

6/22/22 Wednesday

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Amazon Frets High Turnover Will 'Deplete Available Labor Supply' in US by 2024

Ecommerce giant Amazon is afraid its warehouses have such high turnover rates that within the next few years, they will have employed or fired the entire workforce around their warehouses, according to leaked internal research by the company.

"If we continue business as usual, Amazon will deplete the available labor supply in the US network by 2024," [said the research](#), according to Vox's tech-focused subsidiary Recode, which printed the quote in a Friday report.

The publication noted that this doesn't refer to the entire US labor force, but to populations within a certain radius around Amazon's existing or planned facilities and of the socioeconomic milieu from which Amazon typically hires.

In some parts of the US, like Phoenix, Arizona, this has already happened, while in others, like southern California's "Inland Empire" region east of Los Angeles, it's projected to occur by the end of the year.

In many ways, the development is Amazon being hoisted on its own petard: founder Jeff Bezos, until recently the world's richest man, has long opposed holding onto workers for a long time, fearing it would lead to a "march to mediocrity," according to the [New York Times](#).

In others, it is a product of the company's [strict regimentation](#) of its labor force, which leads to either burnout or termination - [or worse, suicide](#) - among its workers at a frighteningly high pace. The attempts in recent years to win labor union representation by Amazon workers, especially in [Bessemer, Alabama](#), and [Staten Island, New York](#), have been driven by resentment at these policies.

A [report by the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration \(OSHA\)](#), the Labor Department's workplace safety watchdog, found that Amazon's serious injury rate last year was more than twice the national average, with 6.8 injuries per 100 workers in 2021 alone. Moreover, that was a 20% increase over the prior year, corresponding to the company's colossal growth amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, Amazon added over [half a million new workers](#), and its [profits increased by 84%](#) over the previous year, while in 2021, the company grew by another 22%.

That said, at the end of 2020, [Bezos told shareholders](#) the company had to "do a better job" for its employees and commit to being "Earth's best employer and Earth's safest place to work."

The announcement comes as the US economy is reporting some of the lowest unemployment it's ever seen, although the [Labor Department's official numbers](#) mask a malaise of long-term unemployment or underemployment that still has more than 10 million workers looking for adequate jobs. With inflation at levels not seen in nearly half a century, the [Federal Reserve is trapped](#) in the careful balancing act of trying to slow the creation of new money in the economy by raising interest rates without also stalling that economy and causing a new spike in unemployment [or worse, a recession](#).

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Watch: White House NSC Spox Gives Totally Different Answers on China, India Oil Imports From Russia

In a joint statement in April, Russian and Chinese envoys pledged that their nations would continue to strengthen their relationship “no matter how the international situation changes.” American hypocrisy was on display on Tuesday in the White House briefing room when John Kirby, the communications coordinator for the National Security Council, was variously asked about Chinese and Indian imports of Russian petroleum.

First, a reporter asked Kirby about a recent report by China’s customs administration revealing the country has imported a [record amount of crude oil](#) from the Russian Federation in 2022 and what the administration’s “message” about that fact is to Beijing.

“I think this is just a piece of China’s willingness to continue to go along with Russia,” [Kirby said](#). “And we’re seeing this as yet another example of a growing collaboration between China and Russia with respect to Ukraine.”

“And we have, as we’ve said at the outset, called on China to be a responsible power here and to join the rest of the world in condemning what Russia has done in Ukraine and in enforcing sanctions against Russia for it. So, it’s just another example,” he added.

Since Russia launched its special operation in Ukraine in February 2022, the US has sought an excuse to apply to China the same kind of punishing sanctions it did to Russia in response to the operation. Despite the [two nations’ close friendship](#), China has tacked a [careful course of neutrality](#) on the issue, promoting a peaceful solution in Ukraine but refusing to abide by the Western-directed campaign to exclude Russia from the global community.

India has done much the same, [dramatically increasing](#) its purchases of Russian oil and [abstaining from United Nations votes](#) about Russia. However, New Delhi is key to Washington’s plans to [encircle “malign actor” China](#), and Kirby’s answer to a similar question moments later revealed that double standard.

“Look, India is also a very key strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific region. And there’s many ways that that partnership represents itself both in defense and security, economic as well,” Kirby told reporters on Tuesday.

“I think we’ll let Indian leaders speak to their economic policies. What I can just tell you is we value this bilateral relationship with India and we continue to want - obviously, every country has to make their decisions for themselves. These are sovereign decisions. But we want as much pressure put internationally on Russia as possible,” he added.

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East African Community Sends Troops to Eastern Congo as War with Rwanda Brews

Amid the threat of war in the Great Lakes region, the East African Community bloc has elected to send peacekeepers to the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Meanwhile, Rwanda has accused Kinshasa of allowing the crisis between Hutu and Tutsi rebel groups across the border to fester.

Following calls by Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, the EAC voted on Monday to activate its East African Regional Force (EARF) in response to the North Kivu crisis. The decision was given the African Union's blessing.

"The deployed EAC regional force should, in cooperation with the military and administrative forces of the DRC, seek to stabilize and secure the peace in the DRC," read a statement by the bloc, according to [The East African](#).

The bloc includes seven states, the most recent addition being the DRC, which joined earlier this year. It also includes Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Kenya and South Sudan. The statement did not say if Rwandan troops were excluded from the force after Kinshasa [objected to their presence](#), having [already accused them](#) of sponsoring the M23 rebel movement in North Kivu.

The EAC force will work alongside the UN peacekeeping force MONUSCO, which has 14,000 troops in the area to keep the various factions from fighting each other or committing human rights abuses against the population.

Last week, DRC President Felix Tshisekedi [said there was "no doubt"](#) Tutsi-led Rwanda was backing the Tutsi-majority M23, accusing it of serving as a proxy force to attack DR Congo. A relic of the Congo Wars of the 1990s and 2000s, the M23 rebelled last year, claiming Kinshasa had violated the deals leading to its demobilization. The group's main adversary is the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a Hutu Power militia often aligned with the DRC government that is descended from the groups responsible for the [1994 genocide of Rwandan Tutsis](#) and Twa.

"Making those accusations is simply running away from his responsibilities as the president of that country," said [Rwandan President Paul Kagame](#) at the Qatar Economic Forum on Monday. Kagame led the Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in overthrowing the genocidal Hutu Power government in 1994, ending the genocide. However, that was only the beginning of the fighting, as Hutu groups that fled into eastern DR Congo staged new attacks in Rwanda, and Rwanda's efforts to defeat them spiraled into the catastrophic Congo Wars that enveloped the region for more than a decade.

"The Congolese of Rwandan ethnicity and how that issue has been handled in the Congo needs more attention," Kagame continued. "It can be addressed. If you look at the rights of people, fixing their problem is a simple matter."

Like most of Africa, the borders between DRC and Rwanda are arbitrary, decided by agreements between European rulers [during the colonial era](#). Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania were conquered by the German Empire in the 1890s, while the Congo territory to the west was controlled by the Belgian monarchy, although Belgium later also seized the areas of modern Rwanda and Burundi from Berlin during the First World War. People of the same ethnic groups live on both sides of the borders, and the colonial rulers [exploited their differences](#) to "divide and rule" the territory.

For the Tutsis, that means about 400,000 live in the DRC, while 1.7 million live in Burundi and less than 2 million live in Rwanda, although after the genocide, Rwanda ended its ethnic census so numbers are imprecise.

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'Barbecue That's Gone Wrong': UK Astronaut Reveals Space Station Smells Like Farts

Extended space flight presents a myriad of challenges for astronauts, including changes to muscles and exposure to solar radiation, to say nothing of getting used to floating around in zero-gravity all the time. Digestive issues are probably not at the top of the list of commonly expected problems, though.

In space, nobody can hear you scream - but they can definitely smell your farts.

That's what British astronaut Tim Peake revealed on a recent [episode of the podcast](#) "Dirty Mother Pukka" with Anna Whitehouse, alongside other incredible nuggets of information the public might not know about space flight.

