

**6/16/22 Thursday**

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Taiwan Admits 'Long-Time Practice' of Hiring Lobbyists, PR Firms to Push Closer US Relations

More than once since taking office, US President Joe Biden has had to walk back statements that the US is obligated by treaty to defend Taiwan from Chinese attack, undermining a longstanding policy of "strategic ambiguity" about whether Washington would risk nuclear war over the island's autonomy.

In a rare public admission, the autonomous government in Taiwan confirmed reports in Taiwanese media that it has shelled out massive amounts of money on public relations and lobbying efforts in the United States to build support for its continued stand against the Chinese government.

"Regardless of which political party is the government, this is a long-time practice for our representative office in the US to hire public relations firms to assist us in strengthening ties with the United States," Taiwan's foreign ministry spokeswoman [Joanne Ou told reporters](#) on Thursday.

Ou asserted that "Many countries have also hired public relations firms to lobby [the US]" and that Taipei's practices have been legal and transparent.

The admission followed a report in Taipei-based United Daily News (UDN), which revealed much of the details [in a Thursday story](#).

The paper combed through the US Department of Justice's files for the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), finding that among those contracted to push a pro-Taiwan position in Washington, DC, have been Dick Gephardt, a former Democratic leader in the US House of Representatives, and Bob Dole, a prominent former US Senator who made a failed presidential bid in 1996 on the Republican ticket. UDN also mentioned Potomac International Partners, a lobbying firm close to the Republican Party.

According to the paper, Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), a faction that supports independence from China, paid Potomac \$30,000 a month to represent its interests in Washington; Dole \$20,000 a month and Gephardt \$22,000 a month. However, it notes that both men had good relations with the Kuomintang (KMT) government before, too, with the lobbying deals going back to at least 2013 but intensifying after DPP leader Tsai Ing-Wen became Taiwan's president in 2016.

The following year, Donald Trump became the US President, and the US grew increasingly close to Taiwan, selling it more weapons than ever and giving it new diplomatic cover internationally. Numerous high-profile visits by US politicians have followed, and maintaining Taiwan's autonomy from Beijing has become a major part of Washington's larger drive against China in what it calls "great power competition." US President Joe Biden has continued those policies.

In 2017 alone, Taiwan paid US lobbyists \$3.2 million, UDN noted. In late 2016, Dole's role in greasing the wheels of the US-Taiwan relationship, and with Trump especially, via his law firm

Alston & Bird fell in the public spotlight thanks to the [New York Times](#). The paper noted that between May and October 2016, Dole's firm received \$140,000 from Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO), Taiwan's de facto embassy in Washington.

[Slate also revealed](#) at that time that former leading Democratic senator Tom Daschle, who formed a lobbying firm after leaving office in 2004, was also on Taipei's payroll.

Beijing considers Taiwan a rebellious province of China and has vowed to reunify the country, split ever since the civil war of the 1930s and 40s. The US [switched its recognition](#) of the legitimate Chinese government from the Republic of China rump state in Taiwan to the People's Republic of China in Beijing in 1979, officially recognizing Beijing's One China Policy, but maintaining its informal support for Taipei at the same time.

Ou told reporters Thursday that "The function of public relations companies is to help the US government and people to have a better understanding of Taiwan."

With just a handful of countries that still recognize its legitimacy, Taipei has struggled to keep the friends it has. Recent countries to [switch their recognition](#) from Taipei to Beijing include Nicaragua, Kiribati, and the Solomon Islands, with Honduras possibly following if President [Xiomara Castro follows](#) through on her campaign pledge.

In January, it was revealed that Taiwan was bankrolling a powerful lobbying firm, Ballard Partners, to [represent the Guatemalan](#) government's interests in Washington. Guatemala is one of just 14 states that recognize the ROC as the Chinese government.

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UN Experts Decry Police Violence Against Maasai Tribesmen in Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater

One of the most popular wildlife safari locations in Africa, Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater is famous for its herds of wildebeest and lion prides as well as scenic panoramas, bringing in millions in revenue each year. However, locals fear their interests are being sacrificed to satisfy tourist fantasies.

A panel of human rights experts convened by the UN Office of High Commissions on Human Rights (OHCHR) has condemned reports of violence against Massai tribesmen by Tanzanian police, warning that forced evictions and displacement violate international law.

"We are deeply alarmed at reports of use of live ammunition and tear gas by Tanzanian security forces on 10 June 2022, reportedly resulting in about 30 people sustaining minor to serious injuries from live bullets and the death of a police officer," [the experts said](#) on Wednesday.

A pastoralist people who herd various types of cattle between different locations over the course of the year, the Maasai are indigenous across East Africa but were steadily displaced from their lands by European colonialism. Today their traditional livelihoods are largely confined to nature reserves shared by threatened species like the Black Rhinoceros.

According to environmental [news site Mongabay](#), the situation began on June 6, when roughly 700 members of Tanzania's anti-riot Field Force Unit (FFU) arrived without explanation in the Loliondo region of Ngorongoro, a vast crater some 100 square miles in size that is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Several days later, the police told the villagers that they were there to begin demarcating land for a game reserve, and began erecting beacons. The reserve would create a wildlife corridor for trophy hunting and safari tourism and evict some 70,000 Maasai from their land - about half of the Maasai population in Ngorongoro.

The Maasai resisted, beginning a sit-in protest that one leader told Mongabay was "a peaceful demonstration, just to try to push for police attention." The police opened fire with live rounds, shooting 31 people, killing one and seriously injuring 14. One police officer was also killed, shot by a Maasai arrow. Police have arrested about 19 people including nine councilors and the district chairman.

Tourism is a major economic factor for the East African nation, bringing about 650,000 people to the country each year and about \$55 million in revenue. Visitors to the crater can stay in high-end hotels that enjoy infrastructure that Maasai villages lack, including running water and electricity. By contrast, just 4.8% of Ngorongoro Conservation Area income was spent on "community development" in 2018, [according to Mongabay](#) - about one-third of what was spent four years earlier.

The Tanzanian government says there are no plans to forcibly evict the Maasai, who number some 150,000 in the area, but the UN experts noted that "under such conditions, it seems impossible to guarantee that the relocation of the Maasai from the area will not amount to forced evictions and arbitrary displacement under international law."

"This will cause irreparable harm, and could amount to dispossession, forced eviction and arbitrary displacement prohibited under international law," they wrote. "It could jeopardize the Maasai's physical and cultural survival in the name of 'nature conservation', safari tourism and trophy hunting, ignoring the relationship that the Maasai have traditionally had with their lands, territories and resources and their stewardship role in protecting biodiversity."

Tanzanian officials say the Maasai who have left have done so voluntarily. Arusha regional commissioner [John Mongella told AFP](#) that about 296 families had registered to move to a district about 370 miles south of Ngorongoro, where the government had set aside about 400,000 acres for Maasai resettlement.

"I have seen water, schools and even electricity in the new residence, why shouldn't I go there?" one herder told AFP.

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US CDC Releases New Guidance on Monkeypox Diagnosis, Warning Early Symptoms Look Similar to STIs

As cases of monkeypox virus (MPXV) continue to rise in the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have issued new guidance on the virus, especially in the area of diagnosis. Though known for decades, the newest variant of the virus is behaving in unexpected ways.

As of Wednesday, the US has detected 84 cases of MPXV, [according to CDC data](#), and 2,027 cases have been detected across 36 countries. While the virus cannot reach the level of

infectiousness of COVID-19, the US has upped its efforts to detect, diagnose, and treat people who have been infected, many of whom are gay and bisexual men who have contracted it during casual sexual encounters.

According to [the CDC's new guidance](#), MPXV is not a sexually transmitted infection (STI) and is likely spreading due to the close physical contact that happens during sex. However, many of the early symptoms look somewhat similar to STIs such as syphilis and gonorrhea, and part of the CDC's new guidance is for doctors to more rigorously test people with rashes or lesions that they believe can be explained by an STI.

"It's important to be aware that monkeypox cases may present similar to some sexually transmitted infections and could be mistaken for other diagnoses," CDC Director [Rochelle Walensky told reporters](#) last week. "Health-care providers should not rule out monkeypox just because a patient has another diagnosis or another STI."

Since it was discovered in Liberia in 1970, MPXV has generally caused symptoms in patients that are extremely similar to the virus' much deadlier cousin, smallpox. However, according to the CDC, the newest variant of the virus spreading across Europe and the Americas since last month has some new features, including a persistent rash in the mouth, genitals or anus, and lesions that remain localized instead of spreading across the body. The health agency also notes that multiple types of lesions can be present on a single person, including fluid-filled ones, pus-filled ones, and raised ones.

The lesions remain the most infectious aspect of the virus and touching the skin or the contents of a lesion is enough to cause an infection. Thus, bedding or clothing that has touched the lesions can also cause infection, much as it does in smallpox.

The risk to the public remains low, the CDC said, noting that people exposed to people who were infected, or who traveled to countries with an outbreak, should be extra-vigilant of early symptoms. If someone tests positive for orthopoxvirus, the family of viruses that includes MPXV, they are advised by the CDC to isolate themselves from others until their scabs have fallen off and a fresh layer of skin has formed. The symptoms typically last between two and four weeks. The World Health Organization (WHO), a UN-affiliated global health agency, [referred to the change](#) in viral symptoms as "an unusual situation."

The MPXV version spreading is a West African variant with a mortality rate of 1% and has caused no deaths in the present outbreak outside of the virus' endemic range in Central and West Africa. Other variants of the virus can have a mortality rate of as high as 10%, which still pales in comparison to the 30% death rate of the now-eradicated smallpox, a close relative of MPXV.

Because of their similarity, it is believed that the smallpox vaccine can also protect against MPXV, although that has never been tested. [According to CNBC](#), the US has 72,000 doses of the smallpox vaccine Jynneos, which has been approved to treat MPXV, requiring a two-dose administration. The country has been [distributing Jynneos to those infected](#) with the virus and has ordered 300,000 more doses of the vaccine. The US also has 100 million doses of an [older smallpox vaccine](#), ACAM2000, in storage, but isn't using them for MPXV because it can cause a more severe reaction.

