing amount of debris from Earth being scattered across the Red Planet’s surface.

Littering on Earth typically gets you a fine if the police find out, but what about on Mars? US spacecraft have recently spotted several pieces of human-made space junk on the planet, shed during missions to the surface.

“It’s a surprise finding this here,” the Twitter account for NASA’s Perseverance rover, which is written in the first-person, tweeted on Wednesday about a piece of thermal blanket used during its descent to the planet on February 18, 2021. “My descent stage crashed about 2 km away. Did this piece land here after that, or was it blown here by the wind?”

Mars has a thin atmosphere that is too sparse to support human respiration, but which can still blow dust around and [spin up dust devils](#) that dance across its surface. Perseverance brought with it a small helicopter, Ingenuity, that has demonstrated the ability to sustain flight on the Red Planet using the same methods as on Earth.

From its airborne perch, Ingenuity has also spotted human space debris. In late April, NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory, which manages the Mars mission, [posted photos snapped by Ingenuity](#) of the lander’s “parachute that helped the agency’s Perseverance rover land on Mars and the cone-shaped backshell that protected the rover in deep space and during its fiery descent toward the Martian surface.”

The photos, it noted, were taken during a flight to [study the wreckage](#) and help NASA design safer future landers. While the backshell fractured and created a debris field when it impacted the Martian surface at 78 miles per hour, almost everything else appears intact, including the parachute used to slow the lander's descent.

There have been 15 missions to the Martian surface by the US, Soviet Union, European Space Agency, and China since 1971, several of which impacted the surface at extreme speed thanks to system failures, and most of which have become inert junk as their batteries wore out. A similar phenomenon [exists on the moon](#) and on Venus, where humans have also sent numerous spacecraft missions.

However, for now, the junk doesn't seem to pose the same problems as [space junk in Earth orbit](#) does, which can strike astronauts, satellites, and space stations also in orbit. While spacecraft can be designed to withstand impacts by space junk or micrometeorites, as NASA's [Webb space telescope showed](#) when it was struck for the first time earlier this month, most aren't, and an impact could cause serious damage to equipment or be deadly to human beings.

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More Than 6,300 US Flights Delayed, Canceled on Friday Amid Continued Staff Shortages

US air carriers slashed or delayed thousands of flights on Friday as they continue to struggle with a shortage of labor and a surplus of customers, leaving travelers stranded at airports. According to online flight tracking services, by 5 pm Eastern Time on Friday, more than 1,300 US flights had been canceled and another 5,000 were suffering flight delays. The worst-hit airlines were American Airlines and Delta Air Lines.

"The vast majority of that is weather-related," American Airlines spokesperson Curtis Blessing [told USA Today](#), noting that storms in the Miami, Florida area had impacted a large number of flights for the air carrier.

The trouble carried over from the day prior, when more than 1,700 flights were canceled and 8,700 delayed, amounting to 31% of all flights in the US that day. It came as US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg met with airline executives, demanding answers about how they had changed their protocols to avoid the chaos seen several times this year already, most notably during the Memorial Day holiday last month, during the July 4 holiday weekend.

"I let them know that this is a moment when we are really counting on them to deliver reliably for the traveling public," [Buttigieg told NBC News](#).

In other cases, delays were caused by a shortage of open airport gates, [especially at Charlotte-Douglas](#) International Airport in North Carolina, a major travel hub. At New York City's LaGuardia Airport, more than one-third of flights were canceled on Thursday and at Newark Liberty, one of New York's other main air hubs, more than one-quarter of flights were canceled. In addition to bad weather, airline unions have blamed corporate leaders for failing to replace pilots who retired or took leave during the travel slump earlier in the pandemic. On Wednesday, American Airlines CEO [Robert Isom said the company](#) would revise its pay standards for its

14,000 pilots, acknowledging that standards had changed since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020.

Sick workers could also be contributing to the delays, with airlines that canceled their mask-wearing policies after the federal government lifted them earlier this year showing a marked increase in flight delays and cancellations, [according to CBS News](#).

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'The Mandalorian' Actress Gina Carano Speaks Out After Losing Her Job to Cancel Culture
By - Mary Manley

Lucasfilm first fired actress Gina Carano in February of 2021 after she shared offensive social media posts likening today's political climate to Jews who suffered during the Holocaust. The former Mixed Martial Arts fighter played the character Clara Dune on the "Star Wars" spinoff, "The Mandalorian."

"Jews were beaten in the streets, not by nazi soldiers but by their neighbors.... Even by children," [Carano](#) shared on her Instagram story in February of last year.

"Because history is edited, most people today don't realize that to get to the point where Nazi soldiers could easily round up thousands of Jews, the government first made their own neighbors hate them simply for being Jews. How is that any different from hating someone for their political views?" The post reads in an effort to equate religion to politics.

The post [Carano](#) shared last year did not appear to be written by her, but was most likely a screenshot of a separate user's post that she then shared to her own Instagram story. However, it was the final straw for fans, as it wasn't the first time Carano had shared controversial political beliefs on social media, and saw Carano booted from the Disney+ show.

The 40-year-old actress and former MMA fighter will be starring and producing in a new Western called, "Terror on the Prairie." She referred to the film as "closure" in the wake of her workplace catastrophe at Lucasfilm— which is owned by Disney. Carano's conservative views soured her reputation beyond repair with the multibillion-dollar company, so much so that a spokesperson for Lucasfilm said she wouldn't have any future employment at the production company.

"Nevertheless, her social media posts denigrating people based on their cultural and religious identities are abhorrent and unacceptable," the spokesperson added.

"When I was canceled, I felt like everything was turned against me," the actress told [Fox News](#) on Friday. "Everything that I loved was just against me. I was fighting for my name. I just felt like everything was stripped from me."

The actress then compared her own experience with cancel culture to the experience of her character Hattie McAllister in "Terror on the Prairie," a 2022 film from the conservative news and media company The Daily Wire.

"But Hattie, she's out there with her family. She's trying to be a supportive wife, but she's removed from her home and it's hard. Everything has been stripped from her. The elements have turned against her," the actress explained.

In September of 2020, Carano was accused of mocking trans people with snide remarks about gender pronouns. When asked by fans to put her gender pronouns on her Instagram profile, she instead wrote, “boop/bop/beep” in what she said was an effort to call out “abuse” by trans-supporting fans.

“They’re mad cuz I won’t put pronouns in my bio to show my support for trans lives. After months of harassing me in every way,” Carano explained in 2020. Following backlash from fans, she later wrote that Pedro Pascal—who plays the lead character in “The Mandalorian”—explained why including pronouns in one’s biography is important.

“Yes, Pedro & I spoke & he helped me understand why people were putting them in their bios,” she wrote. “I didn’t know before but I do now. I won’t be putting them in my bio but good for all you who choose to.”

“The support that I received from so many people... Never in my life would I have expected something like that,” Carano said in her interview with Fox.

“I just thought, ‘Life is going to be a bit harder and a little different.’ But so many people came to my defense. I think a lot of them were paying attention to what really happened instead of just reading the headlines... I kept on thinking, ‘Gosh, I’m not a controversial person at all.’ I just really felt like certain things needed to be talked about [concerning] the last couple of years.” Carano also garnered criticism for supporting former President Donald Trump on social media, including Trump’s false allegations concerning [voter fraud](#) after he lost the [2020](#) presidential race to President Joe Biden.

“I don’t think you should sign away your rights ... your right to speech just because you’re an actress or a basketball player. I think if there’s any time to stand up for something, it’s when you feel like your country’s in massive danger of losing our constitutional rights,” the actress said. “Normally I would just act, and I would probably be quiet. But I couldn’t do that because I felt like if I know this, and I believe this so passionately, and I keep it to myself, and I see everybody else holding their breath and not saying anything, then I felt like I would get sick. I’d hold that in and hold my breath along with everybody else.”

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Missiles Fired From Gaza Strip Into Southern Israel - Video
By - Mary Manley

Air raid sirens warning of possible rocket attacks were activated in southern Israel near the Gaza Strip and the city of Ashkelon, which is located just 30 miles south of Tel Aviv.

"Sirens have sounded near the city of Ashkelon and the area adjacent to the Gaza Strip," the Israel Defense Forces said on Saturday.

Residents of the nearby area have already begun sharing footage of the sirens near Ashkelon on social media.

A rocket was launched from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory, but according to the Israeli military, the rocket was successfully blocked by the [Iron Dome](#) missile defense system--- a

three-part system that uses radar, command-and-control, and an interceptor that destroys incoming rockets to protect its citizens and infrastructure.

"One rocket was fired at Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip. The rocket was intercepted by an air defense system," the Israeli military said in a statement.

The Iron Dome is estimated to be 90% accurate in intercepting short-range rockets, according to Israeli officials.

Palestinian militants were responsible for firing the rocket, according to [The Associated Press](#).

The attack comes after a lull along the Gaza-Israeli border that had lasted for about two months. Palestinian groups have not claimed responsibility for the rocket attack.

Israeli troops were responsible for killing three Palestinians and wounding ten others on Friday morning during a military raid in search of weapons in the West Bank town of Jenin, which is currently occupied by Israeli forces. The Israeli military has been carrying out [raids](#) on an almost daily basis in the West Bank. The killing of the three young Palestinians most likely triggered the rocket attack.

The rocket was successfully blocked by Israeli forces and there have been no reported casualties.

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UK to Toss Assange Across the Pond - Cartoon

By - Ted Rall/Mary Manley

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's worst fears have come true; on Friday the United Kingdom approved of his extradition to the United States despite his efforts to evade arrest for the past seven years. The Australian journalist first sought political asylum at the Ecuadorian embassy in London in 2012.

UK Home Secretary Priti Patel has signed an order to hand over Assange to the US, where he will face espionage and hacking charges for his work as an activist in organizing and directing the non-profit WikiLeaks, which publishes classified media online.

According to both his wife and attorneys, Julian Assange, 50, is "certain" to die while in US custody. His attorneys argue that he would be at a high risk of suicide were he to be placed in US custody. His wife Stella [Morris](#), 38, says the US legal system has "many issues" but that her husband's case is "unique."