Peake, who was the first British astronaut in the European Space Agency (ESA) and spent six months aboard the International Space Station (ISS) in 2016, revealed the startling fact about orbital flatulence while being grilled about space flight by an eight-year-old child on the podcast. "What's it like to burp in space when you've got your helmet on?" the child asked him, eyes likely aglow.

"That's a great question, but do you know you don't actually burp in space?" Peake replied. He went on to explain, and yes, dear reader, he spared us no detail.

"So when you eat food your body is still digesting your food and producing the gas but those bubbles of gas don't rise up. So there's only really one way that they do come out," he said.

Peake told the kid, likely already horrified at the thought of the [man-made nebula](#), that the ISS smells "really unusual."

"It's a little bit like a barbecue that's gone wrong. Burnt meat, scorched, metallic smell - almost like static electricity when you take your jumper off and you've got those static sparks," he said. It's hard to know if such a description made it more or less likely the child would want to grow up to be an astronaut. However, [a 2019 survey conducted](#) by toymaker LEGO found that more kids these days want to be YouTube stars rather than astronauts visiting the real stars.

One burning question left unanswered is: could an astronaut burp on the Moon? Earlier this week, the US space agency NASA took a big step toward being able to once again answer that question when it [successfully tested the Artemis 1 rocket](#) in what it called a "wet dress rehearsal" for the Artemis 1 test launch later this year. The system is expected to ferry a new generation of astronauts to the Moon and to help stage for a future manned mission to Mars.

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US Army Sees Near Threefold Uptick in 'Sextortion' Cases as Experts Highlight Dangers of Loneliness

By - Evan Craighead

The Federal Bureau of Investigation defines sextortion as a crime in which an individual threatens to not distribute someone's private and/or sensitive material in exchange for sexual favors or money. This material includes nude images and sexual videos retrieved without the victim's knowledge or consent.

There has been a nearly threefold increase in 'sextortion' or 'revenge porn' reports filed by US Army service personnel and their family members in the past three years, according to data provided to [Military.com by the Army's Criminal Investigation Division](#) (CID).

Per Army CID statistics, the division received 56 reports of sextortion in 2019, prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US. That number ballooned to 147 sextortion cases in 2020 and another 132 reports of sextortion in 2021.

Between 2019 and 2022, victims of sextortion collectively lost some \$428,000, per the Army CID.

The rapid climb in reports appears to show a proliferation of low-effort cyber crimes targeting US military-affiliated individuals. The data could also reflect an improvement in the digital literacy of online users looking out for potential scams.

"CID continues to aggressively take actions to prevent, investigate, and educate against these types of scams targeting our service members and families," Edward LaBarge, assistant director of the Army CID's Cyber Directorate, told Military.com.

As of this article's publication, at least 61 sextortion reports have been logged for 2022, which remains on track with recent years.

"This type of scam is an easy one to execute and a favorite amongst scammers," LaBarge said. Earlier this month, US-based security firm Zscaler's ThreatLabz team revealed that there has been a resurgence in "malicious voicemail-notification-themed emails" targeting US military and software security personnel in an attempt to steal their Windows Office 365 and Outlook account credentials.

Those who fall for such attacks are likely to have other accounts compromised.

"As an extra precaution, users should not open attachments in emails sent from untrusted or unknown sources," ThreatLabz recommends. "As a best practice, in general, users should verify the URL in the address bar of the browser before entering any credentials."

Experts believe that the increase in online blackmail cases can be explained by criminals' attempts to play on natural human emotions and feelings exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as loneliness and despair.

Ursula Palmer, executive director of the Military & Veteran Programs at the Cybercrime Support Network, told Military.com that folks from all walks of life were "stuck at home for a year" and turned to dating websites or apps to find attention and affection.

"And then it happens that the person you were talking to wasn't who they said they were," Palmer said. "They were just trying to get those images or videos so that they could extort you as a target."

Palmer noted that US military personnel are prime targets in a variety of scams due to a “steady paycheck or steady benefits,” like Basic Housing Allowance or disability checks.

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‘Be Careful What You Wish For’: Trump Blasts ‘RINO’ Sen. Cornyn Over Bipartisan Gun Safety Bill

By - Evan Craighead

With a 64-34 vote Tuesday, the US Senate advanced a gun safety bill that includes some \$11 billion for mental health services and \$2 billion for community-based anti-violence efforts. It came as a product of bipartisan draft negotiations that included GOP Sen. John Cornyn, who as a result, was formally rebuked by the Republican Party of Texas.

Former US President Donald Trump laid into Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) in a Wednesday social media post that dubbed the Texan a ‘Republican in Name Only’ (RINO) for his role in bipartisan draft negotiations that brought about the framework for [S.1738, the ‘Safer Communities Act.’](#) The proposed legislation received support from 14 GOP senators, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY). A final vote is scheduled for Thursday.

“The deal on ‘Gun Control’ currently being structured and pushed in the Senate by the Radical Left Democrats, with the help of Mitch McConnell, RINO Senator John Cornyn of Texas, and others, will go down in history as the first step in the movement to TAKE YOUR GUNS AWAY. Republicans, be careful what you wish for!!!” the US president said in a June 22 post to Truth Social.

Speaking from the Senate floor on Wednesday, Cornyn said a collection of 10 Republicans and 10 Democrats from the upper legislative chamber first agreed upon a “set of principles” to be used as a framework for later negotiations conducted by himself and Sens. Chris Murphy (D-CT), Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ), and Thom Tillis (R-NC).

“I believe that as the senators see the text that supports those principles, they will see we’ve tried our best to be true to what those agreed principles should be,” Cornyn said.

The loose framework included increased funding for mental health and school safety in the wake of the recent Uvalde school shooting in Texas, where 19 elementary school students and two teachers were slain by an 18-year-old gunman. US senators in the broader negotiations also called for enhanced background checks for those aged 18 to 21 years old.

The 80-page bill received enough bipartisan support to potentially overcome the 60-vote filibuster within two hours of its introduction. McConnell insisted the bill was a “common sense package of popular steps” to better address the country’s issue with gun violence.

At the same time, the proposed legislation appears to be opposed by a majority of GOP senators, the National Rifle Association, and the Republican convention of Cornyn’s home state, which formally rebuked a number of US lawmakers for their negotiations.

The move came as part of [a 40-page party platform](#) approved at the Texas Republican Party’s convention in Houston on Saturday, and included rebukes of Cornyn, Tillis, and Sens. Roy Blunt

(R-MO), Bill Cassidy (R-LA), Susan Collins (R-ME), Lindsey Graham (R-SC), Rob Portman (R-OH), Mitt Romney (R-UT), and Pat Toomey (R-PA).

Additionally, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) and Minority Whip Steve Scalise (R-LA) have opposed the bill, as well as the House Freedom Caucus.

The latter has called attention to the bill's incentives for the implementation of "red flag" laws that can temporarily block gun sales to individuals deemed to be a danger to themselves or others.

"Red flag laws permit the preemptive seizure of firearms from Americans without due process by allowing any person to report a gunowner to law enforcement and petition for the confiscation of that individual's firearms, even before the gunowner has an opportunity to defend themselves," the group said in a Tuesday statement.

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US Supreme Court Rules New York State Gun Law Violates Constitutional Right to Bear Arms

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court on Thursday struck down a New York State law that prohibited individuals from carrying a firearm without specific cause on the grounds that it violates the 14th amendment of the Constitution, according to a decision written by Justice Clarence Thomas.

The New York State law in question required individuals who wished to carry a firearm outside their home to prove that they have "proper cause" to do so based on a special need for self-defense beyond that of an ordinary citizen.

"New York's proper-cause requirement violates the Fourteenth Amendment by preventing law-abiding citizens with ordinary self-defense needs from exercising their Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms in public for self-defense," the US Supreme Court said.

Thomas argued that no other constitutional right requires a citizen to demonstrate to the government the need to exercise that right.

The New York State law prevents law-abiding citizens from exercising their Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms, Thomas concluded.

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US Not Expecting HIMARS, Other Weapons to Change Right Away Situation in Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The United States does not expect the military equipment it has sent to Ukraine, including the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), to immediately change the situation in Ukraine, CNN reported on Thursday, citing two US officials with direct knowledge of US intelligence assessments.