Because of its origins in Africa, coverage of the MPXV outbreak has often featured imagery of Africans bearing its trademark lesions, which African doctors have denounced as discriminatory

and stigmatizing. As a result, the [WHO announced earlier](#) this week that it would rename the virus.

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Progressive US Lawmakers Urge Biden to Drop Anti-Cuba Sanctions Blocking Covid Vaccine Exports

One of the Trump administration's final acts was to add Cuba to the list of state sponsors of terrorism, a retaliatory move for Havana's sheltering of Colombian militia leaders who traveled there for good-faith peace talks with Bogotá and remained there after Colombian President Ivan Duque, a close US ally, re-launched the war.

A group of 26 US lawmakers on Thursday delivered a letter to US President Joe Biden asking him to revise his administration's sanctions policy toward Cuba so as to allow the flow of medical supplies, including vaccines, to and from the island. The socialist state has produced five COVID-19 vaccines and a lung cancer vaccine, among other miracle drugs, and its doctor corps brings essential medical care to other Third World nations.

"As our nation and the world continue to confront the COVID-19 pandemic, we ask you to explore possibilities for engaging with Cuba on issues of global health," the lawmakers, led by Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA), [wrote in the letter](#).

"As an initial step, we ask that you review US policy towards Cuba in order to facilitate greater global vaccine equity, with a particular focus on ensuring that US sanctions do not impede current or future efforts by Cuba to share COVID-19 vaccines and related technology and medical support with low-income countries around the world," the letter continues.

"Cuba's goal of vaccinating people in low-income countries offers an important opportunity and bridge for our nations to work together once again on urgent health care issues facing the world," they added. "Accordingly, we urge your Administration to conduct a review of U.S. policy toward Cuba and take appropriate executive action to ensure that basic medical supplies and components for producing and distributing vaccines are not negatively affected by the U.S. embargo."

Cuba has [been under US sanctions](#) since a socialist revolution overthrew the US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959. The sanctions - referred to as a "blockade" in Cuba - have strangled Cuba's economy and deprived it of essential trade with its former largest trading partner, the US. While Cuba became an important friend to the Eastern Bloc socialist states and enjoyed a preferential trade relationship with the Soviet Union, the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 created new hardship, which the Cubans call the Special Period.

Under former US President Barack Obama, US-Cuba relations warmed somewhat, with Obama dropping some sanctions and beginning the process of normalizing ties. However, [that was sharply reversed](#) when Donald Trump became president in 2017, with a host of new sanctions put in place as Trump's administration tried to force a right-wing coup in Venezuela, a close Cuban ally, by strangling its economy and supporting dissident far-right forces like self-proclaimed interim president Juan Guaidó.

US President Joe Biden has largely continued Trump's policies, [expanding sanctions even further](#) after US-backed protests erupted across the island in July 2021, building on popular anger over electrical shortages and the COVID-19 outbreak to try and [make them into anti-government demonstrations](#).

Despite the pressure, Cuba's medical system was able to independently [develop five COVID-19 vaccines](#), although because of sanctions, they were only able to get enough syringes to vaccinate their entire population thanks to a [massive donation drive](#) by US peace activists. Havana has recently [made a deal with Iran](#) to allow production of its Soberana 02 vaccine in Iran, and China and Cuba recently moved to [patent a joint Pan-Corona vaccine](#) to treat COVID-19 and related illnesses.

According to the congress members, Cuba's vaccine infrastructure could help provide cheap, effective vaccines across the Third World, meeting a critical goal of the Biden administration and helping to end the COVID-19 pandemic.

"US sanctions on Cuba directly impede these goals, not only by harming the country's ability to vaccinate its own population but also by placing obstacles in the way of Cuba's ability to produce and distribute its vaccine to other countries that continue to face shortages," their letter reads.

Pressley and other progressive US lawmakers similarly pressed Biden in February 2021, just weeks after he took office, to [revise US sanctions on Venezuela](#) in order to help that country better fight the COVID-19 outbreak.

"It is both a moral and public health imperative that our efforts to combat COVID-19 are global in scope because the pandemic's economic consequences require international cooperation," [the lawmakers wrote](#) at the time. "The pandemic does not adhere to borders, nor does it account for complex geopolitical realities - until the virus is eradicated everywhere, it is not eradicated anywhere."

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Video - Tom Hanks Tells Fans to 'Back the F\*\*\* Off' as They Nearly Knock Over His Wife  
By - Mary Manley

Actor Tom Hanks, 65, known for "Forrest Gump" and "Cast Away," has been married to his partner Rita Wilson since 1998. The two first met on the set of "Bosom Buddies" while Hanks was still married to his college sweetheart Samantha Lewes.

Tom [Hanks](#) and Rita [Wilson](#), 65, were exiting a restaurant in New York when paparazzi and overeager fans rushed into the couple, causing Wilson to stumble and scream.

The two actors were all smiles as they greeted the crowd and began walking to their car. But the mood grew sour when some fans began crowding around the couple while holding out their phones in an attempt to get selfies with the celebrities.

The group managed to get between Hanks and his wife as Wilson walked to the car seemingly oblivious to any danger. Hanks looked worried as he tried to catch up to his wife through the crowd.

One fan appeared to bump into Wilson, the producer of "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," who screamed and stumbled. Wilson managed to regain her footing, turned to one of the fans and yelled: "Stop it!"

The fan appeared to be holding a makeshift prop of the character 'Wilson' (a volleyball) from Hanks' 2000 film "Castaway" when he accidentally shoved the back of the actress.

Hanks then became irate, turning toward the group and yelling: "That is my wife. Back the f\*\*\* off." His hands were outstretched in front of him as he seemed prepared to push the overzealous crowd back in order to protect his wife.

The person who had bumped into Wilson also turned to the crowd and said: "What are y'all doing?"

"Knocking over my wife?!" an incredulous Hanks yelled at the crowd.

"They buggin'," said one person in the crowd. "That's disgusting!" exclaimed a female voice in agreement.

"Sorry about that, Tom," said a male paparazzi as the couple retreated to their car.

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FIFA Announces 2026 World Cup Host Cities in North America

By - Mary Manley

The 2026 FIFA World Cup was won by a joint bid from the North American countries of Mexico, Canada, and the United States. The 2018 World Cup, hosted by Russia, saw a total of 3.572 billion people watch the games, and roughly 6.8 million tourists traveled to host cities to watch the games.

While FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 is still set to begin in November, FIFA is already announcing where in North America the 2026 games will be held.

On [Thursday](#), FIFA announced the North American cities that will host the 2026 World Cup.

Individual cities across Mexico, Canada, and the U.S. watched [live](#) as the organization announced 16 cities which they selected from a list of 22, each city hoping to win their bid.

In order to reduce travel, said FIFA president Gianni Infantino, the organization grouped cities by regions; East, Central, and West. Infantino said the decision was to "ensure fans did not have to travel too far, to ensure everyone has a fantastic experience."

The cities that will be lucky enough to host the 23rd quadrennial international men's association football championship will include: Toronto (BMO Field), Boston (Gillette Stadium, Foxborough), Philadelphia (Lincoln Financial Field), Miami (Hard Rock Stadium, Miami Gardens), and New York in a joint bid with New Jersey (MetLife Stadium) in the East region.

Those in the Central region include: Kansas City (Arrowhead Stadium), Dallas (AT&T Stadium), Atlanta (Mercedes Benz Stadium), Houston (NRG Stadium), Monterrey, Mexico (Estadio BBVA), and Mexico City (Estadio Azteca).

The Western region will encompass Vancouver (BC Place), Seattle (Lumen Field), San Francisco (Levi's Stadium, Santa Clara), Los Angeles (SoFi Stadium, Inglewood), and Guadalajara, Mexico (Estadio Akron).

All games in the United States will be played at a National Football League stadium, and seven of the 11 American stadiums (MetLife Stadium, Gillette Stadium, AT&T Stadium, Mercedes Benz Stadium, NRG Stadium, Lumen Field, and SoFi Stadium) utilize artificial turf.

Cities that lost their bids included Cincinnati, Denver, Nashville, Orlando, Pasadena, Washington, DC (which went for a joint bid with Baltimore), and the Canadian city of Edmonton. Folks in Kansas City, Missouri, watched as they learned they would be one of 11 cities to host the World Cup in 2026. The city known for their steaks and barbecue has a population of about 500,000 people, making it one of the smallest cities to be chosen apart from Miami and Atlanta. A group gathered in the [Kansas](#) City Power and Light District cheered as they learned their city would be hosting the World Cup for 2026.

"The success of Kansas City's bid is a testament to the accomplishments we can achieve when we work together," said Sporting Kansas City Principal Owner Cliff Illig.

"Today's announcement is the celebration of a shared vision that will culminate with the largest event in Kansas City history. The World Cup will bring unprecedented tourism and economic activity to our community and will provide an opportunity to showcase our city on a global stage. We are excited for Kansas City to proudly welcome the world for the 2026 FIFA World Cup." Infantino, who is Swiss-Italian, revealed that some of the final host cities were not selected until the day they were announced.

Cities will now buckle down and begin plans to host the soccer teams as well as fans from around the world. The World Cup has not been hosted by the US since 1994, when a measly 70,000 Americans visited the matches across nine host cities. By 2017, however, soccer had become the third-most watched team sport in the US behind basketball and American football. During a press conference on [Thursday](#), Infantino predicted that "2026 will be much, much bigger [than 1994]. I think this part of the world doesn't realize what will happen here in 2026. The world will be invading Canada, Mexico, and the United States."

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Depp vs. Heard, Jury Member Says Amber's 'Crocodile Tears' Made Them Uncomfortable  
By - Mary Manley

Actress Amber Heard sat down for her first interview this week to discuss the verdict that was passed down on June 1. Both Amber Heard and Johnny Depp were found liable for defamation in their lawsuits against each other by a jury in Fairfax, Virginia. Depp, however, was awarded significantly more in damages.