"He has been persecuted for over a decade, he is charged in a way that prevents him from being able to mount a defense, and his health is deteriorating to such a degree that his body may not be able to take the strain," Morris wrote in an email to The Independent. She described the US as a foreign power "that is out for revenge" against Assange for exposing their "committed crimes."

[Assange's](#) legal team—which includes human rights lawyer Jennifer Robinson with Doughty Street Chambers in London—announced on Friday that they would appeal the order and attempt to take Assange's case to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France.

But the Home Office argued that they “have not found” that it would be “oppressive, unjust or an abuse of process” to extradite Assange.

“Allowing Julian Assange to be extradited to the US would put him at great risk and sends a chilling message to journalists the world over,” Agnes Callamard, Amnesty International secretary-general, [said in a statement](#) Friday.

Assange faces up to 175 years in US prison on 18 criminal charges.

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Sicario Monkey Dressed in Bulletproof Vest Dies in Narco Shootout

By - Mary Manley

At least ten suspected criminals in Texcaltitlan were gunned down while ten others were arrested by police. According to the state Attorney General’s Office (FGJ), a “heavily armed group” attacked security officers during an operation 60 miles southwest of Mexico City. Officers from the FGJ’s office and the National Guard gunned down alleged members of Mexico’s La Familia [Michoacana](#) cartel while in pursuit of the cartel leader. Officers responded with “legitimate force,” the FGJ said, when the heavily armed cartel members attacked them on the Toluca-Texcaltitlan highway.

One unexpected casualty was a pet [monkey](#) dressed in a bulletproof vest and a camouflaged jacket. The monkey was found dead with his arms wrapped around his 20-something-year-old owner who also died during the shootout.

The images of the “hitman” monkey circulated online, with many members of the public believing the photos to be fake—but they’re real, police have confirmed. The monkey was most likely trafficked by the drug gang, considering it’s classified as [endangered](#) by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

The spider monkey was also wearing a diaper.

The monkey’s body will receive a necropsy (an autopsy for animals) by vets from the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Zootechnics of the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico. Mexican animal rights group Animal Lawyers explained that gang members will often abuse or mistreat exotic pets, while security analyst David [Saucedo](#) adds that although Mexican law allows for the ownership of exotic pets under certain conditions, gang members will often take it a step too far, keeping tigers or monkeys as a symbol of status and power in an attempt to emulate the Colombian drug lords of the late 20th century.

“Mexican drug traffickers copied from the narcos of the Medellin cartel the custom of acquiring exotic animals and setting up private zoos,” said Saucedo. “According to the code of the drug trafficking aristocracy, having a private zoo was a prerequisite for being part of the circle of big-time drug traffickers.”

“Some drug cartel capos, like Zetas leader Heriberto Lazcano, acquired exotic animals to torture or disappear their victims,” he added. “Several of his enemies were devoured by the tigers or the crocodiles that the Zetas kept in their pens or cages.”

Three of the ten criminals who were detained are receiving medical care after sustaining injuries during the gunfight. Another died from injuries later at the hospital. Of those who were detained, at least three are women and one is a child who is less than 15 years old.

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Britney Spears' Lawyer Slams Father Jamie for Wanting to Drag Her Back to Court
By - Mary Manley

A conservatorship is a legal status in which a court appoints a person to control and manage another adult's finances because they are incapacitated. The individual may be in a coma, have advanced Alzheimer's disease, or have a serious illness/disability.

Popstar Britney Spears first fell under the [conservatorship](#) of her father Jamie Spears (born James Parnell Spears) in 2008. For 13 years Jamie controlled Britney's income, home, vehicles, assets and healthcare. On September 29, 2021, a judge suspended Jamie Spears as conservator of Britney's estate, and in November, the judge terminated the conservatorship. Britney compared the experience to "being in jail."

The Legal battle between [Jamie](#), 69, and his daughter are far from over. In a new court filing, Jamie claims that Britney, 40, is dragging his name through the mud both on social media and, apparently, in her upcoming book which won't be released until the end of this year.

The filed court documents request his daughter be deposed under oath concerning her [allegations](#) that she was deprived of pain medication, was forced into therapy against her will, and was made to give eight vials of blood per week while unable to see her kids.

Jamie's attorney, Alex Weingarten, said on Thursday that the beloved pop star "continues to make public social media posts containing incendiary allegations of various factual matters". Britney's attorney, Matthew [Rosengart](#), rebutted the filing saying Jamie had "impugned" his own character "long ago".

"Mr. Spears, who was ignominiously suspended by the Court in September, continues to disgrace himself, especially through this most-recent foolish and ill-advised filing, which is riddled with errors and falsehoods, as he himself knows," the Trial Attorney and former federal prosecutor said.

"In addition to trying to bully his own daughter, he is now pathetically reduced to trying to intimidate her, while abusing the legal process and running and hiding from his own deposition. Anyone else would be ashamed by these tactics, but he and his representatives are truly shameless. In terms of 'impugning his character,' Mr. Spears did that to himself long ago."

Jamie's court filings come days after his daughter's June 9 wedding to her longtime partner Sam Asghari, 28, at her Thousand Oaks home. Britney was not allowed to marry, nor allowed to have children during her conservatorship, but has two teenage boys with her ex-husband Kevin Federline.

"Despite his demonstrably false claims that he has 'nothing to hide' and would therefore 'hide nothing,' James P. Spears has been running and hiding from his deposition and accounting for his misconduct—under oath—as required by law," court documents stated.

When Jamie agreed to sit down for a deposition on the condition that Britney sits for her own, Rosengart rejected the agreement in order to protect his client from “further trauma and abuse.” Those in control of Britney’s assets are believed to have made millions off the Princess of Pop. Britney herself believes that her father and his team of lawyers took more than \$36 million from the musician over the course of 13 years. A forensic evaluation found that Jamie did profit at least \$3.6 million from his daughter's career, while taking an additional [\\$30 million](#) to pay for his own legal fees.

Jamie stepped down as conservator in August of 2021 following the [#FreeBritney](#) movement and pressure from Britney's legal team.

Despite the conservatorship, Britney released four albums, headlined a global tour that earned [\\$131 million](#), and conducted a Las Vegas residency for four years as her father controlled her career.

Britney’s Instagram account was deactivated on Thursday. She recently moved into a new \$11.8 million home in [Calabasas](#), California with her new husband.

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Two Actors Dead and Six Injured on Netflix’s ‘The Chosen One’, Production Suspended
By - Mary Manley

Actors Raymundo Garduño Cruz and Juan Francisco González Aguilar were killed in a car crash on June 16 during the filming of the Netflix series "The Chosen One." The show is an adaptation of Mark Millar and Peter Gross' comic book series American Jesus, in which a 12-year-old discovers he is the second coming of Jesus Christ.

A car accident near Mulege on the Baja California Sur peninsula left two actors dead and six others injured. The van reportedly flipped after it ran off the road into desert terrain. The actors were not filming at the time, but were instead on their way to a nearby airport after filming had wrapped in Santa Rosalía, according to [sources](#).

The six injured individuals include two actors and four crew members, all are said to be in stable condition. Mexican actors Raymundo Garduño Cruz and Juan Francisco González died in the car crash.

While Netflix has yet to comment on the accident, the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) say they will be investigating the crash.

“SAG-AFTRA has been in contact with Netflix and with the Mexican actors union ANDA about this incident and we are investigating the circumstances with local production,” said a [spokesperson](#). “On set safety is always our top priority. We will continue to take all necessary steps to ensure that our members and others are safe in their workplace.”

While an investigation is still underway, friends of those who were killed or injured in the car accident apparently contact the Daily Beast to air grievances, saying they had been told by the actors that transportation as well as other logistics during filming.

“It fills me with rage that there are reports of abuse and exploitation being shared by people involved with the production,” said Liliana Conlisk [Gallegos](#), who was an alleged friend of

González Aguilar. "I would like to demand that this is further investigated. If nothing wrong was going on, then there shouldn't be an issue with providing the information."

"It is imperative that the production report how many hours of rest the driver who lost control of the truck had," said friend of Raymundo Garduño Cruz, Fernando Bonilla on [Twitter](#).

The show's production company [Redrum](#) says they will be suspending production on The Chosen One temporarily. Plans for the show The Chosen One were first announced by Netflix in 2018. British comic book writer Mark Millar is also known for Ultimate Fantastic Four, Ultimate X-Men, Kingsman, and Kick-Ass.

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Uvalde Officials Use Legal Loophole to Hide Shooting Records

By - Mary Manley

Nineteen children and two teachers were gunned down at Robb Elementary on May 24 by an 18-year-old armed with an assault rifle and tactical vest. Reports quickly emerged that police hesitated outside of the school for up to an hour while the gunman was inside.

Parents were caught on tape pleading with the officers to enter the school. One mother told the Wall Street Journal she was put in handcuffs after pleading with officers to enter the school.

"The police were doing nothing," Angeli Rose [Gomez](#) said.

"It took them 45 minutes to do what? Nothing," said Jose Cazares whose niece, Jackie, died in the shooting. "My brother said 'let me go in there ... my baby is in there. I'm not going anywhere until I see my baby.'"

"I heard the governor say that he allocated half a billion dollars for school safety," Cazares added. "Why wasn't that school safe?"

Now Uvalde officials are using a legal loophole as well as other broad exemptions under Texas state law to avoid releasing police records. The move isn't surprising after the police failed to provide clear information regarding the shooting, opting instead to provide minimal information and continually changing their [narrative](#) on what transpired.

Almost 150 public record requests, including police body camera footage and recorded 911 calls have been sent to the Uvalde officials.

While the Texas Department of Public Safety is currently investigating the shooting, the City of Uvalde has hired a private law firm. Cynthia Trevino from the firm Denton Navarro Rocha Bernal & Zech, contacted Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton on Thursday asking him to rule on which public records have to be released, according to NPR.

The firm is using the "dead suspect loophole" as a reason to conceal information regarding the shooting. The loophole essentially argues that if a person dies while in police custody they are "protected" by law because they were not yet charged for their crime.