According to the sources, the Russian military has already destroyed some of the new weapons supplied by the West, including the M777 howitzers.

Last week, US President Joe Biden said he had notified Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy that Washington will provide Kiev with an additional security aid package in the amount of \$1 billion. The new package includes guided multiple launch rocket system munitions, 18 howitzers, 36,000 rounds of artillery ammunition and two additional Harpoon anti-ship missile systems, according to the Defense Department.

The package also includes \$650 million from the Ukraine security assistance initiative funds, including two additional Harpoon coastal defense systems and thousands of secure radio and night vision devices and thermal weapon sites, the Defense Department added.

Last Wednesday, the Biden administration announced a military aid package for Ukraine that would include 1,000 anti-tank Javelin missiles, 50 command launch units and four Mi-17 helicopters as well as four HIMARS.

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US Envoy on Antisemitism to Visit Israel, Saudi Arabia Ahead of Biden's Trip - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy on Antisemitism Deborah Lipstadt will commence her 11-day trip to Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United Arab Emirates on Sunday to build upon Abraham Accords ahead of President Joe Biden's visit to the Middle East, the State Department said.

"On June 26, 2022, Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, will depart for her first international trip since assuming her role in April 2022. The 11-day trip will include stops in Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates," the State Department said in a press release on Thursday.

Lipstadt will meet with senior governmental and civil society leaders to discuss what the US government has referred to as "important changes" taking place in the Middle East and to promote interfaith understanding and combating anti-Jewish sentiments, the release said.

On Wednesday, State Department top policy official for the Middle East Barbara Leaf said the Biden administration is currently working to expand the Abraham Accords and promised to provide "interesting announcements" during Biden's upcoming trip to the Middle East.

Biden intends to visit the Middle East from July 13 to July 16 with stops in Israel, the West Bank and Saudi Arabia and meet with nearly a dozen counterparts from across the region and beyond, according to an administration official.

In September 2020, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed a set of documents dubbed the Abraham Peace Accords that were later joined by Morocco and Sudan. The accords entailed the resumption of embassy operations, the establishment of direct flights and the lifting of the ban on tourist trips and official visits.

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White House to Cooperate With 11 US States on New Offshore Wind Partnership

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) – The US federal government together with 11 states on Thursday launched a new offshore wind partnership in a fresh effort to lower energy costs by harnessing green energy.

"Today, the White House is joining with eleven governors from up and down the East Coast to launch a new Federal-State Offshore Wind Implementation Partnership that will accelerate the growing offshore wind industry," the White House said in a statement. "The partnership will support efforts to provide Americans with cleaner and cheaper energy, create good-paying jobs, and make historic investments in new American energy supply chains, manufacturing, shipbuilding, and servicing."

The federal government and governors promised to work together on expanding key elements of the offshore wind supply chain, from manufacturing facilities and port capabilities to workforce development, the statement read.

"The Administration is also announcing steps to advance a National Offshore Wind Supply Chain Roadmap and designating offshore wind vessels as Vessels of National Interest to facilitate more offshore wind construction," the White House added.

The government sees good prospects for the project, which would allow for an estimated \$109 billion revenue opportunity across the offshore wind supply chain this decade, according to the statement.

"The Federal-State Partnership will look to expand to the West Coast and the Gulf of Mexico as offshore wind energy projects develop in those regions," the statement said.

The Biden administration has said the impact of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine and alleged price gouging by energy firms are responsible for higher fuel prices. Biden on Monday also partially blamed companies not refining enough oil for impacting supply. However, Russia has denied the accusations, saying the sanctions imposed by the US and its allies, as well as Ukraine's mining the Black Sea, have upended the market and contributed to higher energy, food and fertilizer prices.

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Damaging Methane Gas Leaks Occur Every 40 Hours Across US - Report

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - Damaging and potentially harmful to health methane gas leaks occur on average once every 40 hours across the United States, the US PIRG Education Fund's Environment America Research & Policy Center and Frontier Group said in a report on Thursday.

"A gas pipeline incident occurs somewhere in the U.S. approximately every 40 hours. From 2010 through nearly the end of 2021, almost 2,600 pipeline incidents related to the release of gas occurred in the United States that were serious enough to be reported to the federal government," PIRG said in a report.

Some 850 of those incidents set off fires and 328 caused explosions as well as killing in all 122 people and injuring more than 600, the report noted.

"The total costs to communities from things such as property damage, emergency services, and the value of intentionally and unintentionally released gas, totaled nearly \$4 billion," the press release read.

The methane accidents also led to the leakage of 26.6 billion cubic feet of gas, the global warming-emissions equivalent to over 2.4 million passenger vehicles driven for a year, PIRG added.

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US Prosecutors Seek Up to 55 Years for Maxwell Over Role in Sex Abuse of Teen Girls

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - Sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein's associate Ghislaine Maxwell may face from 30 to 55 years in prison for her role in "the horrific sexual abuse of multiple young teenage girls," according to memorandum from US federal prosecutors.

"Ghislaine Maxwell sexually exploited young girls for years. It is difficult to overstate the magnitude of her crimes and the harm she caused. Her crimes demand justice. The Government urges the Court to impose a sentence within the applicable Guidelines range of 360 to 660 months' imprisonment," the memorandum said.

Maxwell "played an instrumental role in the horrific sexual abuse of multiple young teenage girls," it added.

In late December, Maxwell was convicted of five out of the six charges related to sex trafficking of underage girls.

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Nike Announces Decision to Fully Exit Russia

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - US sportswear maker Nike is leaving the Russian market entirely, the company said on Thursday, several months after it suspended its operations in the country.

Nike suspended its operations in Russia in March in response to Russia's military operation in Ukraine.

"Nike inc. has made a decision to exit the Russian market. Therefore, Nike.com and the Nike mobile app will be no longer available in this region. Nike stores that have been recently temporarily closed will not reopen," the statement said.

In February, Russia began a military operation in Ukraine, responding to calls for help from the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in countering the aggression of Ukrainian troops. In response, Western nations have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow. Many foreign companies have suspended their Russian operations.

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RPT - Russian 18th Century Replica Wooden Boat Starts New Stage of World Trip, Heads to Chukotka

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - Russian and US voyagers who are traveling around the world onboard the Pilgrim, a replica of the 18th century wooden Pomor boat, started a new stage of the trip heading from the US state of Alaska to Russia's Chukotka, the boat's captain Sergey Sinelnik told Sputnik.

"Now we covered 1,150 nautical miles from Homer to Adak," Sinelnik said, referring to a city on the Adak Island, which is a part of the Aleutian Islands. "I hope we will come back to Russia in several weeks."

The crew is looking for new members who are willing to complete the trip, the captain pointed out. The boat still has to cover about 880 nautical miles, he added.

"This is a big distance, especially since the Bering Sea is harsh, it is cold, damp, windy, fogs and strong currents. You need to keep your eyes open," Sinelnik said.

The Pilgrim, a 40-foot sailboat, started the voyage around the world five years ago from the city of Petrozavodsk in Russia's Karelia region. The vessel visited multiple countries in Europe, the Canary and Caribbean islands, as well as Cape Verde.

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UPDATE 2 - Uvalde School District Police Chief Placed on Administrative Leave - Superintendent

(Adds more background in paras 8,9, updates throughout)

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The police chief of the Uvalde Consolidated School District Pete Arredondo has been placed on leave due to a lack of details in the investigation into law enforcement's response to the school shooting that left 19 children and two teachers dead, Superintendent Hal Harrell said in a press release.

"Today, I am still without details of the investigations being conducted by various agencies," Harrell said in the release on Wednesday. "Because of the lack of clarity that remains and the

unknown timing of when I will receive the results of the investigations, I have made the decision to place Chief Arredondo on administrative leave effective on this date."

On Tuesday, Texas Department of Public Safety Director Steven McCraw said the local authorities could have responded to the shooting within three minutes. McCraw said the only thing stopping a hallway of dedicated officers from entering the school classroom was the on-scene commander who "decided to place the lives of officers before the lives of children." At a presser at the end of May, McCraw said that the person who made the decision - the commander in question - was the School District Police Chief. A US media reported identified him as Arredondo.