A juror is speaking out against Amber Heard, 36, after she made claims against a Fairfax jury in an interview with NBC's Savannah Guthrie heavily insinuating that the jury watched or looked at social media during the trial.

"Of course, 'til my dying day, [I] will stand by every word of my testimony," she said. "I think [the] vast majority of this trial was played out on social media. I think that this trial is an example of that gone haywire, gone amok, and the jury's not immune to that."

A juror is speaking out after Heard made claims that some of them were influenced by social media coverage of the trial between her and her ex-husband Johnny Depp. Depp sued Heard for defamation after she had written an article in which she painted herself as a victim of domestic violence.

The jury awarded Depp a sum of \$10 million in compensatory damages and a capped \$350,000 in punitive damages. Heard received \$2 million in her countersuit for compensatory damages. The anonymous juror spoke with [Good Morning America](#) on Thursday, disputing Heard's claims by saying that he and "at least" three others did not have Twitter accounts.

"Some people said we were bribed. That's not true. Social media did not impact us. We followed the evidence. We didn't take into account anything outside [the courtroom]. We only looked at the evidence," he said. "They were very serious accusations and a lot of money involved. So we weren't taking it lightly."

"None of us were really fans of either one of them," the juror added, saying he knew more of Depp than of Heard but hadn't seen many of his films.

The anonymous juror, who is one of seven, said that Heard's behavior on the stand wasn't believable, either, and that they were "uncomfortable" with her constantly staring at them.

"The crying, the facial expressions that she had, the staring at the jury — all of us were very uncomfortable..." the juror explained. "She would answer one question and she would be crying and then two seconds later she would turn ice cold... Some of us used the expression 'crocodile tears.'"

"It didn't come across as believable," he added. "It seemed like she was able to flip the switch on her emotions. She would answer one question and she would be crying and two seconds later she would turn ice cold. It didn't seem natural."

He added that the jury found both Depp and Heard to be "abusive to each other" but found that Heard's team failed to prove any physical abuse from Depp.

"They had their husband-wife arguments. They were both yelling at each other. I don't think that makes either of them right or wrong. That's what you do when you get into an argument, I guess. But to rise to the level of what she was claiming, there wasn't enough or any evidence that really supported what she was saying," he said.

He said that the jury saw much of what Heard was saying while on the stand as contradictory. A majority of the jury believed Heard to be the aggressor in the relationship, and found various inconsistencies in her testimony.

"If you have a battered wife or spouse situation, why would you buy the other person, the 'aggressor,' a knife? If you really wanted to help Johnny Depp get off drugs, why are you taking drugs around him?" he asked.

Heard gifted Depp a very large knife as a gift despite claims that he had been abusing her shortly beforehand. The [knife](#) was inscribed with a message saying, "hasta la muerte," meaning "until death."

He also added that Heard's commitment to wearing makeup on a daily basis to "hide bruises" as she and her legal team claimed did not coincide with her decision to go sans makeup the day she filed a restraining order against Depp. An ex-employee from TMZ said that in 2016 that the news agency had been given an insider tip that Heard would be filing a restraining order.

"We were trying to capture Amber leaving the courthouse and an alleged bruise on the right side of her face," explained Morgan [Tremaine](#), who previously worked for TMZ. "She was going to

sort of stop and turn towards the camera to display the bruise on the right side of her face, the alleged bruise.”

The juror explained that the defense’s claim that Heard “never goes outside without make-up on” fell apart.

“Yet she goes to file a restraining order without make-up on. And it just so happens her publicist is with her. Those things add up and start to become hard to believe,” he said.

Another blow for Heard and her legal team was when [Heard](#) made the claim that she had donated the entirety of her \$7 million divorce settlement from Depp to charity, when in fact she had only donated \$350,000 indirectly. Heard argued that “pledge” and “donation” were synonymous terms, even as the jury was shown a video of Heard on a Dutch talk show in which she claimed, “\$7 million in total was donated. I split it between the ACLU and the Children’s Hospital of Los Angeles. I wanted nothing.”

“The fact is, she didn’t give much of it away at all,” the juror said. “It was disingenuous.”

The juror also condemned Heard’s [legal team](#), which was composed of Ben Rottenborn from Woods Rogers Attorneys at Law in Virginia, as well as Elaine Bredehoft and Adam Nadelhaft from Charlson Bredehoft Cogen Brown & Nadelhaft, also in Virginia.

“They would cut people off in cross because they wanted one specific answer without context. They were forcing people to just answer a very narrow question... which was obvious,” he said. “She needs better advice.”

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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.

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

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, a new Yahoo News/YouGov poll showed on Friday. The survey found 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 poll surveyed 1,541 US adults from June 10-13, and the margin of error is about 2.9%.

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#### UN Says Lack of Investing in Fossil Fuels Makes States Vulnerable to Ukraine Crisis

UNITED NATIONS, June 17 (Sputnik) - Lack of investment in fossil fuels makes states vulnerable to a spike in prices resulting from the crisis in Ukraine, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in remarks to the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate (MEF). "Had we invested earlier and massively in renewable energy, we would not find ourselves once again at the mercy of unstable fossil fuel markets. Let's make sure the war in Ukraine is not used to increase that dependency," Guterres said.

According to the Western states, the increase in fossil fuel prices results from Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. Many are cutting down the imports of Moscow's resources to unite their efforts and punish Russia. The lack of supplies and new policies have caused chaos in the markets and affect people's homes worldwide.

The UN chief added that inflation and the spike in gas prices are actually climate and fossil fuel issues. He said that the world's resources are limited, and because of the fast growth, we should also use infinite resources, or we will see more conflict, inflation, and climate crisis.

"The solution is equally clear: we do have infinite resources at our disposal when it comes to energy needs. Wind, sun, and tides never run out," he said.

Guterres, since taking office in 2017, has made climate change one of his priorities. He has been criticized for lacking strong public diplomacy on many critical issues and conflicts but has always expressed firmly on the threat of rising temperatures.

The MEF is a leader-level meeting organized by US President Joe Biden on June 17, being his third MEF leader-level meeting since he took office. According to the US State Department, the MEF participants represent 80 percent of the world's GDP, population, and green course emissions.

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Third American Missing in Ukraine Identified as Former US Marine - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - A third US fighter missing in Ukraine is believed to be former marine Grady Kurpasi, CNN reported, citing his wife.

The US State Department said on Thursday that it was checking information about another American who could have gone missing in Ukraine.

According to the TV channel, the last time close friends communicated with Kurpasi was on April 23-24. Grady reportedly served in the US Marine Corps for about 20 years and retired in November 2021. He was believed to have arrived in Ukraine on March 7.

"For him personally, he has a skill set that he feels he can give back. He wanted to go and help the Ukrainian people. He wasn't really planning on fighting," George Heath, a family friend of Kurpasi, told CNN.

In late April, Kurpasi and other volunteers who went to Ukraine to fight against Russia were tasked with running an observation post near Kherson, around the time the ex-marine stopped communicating with his wife and friends back in the US, according to Heath.

The State Department informed relatives that Kurpasi went missing on April 28, he added.

On Wednesday, news media reported that US citizens Alexander Drueke, 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,

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Biden at Energy-Climate Forum to Discuss Alternatives to Russian Fertilizer - Official

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's virtual energy and climate forum being held later on Friday will convene several major world leaders to discuss a range of global issues including seeking alternatives to Russian fertilizer and accelerating the transition to clean energy, a senior US administration official told reporters.

Biden will host a virtual leader-level meeting of the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate (MEF) on Friday starting at 8:30 a.m. EST (12:30 p.m. GMT). It marks Biden's third leader-level convening of the MEF since taking office, according to the White House.

"In agriculture, this is really a global call to action on looking at alternatives or certain types of fertilizer to ensure that we are able to grow more food with less inputs, to make it more efficient and more productive," the US official said.

The official said the Ukraine conflict has presented a moment of a "doubling down" and accelerating the transition from fossil fuel to climate-aligned energy.

The countries that will participate in the virtual forum include Argentina, Australia, Chile, China, Canada, the European Union, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Norway, Nigeria, Republic of Korea, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, Vietnam, Egypt, and France.

Biden and his counterparts will make a set of announcements in a few key sectors that will help address challenges in energy security, food security, and climate, the official said.

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Antonov Calls for Lifting Belarus Fertilizer Sanctions, Says Moscow Ready to Export Grain  
(Adds details in paras 3-14)

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US should cooperate with Moscow and lift sanctions on Belarusian fertilizers if it really wants to resolve the global agricultural crisis, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said in an op-ed.

"If Washington really wants to improve the situation in the global agricultural market, let us cooperate. Stop blaming Russia for all the troubles. We are ready to work together to improve the situation in all countries of the world," Antonov wrote in the article published in The National Interest on Thursday. "We are ready to facilitate the smooth export of grain from the ports under our control. There are also opportunities to use transport corridors through Poland, Romania, and Belarus. The only thing that the latter... option requires is a sanctions lift on Belarusian fertilizers."

The ambassador also said that Western sanctions have become a significant adverse factor in the food crisis but the West has chosen to "shift responsibility" for food and energy price hikes by blaming Russia. In addition, Antonov pointed to the Western focus toward renewable energy sources as another factor in the crisis.

"The situation has been further complicated by the Western-led campaign to forcefully accelerate the transition by the international community from traditional energy sources to renewable energy, without taking into account the socio-economic specifics of countries and regions. The attempts to make a quick leap to 'green' energy drove up the cost of agricultural products as well as resource-intensive mineral fertilizers," he said.

Russia, he added, has become a target for accusations that have "nothing to do with reality." "Our country is being imputed with trying to take steps aimed at deliberately degrading global food security, preventing Ukrainian agricultural exports by sea, and blocking the sowing campaign in that country. It's time to put an end to these speculations," the ambassador said in the article.

The ambassador noted that back in 2020 the UN warned of the risks of a growing crisis in the global agricultural market. Then prices started to increase and then skyrocketed by 50 percent by this February "before the start of our special operation in Ukraine," he added.