Police in Texas do not have to turn over information if a person dies in their custody. Governor Greg Abbott and a Texas police union have worked in the past to uphold this law.

"The policy consideration is a good one. Maybe you're wrongfully accused of something; this was meant to protect the accused. And now it's been flipped on its head," said Texas

Representative Joe Moody, who is also vice chair of the state house [committee](#) which is investigating the shooting.

Texas Representative Dustin [Burrows](#), who is leading the investigation behind closed doors, said he didn't understand why the Uvalde police took so long to cooperate with the investigation. Uvalde school district police chief Pete Arrendondo has not been included in the list of witnesses being investigated by the committee.

"It is meant to protect the innocent," added Kelley [Shannon](#), who is the executive director of the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas. "[In some cases] it is being used and misused in a way that was never intended."

The news of Uvalde officials essentially smothering details regarding the shooting comes on the heels of a senior sheriff's deputy telling the New York Times that Uvalde police passed up the chance to shoot the gunman before he entered the school.

On Saturday it was revealed that Chief Deputy Ricardo Rios said that two officers, one of whom had an AR-15-style rifle, failed to take down the school shooter because they were afraid of hitting children who were playing in the line of fire. The gunman first entered the school at 11:33 a.m. It was not until 12:50 p.m. that police shot the 18 year-old gunman.

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Jan. 6 Committee May Subpoena Pence for Testimony After Trump's Rant Against VP, Panel
By - Evan Craighead

The House select committee probing the deadly January 6 attack on the US Capitol is slated to present evidence this week in support of the assertion that former US President Donald Trump was involved in an elector scheme to overthrow the 2020 election results. Trump has accused the 9-member panel of "knowingly spinning a fake a phony narrative."

The January 6 committee may subpoena former US Vice President Mike Pence and other "key individuals" for testimony as it continues to hold public hearings on US President Donald Trump's alleged [pressure campaign against his former vice president](#), and state and local election officials, according to Sunday remarks from a panelist.

"We're not taking anything off the table in terms of witnesses who have not yet testified," Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA) said on CNN's "State of the Union."

Tuesday's hearing will also provide details regarding "how a similar pressure campaign directed against state and local election officials put their lives in danger," according to the panelist.

"And, similarly, [Trump] was told this scheme is essentially something that his own lawyers could not justify, but yet he pressed on, uprooted people's lives, put their lives and our democracy very much at risk," Schiff said.

Last week, Rep. Pete Aguilar (D-CA) claimed Trump had knowledge of the violence occurring at the US Capitol building when he tweeted that Pence, who was overseeing the certification of Electoral College votes in the Senate, "didn't have the courage to do what was necessary" and overturn the official results.

Rather than call off his rioting supporters, Trump sought to “accelerate the violence” against his vice president, Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) claimed during a Sunday appearance on CBS’ “Face the Nation.”

“All of us elected officials but also just Americans and their neighbors need to stand up for the rule of law and against political violence,” said Lofgren, a panelist on the House select committee. “It’s not what America is about.”

Pence was ultimately evacuated from the chamber as rioters were overheard shouting variations of the chant: “Hang Mike Pence!”

Panelist: Trump’s Response to Committee, Pence is Tantamount to a Confession

The panelists’ comments came two days after Trump publicly decried allegations from aides who claimed he [berated Pence in a “heated” phone call](#).

Speaking to a group of Christian conservatives in Nashville, Tennessee, the former US president specifically denied that he called Pence a [“wimp,” as one Trump White House assistant testified last week](#).

“I say it sadly because I like him, but Mike did not have the courage to act,” Trump said on Friday.

He also accused the nine-member panel of seven Democrats and two Republicans of “knowingly spinning a fake and phony narrative.”

Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD) fired back at Trump on Sunday, telling NBC’s “Meet the Press” that the former commander-in-chief is proving “what we have been contending all along” with his [public outbursts](#) and apparent disdain for the former vice president.

“Yeah, he’s essentially saying, ‘Yeah I did it and I’ll do it again,’” Raskin asserted.

“[I]f you allow impunity for attempts at unconstitutional seizures of power—which is what a coup is—then you’re inviting it again in the future,” the panelist added.

While the House select committee can only recommend charges against Trump, US Attorney General Merrick Garland announced last week that he, as well as “the Jan. 6 prosecutors,” are tuning in to the public hearings and plan to watch all of the televised proceedings.

Garland noted the Justice Department will not limit prosecutors’ ability to pursue charges against former or current US government officials. “This investigation is proceeding according to the facts and the law,” Garland told reporters. “We are not obstructed from continuing our investigation in any way.”

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Strong Magnitude 5.8 Earthquake Strikes Taiwan - EMSC

By - Evan Craighead

Seismic activity was felt as far as Taipei, Taiwan, on Monday morning as a strong earthquake registered between magnitude 5.8 and magnitude 6.0 struck Hualien County, a large, mountainous region with one of the lowest populations on the island.

A magnitude 5.8 earthquake was registered some 37 kilometers (23 miles) south of Hualien City, Taiwan, at approximately 9:05 a.m. local time on June 20, according to early data from the European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre (EMSC).

The seismic event occurred at a shallow depth of about 6.8 kilometers(4.2 miles), [according to Taiwan's Central Weather Bureau](#).

The bureau, EMSC, and US Geological Survey (USGS) initially registered the earthquake as a magnitude 6.0 event. However, the EMSC has since downgraded it to magnitude 5.8.

"Good side-to-side shaking for about 15-20 seconds on 4th floor in Zhubei," [said one witness in Zhubei, Taiwan](#), some 144 kilometers (89 miles) from the epicenter.

Another individual reported that they "felt the shake quite strongly" while on the fourth floor of a building in Taiwan's Taoyuan City, approximately 153 kilometers (95 miles) from the central point.

The earthquake struck a sparsely populated part of the island, according to the Central Weather Bureau. However, strong tremors were felt by those as far away as the Taiwanese capital of Taipei, located nearly 160 kilometers (99 miles) from the epicenter.

Taiwan is prone to earthquakes, as the island rests at the convergent boundaries of the Eurasian and Philippine Sea Plates.

There have been no immediate reports of injuries or structural damage.

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CBP: Terror Watch List Arrests Spike Amid Record Migrant Encounters at Southwest US Border
By - Evan Craighead

In January 2021, the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) halted public updates of Terrorist Screening Database encounters at the border. The CBP has since faced pushback from GOP lawmakers rejecting the agency's assertion that data previously released under the Trump administration is now "law enforcement sensitive."

US Border Patrol officials recorded an all-time monthly record of 239,416 migrant encounters along the southwest border in May, amounting to a 2% uptick from the number of encounters registered in April, [according to recent CBP data](#).

One contributing factor to the increase in attempted US border crossings is the federal government's use of Title 42, the Trump-era policy that employed COVID-19 and public health as the basis for the expulsion of migrants seeking asylum in the US.

Federal data shows 25% of encounters at the border in May were with migrants who attempted to cross into the US within the past year. Comparatively, the average one-year re-encounter rate was approximately 15% for fiscal years 2014 to 2019.

"Current restrictions at the US border have not changed: single adults and families encountered at the Southwest Border will continue to be expelled, where appropriate, under Title 42," CBP Commissioner Chris Magnus said in a quoted statement.

Around 69% (165,200 encounters) of the 239,416 migrants encountered at the southern border were logged as 'single adults,' amounting to a 2% decrease from April to May.

Border Patrol agents observed an 8% increase in 'family unit' individuals stopped at the southwest land border.

A total of 100,699 migrant encounters, or 42% of May encounters, were processed for expulsion under Title 42. Of those expelled under the Trump-era policy, 90,650 encounters involved single adults (55% of single adult migrants encountered in May).

"Our message to those who would try and gain illegal entry to the United States remains the same—don't make the dangerous journey only to be sent back," Magnus added, warning that human smugglers are seeking to "exploit vulnerable populations" and exploit migrants for "financial gain."

The remaining 138,717 migrant encounters were processed under Title 8—the US' border enforcement policy for credible asylum-seekers—with 74,550 encounters involving single adults and 49,432 encounters involving family unit individuals.

The law enforcement agency's statistical overview for May 2022 notably included an update of its Terrorist Screening Database (TSDS) encounters.

The TSDS, also known as the "watchlist," is a collection of sensitive information on the identities of individuals ranging from potential threats to the US, to fugitive terrorists.

As of this article's publication, the US has seen a rise in TSDS encounters at the southwest border, which has seen 50 cases for fiscal 2022 (October to May) so far. Just 15 TSDS encounters were recorded in fiscal year 2021.

Another 142 TSDS encounters were logged at the US' northern border for fiscal 2022 so far—eclipsing the 54 encounters observed in the previous period.

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One Dead, 8 Injured in Shooting in New York's Harlem - Police

WASHINGTON, June 20 (Sputnik) - One individual was killed and eight more were injured in Harlem neighborhood of New York on Monday, NYPD Chief Brian McGee said.

"Early this morning police responded to the report about numerous people being shot ... There are a total of nine people being shot," McGee said.

One male was later pronounced dead.

According to media reports, the victims were at a gathering or a barbecue. The investigation is currently underway.

Pressure has been mounting on the US government to tackle a rise in gun-related violence after a supermarket shooting in Buffalo, New York, killed 10 people and a massacre at a school in Uvalde, Texas, left another 22 dead.

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New York Fed Model Puts Odds of US Recession at 80%

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - A Federal Reserve Bank of New York model projects that there is an 80 percent chance the United States will experience a 1990's style recession, five of the central bank's researchers said in a blog post.

Earlier this week, the Federal Reserve announced the highest US interest rate hike in 28 years to fight inflation, with Chairman Jerome Powell denying the central bank was pushing the country toward a recession even as he expressed doubts a "soft landing" for the economy can be achieved.

"The chances of a hard landing - defined to include at least one quarter in the next ten in which four-quarter GDP growth dips below -1 percent, as occurred during the 1990 recession - are about 80 percent," the post said on Friday.

The analysts said the projection, generated by the bank's dynamic stochastic general equilibrium (DSGE) model, does not represent an official New York Fed forecast.