Last month, Texas authorities said Arredondo was not cooperating with the state's probe into the incident.

Earlier on Wednesday, Texas State Senator Roland Gutierrez said he is suing DPS for access to records related to the elementary school shooting.

Preliminary results of the probe into the shooting found that there were no law enforcement officers at the school readily available to engage the gunman.

Earlier this month, Arredondo told the Texas Tribune he did consider himself in charge of the scene and that the doors separating the police from the shooter were locked and impossible to break in. The Texas Tribune, however, said law enforcement records indicate that Arredondo gave orders at the scene while there is no video evidence that Arredondo attempted to open the classroom doors.

Some critics including Gutierrez have accused Texas authorities of a "cover up." Texas gubernatorial candidate Beto O'Rourke this week called on incumbent governor Greg Abbot to "tell the truth" and release the facts of what happened.

On May 24, an 18-year-old gunman opened fire inside Robb Elementary School, killing 19 students and two teachers.

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Uvalde School District Police Chief Placed on Administrative Leave - Superintendent
(Adds details, background in paras 3-7)

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Earlier on Wednesday, Texas State Senator Roland Gutierrez is suing the state's Department of Public Safety (DPS) for access to records related to the elementary school shooting.

On May 24, an 18-year-old gunman opened fire inside Robb Elementary School, killing 19 students and two teachers.

Preliminary results of the probe into the shooting found that there were no law enforcement officers at the school readily available to engage the gunman. However, McCraw on Tuesday said there was a sufficient number of armed officers wearing body armor at the school three minutes after the shooter entered the building.

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Uvalde School District Police Chief Placed on Administrative Leave - Superintendent

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The police chief of the Uvalde Consolidated School District Pete Arredondo has been placed on leave due to a lack of details in the investigation into law enforcement's response to the school shooting that left 19 children and two teachers dead, Superintendent Hal Harrell said in a press release.

"Today, I am still without details of the investigations being conducted by various agencies," Harrell said in the release on Wednesday. "Because of the lack of clarity that remains and the unknown timing of when I will receive the results of the investigations, I have made the decision to place Chief Arredondo on administrative leave effective on this date."

On Tuesday, Texas DPS Director Steven McCraw said the local authorities could have responded to the shooting within three minutes. Last month, Texas authorities said Arredondo was not cooperating with the state's probe into the incident.

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Blinken, Families of Americans Detained Abroad Discuss Work for Their Release - State Dept

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with the families of Americans detained abroad to discuss the administration's efforts to free them, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with families of US nationals held hostage or wrongfully detained abroad," Price said in the release on Wednesday. "Secretary Blinken

affirmed that working to bring their loved ones home is something he is personally focused on, and he has no higher priority as Secretary of State."

Moreover, Blinken reiterated that it is important for the State Department to continue to partner with families through regular and transparent communication.

Blinken also told families that President Joe Biden is aware of each case and is committed to bringing all US nationals detained abroad home, Price said.

Earlier on Wednesday, the family of US citizen Paul Whelan, who is imprisoned in Russia for espionage, said the United States' inaction to free citizens arrested abroad will ensure more Americans will be detained overseas.

Whelan's family said US authorities appear to be working aimlessly, further complicating the issue to free Paul Whelan.

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Canada to Open Embassy in Rwanda for First Time - Foreign Affairs Minister

OTTAWA, June 23 (Sputnik) - Canada will open an embassy in Rwanda for the first time in both countries' diplomatic history, Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly announced in a press conference from Kigali.

"We will be opening an embassy for the first time here in Rwanda, in Kigali," Joly told reporters on Wednesday. "And we'll have an ambassador also working from... Kigali."

The foreign minister said Ottawa needs more tools, resources and boots on the ground in Rwanda because Canada's voice "needs to be heard."

Joly also announced that Canada will be appointing a new ambassador to the African Union based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in a bid to invest in Canada's diplomacy.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Joly are currently in Rwanda assisting to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) with 54 other countries.

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Two-Thirds of Americans Believe United States Less Respected Around World - Poll

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - More than two-thirds of Americans say they believe the United States is less respected around the world today than it used to be, a new Pew Research Center opinion poll revealed.

"A majority of Americans have long held the view that the United States is less respected by other countries today than it was in the past, and around two-thirds of US adults (68%) say that's the case today," a release on the poll said on Wednesday.

Only 13% of those polled believed the United States was more respected on the international stage in 2022 than in previous times. Another 19% believed the country was respected now as it was previously, though not more so, the release said.

"Around eight-in-ten Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (81%) currently believe the US is less respected than in the past – among the highest GOP percentages measured in Center surveys dating back to 2004. This represents a shift of nearly 50 percentage points from the Trump era," the release added.

About 60% of Democrats and those tilting toward the party also agreed respect for the United States had declined around the world, according to the release.

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US House Rejects Legislation Establishing Active Shooter Alert System

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives rejected a proposed legislation establishing an active shooter alert system across the United States similar to the so-called AMBER alert system used for abduction of children.

House lawmakers on Wednesday evening failed to pass the bill with a two-thirds majority, with the vote ending with 259 in favor and 162 against.

The legislation would have required the US Justice Department to act as the national coordinator of an Active Shooter Alert Communication Network for emergency situations involving an active shooter. The Justice Department as coordinator would be tasked with establishing alert plans alongside state and tribal governments.

The bill also would have required the Justice Department to encourage federal, state, local and tribal law enforcement agencies to establish procedures for responding to active shooters.

Additionally, the legislation would require the Government Accountability Office to study and report on responses to active shooters and situations requiring use of the alert system.

The legislation made its way before Congress following a number of recent mass shootings in the United States, including an elementary school shooting in Texas that killed 21 people and a supermarket shooting in New York that killed ten people.

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NATO to Unveil New Force Posture Commitments at Madrid Summit - US Official

(Updates with details in paras 4-8)

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - NATO allies will unveil new force posture commitments to strengthen the military alliance's deterrence posture, a senior US administration official said during a conference call.

"Leaders will announce new force posture commitments to strengthen NATO defense and deterrence posture," the official said on Wednesday.

In addition, NATO leaders will also endorse a new strategic concept to address challenges to Euro-Atlantic security, including Russia and China, the official said.

NATO allies will also discuss during the summit, which will be held in Madrid on June 29 to 30, efforts to ensure the alliance has the resources needed to deliver on its commitments, that includes increasing defense spending, the official said.

NATO leaders will also hear remarks from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during the summit to go over support for Ukraine.

US President Joe Biden at the G7 Summit June 26 to 28 will roll out a specific set of proposals to increase pressure on Russia and to provide collective support to Ukraine, the official said.

At the G7, Biden will participate in seven working sessions that will address matters related to Ukraine, energy security, the global economy, climate, among other topics, the official said.

Zelenskyy will also participate in meetings with G7 leaders to discuss efforts to support Ukraine amid Russia's special military operation.

G7 leaders are also expected to discuss what steps can be taken to reduce Russia's energy revenues while stabilizing global energy markets and lessening disruptions, the official said.

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US House Passes Legislation Addressing Mental Health, Opioid Addiction Nationwide

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation addressing mental health and opioid addiction issues nationwide by expanding program funding and changing treatment policies.

House lawmakers on Wednesday passed the bill, dubbed Restoring Hope for Mental Health and Well-Being Act, in a vote of 402-20, with all votes in opposition coming from Republican members.

The legislation reauthorizes through 2027, expands and modifies various programs and funding opportunities such as the Pediatric Mental Health Care Access Grant and Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment Block Grant, according to an official bill summary.

The bill also expands access to opioid and other substance abuse disorder treatment services by eliminating a provision requiring people to be addicted to opioids for at least one year before receiving care and promoting access to high-quality recovery housing.

In addition, the legislation addresses federal coordination on efforts related to behavioral health, issues related to maternal mental health and substance use, and integration of behavioral health in primary care settings.

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US-Europe Energy Task Force Denounces Alleged Russian Coercion on Fuels - White House

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - A joint US-EU Task Force on European Energy Security has issued a statement criticizing Russia for allegedly trying to pressure European nations that import fossil-based fuels from Moscow, the White House announced.