"Twenty million tons of grain supposedly ready for shipment from Ukrainian ports, which our so-called partners constantly refer to, constitute less than 1 percent of the total volume of the global food market. The delay in the export of wheat can be hardly considered a 'catastrophic' development of the overall situation," Antonov wrote.

It is a matter of concern for Moscow, he added, that Ukraine remains self-sufficient in terms of food security because it corresponds to Russia's national interests.

"We are undertaking the necessary efforts in this regard - assisting farmers in the liberated territories, restoring infrastructure, supplying seeds. At the same time, Russian servicemen are engaged in humanitarian demining of farmland. More than 12,000 explosives on 200 hectares of fields have been deactivated," he said.

Russia, Antonov stressed, is not trying to impede Ukrainian food exports.

"We understand very well the importance of resuming supplies to the countries in need. But the departure of merchant vessels from the Black Sea ports is hampered by the Kiev authorities' actions," he said. "It was their decision to install around 420 mines. Due to their outdated construction, their anchors often fall off, which only increases their danger."

As a result, Antonov said, dozens of foreign ships remain stuck in Nikolaev, Kherson, Chernomorsk, Ochakov, Odessa, and Yuzhny.

"The conclusion is that there are no obstacles from our side. The ball is in Kiev's court now," the ambassador wrote.

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US, Allies Dismantle 'RSOCKS' Botnet Allegedly Operated by Russians - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Law enforcement from the US and three European countries collaborated to bring down a botnet allegedly run by Russian cybercriminals, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"The US Department of Justice, together with law enforcement partners in Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, have dismantled the infrastructure of a Russian botnet known as RSOCKS which hacked millions of computers and other electronic devices around the world," the release said on Thursday.

RSOCKS botnet, the release added, targeted several large public and private entities including a university, a hotel, a television studio, and an electronics manufacturer, in addition to home businesses and individuals.

The Justice Department said a botnet is a group of hacked internet-connected devices controlled as a group without the owner's knowledge.

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US Imposes Visa Restrictions on Five Cuban Officials - Blinken

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The US imposed visa restrictions on five Cuban government officials in connection with human rights abuses including unfair trials and jailings, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a press release.

"The Department of State has taken steps to impose visa restrictions on five Cuban officials pursuant to Presidential Proclamation 5377, which suspends nonimmigrant entry into the United States of officers and employees of the Cuban government," Blinken said on Thursday. "These five officials are connected to unfair trials and unjust sentencing and imprisonment of peaceful July 11, 2021, protesters. This announcement of visa restrictions comes in response to the actions of Cuban government officials that deny Cubans their basic human rights and fundamental freedoms."

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Mother of US Man in Ukraine Says State Dept. Verifying Photo Confirming Alleged Capture

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - The State Department is working to verify a photo depicting two US men allegedly captured as combatants in Ukraine, the mother of one of the men said during an interview.

"They're working hard to verify [the photo]. We're very hopeful," Bunny Drueke told CNN on Thursday when asked about the photo being circulated. "I have seen it."

Earlier in the day, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said the US has been in contact with the families of the two men reported missing in Ukraine. However, the United States has not yet discussed the matter with the Russian government, Price also said.

Drueke's son John-Robert Drueke is shown in the photo alongside Andy Huynh, both US veterans who were fighting alongside Ukrainian forces. The men are shown sitting in military clothing with their hands behind their backs.

Drueke in the interview also said that she does not want to get her hopes up about the photo's veracity given the prevalence of photoshop technology.

"I'm hopeful that it's an actual photo of them, that they are alive. Whoever is in the photo doesn't look particularly hurt. The one that's supposed to be my son looks rather angry, and that sounds like my son," Drueke said.

On Wednesday, media reported that Drueke, 39, and Huynh, 27, were captured by Russian forces near the city of Kharkiv. The reports said the former is a US Army veteran and the latter a US Marine Corps veteran.

Drueke felt he was too old to fight but had useful experience training soldiers, and decided to volunteer to teach Ukrainians how to use equipment, his mother said. He did two tours of duty in Iraq while in the US military, she added.

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Quebec City Police Conducting Raids Against Neo-Nazi Group Atomwaffen Division - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 17 (Sputnik) - Quebec City police is conducting raids in a neighborhood of the city against the neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen Division, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) reported.

Police officers have already executed two search warrants, the report quoted Cpl. Charles Poirier as saying.

Poirier said the actions of the police constitute a "national security operation," the report said, adding that Atomwaffen Division is a far-right affiliated group.

While an emergency response team and armored vehicle were present on the scene, there is no threat to the general public and no arrests were made, the report said.

Atomwaffen Division is a neo-Nazi group founded in the United States in 2013. The group claims to be inspired by the serial killer Charles Manson and posits that history will end in a race war, the report said.

This is the third time in the last several months that the police acts against Atomwaffen Division members. In May, the police arrested 19-year-old man linked to the group, while two months earlier officers raided the home of group's key member Patrick Gordon Macdonald in Ottawa.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY  
WASHINGTON, JUNE 17 (Sputnik) -

#### UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- \* Ukraine has to conduct negotiations with Russia itself, France and Germany can not do that for Kiev, French President Emmanuel Macron said on Thursday.
- \* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Stingers and Javelin missiles, supplied by the West to Ukraine, have been already sold at a discount on the black market and have surfaced in Albania and Kosovo.
- \* Employees of the laboratory in the village of Sorokovka in Kharkiv region tested highly active neuromodulators that caused irreversible damage to the central nervous system as part of the US military biological program in the region, Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov, the head of the radiation, chemical and biological defense of the Russian Armed Forces, said.
- \* The United States has confirmed that the Defense Department and biolabs in Ukraine are connected, Kirillov said.
- \* Donetsk Mayor Alexey Kulemzin said that the city center was shelled on Thursday, adding that several people were injured.

#### WESTERN MILITARY AID

- \* France will deliver six more CAESAR self-propelled howitzers to Ukraine, President Emmanuel Macron said on Thursday.
- \* The United States expects to send more artillery rocket systems as part of next military aid package for Ukraine, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said.

#### EU-UKRAINE RELATIONS

- \* France, Germany, Italy and Romania are in favor of granting the EU candidate status to Ukraine immediately, Agence France-Presse reported on Thursday, citing French President Emmanuel Macron.
- \* If the European Union grants membership to Ukraine, it will once again prove that the bloc is ready to ignore its own criteria in favor of geopolitical considerations, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.
- \* The European Union is ready to back Ukraine's candidate status immediately and has no right to tell Kiev to "come back later," Macron said.

#### ENERGY MARKETS

- \* Europe paid 350-400 billion euros for energy resources in 2021 and will overpay another 400 billion euros this year, due to its decisions, due to rising prices, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on Thursday.

\* European Commissioner for the Economy Paolo Gentiloni said that the European Union will not face a recession over the situation with imports of Russian gas.

\* Most of Gazprom's European clients have switched to paying for gas in rubles, which is about 90-95% of the supplied volumes, Novak told reporters on the sidelines of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF).

\* A decline in gas supplies to a number of European countries is due to the fact that Siemens turbines, which were used to supply gas via Nord Stream, are not returning from maintenance in Canada, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, noting Russia has nothing to do with it.

#### AMERICANS CAPTURED IN UKRAINE

\* The Biden administration is in touch with the families of two Americans reportedly captured by the Russian military in Ukraine, but has not yet discussed the matter with the Russian government, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

\* The Biden administration is aware of the reports that at least one additional US citizen has gone missing in Ukraine amid Russia's special operation there, Price said.

#### STATE OF RUSSIA'S ECONOMY

\* Russia will soon have to compensate for the 40% to 45% decrease of its imports but the country's economy is doing a bit better despite Western sanctions, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

\* The Coca-Cola HBC, a bottler of the coca-cola drink, said it is, together with its customers in Russia, in the 'process of depleting stock.'

\* Italy's Enel Group has sold its 56.43% share in Enel Russia to Lukoil and the Gazprombank-Freesia investment fund, Enel said.

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#### Biden Says US Public 'Really, Really Down' About Inflation, Recession 'Not Inevitable'

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said in a recent interview that the American public is really concerned about inflation in the United States but a recession is not inevitable.

"People are really, really down," Biden told the Associated Press on Thursday. "The need for mental health in America, it has skyrocketed, because people have seen everything upset. Everything they've counted on upset. But most of it's the consequence of what's happened, what happened as a consequence of the COVID crisis."

Biden also underscored that a recession in the United States is not inevitable, claiming he is confident that the US is in a strong position to overcome inflation.

US inflation, as recorded by the Consumer Price Index, grew at an annualized rate of 8.6% in May - the fastest rate since 1981. The cost of virtually all goods, including food, fuel, shelter and clothing, increased significantly last month.

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 pointed both towards impacts of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine and alleged price gouging by energy firms.

Global food prices and supply availability have also faced instability as a result of the situation in Ukraine, with Western leaders pinning responsibility on Russia's operation and Moscow pointing toward Western sanctions and Ukrainian sea mines as barriers to bringing food and fertilizer to market.

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#### US Officials Discuss Cybersecurity Challenges in National Health Care - White House

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - Senior US government cyber officials and business executives working in the healthcare sector held a briefing and a discussion on the cybersecurity issues facing them, the White House announced in a readout on Thursday.

"[On Wednesday,] National Cyber Director Chris Inglis hosted Deputy Secretary of Health and Human Services [HHS] Andrea Palm, senior US government cybersecurity officials, and CEOs and other senior executives representing entities on the Health Sector Coordinating Council Cybersecurity Working Group Executive Committee for a cyber threat briefing and roundtable discussion," the readout said.

Participants discussed the five-year anniversary of the Health Care Industry Cybersecurity Task Force's "Report on Improving Cybersecurity in the Health Care Industry," including areas where additional focus is needed, the readout said.

"Palm provided an update on HHS's work to finalize a sector incident response plan, and Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency [CISA] Deputy Director Nitin Natarajan shared resources CISA has available to help manage cybersecurity risk in critical infrastructure sectors, including healthcare," the readout added.

All of the participants agreed on the importance of additional collaboration, including through exercises, to help improve cybersecurity in the sector, according to the readout.