According to the model, the researchers explained, there is only a 10% chance of a "soft landing," defined as four-quarter GDP growth staying positive over the next ten quarters.

The model also projects inflation to remain elevated in 2022 at 3.8 percent, up a full percentage point relative to March, the post added. In addition, the forecast says inflation will decline only gradually toward 2 percent thereafter - including 2.5 and 2.1% in 2023 and 2024, respectively.

The post was authored by five central bank analysts including New York Fed Macroeconomic and Monetary Studies economic advisers Marco Del Negro and Andrea Tambalotti along with senior research analysts Aiden Gleich, Shlok Goyal, and Alissa Johnson.

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US Pauses Ukraine Drone Sale Over Fear Equipment May Fall Into Russian Hands - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's plans to deliver four drones to Ukraine was suspended amid fears that the equipment's advanced surveillance technology may fall into the hands of Russian forces, Reuters said in a report, citing two people familiar with the matter.

Concerns that the radar and surveillance equipment in the MQ-1C Gray Eagle drones were raised during a review of the delivery by the Pentagon, the report said on Friday. The issue was previously overlooked in the initial review, the report added.

The decision on whether to proceed with the delivery is now under review by senior Pentagon commanders, the report said.

The proposed drones are capable of staying airborne for up to 30 hours, gathering vast amounts of intelligence data, and carrying up to eight Hellfire missiles. Each drone costs approximately \$10 million, according to Army documents.

Officials are considering switching the drones' current radar and sensor equipment with less sophisticated technology, although such a move could take months to complete, the report also said.

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Wall Street Ends Week in Bear Market Territory Despite Friday Rebound

NEW YORK, June 18 (Sputnik) - Wall Street ended the week in bear market territory despite a rebound on Friday as growing fears of a US recession made more investors sour than optimistic about stocks.

"It has been a painful week on Wall Street as inflation has forced many central banks to become more aggressive with outlining their monetary tightening plans that will lead to significant slowdowns for their respective economies," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.

Wall Street's S&P 500 index, representing the top 500 US stocks, ended up 0.1% on the day. For the week though, the S&P fell almost 6%. For the year, it was down 23%. By broad market definition, any asset that loses 20% or more of its value from its most recent high or period like a quarter is defined as being in a bear market.

The Nasdaq Composite, which comprises marquee technology names such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, rose 1.4% for Friday. For the week, it lost almost 5% while for all of 2022, it was down 31%.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, comprising stocks of 30 large US corporations, bucked Friday's uptrend on the S&P 500 and Nasdaq by settling down 0.1%. Like Nasdaq, the Dow slid 5% on week. For the year, it showed a decline of 18%.

US stocks have experienced a severe downturn since the start of June, with losses accelerating after the Federal Reserve raised US interest rates by the most in 28 years, adding three quarters of a percentage point after earlier hikes of a quarter point and half point in March and May, respectively.

On Friday, the US central bank's divisional chief for Minneapolis, Neel Kashkari, said more aggressive rate hikes will likely follow if US inflation does not retreat from four-decade highs. The US economy has already shown a negative growth of 1.4% for the first quarter. If it does not return to the positive by the second quarter, the United States will technically be in a recession, given that it takes two straight quarters of negative growth to make a recession.

Also on Friday, US factory output fell for a fifth straight month as firms struggled with supply-chain bottlenecks and high costs while industrial production itself rose.

Despite that, some investors returned to pick up stocks cheapened by selling from earlier in the week. The rebound, however, was not enough to lift stocks from the bear market they had slipped into.

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UPDATE - Ottawa Police Says Expects Protests as Trucker Convoy Comes Back on Canada Day

(Updates to clarify description of protests in paras 5,6)

OTTAWA, June 18 (Sputnik) - Protests are expected in Ottawa on July 1st as the Freedom Convoy of trucks makes a comeback to the capital for the Canada Day celebrations, Ottawa police said in a press release.

"The right to lawful and peaceful demonstrations will always be protected. We will not allow for conditions that led to the unlawful protests in February to reoccur. We are applying lessons learned from the unlawful protest as well as the Rolling Thunder and associated protests to build our plan," Ottawa police said on Friday.

The police said it will work for a safe celebration of Canada Day by cooperating with the organizers to ensure respect for the rule of law, the release said. Officers are to be enforcing the Trespass to Property Act, Liquor License Act, local laws and the Criminal Code, the release added.

The protesters plan to stay for a prolonged time, repeating their demands from February for the government to put an end to what they said were tyrannical vaccine and mask mandates, and also for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to resign.

In February 2022, Canada was shaken by a protest movement lead by truckers. For a month, the protesters blocked border crossings, highways, Ottawa, and other important cities, demanding the complete lifting of all COVID-19 related sanitary measures.

This led to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau invoking the Emergencies Act, an action currently being questioned by parliamentary opposition parties, civil society and other public actors, who consider it unlawful. Critics accused the Trudeau government of abusing the emergency powers especially with measures like freezing the bank accounts of those suspected of supporting the blockades.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, JUNE 18 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Russia is not against Ukraine joining the European Union, President Vladimir Putin said on Friday.

* Storming of the Ukrainian fortified areas near Donetsk, from where they hit residential areas, has no purpose as it may lead to heavy Russian casualties, Putin said.

* The issue of Crimea would not arise if Russia and Ukraine had a partnership, Putin said.

* Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson discussed supplying Kiev with heavy weapons and air defense systems, Presidential Office chief Andriy Yermak said.

* US President Joe Biden said was briefed on Americans reportedly captured in Ukraine but said he does not know their whereabouts at present and added that Americans should not go to Ukraine.

EURASIAN ECONOMIC UNION

* Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev on Friday called for linking the Eurasian integration and China's "One Belt One Road" initiative.

* The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) sees no harm if Ukraine joins the European Union, Tokayev said.

NATO

* The statements made by Sweden and Finland about taking Turkey's security concerns seriously are encouraging, Fahrettin Altun, the head of communications in the Turkish presidential office, said on Friday.

US-VENEZUELA RELATIONS

The United States is relaxing economic sanctions on Venezuela and lifting restrictions on a former high-ranking official at its energy giant PDVSA, Carlos Erik Malpica-Flores, the Treasury announced on Friday.

SANCTIONS

* Russia will cooperate with Western companies that are willing to work with Moscow despite unprecedented "arm-twisting" and blackmail from the United States and its allies, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Friday.

* Leaders of EU countries in informal conversations are discussing the possibility of applying sanctions to any "inconvenient" state, including own member states, Putin said.

* Russia is expected to export more crude oil this year than in 2021, Deputy Energy Minister Pavel Sorokin said at an economic forum in St. Petersburg.

* Russian restrictions on the export of the three "noble" gases of helium, neon and argon are threatening to drive US semiconductor and computer chips prices far higher and cripple domestic industries like auto manufacturing dependent on them, US media reported.

* Lithuanian Railways has notified the Kaliningrad Railway of stopping the transit of a number of goods that are under EU sanctions starting on Saturday, Kaliningrad Region Governor Anton Alikhanov said.

ENERGY MARKETS

* Crude prices fell as much as 9% on the week as the oil market saw its biggest plunge since April on growing fears of a recession in the United States amid aggressive rate hikes by the Federal Reserve to curb inflation at 40-year highs.

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Trump Says Russia-Ukraine Situation Could Lead to World War Three

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The handling of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine could potentially lead to World War Three, former US President Donald Trump said on Friday in remarks to the Faith and Freedom Coalition.

"We have a war in Ukraine... Thousands and thousands of people are dying and perhaps it's going to lead to World War Three, because [of] the way we're handling it," Trump said during the speech in Tennessee.

Trump criticized European nations for giving "a fraction" of what the United States is giving to Ukraine despite being more directly impacted by the situation.

The conflict also would not have emerged under the Trump administration, the former president also said. The US has lost the respect of other nations around the world as a result of the Biden administration's foreign policy, Trump added.

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Trump Criticizes January 6 Select Committee Hearings, Mike Pence in Tennessee Speech

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump on Friday during a speech in Tennessee criticized the hearings of the January 6 Select Committee investigating the Capitol breach, as well as ex-Vice President Mike Pence for his decision to certify election results in favor of Joe Biden that day.

The committee on Thursday met for their third public hearing, with a focus on Trump's alleged attempts to pressure Pence into changing the results of the 2020 presidential election during the joint session of Congress that day. Trump during a phone call purportedly called Pence a "wimp" when he refused, according to testimony from a former White House assistant.

"I never called Mike Pence a wimp," Trump said during remarks to the Faith and Freedom Coalition. Mike Pence had a chance to be great. He had a chance to be, frankly, historic. But just like Bill Barr and the rest of these weak people, Mike – and I say it sadly, because I like him – but Mike did not have the courage to act."

Trump disputed that Pence had "no choice" but to certify the electoral results in favor of Biden, citing a historical example of Thomas Jefferson dealing with Georgia votes during his time as US Vice President.

Trump roundly condemned the work of the committee, arguing that its members have violated standards of decency, separation of powers and executive privilege. The lawmakers are weaponizing the justice systems against political opponents, Trump said.

Trump also said that if he were to become US president again, he would look very seriously at pardons for people imprisoned on charges related to the January 6 Capitol breach. More than 840 people have been arrested over their involvement in the January 6, 2021 breach of the Capitol, according to the US Justice Department.

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Oil Tumbles 9% on Week As US Recession Fears Grow; Biggest Drop Since April

NEW YORK, June 17 (Sputnik) - Crude prices fell as much as 9% on the week as the oil market saw its biggest plunge since April on growing fears of a recession in the United States amid aggressive rate hikes by the Federal Reserve to curb inflation at 40-year highs.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate, the benchmark for US crude, settled down \$8.03, or 6.8%, at \$109.56 per barrel. For the week, WTI was down almost 9%, for its first weekly loss since April.

London-traded Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, settled down \$6.69, or 5.6%, at \$113.12. For the week, Brent tumbled more than 7% for its first weekly drop as well in two months.