"The US-EU Task Force on European Energy Security met virtually on June 22," the White House said in a release on Wednesday. "The sides denounced Russia's continued energy coercion of European Union Member States and underscored their continued commitment to reduce dependency on Russian fossil fuels by diversifying Europe's energy supply."

Task Force participants then discussed taking specific actions to reduce energy demand in European nations by improving energy efficiency and encouraging a wider application of renewable energy sources, the release said.

The meeting was directed by US Senior Adviser for Energy Security Amos Hochstein and Bjorn Seibert, the head of Cabinet or chief of staff of the European Commission President, the release added.

European Commission Director General for Energy Ditte Juul Jorgensen and National Security Council Senior Director for Climate and Energy Melanie Nakagawa also participated in the virtual meeting, according to the release.

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Texas Senator Sues State DPS for Access to Uvalde Shooting Information - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - Texas State Senator Roland Gutierrez is suing the state's Department of Public Safety (DPS) for access to records related to the elementary school shooting in the town of Uvalde in which 19 students and two teachers were killed, according to a press release from Gutierrez's office.

"In the wake of this massacre, the State of Texas has completely failed to provide the community of Uvalde with truthful answers. Weeks have come and gone, and yet families who lost their children have not been told by their government the basic information about who was on site as their children bled, what tools were at their disposal to stop the gunman, and exactly why they decided to wait instead of act," the release said on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, Texas DPS Director Steven McCraw said the local authorities could have responded to the shooting within three minutes. However, law enforcement took over an hour to engage the shooter despite having ballistic shields.

On May 31, Gutierrez sent a records request to the DPS asking for information, the press release said. Under Texas law, DPS is required to respond to such requests or seek an exemption from the state Attorney General.

DPS has neither requested an exemption nor provided a response to the request, the release said.

"From the very start, the response to this awful gun tragedy has been full of misinformation and outright lies from our government," the release said. "We must not fail these families again with cover ups and misinformation."

Preliminary results of the probe into the shooting found that there were no law enforcement officers at the school readily available to engage the gunman. However, McCraw on Tuesday said there was a sufficient number of armed officers wearing body armor at the school three minutes after the shooter entered the building.

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Biden to 'Check Signals' With German Leader Scholz Before G7, NATO Talks - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will meet with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to kick off his visit to Germany and Spain for the G7 and NATO summits next week, a senior administration official told reporters.

"At the very top of the trip, President Biden will be meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Germany, of course, has the presidency of the G7 this year, so this will be a good opportunity for the president to check signals with Germany at the top, as well as to affirm the deep and enduring ties between our two countries and our continued coordination on a broad range of global challenges," the senior administration official said on Wednesday.

The G7 summit will take place in Germany from June 26-28, while Spain will host the NATO summit in Madrid from June 28-30. Biden on the trip will take part in the two summits in addition to bilateral meetings with various world leaders.

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US, EU Increased Engagements With Pacific Islands Over Recent Months - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The United States and the European Union have in the recent months increased their engagements with the Pacific Islands and are now regularly communicating with the partners in the region, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Camille Dawson said during a conference organized by the Atlantic Council.

"Obviously there has been an uptick in US engagement with the Pacific Islands in recent months, and that has also been the case with the EU and other countries within the Indo-Pacific region, and we are speaking regularly with all of those partners and allies," Dawson said on Wednesday.

Dawson pointed out that the United States is trying to coordinate its actions with the Pacific Islands partners to identify and fill the needs that the Pacific countries see as the most critical.

At the same time, the United States is focused on listening and learning and not on imposing solutions onto partners from the Pacific Islands, Dawson added.

In April, China and the Solomon Islands announced the signing of a strategic cooperation agreement, which reportedly involved the construction of a Chinese military base on the territory

of the islands. The news drew criticism from the United States and Australia, among others, who claimed that the move would be destabilizing for the region.

Beijing called reports about the construction of a Chinese base in the Solomon Islands disinformation.

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US Approves Sale of Guided Munitions to 12 NATO Allies - Defense Security Agency

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has approved the sale of hundreds of precision guided munitions, or so-called "smart bombs," to 12 member states of the NATO alliance, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) announced.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the NATO Support and Procurement Agency of Precision Guided Munitions and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$22.7 million," the DSCA said in a press release on Wednesday.

The DSCA notified Congress of the State Department's approval of the sale earlier on the same day, the release also said.

"NATO Support and Procurement Agency as Lead Nation has requested the possible sale of 239 GBU-39/B Small Diameter Bombs, Increment I; 204 FMU-152 fuzes; 204 MK-82 500LB General Purpose Bombs; and 50 BLU-109 2000LB Hard Target Penetrator Bombs," the release added.

The weapons will be delivered to the armed forces of Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom, according to the release.

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Canadian Government Faces \$464M In Net Loss From Trans Mountain Pipeline Project - Watchdog

OTTAWA, June 23 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government investment in the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion project has resulted in a net loss of 600 million Canadian dollars (\$464 million), the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO) said in a report.

In 2018, the Trudeau government bought the pipeline but on August of the same year, the country's Federal Appeal Court ordered the project suspension as it was opposed by British Columbia and the Autochthonous people.

"In this update, PBO finds that the Government's 2018 decision to acquire, expand, operate, and eventually divest of the Trans Mountain assets will result in a net loss for the federal government as calculated on a Net Present Value (NPV basis)," the report said on Wednesday.

According to the PBO report, the Trans Mountain purchase price was 4.4 billion Canadian dollars, but available data shows the current value of cash flows in it since it was acquired, stands at 3.9 billion Canadian dollars, which a -0.6 billion Canadian dollars in revenues. In addition, the construction budget for the pipeline expansion project has increased from 12.6 to 21.4 billion Canadian dollars with a delivery date set in late 2023.

The report noted that, were the construction and expansion to be canceled indefinitely, it is estimated that the government may need to write off assets worth 14.4 billion Canadian dollars in 2022.

Trans Mountain was built in 1953 by US company Kinder Morgan. In 2013, plans were made to expand the pipelines by building a second one from Edmonton, Alberta to Hargreaves, British Columbia to increase the system's capacity from 300,000 to 890,000 barrels per day.

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NATO to Unveil New Force Posture Commitments at Madrid Summit - US Official

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - NATO allies will unveil new force posture commitments to strengthen the military alliance's deterrence posture, a senior US administration official said during a conference call.

"Leaders will announce new force posture commitments to strengthen NATO defense and deterrence posture," the official said on Wednesday.

In addition, NATO leaders will also endorse a new strategic concept to address challenges to Euro-Atlantic security, including Russia and China, the official said.

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US to Roll Out Proposals at G7 Summit to Increase Pressure on Russia - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden at the G7 Summit next week will roll out a specific set of proposals to increase pressure on Russia and to provide collective support to Ukraine, a senior Biden administration official said during a conference call.

"At the summit, we will roll out a concrete set of proposals to increase pressure on Russia and demonstrate our support collectively for Ukraine," the official said on Wednesday.

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Russian 18th Century Replica Wooden Boat Starts New Stage of World Trip, Heads to Chukotka

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - Russian and US voyagers who are traveling around the world onboard the Pilgrim, a replica of the 18th century wooden Pomor boat, started a new stage of the trip heading from the US state of Alaska to Russia's Chukotka, the boat's captain Sergey Sinelnik told Sputnik.

"Now we covered 1,150 nautical miles from Homer to Adak," Sinelnik said, referring to a city on the Adak Island, which is a part of the Aleutian Islands. "I hope we will come back to Russia in several weeks."

The crew is looking for new members who are willing to complete the trip, the captain pointed out. The boat still has to cover about 880 nautical miles, he added.

"This is a big distance, especially since the Bering Sea is harsh, it is cold, damp, windy, fogs and strong currents. You need to keep your eyes open," Sinelnik said.

The Pilgrim, a 40-foot sailboat, started the voyage around the world five years ago from the city of Petrozavodsk in Russia's Karelia region. The vessel visited multiple countries in Europe, the Canary and Caribbean islands, as well as Cape Verde.