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#### Musk, Tesla, SpaceX Sued for \$258Bln Over Alleged Dogecoin Fraud - Reports

NEW YORK, June 16 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk is being jointly sued with his electric car company Tesla and space tourism firm SpaceX for \$258 billion over claims that they engineered a racketeering scheme involving the cryptocurrency Dogecoin, Bloomberg reported on Thursday.

The lawsuit was filed by Keith Johnson, an investor who says he and others lost money on Dogecoin because of the actions of three defendants who inflated the cryptocurrency's value, then let it collapse.

Johnson described himself as "an American citizen who was defrauded out of money by defendants' Dogecoin Crypto Pyramid Scheme." He said the "defendants falsely and deceptively claim that Dogecoin is a legitimate investment when it has no value at all."

The suit, filed on Thursday in a US federal court in New York City, seeks to represent a class of people who have lost money trading in Dogecoin since April 2019. The plaintiffs are demanding \$86 billion in primary damages and so-called triple damages of \$172 billion. They also want an order blocking Musk and the two companies from promoting Dogecoin, and a declaration that trading in the cryptocurrency constitutes gambling under US and New York State law.

At the time of publication, Bloomberg said neither Musk nor SpaceX and Tesla responded to its requests for comment.

Dogecoin was trading on Thursday at about 5 cents, down some 67% since the start of 2020. It had rallied to as high as 74 cents last year as Musk tweeted in favor of the coin. It subsequently gave up most of its gains after the billionaire turned sour on the coin, describing it as a "hustle" on a live talk show. A hustle refers to a scheme used to fraud.

Musk is the world's richest man based on his holdings of the super-valuable Tesla stock.

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RPT - Canada in Talks With Germany About Stranded Nord Stream Turbine – Ministry

OTTAWA, June 16 (Sputnik) – Ottawa and Berlin are in contact regarding the Nord Stream turbine that Seimens sent to Canada for maintenance before it got stranded in the country due to sanctions on Russia, Canada's Natural Resources Ministry said in a statement cited by Reuters on Thursday

"The government of Canada is in active discussions with Germany about the turbines in question, and we are working to reach a resolution," a spokesman for the ministry said in the statement.

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**US Newspaper Says Removed 23 Stories After Audit Finding Possible Fake Quotes, Sources**

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - USA Today has removed 23 stories from its website after an audit found that reporter Gabriela Miranda may have fabricated individuals and quotes used in articles, the newspaper said in a report on Thursday.

"After receiving an external correction request, USA Today audited the reporting work of Gabriela Miranda," the report said. "The audit revealed that some individuals quoted were not affiliated with the organizations claimed and appeared to be fabricated. The existence of other individuals quoted could not be independently verified. In addition, some stories included quotes that should have been credited to others."

Miranda resigned after the 23 articles were removed for not meeting editorial standards, the report said.

USA Today will bolster its reporting and editing diligence by improving processes for those who want to file complaints or request corrections and ensuring that reporters take steps to verify all sources and information, the report said.

The newspaper will also apply additional scrutiny to sources found through social media or other online means, the report added.

Removed articles include pieces on the Texas abortion ban, Russian activity near a nuclear power plant in Ukraine, Georgia elections and health topics, according to the report.

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**Biden Signs Into Law Legislation to Overhaul US Shipping Industry Rules, Prevent Abuse**

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden on Thursday signed a bill into law that will overhaul the US shipping industry and provide safeguards to prevent companies from manipulating the market, according to the White House press pool.

The US House of Representatives approved the Senate-passed Ocean Shipping Reform Act on Monday afternoon.

Biden said earlier this week that the bill will help lower costs for US retailers, farmers and consumers. He explained that shipping carriers increased their prices by as much as 1,000% during the coronavirus pandemic and often refused to take US exports back to Asia, costing US farmers and ranchers a lot of money.

The measure will require that the US Federal Maritime Commission to investigate complaints about detention and late fees charged by common ocean carriers, determine whether those charges are reasonable and order refunds for unreasonable charges.

The measure will also prohibit common ocean carriers, marine terminal operators, or ocean transportation intermediaries from unreasonably refusing cargo space when available or resorting to other unfair discriminatory methods.

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#### January 6 Committee Discusses Trump Effort to Pressure Pence to Change Election Results

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - The House Select Committee investigating the January 6 Capitol breach in their third public hearing on Thursday heard testimony related to former President Donald Trump's alleged efforts to pressure then-Vice President Mike Pence to change the 2020 presidential election results in their favor.

The committee heard from former Pence legal counsel Greg Jacob and informal Pence advisor and retired federal judge Michael Luttig. The two men were questioned by lawmakers about their knowledge of Pence's thoughts and Trump's communications with Pence in the time surrounding the certification of election results on January 6.

Trump's purported plan to overturn the 2020 presidential election required Pence to refuse certification of election results in favor of Joe Biden during the joint session of Congress at the Capitol on January 6, which Pence oversaw as President of the Senate.

Pence first began discussing with advisors his possible role in such a plan in December 2020, Jacob said. The team ultimately concluded that Pence did not have the constitutional authority to stop certification of results in favor of Joe Biden from states where results were challenged, according to Jacob.

If Pence had declared Trump the winner on January 6 instead of Biden during the joint session, then the United States would have been plunged into a situation "tantamount to a revolution within a constitutional crisis," Luttig said.

The committee also viewed video of January 6 demonstrators making threatening comments toward Pence, which the lawmakers linked to a tweet from Trump saying that Pence did not have the "courage" to intervene in the election certification. Pence that day was taken to a secure room during the breach of the Capitol and never left the building, according to Jacob.

The committee's third public hearing comes in a seven-part series by the committee meant to showcase testimony and interviews with officials linked to the events of January 6 in an effort to lay out an alleged plot by Trump to overturn the 2020 election results.

Trump and numerous other critics have argued that the work of the US House Select Committee is a show trial intended to score political points before upcoming elections. Critics have also said the probe is biased because US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi refused to admit Republican lawmakers on the panel who may question and challenge its work.

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#### Wall Street in Deeper Bear Market, Recession Fears Trigger New Selloff After 1-Day Rally

NEW YORK, June 16 (Sputnik) - Wall Street descended into deeper bear market territory Thursday as recession fears again triggered a selloff in US stocks, which rebounded a day earlier on optimism the Federal Reserve will return to market-friendly interest rates by 2024 after it gets inflation under control.

Some half-hour to the close, Wall Street's S&P 500 index, representing the top 500 US stocks, was down 3.5%.

For the year, the S&P 500 was down 23.3%, more than Tuesday's slide of 21% for the year. 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, was down 4.3%. For all of 2022, it was down 32.1%, versus Tuesday's 31% tumble for the year.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, comprising stocks of 30 large US corporations, was down 2.6% on the day. For the year, the Dow was down 17.9%.

"US economic data is showing a deceleration in activity, which is making Wall Street bring forward their recession calls," said Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA. "Jobless claims remained steady, but everyone is focusing on a steady stream of layoff announcements from companies across housing and crypto markets. The housing market is cooling quickly after both housing starts and building permits plunged, while mortgage costs surge to ... the biggest one-week increase since 1987."

The Federal Reserve on Wednesday announced a 75-basis point, or a three-quarter percentage point, increase for the third US interest rate hike since the outbreak of the pandemic two years ago. This year's three hikes have cumulatively brought rates to between 1.5% and 1.75% from a mere zero to 0.25% in February.

But investors took heart in the central bank's forecast that the current monetary tightening would last till 2024 at most and not longer. That led to Wednesday's broad rally in stocks.

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#### Musk Says Twitter Users Should Be Allowed to Say 'Pretty Outrageous Things' - Reports

NEW YORK, June 16 (Sputnik) - Twitter's prospective buyer Elon Musk said on Thursday users of the service should be able to say what they wanted, including "pretty outrageous things," as long as these were covered by the law, Bloomberg reported.

Taking to the microblogging site itself to talk about free speech — a subject as passionate to him as his Tesla electric car company and Space X orbit travel enterprise — Musk said freedom

of speech did not equate to freedom of reach, according to people who participated in his conversation with Twitter employees.

The conversation itself was a non-public event. Thus media access to what Musk said was limited to interviews held separately by news organizations with those who participated in the chat with their prospective owner, who's also the world's richest man based on his holdings of the super-valuable Tesla stock.

During his more than hour-long chat with the employees, Musk reportedly said Twitter users should be able to say "pretty outrageous things" as long as those things are within the parameters of the law.

The other widely-reported quote from Musk was that "freedom of speech doesn't mean freedom of reach."

One of Twitter's most-prolific users, with more than 98 million followers, Musk has expressed concern with the company's moderation policies. This included Twitter's decision in January 2021 to ban former US president Donald Trump from the platform on charges that tweets he issued had encouraged his supporters to storm the US Capitol building, after his election loss in November 2020.

In March this year, Musk tweeted out a poll that asked Twitter users whether the site adhered to the principle of free speech. The poll, however, showed that most Americans did not have a problem with Twitter or other social media companies removing posts that included misinformation, promotion of violence and a hazard to the public. While 73% of respondents to the Musk poll said they supported removing posts that probably contained false information, just 20% said they opposed removing those posts.

Musk has offered to buy Twitter for roughly \$44 billion and take the company private, away from the New York Stock Exchange. But like many dealings of the outspoken billionaire, the Twitter acquisition itself has been riddled with controversy from day one, with Musk demanding that the company be absolutely transparent with fake accounts on the site and that its employees, except for the super talented, all on site instead of from home — a practice that became popular during the two-year long coronavirus pandemic.

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US Justice Dept. Notifies January 6 House Panel It May Be Hampering Criminal Probes

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department notified the House select committee investigating the January 6 Capitol riot that it may be complicating criminal probes and trials connected to the event.

"It is now readily apparent that the interviews the Select Committee conducted are not just potentially relevant to our overall criminal investigations, but are likely relevant to specific prosecutions that have already commenced," Justice Department officials said in a letter to the committee.

The Justice Department is requesting the committee provide copies of transcripts of all its witness interviews.