WTI surged earlier this week to a three-month peak of \$123.18, its highest since the March run-up to almost \$130 after the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Brent rallied to \$125.16 this week, after a March peak of nearly \$140, which itself was the highest in 14 years.

Technical analysts have been warning for weeks that WTI and Brent prices were severely overbought as both crude benchmarks tacked on about \$20 each over the past eight weeks.

The oil trade appeared to take serious note of the warning on Friday after US factory output fell for a fifth straight month, as firms struggled with supply-chain bottlenecks and high costs, despite industrial production itself rising.

The Federal Reserve's divisional chief for Minneapolis, Neel Kashkari, meanwhile warned that the central bank might need to get more aggressive with interest rates if US inflation doesn't retreat from four-decade highs.

That was a sign that June's three-quarter percentage point increase — the largest in 28 years — could be followed up by more major hikes, despite Fed Chair Jerome Powell's assurance earlier this week that there will be no more super-sized hikes this year and that rate cuts could actually come as early as 2024.

The US economy has already shown a negative growth of 1.4% for the first quarter. If it does not return to the positive by the second quarter, the United States will technically be in a recession, given that it takes just two straight quarters of negative growth to make a recession. "Recessions are increasingly likely as central banks race to dramatically raise rates before inflation spirals out of control," Craig Erlam, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said as the European Central Bank indicated three big rate hikes as well for 2022. "It is better than the alternative though; stagflation."

While the world, particularly the United States, was not yet in a stagflationary environment, where prices keep rising while the economy continues falling, the term has "been thrown around way too much in recent months, which perhaps highlights the trepidation around it," Erlam said. "The risk of one is rising, which is why central banks are becoming increasingly accepting of their actions tipping the economy into recession," he added.

While the Ukraine conflict and subsequent Western sanctions on major energy exporter Russia has exacerbated the global tightness in crude supply, this year's rally in oil has also gone beyond the affordability of many poor consuming nations, say analysts.

In the United States, the best gauge of public burden from the rally was the pump price of gasoline, or petrol, that exceeded \$5 a gallon for the first time since last week. Many US pumps, especially those in West Coast states like California, were selling at close to \$6 a gallon, the American Automobile Association said. Diesel was even higher in California, at beyond \$7 a gallon.

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US Aviation Firms, Mobile Carriers Agree to Phased Rollout of 5G Near Airports - FAA

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US aviation operators and mobile carriers have agreed on a "phased approach" to the rollout of 5G communications systems near airports that will allow aircraft susceptible to interference to be retrofitted with compatible equipment, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said on Friday amid efforts to ease the transition to the latest cellular technology.

"The phased approach requires operators of regional aircraft with radio altimeters most susceptible to interference to retrofit them with radio frequency filters by the end of 2022," the FAA said in a statement. "This work has already begun and will continue on an expedited basis." US mobile carriers AT&T and Verizon said in January they have delayed introduction of their 5G network near some airports due to airlines' concerns about flight safety from the deployment of the technology, and expressed frustration with aviation authorities over the matter.

The FAA, in an update of the situation, said key stakeholders in the aviation and wireless industries have identified a series of steps that will continue to protect commercial air travel from disruption by 5G C-band interference, while also enabling Verizon and AT&T to enhance service around certain airports.

"We believe we have identified a path that will continue to enable aviation and 5G C-band wireless to safely co-exist," FAA Acting Administrator Billy Nolen said in the statement issued Friday. "We appreciate the willingness of Verizon and AT&T to continue this important and productive collaboration with the aviation industry."

The FAA said filters and replacement units for the mainline commercial fleet should be available on a schedule that would permit the work to be largely completed by July 2023. After that time, the wireless companies expect to operate their networks in urban areas with minimal restrictions.

"The radio-altimeter manufacturers have worked at an unprecedented pace with Embraer, Boeing, Airbus and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to develop and test filters and installation kits for these aircraft," the statement said. "Customers are receiving the first kits now. In most cases, the kits can be installed in a few hours at airline maintenance facilities."

Throughout the process, the FAA will work with both the aviation and mobile carrier industries to track the pace of the radio altimeter retrofits while ensuring wireless companies relax mitigation measures around key airports in carefully considered phases.

The agency also will continue to engage with the National Telecommunications and Information Administration and the Federal Communications Commission on technical issues associated with these efforts, the statement added.

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Russia Crackdown of Noble Gases Exports Hurting US Chips, Semiconductor Industry - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Russian restrictions on the export of the three "noble" gases of helium, neon and argon are threatening to drive US semiconductor and computer chips prices far higher and cripple domestic industries like auto manufacturing dependent on them, CNN reported on Friday.

Following US sanctions imposed on the sale of computer chips and semiconductors to Russia, Moscow responded at the the end of last month by restricting exports of the three so-called inert gases, the report said, citing an earlier report from the Russian news agency TASS.

Before the Ukraine conflict began on February 24, Russia and Ukraine together produced approximately 30% of the neon gas need by the uS computer chip industry, the report said. Because of previous chip shortages, US automakers made ten million less vehicles than in 2021, the report added.

Even if supply levels can be restored while the Russian export restrictions last, the cost of the three gases used in the industrial computer chip making sector is likely to remain much higher, according to the report.

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Ottawa Police Says Expects Protests as Trucker Convoy Comes Back on Canada Day

OTTAWA, June 17 (Sputnik) - Protests are expected in Ottawa on July 1st as the Freedom Convoy of trucks makes a comeback to the capital for the Canada Day celebrations, Ottawa police said on Friday.

"The right to lawful and peaceful demonstrations will always be protected. We will not allow for conditions that led to the unlawful protests in February to reoccur. We are applying lessons learned from the unlawful protest as well as the Rolling Thunder and associated protests to build our plan," Ottawa police said in a press release.

The police said will work for a safe celebration of Canada Day by cooperating with the organizers to ensure respect for the rule of law, the release said. Officers are to be enforcing the Trespass to Property Act, Liquor License Act, local laws and the Criminal Code, the release added.

The protesters plan to stay for a prolonged time, repeating their demands from February for the government to put an end to the what they said were tyrannical vaccine and mask mandates, and also for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to resign.

In February 2022, Canada was shaken by the mass peaceful protest movement lead by truck drivers, who for a month parked their vehicles effectively blocking border crossings, highways, the country's capital and other important cities, demanding for the complete lifting of all COVID-19-related mandates.

Trudeau invoked the Emergencies Act, an action currently being questioned by parliamentary opposition parties, civil society and other public actors, who consider it to be unlawful. The

police responded by a brutal crackdown of the movement that included freezing of bank accounts and other repressive measures against the peaceful protesters.

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US Senators Introduce New Legislation on Taiwan That Includes \$4.5Bln in Security Aid

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US senators Bob Menendez and Lindsey Graham introduced new bipartisan legislation that would change US policy towards Taiwan amid its rising tensions with China as well as provide the island with \$4.5 billion in security assistance over four years, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations said on Friday.

"US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Menendez and Senator Lindsey Graham announced they have introduced the bipartisan Taiwan Policy Act of 2022," the committee said in a press release. "Specifically, the Taiwan Policy Act of 2022 creates a new initiative to bolster Taiwan's defense capabilities, providing almost \$4.5 billion in security assistance over the next four years."

The new bill envisions designation of Taiwan as a US major non-NATO ally and support for Taiwan's participation in international organizations and multilateral trade architecture, the release added.

The bill would also authorize the US government to strengthen security cooperation with Taiwan, including creation of a comprehensive training program to improve Taiwan's defense capabilities, according to the document.

Taiwan became alienated from Beijing after becoming a stronghold of the Chinese Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang) that suffered defeat to the Communist Party in a civil war in 1949. The Chinese mainland and the island resumed business and informal contacts in the late 1980s. Beijing opposes any official contacts of foreign countries with Taiwan and considers Chinese sovereignty over the island indisputable.

Last Friday, Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe said that any attempts to use Taipei to control Beijing are doomed to failure. Speaking at a meeting with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin on the sidelines of Shangri-La Dialogue, Wei Fenghe said that the recent US decision on arms sales to Taiwan is seriously damaging to China's sovereignty and security interests.

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Third Victim, 84, Dies After Alabama Church Potluck Dinner Shootings - Police

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - A third victim, an 84-year-old woman, has died, bringing the death toll to three after a 71-year-old man opened fire at a church potluck dinner on Thursday night, police said.

"It is with great sadness that the Vestavia Hills Police Department reports the passing of the third shooting victim from Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church," the statement said. "An 84-year-old white female was transported, from the scene, to UAB hospital for treatment on the evening of June 16, 2022.

The other two victims were aged 84 and 75, police previously announced.

The suspect, described only as a white man, is currently in police custody and will have warrants for capital murder issued against him later on Friday by the county district attorney's office, local police captain Shane Ware said on Thursday.

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Biden Says Going to Gulf Summit Reason for Trip to Saudi Arabia, Not Meeting Crown Prince

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Friday said the reason he is going to Saudi Arabia is to attend an international conference, not to meet with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS).

The White House earlier this week said Biden is expected to hold a bilateral meeting with the Saudi crown prince and King Salman's leadership team during a Gulf Cooperation Council meeting in Jeddah next month. The president has been criticized for planning to meet with the crown prince in light of his alleged role in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

"I'm not going to meet with MBS. I'm going to an international meeting and he's going to be part of it," Biden told journalists at the White House.

One correspondent said the White House pool interpreted the remark as Biden saying he was not traveling for the sole purpose of meeting the crown prince as opposed to him ruling out a meeting while there.

Next month, Biden will head to the Middle East region, including Israel, the West Bank, and Saudi Arabia, where Iran will be big part of discussions.

In Saudi Arabia, the official said, Biden will participate in the summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council plus three with his counterparts from Saudi Arabia Kuwait, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar, plus Iraq, Jordan and Egypt.

During his campaign for the 2020 presidential election, Biden labeled Saudi Arabia a "pariah state" over what he said was the crown prince's alleged role in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Khashoggi is believed to have been murdered and dismembered by a Saudi hit squad inside the the country's consulate in Istanbul in 2018. The Saudi Crown Prince has denied ordering the murder.