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US Considering Expanding Diplomatic Presence in Pacific Islands, Beyond - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is looking into expanding its diplomatic presence in the Pacific Islands and beyond as part of its new approach to the region, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Camille Dawson said during a conference organized by the Atlantic Council.

"I'll just note that we, on the US side, have announced that we will be opening an embassy in the Solomon Islands and we're looking to expand our diplomatic presence elsewhere in the Pacific Islands and beyond as well," Dawson said on Wednesday.

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Biden Admin. Refuses to Cooperate in Watchdog Probe Into Fall of Afghan Govt. - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - Biden administration officials are ignoring the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction's (SIGAR) requests to provide documents related to the collapse of the Afghan government, Politico reported citing SIGAR's letter to the Secretary of State and USAID administrator.

SIGAR chief John Sopko wrote in the letter that the State Department and USAID have in some cases ignored SIGAR's communications, did not provide officials for interviews and refused to permit international travel for the watchdog to conduct an on-the-ground investigation, the report said on Wednesday.

The SIGAR seeks to obtain information related to the fall of the Afghanistan government in August 2021, the transfer of funds to the Taliban and humanitarian programs for the Afghan people, the report said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) -

NATO

* The United States is pushing for a deal to be reached between Finland, Sweden and Turkey regarding the former two countries' accession to NATO before the alliance's summit in Madrid later this month, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said in a testimony before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Wednesday.

US-RUSSIA DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

* The Russian Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday the United States did not allow the arrival of a special flight from Russia to evacuate employees of the Russian diplomatic missions and members of their families who were previously ordered by the State Department to leave by the end of this month.

* Russia's request to allow a special flight into the United States to evacuate diplomats and their families is part of ongoing diplomatic discussions, State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

ENERGY MARKETS

* US President Joe Biden said in a speech on Wednesday that his administration's efforts to lower gas prices call on energy companies to refine more oil into gasoline to increase supplies and reduce costs at the pump.

* Biden is not proposing a ban on export of American oil, but no options are excluded, Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said.

* There will be a global fuel demand issue when China is able to fully open up after the coronavirus pandemic, Granholm said.

* Poland is able to survive without gas supplies from Russia and its gas storage facilities are completely full while its infrastructure is ready for diversified deliveries, Polish Secretary of State and Government Plenipotentiary for Strategic Energy Infrastructure Piotr Naimski said.

ELECTIONS IN FRANCE

* French President Emmanuel Macron said on Wednesday he does not see the need to form a government of national unity after failing to win a ruling majority in the recent parliamentary elections.

MIDDLE EAST

* The United States is currently working on expanding the Abraham Accords, the State Department's top policy official for Middle East said on Wednesday, promising "interesting" announcements during President Joe Biden's upcoming trip to the Middle East,

ANTI-RUSSIA SANCTIONS, EXEMPTIONS

* The United States and its allies are looking into tariffs authorities to impose new consequences on Russia, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

* The United States does not want impediments for countries purchasing Russian food and fertilizer amid concerns about over-compliance with US sanctions, Assistant Treasury Secretary for Business Affairs Ramin Toloui said.

* The European Union is working with the United Nations to establish maritime corridors to export Ukrainian wheat from Odesa, the European External Action Service's deputy secretary-general for common security and defense policy and crisis response said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Germany will continue delivering weapons to Ukraine, Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht said on Wednesday without providing any details details about dates and delivery routes.

* US National Security Adviser and Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley discussed Kiev's defense needs with their Ukrainian counterparts, Senior Director for Europe at the US National Security Council Amanda Sloat said.

AFGHANISTAN EARTHQUAKE

* The death toll from the earthquake in Afghanistan reached 1,100, more than 1,650 people were injured, the Tolo News reported on Wednesday.

* UN staff and facilities in Afghanistan have not been affected by the deadly earthquake that struck the country on Wednesday, UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Afghanistan Ramiz Alakbarov told Sputnik.

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US Concerned About Messages Imparted at Lavrov's Meetings at G20 Ministerial - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned about the messages that will be communicated during Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's bilateral meetings at the G20 ministerial in Indonesia next month, hoping that participating countries will convey opposition to Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

Lavrov will hold bilateral meetings with his counterparts from Brazil, China, Mexico and South Africa when he attend the G20 ministerial meeting next month.

"When it comes to the meeting that Foreign Minister Lavrov will have in Bali at the G20 ministerial, I would leave that to the Russians to describe, for us we are much less concerned

about whom he meets with and much more concerned with the messages that are imparted during those meetings," Price said during a press briefing.

Price also said he expects responsible countries to convey that Russia's special military operation in Ukraine cannot be tolerated and will be met with steep consequences for Russia. Lavrov will take part in the G20 ministerial meeting on July 7-8. There are currently no plans for Lavrov and US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to meet on the sidelines of the ministerial meeting.

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US Does Not Want Impediments for Countries Purchasing Russian Food, Fertilizer - Official

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The United States does not want impediments for countries purchasing Russian food and fertilizer amid concerns about over-compliance with US sanctions, US Assistant Secretary of Business Affairs Ramin Toloui said on Wednesday.

"There are concerns about so called over compliance with sanctions," Toloui said during a conference call. "The United States does not want there to be impediments to the ability of countries, companies to purchase Russian food, Russian fertilizer and for those goods to access international markets."

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EU Deputy Director of Military Staff Says Russia Using Ukraine to Oust West From Africa

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - EU Military Staff Deputy Director General for European External Action Service Lt. Gen. Giovanni Manione said on Wednesday that he believes Russia is using Ukraine to oust the western countries from Africa.

"One thing that bothers me particularly regarding that Ukraine war is the focus, extreme focus that we are putting on the Ukraine war. My question is are we sure that this is the main effort of Russia? Are we really sure that Russia intends to occupy Ukraine and go on with the effort towards Europe. Do we really believe this?" Manione said. "Or could it be that this is the secondary effort to distract our attention, to focus our resources there and in that way to distract us completely from Africa."

Manione continued: "Do you know how many countries in Africa abstained from voting on the UN resolution condemning Russia? And do you know in how many of these countries Wagner company is present?"

He also noted that many of these countries have significant reserves of important metals and rare materials.

"If you don't know, then how we can make evaluation on where is the main effort of Russia," he said. "I tell you, in my view, the main effort of Russia is ousting western countries from Africa. And when this will happen, then we will have to ask them if we want our gas, oil or whatever. And this is the best result they can achieve. And while we are concentrating on the East, they are acting to the south. And then it will be a disaster."

Manione called on the intentional community to pay more attention to what is referred to as the Global South.

"I would ask our leaders to concentrate on the possible efforts that are not secondary at all of the Russian invasion of Ukraine," he said.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. Russia has said the goal of the operation is to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine and its sole target is the country's military infrastructure.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said the special military operation aims to "protect people subjected to genocide by the Kiev regime for eight years."

As of March 25, the Russian military completed the main tasks of the first stage of the special operation, significantly reducing Ukraine's combat potential. The collective West has imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia and supplied offensive and defensive weapons to Ukraine worth multiple billions of dollars.

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US Pushing for Finland, Sweden, Turkey to Reach NATO Deal Before Madrid Summit - Donfried

WASHINGTON, June 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is pushing for a deal to be reached between Finland, Sweden and Turkey regarding the former two countries' accession to NATO before the alliance's summit in Madrid later this month, US Assistant Secretary of State for

European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said in a testimony before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Wednesday.

"So I will say that we certainly are pushing for that," Donfried said when asked whether she believes all NATO members, including Turkey, will agree on Finland and Sweden's accession by the time of the Madrid summit.

Turkey blocked consideration of Finland's and Sweden's applications over concerns about their long-standing support for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) that Ankara regards as a terrorist organization and a serious threat to its national security.

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US Says Working to Expand Abraham Accords, 'Interesting Things' Likely During Biden's Tour
WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) – The United States is currently working to expand the Abraham Accords, the State Department's top policy official for Middle East said on Wednesday, promising "interesting" announcements during President Joe Biden's upcoming trip to the Middle East,

"We are working in the space that is not in the public domain with a couple of other countries, and I think you'll see some interesting things around the time of the President's visiting [the Middle East]," Barbara Leaf told a House hearing when asked whether the signatories to Abraham Accords are working to expand the agreements.