The committee's failure to provide the transcripts will complicate the Justice Department's ability to prosecute individuals who engaged in criminal conduct at the Capitol riot, the letter said. The committee has held three hearings so far showcasing material and interviews with witnesses in connection to the January 6 riot. Four more hearings will be held through June.

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State Dept. Says US Stands by Anti-Russia Sanctions Strategy

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is standing by its strategy on sanctions against Russia, US State Department spokesperson Ned price said on Thursday.

"We do stand by our [sanctions] strategy [with respect to Russia]," he told journalists at a briefing.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help. The US and its Western allies have since been pressuring Moscow with sanctions, including in the area of energy supplies, causing prices to soar worldwide.

Global oil prices are hovering near 14-year highs at around \$120 per barrel while prices of gasoline at the pump in the United States have reached all-time peaks above \$4.70 per gallon due to a crude supply deficit that began with the 2021 economic rebound from the coronavirus pandemic measures and was exacerbated by this year's sanctions on Russia.

In the United States, the crisis has taken on an added dimension with the closure and downsizing of several refineries during the pandemic that has led to an even more drastic squeeze on the supply of gasoline and diesel - the main fuel that trucks, buses, trains and vessels run on.

Analysts say refineries that are in operation now are providing only what they can - or, more accurately, what they desire - without putting additional money into expanding existing capacity or acquiring idled plants that can be reopened to provide measurable relief to consumers.

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Biden to Host Virtual Meeting of Leaders on Energy, Climate on Friday - White House

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will host a virtual meeting on Friday to discuss energy and climate matters with representatives of other countries, the White House said.

"President Joe Biden will host a virtual leader-level meeting of the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate (MEF) on June 17, 2022, at 8:30 a.m. Eastern Time [12:30 GMT]," the White House said on Thursday in a press release. "The MEF includes countries representing 80

percent of global GDP, population, and greenhouse gas emissions. Other leaders critical to the global effort to tackle the climate crisis have also been invited to participate."

This meeting is part of Biden's effort to address rising costs around the world and to find long-term energy and food security, the release said.

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#### Pentagon's Counter-Hypersonic Program Fails to Mitigate Technology Risks - Watchdog

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - The US Missile Defense Agency (MDA) has not taken the required steps to reduce technology risks before developing counter-hypersonic weapons, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Thursday.

"MDA's efforts to address hypersonic threats include the Glide Phase Interceptor (GPI) and Hypersonic and Ballistic Tracking Space Sensor (HBTSS). These efforts represent technologies that have considerable risks, but MDA has not taken necessary steps to reduce risks and ensure appropriate oversight from the Department of Defense (DOD) or stakeholder involvement," the GAO said.

MDA, the report added, did not plan to obtain an independent technological risk assessment to determine the maturity of the technologies before proceeding with development of the GPI, which is a missile designed to shoot down a hypersonic weapon in the middle or glide phase of its flight.

With respect to the HBTSS, the GAO said the missile defense agency failed to effectively coordinate efforts with the US Space Development Agency and Space Force despite the program being centered on developing space-based sensors to track hypersonic weapons. Overall, the report added, the MDA has continued to fall short of its goals for asset deliveries and testing. For example, the MDA did not conduct any planned system-level cybersecurity tests, which left the agency without knowledge of system vulnerabilities and contributed to programmatic delays.

The GAO, a watchdog that conducts inspections authorized by Congress, also said improved Defense Department oversight and involvement would reduce risk as well.

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#### Sweden, Finland's Accession Meets NATO's Interests – Lithuanian Prime Minister

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) – The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO reflects the strategic interests of the alliance, Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte said on Thursday.

"It is strategic interest for NATO itself to have Sweden and Finland also in the club," Simonyte said during a conversation at the Atlantic Council.

On May 18, Finland and Sweden submitted their NATO membership applications, abandoning decades of neutrality and citing a shift in the security situation in Europe caused by the Ukraine crisis. However, Turkey blocked the application review process over the two nations' long-standing support of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which Ankara considers a terrorist organization.

Simonyte expressed regrets that "in situations like that" some partners "do cherry picking" with regard to issues of strategic importance.

The Lithuanian leader noted she is still hopeful that a solution will be found.

Simonyte added that Lithuania is cooperating with Finland and Sweden on security matters, but their entry to the bloc would make a qualitative difference to these ties.

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**Canada Rolls Out \$6.9Bln 'Affordability Plan' to Ease Inflation Impact - Finance Minister**

OTTAWA, June 16 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has unveiled a new \$6.9 billion "Affordability Plan" to reduce the financial burden on citizens amid runaway inflation, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland said on Thursday.

"We know that Canadians are worried about inflation and that they're asking what their government is going to do about it," Freeland said in a press release. "That's why we have a new Affordability Plan - C\$8.9 [US\$6.9] billion in new support this year - that is going to put more money in the pockets of Canadians at a time when they need it most."

The Affordability Plan is based on five different measures, the release said.

Under the plan, an increase of US\$1.32 billion to the Canada Worker benefit is expected to help three million citizens. In addition, the government will provide a 50% reduction of childcare fees by the end of 2022, the release said.

The plan also includes a 10% increase in pensions for persons 75 years and older and a 500\$ incentive to renters struggling with housing affordability as well as dental coverage assistance for struggling families, the release added.

The government has pledged to continue adjusting government benefits relative to the inflation rate, including regarding pensions and child benefit, according to the release.

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**US Aware of Reports of 1 Additional American Missing in Ukraine - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is aware of the reports that at least one additional US citizen has gone missing in Ukraine amid Russia's special operation there, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"There are reports of one additional American whose whereabouts are unknown? I can't speak to the specifics of that case. Unfortunately, we don't know the full details of that case," Price said during a press briefing. "Our understanding was that this individual had traveled to Ukraine to take up arms."

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US Has Not Discussed With Russia 2 Americans Reportedly Captured in Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is in touch with the families of two Americans reportedly captured by the Russian military in Ukraine, but has not yet discussed the matter with the Russian government, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"As of today, we have not raised this yet with the Russian Federation," Price said during a press briefing.

On Wednesday, media reported that US citizens Alexander Druke, 39, and Andy Huynh, 27, were captured by Russian forces near the city of Kharkiv. The reports said one of the captured Americans is a US Marine Corps veteran and the other is a US Army veteran.

Price said the Biden administration is aware of the un-confirmed reports of two US citizens captured in Ukraine.

"We're closely monitoring the situation. We are in contact with the Ukrainian authorities, as well as with the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the families of the two reported missing US citizens," he said.

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Peskov Says Russia Will Have to Compensate for 40%-45% Decrease in Imports

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - Russia will soon have to compensate for the 40% to 45% decrease of its imports but the country's economy is doing a bit better despite Western sanctions, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

"We are now even feeling a little bit better than one would think," Peskov said told CNN in an interview. "Of course, we understand our problems, we understand that in a very short time we will have to compensate the quite a significant decrease in more than 40%-45% in imports."

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Biden Administration Forms Task Force to Combat Online Harassment, Abuse - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration announced on Thursday that it has decided to form a task force within the Executive Office of the President to address online harassment and abuse, the White House said on Thursday.

"Online harassment and abuse include a broad array of harmful and sometimes illegal behaviors that are perpetrated through the use of technology," the White House said in a statement. "[T]he scale, reach and amplification effects of technology platforms have also exacerbated gender-based violence, particularly through online harassment and abuse." The White House explained it decided to form the task force because women, adolescent girls and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, intersex plus (LGBTQI+) community may be additionally targeted because of their race, ethnicity, religion and other factors and "can experience more severe harms from online harassment and abuse."

The White House said abuse and harassment includes non-consensual distribution of intimate digital images; cyberstalking; sex-related extortion; doxing; malicious deep fakes; gender disinformation; rape and death threats; online recruitment and exploitation of victims of sex trafficking; and technology-facilitated intimate partner abuse.

Women and LGBTQI+ political leaders, activists and journalists have been the victims of sexualized forms of online harassment and abuse that undermines "their ability to exercise their human rights and participate in democracy, governance and civic life," the statement said.

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**White House Says Cannot Confirm Capture of 2 US Mercenaries in Ukraine**

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration cannot confirm the reports that at least two US mercenaries have been captured by the Russian military in Ukraine amid the ongoing special operation there, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

"We can't confirm these reports. We don't know where their whereabouts are. We are working very hard to learn more about these Americans who are now missing. Our hearts go out to their families during this difficult time that they're going through," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

The White House spokeswoman called on Americans to refrain from traveling to Ukraine due to the very real dangers amid the conflict there.

On Wednesday, media reported that US citizens Alexander Druke, 39, and Andy Huynh, 27, were captured by Russian forces near the city of Kharkiv.

The New York Post reported that one of the captured Americans is a US Marine Corps veteran and the other is a US Army veteran.

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

Ukrainian military infrastructure and foreign fighters do not fall under the protections of the Geneva Conventions and other international documents.

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US Imposes Export Restrictions on Belavia Belarusian Airlines - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - The United States issued an order for temporary export restrictions on Belavia Belarusian Airlines for violating the sanctions that the Biden administration imposed on Russia, the US Bureau of Industry and Security said on Thursday. "The Bureau of Industry and Security, US Department of Commerce, through its Office of Export Enforcement (OEE), has requested the issuance of an Order temporarily denying, for a period of 180 days, the export privileges under the Regulations of Belavia Belarusian Airlines," the order said.

Belavia Belarusian Airlines violated US regulations by operating flights into Russia and Belarus after April 8 without the required authorization from the United States, the order added.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Drop, But Only Slightly From 4-Month Highs - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims fell from four-month highs but only slightly after an upward revision of the previous week's numbers, according to a Labor Department report on Thursday that indicated that the stunning drop in unemployment claims seen over the past year may be coming to an end.

"In the week ending June 11, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 229,000, a decrease of 3,000 from the previous week's revised level," the Labor Department said in a statement.

The drop came after claims in the previous week were revised up to 232,000 from 229,000. Either way, the 232,000 and 229,000 represented the highest for claims since the week ended February 18.