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US FDA Approves Moderna, Pfizer/BioNTech Vaccines for Children From 6 Months Old

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on Friday approved the use of Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines on children and babies down to six months old.

"Today, the US Food and Drug Administration authorized emergency use of the Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine and the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine for the prevention of COVID-19 to include use in children down to 6 months of age," the agency said in a press release. Previously the Moderna vaccine had been authorized for use only in adults aged 18 or older while the Pfizer vaccine had been approved for children over the age of five, the release noted. "The agency determined that the known and potential benefits of the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccines outweigh the known and potential risks in the pediatric populations authorized for use for each vaccine," the release said.

On Thursday, the FDA's own Vaccines and related Biological Products Advisory Committee unanimously recommended by a vote of 21 to zero that the change should be implemented.

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Meta Sued Over Alleged Violation of Medical Privacy by Facebook - Court Document

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Meta (banned in Russia as an extremist organization) is being sued over alleged violations of medical privacy of millions of patients in the United States, a court document revealed on Friday.

"Plaintiffs bring this action on behalf of themselves and millions of other Americans whose medical privacy has been violated by Facebook's Pixel tracking tool. As explained herein, Facebook knows (or should have known) that its Pixel tracking tool is being improperly used on hospital websites resulting in the wrongful, contemporaneous, re-direction to Facebook of patient communications to register as a patient, sign-in or out of a supposedly "secure" patient portal, request or set appointments, or call their provider via their computing device," the document said.

The document pointed out that the unlawful collection of data has been done "without the knowledge or authorization of the patient, like Plaintiffs, in violation of federal and state laws as well as Facebook's own contract with its users."

The lawsuit was filed by plaintiff "John Doe" on behalf of himself and all others similarly situated in the US state of California, the court document said.

"When a patient communicates with a health care provider's website where the Facebook Pixel is present on the patient portal login page, the Facebook Pixel source code causes the exact content of the patient's communication with their health care provider to be re-directed to Facebook in a fashion that identifies them as a patient," the document said.

According to the document, the plaintiff is a patient of the Medstar Health System in Baltimore, Maryland, and while getting medical care there he used the "MyMedStar" patient portal to see his laboratory results, make appointments, as well as communicate with his providers.

"Unbeknownst to plaintiff John Doe, and millions of other patients around the country, when he signed-in to the patient portal, the Facebook Pixel secretly deployed on the webpage sent the fact that he has clicked to sign-in to the patient portal to Facebook," the document said.

The document explained that the patient-status is protected by US laws including the so-called HIPAA, which requires a valid authorization before it is collected by Facebook.

"Neither Facebook nor any of the hospitals that deployed the Facebook Pixel on their web properties ("Facebook Partner Medical Providers") procured HIPAA authorizations for the disclosure of patient status and health information to Facebook," it said, adding that such practice represents a violation of the Facebook terms of privacy with its users.

"To date, through experts, Plaintiffs have identified at least 664 hospital systems or medical provider web properties where Facebook has received patient data via the Facebook Pixel," the document said.

The plaintiff also claimed in the lawsuit that Facebook monetizes the data it receives via the Facebook Pixel deployed on medical providers' web properties.

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UN Chief in Constant Contact on Ukraine Grain Deal - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, June 17 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has been in constant contact with the leaders of key countries regarding ways to get grain out of Ukraine, deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said on Friday.

"He has been in touch with a number of senior officials in many key countries ... He has been fairly constantly on the phone in the last days with leaders from around the world and one of the key topics has tended to be the situation of the food, energy, fertilizer and other shortfalls in the global economy," Haq told a briefing.

The UN declined again to comment on the progress toward the Ukraine grain deal or share details of his talks about the matter with world leaders.

"We are not able for reasons of trying to maximize the chances of success to provide you with all the details ... We are continuing to do what we can," Haq said.

The secretary-general has been optimistic about the progress made and is grateful for Turkey's support in the process, but many details are still unclear.

The UN wants to strike a deal to help grain from Ukraine and grain and fertilizers from Russia get back into global markets in an effort to mitigate the spike in prices.

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US Relaxes Venezuela Sanctions, Lifts Restrictions on Former PDVSA Official - Treasury

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United States is relaxing economic sanctions on Venezuela and lifting restrictions on a former high-ranking official at its energy giant PDVSA, Carlos Erik Malpica-Flores, the Treasury announced on Friday.

"In a gesture intended to support talks between the Maduro regime and the Venezuelan opposition, the Biden administration announced on Tuesday an easing of economic sanctions on Venezuela. As a result, Chevron will be able to negotiate its license with the state-owned oil company PDVSA, though it will not yet be allowed to drill or export any petroleum of Venezuelan origin. Additionally, Carlos Erik Malpica-Flores, a former high-ranking PDVSA official and nephew of Venezuela's first lady, will be removed from a list of sanctioned individuals," the statement said.

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Number of Americans Who Believe in God Drops Lowest Level in History - Poll

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The number of Americans who believe in God has decreased to 81%, which is the lowest level in the history of the United States, a new Gallup poll revealed on Friday.

"The vast majority of US adults believe in God, but the 81% who do so is down six percentage points from 2017 and is the lowest in Gallup's trend," a release on the poll said.

By comparison, in the period between 1944 and 2011, more than 90% of Americans said they believed in God, the release said.

"Belief in God has fallen the most in recent years among young adults and people on the left of the political spectrum (liberals and Democrats). These groups show drops of 10 or more percentage points comparing the 2022 figures to an average of the 2013-2017 polls," the release said.

Only 62% of liberals, 68% of young adults, and 72% of Democrats say they believe in God. On the other hand, more than 90% of Republicans and political conservatives said they believe in God, the release added.

Almost three-quarters of the most religious people in the United States say they are attending religious services every week and think God hears prayers and can respond, according to the release.

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UN Says Hopes Due Process Will Be Followed in Assange's Case After UK Approved Extradition

UNITED NATIONS, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is hoping due process will be followed for Wikileaks founder Julian Assange after the United Kingdom Home Secretary Priti

Patel approved his extradition to the United States, UN deputy spokesman Farhan Aziz Haq said on Friday.

"We certainly hope that due process is fully followed and that all international norms and human rights are respected," Haq said during a press briefing.

Haq avoided commenting on whether the decision to extradite Assange was right or wrong and emphasized it is not the job of the United Nations to "second guess" the decisions of the member states' judicial systems.

"It's not the practice of the United Nation to second guess judicial decisions. So we are letting the courts work their way," he said.

On Friday, Patel approved the extradition of Julian Assange to the United States on the basis that the move will not breach his fundamental human rights. Assange now has 14 days to appeal the decision and his legal team said they would do so.

The United States wants Assange on 18 criminal charges for sharing classified documents relating to national defense and Assange faces up to 175 years in prison.

The Wikileaks founder's legal team says it was in the US public interest to reveal Iraq and Afghanistan war-related files showing indiscriminate killing.

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Ex-Trump Adviser Navarro Pleads Not Guilty to Contempt of Congress Charges - Reports WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Peter Navarro, former economic adviser to ex-US President Donald Trump, pleaded not guilty to contempt of Congress charges brought against him by the US House Select Committee investigating the January 6 Capitol breach, CBS News reported on Friday.

Navarro pleaded not guilty to two contempt charges stemming from his alleged refusal to comply with subpoenas from the committee to provide testimony and documents related to Trump's purported plot to overturn the recognized results of the 2020 US presidential election, the report said.

Navarro earlier this month after being indicted said that he will challenge in court the committee and its legal authority, which he claims is unconstitutional and breaks legislative rules.

Navarro, who served as Director of Trade and Manufacturing Policy under the Trump administration, was referred by the committee for contempt alongside other Trump associates including strategist Steve Bannon and Chief of Staff Mark Meadows.

Navarro, if convicted, would face one year in prison for each contempt count, the report said. The case is expected to go to trial later this summer, the report added.

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'Glory' Kickboxing Says Releasing Russian Athletes Over Ukraine, Including Current Champ

MOSCOW, June 17 (Sputnik) - Singapore-based kickboxing promotion Glory is releasing Russian athletes including current Light Heavyweight Champion Artem Vakhitov from their contracts due to challenges arising from Russia's ongoing special military operation in Ukraine, Glory said on Friday in a statement.

"Due to the Russian government's invasion of Ukraine which Glory condemns, Glory has encountered a variety of obstacles that have made it impossible to arrange bouts for its Russian athletes, barriers like travel bans, safety concerns, payment blockages in an environment of worldwide financial sanctions against Russia, and unwilling opponents," the statement said. Vakhitov and several other Russian athletes were released from their contracts as a result of the challenges, according to the statement.

Glory values the athletes and emphasized that it is neither their nor the promotion's fault that fights could not be arranged, the statement said. The promotion went to "enormous lengths" to try and organize bouts for the Russian athletes, the statement also said.

Glory thanked the Russian athletes for their cooperation throughout the challenges and for their "historic performances" in the promotion, the statement added.

The light heavyweight championship left open by Vakhitov's release will be fought over by Lithuanian Sergej Maslobojev and Dutchman Luis Tavares, Glory also said on Friday.

Vakhitov, born in Prokopyevsk, Russia, holds a Master of Sports in Muay Thai and was ranked the number one light heavyweight kickboxer in the world by Combat Press as of June 2022.

Tavares and Maslobojev are ranked second and third respectively.

The decision comes amid a number of international sports organizations grappling with the issue of Russian athletes' participation amid the operation in Ukraine, both due to political and logistical concerns.

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US Might Need More Major Interest Rate Hikes After June Increase - Kashkari

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US central bank might need to get more aggressive with interest rates if inflation in the United States does not retreat from four-decade highs, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis President Neil Kashkari said on Friday.

On Wednesday, the Federal Reserve announced a 75-basis point increase for the third US rate hike since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic two years ago. It was the largest hike in 28 years and brought key lending rates to between 1.5% and 1.75% from the zero to 0.25% range in February.