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Biden Not Proposing Ban on Export of US Oil, But No Options Excluded – Energy Secretary

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden is not proposing a ban on export of American oil, but no options are excluded, Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said on Wednesday.

"There have been awful lot of solutions president has been considering since the war began, since the prices started to jump up, and I don't think anyone has taken anything off the table. He [Biden] doesn't propose this at this moment, but he is not willing to take tools off the table," Granholm told reporters at the White House.

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Finland's Location, Experience With Russia Would Be NATO Asset - US Defense Official

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - Finland's accession to the NATO alliance would be an asset due to the country's strategic location and experience dealing with Russia diplomatically as a neighboring state, US Assistant Defense Secretary for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander said on Wednesday.

"Finland's location on the Baltic Sea, experience with Russia as a frontline state, and advanced capabilities would make it an asset to the Alliance," Wallander said in testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Wallander during the committee hearing expressed support for both Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO, which came under consideration following the launch of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

Both countries have existing bilateral defense relationships with the United States and would provide additional security and stability in Europe as part of NATO. Finland and Sweden bring to the alliance strong economies, educated citizens and democratic governments that fit NATO ideals, Wallander also said.

Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried also testified in favor of Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO during the committee hearing.

Both Karin Olofsdotter Swedish Ambassador to the United States Karin Olofsdotter and Finnish Ambassador Mikko Hautala attended Wednesday's Senate hearing.

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Over 30,000 Ukrainian Refugees Approved for Entering US - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The US government received over 50,000 applications from Ukrainian refugees who want to enter the United States, and approved about 30,000 of them, Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees, and Migration Julieta Valls Noyes said on Wednesday.

"To date, I believe we have over 50,000 applicants for sponsorship, over 30,000 Ukrainians have been approved for travel, and over 10,000 have already arrived." Noyes told reporters. The Biden administration expressed a commitment to accept up to 100,000 Ukrainians, she reminded.

Noyes pointed out the temporary character of this program, because refugees want to return home. In the meantime, Washington promised to expedite the process of their cases, she added.

Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine in February after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help in defending themselves from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops.

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US to Accept More Afghan Refugees in Coming Months - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The United States will receive additional refugees from Afghanistan in the coming months, the State Department's top migration official, Julieta Valls Noyes, said on Wednesday.

On Monday, CBS News reported that the US government is rejecting 90% of Afghans seeking humanitarian refuge in the United States.

"The United States will continue to welcome additional qualifying Afghans in the coming months," Noyes, the US Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees, and Migration, told reporters.

She did not provide specific details but mentioned that the US has provided resettlement assistance for 74,000 Afghans since last July.

According to the CBS report, the US has received 46,000 applications from Afghans hoping to enter the country via the parole process since last July, but only a small percentage have been actually processed. And of those 4,543 requests that have been fully adjudicated, only 297 have been approved, the report said.

The Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in the fall of 2021 following the US military pullout from the country and established an interim government. The new authorities have not yet been internationally recognized even though the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan - the country's name used by the Taliban - was restored in December.

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US Energy Chief Predicts More Fuel Demand Issues Once China Opens After Pandemic
WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - There will be a global fuel demand issue when China is able to fully open up after the coronavirus pandemic, US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm said on Wednesday.

"We've got to make up for the million barrels [of oil] per day that we have lost," Granholm said during a press briefing at the White House. "We will have a demand problem when China opens up after COVID, there will be additional upward pressure on supply."

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US Making Clear to Other States They Can Import Russian Grain Free of Sanctions Risk - WH

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The United States has made it clear to other nations that they can import Russian grain without getting hit with sanctions, US Principal Deputy National Security Adviser Jon Finer said on Wednesday.

"Our sanctions do not touch Russian food," Finer said. "In fact, we are going out of our way to make clear to commercial providers, to make clear to other countries that they can import Russian grain without any risk of running afoul of our sanctions."

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State Dept. Says Talks Ongoing Over Russia Request to Allow Flight to Take Diplomats Out

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - Russia's request to allow a special flight into the United States to evacuate diplomats and their families is part of ongoing diplomatic discussions, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"There's not much I can say because this is the subject of ongoing diplomatic conversations but what I can say is that the Russian statements do not accurately reflect the current state of play," Price told a press briefing.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the United States did not allow the arrival of a special flight from Russia to evacuate employees of the Russian diplomatic missions and members of their families who were previously ordered by the State Department to leave by the end of this month.

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Paul Whelan Feels Left Behind, Family Blames US Government for Inaction - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - US inaction to free citizens arrested abroad will ensure more Americans are detained by foreign states, the family of Paul Whelan, who is imprisoned in Russia for espionage, said on Wednesday.

"The US is no further on in deterring detentions than it was on December 28, 2018. This inaction is not only not helping current detainees, it is practically ensuring there will be more," the statement read.

The family accused the authorities of aimlessness, adding that such an approach is unhelpful and complicates further efforts to solve the problem.

"Unfortunately, the US government has reached a dead end on Paul's wrongful detention. Paul deserves something beyond words. Our family has taken the actions we can to help Paul. It is time for the US government to do the same," the statement said.

Diplomats from the UK and the US embassies visited Whelan twice in the course of the last two weeks. American staff updated the family that he appears to be well but lost about 20 percent of the weight since his detention in December 2018.

"The US Embassy in Russia will be down to one American Citizens Services staff person in a few days, from 3. It is no wonder when phone calls don't happen as promised. It is no wonder Paul feels left behind," the statement said.

Paul Whelan, who holds American, British, Canadian and Irish citizenship, is serving his sentence in Russia's Mordovia region. A Moscow court sentenced him to 16 years in June 2020 on charges of espionage. He denies the charges but did not challenge the verdict in hope of being part of a potential prisoner exchange between the US and Russia.

The charges in Whelan's case were not disclosed, but a press release from Russia's Federal Security Service said he was detained in Moscow at the end of 2018 during a spy operation. Whelan's legal defense team said he was a victim of a provocation.

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Sullivan, Milley Discuss Kiev's Weapons Needs With Ukrainian Counterparts – White House

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) – US National Security Adviser and Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley on Wednesday discussed Kiev's defense needs with their Ukrainian counterparts, Senior Director for Europe at the US National Security Council Amanda Sloat said.

"The United States is in constant contact with the Ukrainians as the war evolves and as their needs shift. Just this morning, Jake Sullivan and Chairman Milley had conversations with their Ukrainian counterparts to continue assessing that," Sloat said at an Atlantic Council event. Since the beginning of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February, the United States has been the main provider of military assistance and equipment to Ukraine, having committed about \$6.3 billion in total. The equipment sent to the country includes 1,400 Stinger anti-aircraft systems, 6,500 Javelin anti-armor systems, 700 Switchblade drones, 126 155mm howitzers among others.

Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help in defending themselves from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops.

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Ex-Tallahassee Mayor, Associate Charged With Fraud - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - A federal grand jury returned a 21-count indictment against former Tallahassee Mayor Andrew Gillum and his associate, Sharon Janet Lettman-Hicks, for committing fraud and related offenses, the US Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"The Indictment alleges that between 2016 and 2019, defendants Gillum and Lettman-Hicks conspired to commit wire fraud, by unlawfully soliciting and obtaining funds from various entities and individuals through false and fraudulent promises and representations that the funds would be used for a legitimate purpose," the Justice Department said in a press release.

In addition, the indictment further alleges the defendants used third parties to divert a portion of those funds to a company owned by Lettman-Hicks, who then fraudulently provided the funds, disguised as payroll payments, to Gillum for his personal use, the release said.

Lettman-Hicks, 53, and Gillum, 42, are charged with 19 counts of wire fraud while Gillum is also charged with making false statements to FBI agents, the release added.

The maximum terms of imprisonment for the offenses are: 20 years for conspiracy to commit wire fraud; 20 years for wire fraud and five years for making false statements, according to the release.

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Latvian National Security Adviser Says Russia Will Change After Ukraine Special Operation

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - Latvia's National Security Council Secretary Janis Kazocins said on Wednesday that Russia will likely change after it ends its special military operation in Ukraine.