For the week to June 11, economists polled by US media had forecast claims to average 216,500. That put the Labor Department's report at 12,500 above estimates.

"Employment conditions are weakening," economist Greg Michalowski said in a comment posted on the ForexLive forum. "The levels [for jobless claims] are still very low, but there [are] some squeaky wheels."

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

An unemployment rate of 4% or below is regarded by the Federal Reserve as maximum employment.

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#### US Lawmakers Introduce Bipartisan Bill to Combat Foreign Influence in Washington

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan group of US House representatives introduced legislation to address foreign influence on government officials and think tanks in Washington, Rep. Jared Golden said on Thursday.

The bill, known as the Fighting Foreign Influence Act, would mandate public disclosures on foreign funding from tax-exempt organizations such as think tanks and non-profits; impose a lifetime ban on former senior executive branch officials, military officers and lawmakers from serving as foreign lobbyists; and require political campaigns to verify that online contributions come from legally eligible donors, the press release said.

The legislation would also ban foreign agents from fundraising for political campaigns, according to the press release. Each of the measures responds to serious vulnerabilities to foreign influence on US policymaking and elections, the press release also said.

"One of the biggest problems with our political system today is how corruption is either completely legal or punished with slaps on the wrist. Right now, foreign governments are able to secretly fund think tanks to push their own agendas, hire former public officials and military officers to lobby for their interests, and have their agents raise millions of dollars for political campaigns." Golden said in the press release. "Our bipartisan legislation would help close each of these loopholes."

The legislation is endorsed by anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International US, the press release added.

Representatives Lance Gooden, Katie Porter, and Paul Gosar joined Golden in supporting the bill's introduction.

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#### Borrell Calls on Russia at UN to Re-Open Black Sea Passage for Ukraine Grain Exports

UNITED NATIONS, June 16 (Sputnik) - Russia should reopen a safe passage in the Black Sea and work with the United Nations to enable grain exports out of Ukraine, European Union foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell said during a UN Security Council meeting on Thursday.

"The easiest way to do this is for Russia to stop its aggression, to withdraw its troops from all its Ukrainian territory, and finally to work with the nation and others to reopen the Black Sea passage," Borrell told the meeting via a video link.

Borrell said many people around the world are starving because 20 million tons of Ukraine grains cannot be exported to markets worldwide and Russia's special military operation in Ukraine is to blame for that outcome.

In addition, Borrell claimed the European Union has not caused nor contributed the existing food crisis and further claimed the comprehensive sanctions that the bloc had imposed on Russia do not play a role in the food crisis.

Russia's Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia negated Borrell's claims as being baseless given that the Western states' policies are directly responsible for the exiting food - and energy - crisis.

"The energy and financial policies of Western countries, including the sharp increase in anti-crisis financial payments which accelerated inflation, hectic transition to a green economy instead of a smooth energy transition, speculations on Western futures markets alongside the sanctions policies of the collective West - this has all triggered the current food and energy crisis," Nebenzia told the UN Security Council meeting.

The Russian ambassador pointed out the European Union and the United States additionally made a mistake in establishing prohibitive measures on insurance, financing and re-shipments, all of which have contributed to the crisis.

Thanks to the European Union actions, relations with Russia have completely collapsed as the bloc is unquestioningly following its "Big Brother," the United States.

Moreover, Nebenzia said the Western representatives conveniently stay silent regarding the fact that Ukraine, not Russia, heavily mined the Black Sea and therefore Ukraine effectively stopped grain and other exports via those waterways.

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US Not Sanctioning Export of Food, Fertilizers - Agriculture Secretary

UNITED NATIONS, June 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is not imposing any sanctions on the exports of food or fertilizers, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack said on Thursday.

"We are not sanctioning food, fertilizers; a ban on [exports of] food and fertilizers will not be a weapon of war," he told reporters at the UN headquarters.

Vilsack is at the UN headquarters in New York to discuss global food insecurity. He met with US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed, and UN humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths.

The US had food security as its signature topic during its May presidency of the Security Council. Secretary of State Antony Blinken traveled to New York to chair a meeting on the food crisis.

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## US House Passes Legislation to Address Food, Fuel Costs Amid Rising Prices

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - The House of Representatives on Thursday passed legislation to address rising food and fuel prices in the United States, including by establishing a special investigator's office to oversee the meat industry and lowering production costs for farmers.

Lawmakers passed the legislation, known as the Lower Food and Fuel Costs Act, in a vote of 221-204, with seven Republicans joining Democrats in support of the bill and four Democrats joining Republicans in opposition.

The legislation combines seven agricultural and energy-related measures to help reduce rising prices in the two sectors, including by bringing down production costs for farmers in the field, bolstering competition in the meat-packing industry and helping make domestic biofuels cheaper and more available, according to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

The bill was also amended on the House floor to include measures to reduce dependence on foreign fertilizer sources and establish Supply Chain Regional Resource Centers to assist the agriculture industry with coordination and grants.

US inflation, as recorded by the Consumer Price Index, grew at an annualized rate of 8.6% in May – the fastest rate since 1981. The cost of virtually all goods, including food, fuel, shelter and clothing, increased significantly last month.

The average pump price of 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 pointed both towards impacts of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine and alleged price gouging by energy firms.

Global food prices and supply availability have also faced instability as a result of the situation in Ukraine, with Western leaders pinning responsibility on Russia's operation and Moscow pointing toward Western sanctions and Ukrainian sea mines as barriers to bringing food and fertilizer to market.

Russia, Belarus and Ukraine are leading producers and exporters of world agricultural products including fertilizer and grain. Russia and Ukraine alone account for an estimated 30% of global exports of wheat, 20% of maize, and 76% of sunflower.

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## US Home Building Permits, Construction Hit 8-Month Lows - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - US home building permits and construction have hit eight-month lows, Commerce Department data showed on Thursday as surging mortgage and interest rates apply a chokehold on both home builders and buyers.

Building permits fell by 7% in May to 1.69 million while housing starts fell 14.4% on the month to 1.54 million, the data showed. Both numbers were at their lowest since October and markedly below consensus forecasts from economists for last month.

The declines were biggest in those regions where the housing market had previously been hottest, the South and the West of the United States, where housing starts fell 21% and 18% on the month, respectively.

The drop in building permits and housing starts were in line with the plunge in US home builder confidence for June. That data released on Wednesday showed the NAHB/Wells Fargo Housing Market Index falling to 67 this month from 69 in May. It was the sixth straight monthly drop for the index, now hovering at two-year lows.

"This is a terrible number for Q2/Q3 GDP," economist Adam Button said in a post on the ForexLive forum, referring to the drop in building permits and housing starts in the second and third quarters. "That's a very sharp slowdown in construction and it came even before the latest spike in interest rates. The real estate market is looking like a sudden stop at best right now. The thing is, there's a shortage of housing in the US and this is only going to make it worse. Down the line, that's inflationary."

Diane Swonk, chief economist at Grant Thornton, said the number of projects being canceled had leaped due to higher interest rates wrecking the calculations of many builders and prospective home-owners.

"So much for all those backlogs and all cash investors builders thought they had," Swonk said via Twitter.

Key mortgage rates in the United States have hit three-and-a-half decade highs as interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve to beat inflation pave the way for a further cooling of the red-hot US housing market, the government agency overseeing mortgages Freddie Mac said on Thursday.

"The 30-year fixed-rate mortgage moved up more than half a percentage point, marking the largest one-week increase in our survey since 1987," Freddie Mac said in a statement. "These higher rates are the result of a shift in expectations about inflation and the course of monetary policy."

On Wednesday, the Federal Reserve announced a 75-basis point, or a three-quarter percentage point, increase for the third US interest rate hike since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic two years ago. It was the largest interest rate hike in 28 years and brought key lending rates to between 1.5% and 1.75% from a zero to 0.25% range in February. "Higher mortgage rates will lead to moderation from the blistering pace of housing activity that we have experienced coming out of the pandemic, ultimately resulting in a more balanced housing market," Freddie Mac said.

Housing and real estate play important roles in the US economy, with roughly 65% of occupied housing units being owner-occupied. That makes homes a substantial source of household wealth and home construction a key provider of employment. In the 2008-2009 financial crisis, a crash of the housing market precipitated what later came to be known as the Great Recession. Since, the US property market has rapidly recovered on the back of economic recovery as well as demand from buyers.

Now, economists say demand for homes might be unraveling from the triple whammy of soaring mortgage rates, Federal Reserve action on interest rates and runaway inflation.

Last week, mortgage applications fell 7%, slipping 21% year-over-year, the data compiled by Markets Insider showed. At the same time, demand for mortgage refinances dropped 6% over

the past week, down 75% year-over-year. The consultancy firm Pantheon Macroeconomics said last week that mortgage applications were in complete "meltdown."

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#### US Mortgage Rates for Homes at 34-Year High - Home Loan Agency

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - Key mortgage rates in the United States have hit three-and-a-half decade highs as interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve to beat inflation pave the way for a further cooling of the US housing market, the home loan agency Freddie Mac said on Thursday.

"The 30-year fixed-rate mortgage moved up more than half a percentage point, marking the largest one-week increase in our survey since 1987," Freddie Mac said in a statement. "These higher rates are the result of a shift in expectations about inflation and the course of monetary policy."

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"Higher mortgage rates will lead to moderation from the blistering pace of housing activity that we have experienced coming out of the pandemic, ultimately resulting in a more balanced housing market," the statement said.

Other data released on Thursday showed US building permits and housing falling to their lowest levels since October, signaling a greater impact of surging interest and mortgage rates on home building.

The drop in building permits and housing starts were in line with the plunge in US home builder confidence for June. That data, released on Wednesday, showed the NAHB/Wells Fargo Housing Market Index falling to 67 this month from 69 in May - the sixth straight monthly drop for the index, now hovering at two-year lows.

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US Targets 2 Individuals, 9 Entities With Iran-Related Sanctions - Treasury

(Adds quotes in paras 2, 4; details in paras 6-11)

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - The United States has put new Iran-related sanctions on two individuals and nine entities, the Treasury announced on Thursday.

"Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned a network of Iranian petrochemical producers, as well as front companies in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that support Triliance Petrochemical Co. Ltd. (Triliance) and Iran's Petrochemical Commercial Company (PCC), entities instrumental in brokering the sale of Iranian petrochemicals abroad," the release said. "This network helps effectuate international transactions and evade sanctions, supporting the sale of Iranian petrochemical products to customers in the PRC and the rest of East Asia." The sanctions target Mohammed Shaheed Ruknooddin Bhore of India and Jingfeng Gao of China.

"Jingfeng Gao, also known as Jeff Gao, is a PRC-based broker for Triliance who has been involved in multi-million-dollar transactions for Iranian petrochemicals on behalf of Triliance," the Treasury said. "Mohammad Shaheed Ruknooddin Bhore (Bhore), an India-based Indian national, manages multiple Triliance front companies, including Dynapex Energy Limited, Petroliance Trading FZE, and YouChem."

The entities on the sanctions list are Fanavaran Petrochemical Company in Tehran, Future Gate Fuel and Petrochemical Trading L.L.C. in Dubai, Gx Shipping Fze also in the United Arab Emirates, Keen Well International Limited in Hong Kong, Kharg Petrochemical Company Limited in Iran, Marun Petrochemical Company in Iran, Sky Zone Trading Fze in the UAE, Teamford Enterprises Limited in Hong Kong and Youchem General Trading Fze in the UAE.

The Treasury explained in the release that Marun Petrochemical Company is a commercial supplier of petrochemicals to Triliance. In 2021, Triliance bought petrochemicals from it worth over \$13 million.

"Iran-based Kharg Petrochemical Company Limited (Kharg Petrochemical) has sold Triliance tens of thousands of metric tons of Iranian petrochemicals, including naphtha, butane, and propane, ultimately destined for the PRC," it noted. "Iran-based Fanavaran Petrochemical Company (Fanavaran Petrochemical) has sold Iranian petrochemicals, including methanol, valued in the tens of millions of dollars to PCC, ultimately destined for the PRC."

The Treasury went on to say that in 2020, Keen Well International Limited was used to process payments on behalf of Triliance for the shipment of Iranian naphtha to Singapore.

"Hong Kong-based Triliance front company Teamford Enterprises Limited (Teamford) facilitated transactions on behalf of Triliance involving the shipment of Iranian sourced petrochemicals to East Asia," it added. "Triliance relies upon several front companies and partners in the UAE to support its operations."

GX Shipping FZE has concealed the source of Iranian petrochemicals in order to advance Triliance's business and evade sanctions, the Treasury continued.

"Triliance has also used front company Future Gate Fuel and Petrochemical Trading L.L.C. (Future Gate) to conceal its involvement in the purchase of Iranian petrochemicals valued at more than \$10 million," the Treasury said. "Sky Zone Trading FZE (Sky Zone) has concealed Triliance's involvement in petrochemical transactions and purchased over \$10 million worth of Iranian petrochemicals on behalf of Triliance. Youchem General Trading FZE (Youchem) has concealed Triliance's involvement in petrochemical transactions and received payments on behalf of Trio Energy DMCC, an OFAC-designated Triliance front company."

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#### **FBI Probes How Russia Obtained US Computer Chips for Military Systems in Ukraine - Reports**

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - The FBI and the Department of Commerce have launched an investigation into how Russia obtained US-made computer chips that have been found in military equipment captured in Ukraine, the Washington Post reported on Thursday. Federal agents from both agencies are already investigating US companies that manufacture the chips, the report said.

The chips as well as other high-tech components made in the United States and the collective West have been discovered in captured Russian radar systems, drones, tanks, ground-control equipment and even littoral combat ships for close-to-shore naval operations, the report said. Some Russian unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, that have been shot down over western Ukraine were packed with high tech components made in the West, the report added. Many of the components were manufactured before the US first imposed economic sanctions on Russia in 2014 but others were manufactured as recently as 2020, according to the report.

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#### **Biden Disappointed With Austin's, Blinken's Rhetoric on 'Wining' in Ukraine - Reports**

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has expressed disappointment with the rhetoric of his key cabinet members, the secretaries of defense and state, for saying they want to see Ukraine win in the conflict with Russia, NBC reported on Thursday. Biden recently held a conference call with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who publicly declared that the United States want to see Ukraine not just defend itself but actually win in the conflict with Russia, the report said. The US president was not happy with expressed stance by the two cabinet members on behalf of the US government, the report said citing sources familiar with the conference call. Biden said they went too far, emphasizing that such comments could create unrealistic expectations and increase the risk of direct conflict of the United States with Russia, and urged them to tone down, the report said.

The US president's displeasure reflects an expectation that the conflict in Ukraine may change its course and become a protracted crisis in which Russia continues to score small but steady victories, the report said.

Some US officials have been concerned the conflict's outcome is becoming undesirable and have begun urging Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy to soften his stance that Ukraine will never cede any territory to Russia as part of an agreement to end the war, the report also said.

However, the Biden administration insists that only Kiev can and must make all decisions and does not push Ukraine one way or another, the report added.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The United States and its allies responded by imposing comprehensive sanctions against Russia while also ramping up military and other support for Ukraine in the amount of \$54 billion.

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US Officials Working to Arrange Phone Call Between Biden, Xi This Summer – Reports  
WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) – The United States is working to arrange a phone call between President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping this summer, a Bloomberg reporter said on Thursday citing unnamed US officials.

As regards a potential meeting between the two leaders, it can take place after China's Communist party congress in the second half of 2022, the reporter said in a tweet.

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US Targets 2 Individuals, 9 Entities With Iran-Related Sanctions - Treasury

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - The United States has put new Iran-related sanctions on two individuals and nine entities, the Treasury announced on Thursday.

The sanctions target Mohammed Shaheed Ruknooddin Bhore of India and Gao Jingfeng of China.

The entities on the sanctions list are Fanavaran Petrochemical Company in Tehran, Future Gate Fuel and Petrochemical Trading L.L.C. in Dubai, Gx Shipping Fze also in the United Arab Emirates, Keen Well International Limited in Hong Kong, Kharg Petrochemical Company Limited in Iran, Marun Petrochemical Company in Iran, Sky Zone Trading Fze in the UAE, Teamford Enterprises Limited in Hong Kong and Youchem General Trading Fze in the UAE.

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## US Encouraging Ukraine to Sell Power to Moldova - Assistant Energy Secretary

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - The US Energy Department is working on encouraging the sale of power from Ukraine to Moldova, US Assistant Secretary of Energy for International Affairs Andrew Light said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"My office has been working earnestly to sort of see what we can do to encourage the sale of power from Ukraine to Moldova," Light told the US House Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber. "The trick here is going to be to do it at the same rate that Moldova is getting from Transnistria [Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic] right now."

At the end of April, Moldovan Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita said Moldova will buy electricity from the Kuchurgan power station at a slightly higher price compared to April but the change will not affect consumers.

The Kuchurgan power station is located in Transnistria and is operated by Moldavskaya GRES company. In 2005, the company became a subsidiary of the Moscow-based power generation company Inter RAO UES. The power station produces about 80% of the electricity used in Moldova.

However, Chisinau's contract with Moldavskaya GRES expired on March 31. The company agreed to extend the contract by one month to April 30. The Moldovan authorities announced a bidding process in search for a new long-term energy provider, but four out of six candidate companies failed to meet the necessary technical parameters, and one withdrew its application. As a result, the auction was canceled and Chisinau had to enter bilateral negotiations with Moldavskaya GRES again.

Gavrilita said the Moldovan authorities will soon start negotiations with other energy generation companies to conclude a favorable long-term contract.

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## Sullivan Says Next Defense Aid Package for Kiev to Include More Artillery Rocket Systems

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) – The United States expects to send more artillery rocket systems as part of next military aid package for Ukraine, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said on Thursday.

"As you said the UK is providing systems, Germans said they are providing systems, and in the next drawdown package from the US we anticipate that there will be further delivery of systems as well," Sullivan said during a discussion organized by the Center for a New American Security.

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More LNG Supplies to Europe Cannot Fully Resolve Dependence on Russian Gas - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) - Increasing the supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Europe can not fully resolve the continent's dependence on Russian gas and for that reason the United States is in close contact with European countries on potential solutions, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Harry Kamian said in a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"Increasing LNG to Europe cannot fully resolve European dependence on the Russian energy," Kaiman told the US House Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber. "We are collaborating with Europe with clean and renewable energy technology providers to help reduce overall demand including US companies."

Kaiman said the demand for gas can be reduced by accelerating deployment of technologies such as heat pumps, smart thermostats, efficient grid technologies, battery storage, offshore wind as well as nuclear energy and clean hydrogen.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The United States, European Union and other Western allies imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia, including on the energy sector, causing prices for energy to soar worldwide.

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More Americans Familiar With, Learning Significance of Juneteenth – Gallup

WASHINGTON, June 16 (Sputnik) – As the United States prepares to celebrate Juneteenth, the new federal holiday is being better understood, more people are becoming familiar with its importance and more Americans support its inclusion as a federal holiday and in American history books, a new Gallup poll said Thursday.

"As the nation prepares to celebrate the second Juneteenth federal holiday, more Americans have become familiar with its significance in U.S. and Black history," researchers with the Gallup Center on Black Voices said. "Greater familiarity has also come with greater support for its inclusion in the list of federal holidays -- as well as inclusion in U.S. history textbooks."

According to polling data, Americans are more familiar with the Juneteenth holiday today than they were in 2021 when President Joe 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.

Juneteenth has many different names, including Emancipation Day, Juneteenth Independence Day, and Freedom Day. It commemorates June 19, 1865, when enslaved Africans in Texas were finally told – 2 1/2 years after Gen. Robert E. Lee, head of the Confederate army, surrendered to Union Gen. Ulysses Grant – that President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had freed them.

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

Pollsters said Juneteenth is understood "by a sizable minority of the population but given the relative newness of the holiday's federal status, this could change."