"If the supply side of the economy does not improve, or if inflation expectations drift higher, then we might need to continue raising rates beyond what I forecast in my SEP submission," Kashkari said in a blog post, referring to the Summary of Economic Projections he made in May. In the SEP submission for May, Kashkari said key US lending rates were only at 1% versus inflation, which was eight times more.

Since, the Federal Reserve has moved key US lending rates to just below 2%. The central bank's Chairman Jerome Powell told a news conference after that 75-basis point interest rate

hike that the Federal Reserve will not likely have a larger quantum of increase, like 100 basis points. The next Federal Reserve interest rate decision, due in July, might constitute a 50-basis point, or another 75-basis point hike, Powell said.

But Kashkari said the Federal Reserve's actions will ultimately be decided by how inflation evolves.

US inflation, as indicated by the Consumer Price Index, grew at an annualized rate of 8.6% in May - more than four times the Federal Reserve's target. Last month marked the fastest growth in price pressures since 1981, as the cost of virtually everything - from food to fuel, shelter and clothing - spiked.

Separately, the University of Michigan said its closely-followed Consumer Sentiment Index sank to a record low in its latest survey for June as Americans became increasingly disillusioned about inflation taking an increasingly bigger bite of their paychecks, particularly after the pump price of gasoline exceeded \$5 a gallon last week for the first time ever. Consumer spending accounts for 70% of the US economy.

The Federal Reserve's preferred rate of inflation is 2% per year. It has vowed to raise rates as high and long as necessary to bring price growth back to its annual target.

"I supported the 75-bps increase in June, and could support another in July," Kashkari wrote in his blog. He said he actually preferred a 50-basis point hike for July to prevent a so-called front-loading of rates that would be detrimental to economic growth.

Yet, Kashkari highlighted the importance of commensurate action by the Federal Reserve to stop inflation in its tracks, and that included more major rate hikes if necessary.

"A steady approach to driving long real rates higher might help us avoid tightening more than is necessary to restore price stability, while ensuring that we do enough," Kashkari added.

Economists, however, fear that the Fed will push the US economy into a recession with the way it's going with rate hikes.

US gross domestic product, or GDP, expanded by 5.7% in 2021, growing at its fastest pace in four decades after a 3.5% tumble in 2020 caused by the coronavirus pandemic measures. Since the start of this year though, GDP growth has been on a weaker trajectory, posting a negative growth of 1.4% for the first quarter. The slowing GDP growth has heightened fears that the United States may be headed for a recession, especially with the aggressive interest rate hikes planned by the Federal Reserve. Technically, the economy needs two straight quarters of negative growth to be in recession, with the first quarter already being in the red.

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US Backs Philippines Against Beijing 'Provocative' Moves in South China Sea - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has publicly added its support to a protest from the government of the Philippines to China accusing Beijing of "illegal fishing" within Manila's 200-mile exclusive economic zone, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement on Friday.

"The United States supports the Philippines in calling on the PRC [People's Republic of China] to end its provocative actions and to respect international law in the South China Sea," Price said in the statement.

Earlier this month, the Philippines issued a diplomatic protest to Beijing after Chinese coast guard ships followed Filipino vessels in the disputed waters.

"We share the Philippines' concerns regarding the PRC's provocative actions interfering with Philippine sovereign rights within the Philippine exclusive economic zone near Second Thomas Shoal and massing vessels near Whitsun Reef. These actions are part of a broader trend of PRC provocations against South China Sea claimants and other states lawfully operating in the region," the statement said.

The United States supported Manila and was committed to continuing to uphold the principle of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, as guaranteed by international law, the statement added.

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Falcon 9 Booster Launches 53 Starlink Communications Mini Satellites Into Orbit - SpaceX
WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The latest Starlink space mission successfully launched 53 more broadband mini communications satellites into low earth orbit (LEO), SpaceX announced on Friday.

The Falcon 9 booster rocket was successfully launched from Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral in the US state of Florida at 12:08 Eastern Daylight Time (EDT).

SpaceX said the second stage successfully separated on schedule and the first stage was landed safely and was successfully retrieved for the 13th time.

It was the first time that a first stage Falcon 9 booster had been used and retrieved 13 times, the company added.

Following the successful launch, SpaceX has so far fired 2,706 Starlink internet satellites into orbit, according to Space Flight Now.

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US, EU Pledge to Accelerate Methane Emissions Reduction - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The United States, the European Union and 11 countries agreed to accelerate reductions in methane emissions in the oil and gas sector of their economies, the US State Department said on Friday.

"Today, the United States, the European Union, and 11 countries launched the Global Methane Pledge Energy Pathway to catalyze methane emissions reductions in the oil and gas sector, advancing both climate progress and energy security," the State Department said in a press release. "Argentina, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, Norway,

and Oman joined the United States and the European Union as inaugural members of the Pathway.”

The Global Methane Pledge (GMP) endorsed at the COP26 gathering has now been endorsed by 120 countries and envisions limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, among other outcomes. Reducing methane emissions in the oil and gas sector, which contribute about 25% of all anthropogenic methane emissions in the world due to flaring, venting and leaking of methane, is critical to achieve the GMP targets, the release said.

The current action is a step to implement the GMP and accelerate introduction of the fastest methane mitigation solutions available, the release added.

The Energy Pathway includes capturing of the maximum potential of cost-effective methane mitigation in the oil and gas sector, and elimination of routine flaring no later than 2030, the release said.

In addition, countries and supporting organizations have pledged \$59 million in funding in support of the Energy Pathway, according to the release.

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SpaceX Fires Employees for Writing, Spreading Letter Denouncing CEO Elon Musk - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - SpaceX has fired a number of employees who took part in writing and distributing a letter about its chief executive Elon Musk, the New York Time reported on Friday.

The letter first appeared on Wednesday denouncing Musk's public activities, particularly on the social media platform Twitter, and accused him of being a frequent source of distraction and embarrassment, the report said.

The employees who wrote the letter called on the company's management to rein Musk in, the report said.

SpaceX had fired some of the employees who organized to write the letter the next day after it appeared in public. The newspaper said in the report it obtained an email from SpaceX's President and Chief Operating Officer Gwynne Shotwell, who said that the company is investigating the issue and had already terminated a number of people.

“We have too much critical work to accomplish and no need for this kind of overreaching activism,” Shotwell said in that email.

It is unclear how many people have been fired and the company did not provide comments on the situation, the report said.

Musk has offered to buy Twitter for \$44 billion and take the company private, away from the New York Stock Exchange, and promote free speech rather than current practice of censoring users. But like many dealings of the outspoken billionaire, the Twitter acquisition itself has been riddled with controversy, with Musk demanding that the company be absolutely transparent with the number of fake accounts on the site and that its employees work on site instead of from home.

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Alabama Church Shooting Suspect Acted Alone, Sometimes Attended Services - Police Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - A 71-year old man suspected of shooting three individuals and killing two at a church in the US state of Alabama acted alone and occasionally attended the church's services, local police captain Shane Ware said on Friday.

The shooting occurred at Stephen's Episcopal Church in the city of Vestavia Hills on Thursday evening. The shooter killed two people, aged 84 and 75, and injured another, aged 84, who is being treated at a local hospital, Ware said during a press conference.

"The church was hosting a small, group meeting, referred to as a 'boomers' potluck dinner.' Our investigation, while ongoing, has revealed that an occasional attendee of the church, that I will only identify as a white male, aged 71, was at the dinner. At some point, he produced a handgun and began shooting, striking three victims," Ware said. "The suspect acted alone. There is no threat to the community."

Another attendee subdued the suspect and held him down until law enforcement arrived at the scene, Ware also said. The person who subdued the shooter was "critical in saving lives," Ware said, calling the individual a hero.

The suspect is currently in police custody and will have warrants for capital murder issued against him later on Friday by the county district attorney's office, according to Ware. The suspect's identity will be released as soon as the warrants are signed, Ware added.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Nicaraguan Mining Company, Government Official - Treasury

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US government has imposed sanctions on the Nicaragua's state-owned mining company Empresa Nicaraguense de Minas and on the President of its Board of Directors, Ruy Lopez Delgado, for allegedly benefiting the country's leadership that Washington has accused it of human rights violations, the Department of the Treasury said in a press release on Friday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated the state-owned Nicaraguan mining company Empresa Nicaraguense de Minas (ENIMINAS) as well as one official of the Government of Nicaragua pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13851," the release said.

The US government has also accused Nicaraguan leaders Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo of deepening cooperation with Russia amid the ongoing special military operation in Ukraine.

The Biden administration said it believes that ENIMINAS played a key role in increasing exports of gold for the alleged benefit of Daniel Ortega and his inner circle, the release said.

Delgado has been blacklisted by the United States for being on ENIMINAS' board of directors and an official of the Nicaraguan government, the release said.

The US government has also issued a general license authorizing wind-down transactions with the company till July 18, the release added.

As a result of the sanctions, all property and interests of the blacklisted persons are now blocked and any transactions with them prohibited, according to the release.

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Biden Says Has Been Briefed on Americans Missing in Ukraine, Doesn't Know Their Location

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Friday he has been briefed on American citizens who were reportedly captured in Ukraine but he doesn't know their whereabouts at the moment.

"We don't know where they are," Biden told reporters. "Americans should not be going to Ukraine."

On Wednesday, news media reported that US citizens Alexander Druke, 39, and Andy Huynh, 27, were captured by Russian forces near Kharkiv. The reports said the two Americans who had gone to Ukraine to fight against Russia are a US Army veteran and US Marine Corps veteran, respectively.

On Thursday, US State Department spokesman Ned Price said that the Biden administration is in touch with the families of two American fighters reportedly captured by Russian military in Ukraine, but has not discussed the matter with the Russian government.

A third US fighter, identified as former marine Grady Kurpasi, went missing in Ukraine in late April, CNN reported.

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RPT - Canada in 'Active Talks' With Germany on Turbines for Nord Stream 1 Pipeline - Ministry

OTTAWA, June 17 (Sputnik) - The Canadian and German governments are working on a solution for the issue in the Siemens turbines for Russia's Nord Stream 1 pipeline that were sent to Canada for maintenance and resulted in a reduction of gas supplies to Europe, Canada's Natural Resources Ministry confirmed to Sputnik on Friday.

"The government of Canada is in active discussions with Germany about the turbines in question, and we are working to reach a resolution," the Natural Resources Ministry said.

On Thursday, Russia said that further delays in the maintenance of the Nord Stream 1 pipeline could lead to a total halt of supplying gas flows via the pipeline network to Europe.

Canada and its allies have imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia, targeting its energy sector as well, after Moscow launched a special military operation in Ukraine. The situation has made it impossible for the supplier, Siemens, to return the stranded turbines back to Russia.

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OTTAWA, June 17 (Sputnik) - The Canadian and German governments are working on a solution for the issue in the Siemens turbines for Russia's Nord Stream 1 pipeline that were sent to Canada for maintenance and resulted in a reduction of gas supplies to Europe, Canada's Natural Resources Ministry confirmed to Sputnik on Friday.

"The government of Canada is in active discussions with Germany about the turbines in question, and we are working to reach a resolution," the Natural Resources Ministry said.

On Thursday, Russia said that further delays in the maintenance of the Nord Stream 1 pipeline could lead to a total halt of supplying gas flows via the pipeline network to Europe.

Canada and its allies have imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia, targeting its energy sector as well, after Moscow launched a special military operation in Ukraine. The situation has made it impossible for the supplier, Siemens, to return the stranded turbines back to Russia.

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Dollar's Standing Could Be Impacted by Cryptos, Global Monetary Change - Fed Chief

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The dollar's international standing could be impacted by the swift evolution in global finance, especially in cryptocurrencies, despite the US currency's reign as a store of value, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said Friday.

"Looking forward, rapid changes are taking place in the global monetary system that may affect the international role of the dollar in the future," Powell said in a live-streamed speech at a conference hosted by the Fed. "We will be thinking not just about the current state of the world, but also how the global financial system might evolve over the next 5 to 10 years."

The Fed said in January that a Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC) could be a safe, digital payment option to the dollar that allowed faster transactions. But it also cited downside risks to the dollar, such as fragmentation of value, from such a government-run cryptocurrency.

Powell touched on that in his Friday speech.

"Most major economies already have or are in the process of developing instant, 24/7 payments," the Fed chief said. "Our own FedNow service will be coming online in 2023. And in light of the tremendous growth in crypto-assets and stablecoins, the Federal Reserve is examining whether a ... CBDC would improve on an already safe and efficient domestic payments system."

Even so, there were risks to the dollar's international standing that could not be ignored, he said. "I would like to stress the importance of the dollar to the US and global economies and financial markets. It is critical that we understand the channels, connections, and effects of the role of the dollar."

The global plan for CBDCs gained momentum last year as central banks around the world began exploring ways to not just avert negative impact on their paper currencies from existing crypto assets like Bitcoin, but also profit from their own digital money.

Fed Vice Chair Lael Brainard, however, told a May hearing held by the US House of Representatives that the central bank would not proceed with a CBDC unless Congress approved it. Brainard's stance was in line with the Fed's decision since January to leave the matter in the hands of US lawmakers, as it released a months-long study on the benefits of having a CBDC, without saying whether it wanted such a payment mode.

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Amazon CEO Jassy Urges US Senators to Reject Bill Reining in High Tech Giants - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Amazon chief executive Andy Jassy has been telephoning US senators directly urging them to reject an antitrust legislation that could significantly limit the freedom of his and other major high tech and social media corporations, Politico reported on Friday.

Jassy has called many senators over the past month in his personal efforts to block the passing of the bipartisan American Innovation and Choice Online Act, co-sponsored by Democratic Senator Amy Klobuchar and Republican Chuck Grassley, the report said.

Google CEO Sundar Pichai is planning to meet in person with senators on Capitol Hill next week in his own efforts to block the bill, the report also said.

The bill would prevent Google from giving its own services, such as Google Maps and reviews, greatest priority at the top of its search results page. And it would prevent Apple from preloading its own applications onto iPhones, the report added.

Apple CEO Tim Cook met with senators last week to express his opposition to the legislation, according to the report.

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Canada Reports 168 Monkeypox Cases Nationwide

OTTAWA, June 17 (Sputnik) – Canada has confirmed 168 cases of monkeypox since the outbreak of the disease was reported in non-endemic countries, Chief Public Health Officer Theresa Tam said on Friday.

"As of the 17th of June 2022, 168 confirmed cases have been reported. 141 from Quebec, 21 from Ontario, 4 from Alberta and 2 from British Columbia," Tam said.

This is a slight increase from June 13, when 155 cases were reported nationwide. The province of Quebec remains the epicenter of the virus.

Minister Tam said the federal government is monitoring the situation as they keep working closely with provincial health authorities.

Monkeypox is a zoonotic disease, transmitted from animals to humans and endemic in some African countries. The pathogen comes from the same family of viruses that causes smallpox, which was eradicated in 1980.

The first outbreak of monkeypox in non-endemic countries was reported in May.

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Biden Proclaims Second Official 'Juneteenth' Holiday in Celebration of End of US Slavery

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Friday in a proclamation set June 19 as the second official celebration of Juneteenth as a federal holiday, commemorating the end of slavery in the United States.

"Last year, I was proud to sign bipartisan legislation establishing Juneteenth as our newest Federal holiday, so that all Americans can feel the power of this day, learn from our history, celebrate our progress, and recognize and engage in the work that continues," Biden said. "I call upon the people of the United States to acknowledge and condemn the history of slavery in our Nation and recognize how the impact of America's original sin remains."

Biden in the proclamation urged all Americans to celebrate the emancipation of slaves and commit to eradicate racism and inequity. The day should also commemorate the work of abolitionists, educators, civil rights leaders, activists, public officials and others who have brought the US closer to fulfilling its ideals, according to Biden.

The holiday is rooted in Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger's march to Galveston, Texas to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation that freed the slaves, years after it was issued by President Abraham Lincoln. Juneteenth marks the day, June 19, 1865, when Granger freed the enslaved Black Americans remaining in Texas.

Texas became the first US state to make Juneteenth a holiday in 1980, and before the date became a federal holiday, 45 states and the District of Columbia already recognized it as a commemoration, day of observance or a state holiday.

According to Gallup polling data released Thursday, Americans are more familiar with the Juneteenth holiday today than they were in 2021 when President Biden made Juneteenth a federal holiday. Close to 60% of adult Americans say they know "a lot" (17%) or "some" (42%) about the Juneteenth holiday. That combined total of 59% is an increase from the 37% registered in May 2021.

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Biden Says His Administration Pulling 'Every Lever' to Stabilize Fuel Prices

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Friday that his administration is using all available leverage to reduce the cost of fuel in the domestic market and called on the international community to work together to stabilize prices.

"In the United States, I am using every lever available to bring down the prices for American people," Biden said at the opening of the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate. "Our country is working together to stabilize the global energy market including coordinating the largest release from the global oil reserve in history."

Biden said that overcoming the global fuel crisis requires long-term solutions in the energy sector and pointed to the need of the international community to work together to bring down energy prices.

The US average price for a gallon of regular gasoline exceeded \$5 a gallon last week for the first time ever, with diesel also at record-high prices above \$6 a gallon. The Biden administration has said the impact of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine and alleged price gouging by energy firms are the causes for the higher fuel prices.

However, Russia has denied the accusations, saying the sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies as well as Ukraine's mining the Black Sea have dislocated the market and contributed to higher energy as well as food and fertilizer prices.

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UPDATE - Biden's Approval Hits New Low, More Voters Say Would Vote for Trump Instead - Polls

(Updates headline, paras 1-3 and 7, with additional polling data)

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's approval rating has hit the lowest point of his presidency, and more US voters now say they would cast ballots for Donald Trump instead of the incumbent in an election, new polling data showed on Friday.

Only 39% of US voters say they approve of the job Biden is doing, while a full 47% disapprove, a new USA TODAY/Suffolk Poll showed. A full 71% of voters think the United States is "on the wrong track," according to the poll.

Meanwhile, a new Yahoo News/YouGov survey showed that 44% of US registered voters would cast ballots for Trump, while 42% would vote for Biden. The results marked the first time since Biden's election that Yahoo News/YouGov poll showed him trailing behind Trump.

Inflation remains a key priority among US voters, with 61% saying they disapprove of Biden's handling of the economy, an increase from 58% last month.

The poll showed that Republicans have a 15-point advantage over Democrats on the question of which party would better handle the US economy, an increase from their 11-point edge last month.

US inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, grew at an annualized rate of 8.6% in May. That showed inflation was expanding at its fastest rate since 1981, as the cost of virtually everything - from food to fuel, shelter and clothing - spiked last month.

The Yahoo News/YouGov poll surveyed 1,541 US adults from June 10-13, and the margin of error is about 2.9%. The USA TODAY/Suffolk poll included 1,000 registered voters, with a margin of error of 3.1%.

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Putin Says EU Informally Mulling Sanctions on 'Inconvenient' States, Including Own Members

ST. PETERSBURG, June 17 (Sputnik) - Leaders of EU countries in informal conversations are discussing the possibility of applying sanctions to any "inconvenient" state, including own member states, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Friday.

"We know that among the leaders of European countries, at the level of informal conversations, very disturbing prospects are being discussed, like the ones that sanctions can be applied not only against Russia, but against any 'inconvenient' state, sooner or later, they can affect everyone, including themselves," Putin said during his speech at the plenary session of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum.

According to experts, continued sanctions against Russia may cost the European Union over \$400 billion in direct losses this year, the president added.

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Putin Says EU Faulty Economic Policies Will Deepen Inequality, Further Split Society

MOSCOW, June 17 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Friday that inequality will worsen in Europe as a result of the bloc's faulty economic policies and this will further aggravate the split in their society.

"A direct consequence of the actions of European politicians and the events of this year will lead to a further aggravation of inequality in these countries. This, in turn, will further split their society. Moreover, the question is not only about the level of well-being, but also about the value orientations of the groups which differ from the rest of this society," he said at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum.

The situation will bring on a rise in radicalism and, finally, a change of elites in power, the president warned.