"I think Russia will change. It has changed in the past," Kazocins said.

Usually, change has taken place after the unsuccessful foreign war against Japan in 1905, the First World War in 1914, the intervention in Afghanistan in 1971 and after the breakup of the Soviet Union, he said.

"This [the Ukraine conflict] is in the same category, because the aim, the political aim of going into Ukraine was not to grasp territory or to defeat the Ukrainian army, but to achieve a political purpose," Kazocins added.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. Russia has said the goal of the operation is to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine and its sole target is the country's military infrastructure.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said the special military operation aims to "protect people subjected to genocide by the Kiev regime for eight years."

As of March 25, the Russian military completed the main tasks of the first stage of the special operation, significantly reducing the combat potential of Ukraine. The collective West has imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia and has supplied offensive and defensive weapons to Ukraine in the amount of tens of billions of dollars.

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NATO Allies Expected to Announce Force Postures at Upcoming Summit - White House

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - Some NATO countries are expected to make announcements on their force postures at the upcoming NATO summit, White House National Security Council Senior European Affairs Director, Amanda Sloat, said on Wednesday.

"The last strategic concept was done in 2010. And as we have been discussing the geopolitical landscape in Europe has changed significantly since then. I also think there are going to be broader announcements on force posture," Sloat, who is also a Special Assistant to the President, said at a forum at the Atlantic Council. "This is something that the alliance has been

discussing over the last year since the last NATO Summit. I anticipate that you will have a number of allies making announcements coming out."

Earlier, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said Russia will be officially named the alliance's main threat in its new Strategic Concept expected to be adopted at the summit that will take place in Madrid June 28-30.

NATO describes its Strategic Concept as a key document that will provide a collective assessment of the security environment and outline guidelines for the alliance's future political and military development.

On June 18, Stoltenberg announced that NATO's new strategy would not consider Russia as a strategic partner but rather as a threat "to peace and stability," adding that the new strategic concept of the alliance will also mention China, whose rise is a challenge to the interests, values and security of NATO.

Russia is designated as a strategic partner in the current strategy of the alliance adopted in 2010.

Moscow has repeatedly stated that NATO is an alliance aimed at confrontation. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in early April that further expansion of the alliance eastward is aggressive in nature and will not make Europe more secure.

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Biden Urges Companies to Refine More Oil in Effort to Reduce Costs at Pump

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday in a speech on the administration's efforts to lower gas prices called on energy companies to refine more oil into gasoline to increase supplies and reduce costs at the pump.

"I'm calling on the [energy] industry to refine more oil into gasoline and to bring down gas prices," Biden said. "Today I'm calling for a federal gas tax holiday, state gas tax holiday for the equivalent relief to customers, oil companies to use their profits to increase refining capacity rather than buy back their own stock, gas stations to pass along the decrease in oil prices to lower prices at the pump, and together these actions could help drop the price at the pump by up to one dollar a gallon or more."

Biden also said that his message to companies running gas stations and those setting gas prices for consumers is that "this is a time of war, global peril," calling on them to lower pump prices as quickly as possible in response to the administration's actions.

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US House Panel Boosts Draft 2023 Defense Budget by \$37Bln, Adds \$550Mln for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The US House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday increased the proposed 2023 defense budget by \$37 billion, including another \$550 million for Ukraine, which brings the total to \$1 billion for Kiev.

The House committee approved the increase with a 42-17 vote.

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Biden Admits Gas Prices Would Not Have Spiked This Way If Not for Anti-Russia Response

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden admitted on Wednesday that the West's response to Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, including sanctions, resulted in higher energy prices that would have not spiked this way otherwise.

"Russia is also one of the largest oil producers in the world," Biden said during a press conference. "We cut off Russian oil into the United State, and our partners in Europe did the same, knowing that we would see higher gas prices. We could've turned a blind eye to [Russian President Vladimir] Putin and gas prices wouldn't have spiked this way, but that would've been wrong."

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EU Says Working With UN to Create Maritime Corridors for Wheat Exports From Odesa

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The European Union is working with the United Nations to establish maritime corridors to export Ukrainian wheat from Odesa, the European External Action Service's deputy secretary-general for common security and defense policy and crisis response said Wednesday.

"We are also working and particularly with the United Nations, to try to see if it's possible to create maritime corridors in order to export the Ukrainian wheat from Odesa," Charles Fries said.

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UN Continues Discussions on Grain Exports After Meeting of Russian, Turkish Delegations

UNITED NATIONS, June 22 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is satisfied that the discussions on enabling grain to be exported out of Ukraine as well as grain and fertilizers out of Russia following a meeting between Turkish and Russian delegations on the matter, UN deputy spokesperson Farhan Aziz Haq said on Wednesday.

"As we have made very clear, because of the sensitivity of these discussions, there is nothing we can really share about these discussions that are continuing. And we are really glad that they are continuing," Haw said during a press briefing.

The United Nations also appreciates the initiatives of individual countries and particularly Turkey's efforts at mediation on the matter, Haq said.

"We believe a number of governments are trying to be helpful, and we encourage that," Haq added.

On Tuesday, the delegations of Russia and Turkey met to discuss export of grains from the region. The Turkish Defense Ministry confirmed to Sputnik on Wednesday that the talks were positive and constructive and the parties reached an agreement to include Ukraine and the United Nations in the negotiations.

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US Developing Normalization Roadmap for Saudi Arabia, Israel - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The White House is developing a so-called "Roadmap for Normalization" of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel in advance of US President Joe Biden's trip to the region in July, Axios reported on Wednesday.

The Biden administration pitched last week the Roadmap for Normalization as a theme of the upcoming trip without providing more details, the report said, citing sources familiar with the matter.

An agreement is not expected to be complete before Biden's trip to the Middle East, but officials are drafting ideas to discuss with Israeli and Saudi leaders, the report said.

The normalization process will likely require a long-term, step-by-step approach, the reported added.

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Canada Inflation Reaches 7.7% in May, Highest Rate Since January 1983

OTTAWA, June 22 (Sputnik) - Inflation in Canada increased to 7.7% year-over-year to May, which represents the highest level of price increases in the past 40 years, Statistics Canada said on Wednesday.

"Canadians continued to feel the impact of rising prices in May as consumer inflation rose 7.7% year-over-year. This was the largest yearly increase since January 1983 and up from a 6.8% gain in April," Statistics Canada said in a press release.

The increase is mainly due to high gas prices at the pump, which marked a raise of 12% in May as compared to April and a jump of 48% compared to May of last year.

In April, Canadians spent 10% more on average for groceries than during the same month in 2021. Overall, the prices of vegetables have increased by 8.2%, while the prices of fruits and meats by 10% and 10.1%, respectively.

Cereals are among the most affected products, with the price of rice increasing 7.4%, bread 12.2% and pasta 19.6%, the release said.

Housing prices are also one of the leading causes driving up inflation rates and marked a 7.4% increase in May, the release added.

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Several New LNG Terminals Will Come Online in Europe Before Winter - European Commission

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - A number of new liquefied natural gas (LNG) import terminals will come online in Europe before winter, while others will become available in the next six-to-12 months, European Commission Director-General for Energy Ditte Juul Jorgensen said on Wednesday.

"We have now a number of LNG terminals across Europe. You will see more LNG import terminals coming online some even before winter, some during the coming six-to-twelve months," Jorgensen said.

On Thursday, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Harry Kamian said increasing the supply of 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 finding potential solutions.

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 on Russia, including on its energy sector, causing market disruptions and increases in prices for energy products worldwide.

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Thailand Extradites Russia's Dmitry Ukrainsky to US – NY District Attorney Office

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) – Russian citizen Dmitry Ukrainsky, charged with credit card fraud, has been extradited from Thailand to the United States, spokesman for the US Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York John Marzulli told Sputnik on Wednesday.

Thailand extradited Dmitry Ukrainsky on June 16, human rights activist Ivan Melnikov told Sputnik. In February 2019, the Bangkok criminal court approved Ukrainsky's extradition to the US, despite a previous ruling to extradite him to Russia.

"He has been extradited and was arraigned in Brooklyn Federal Court yesterday. The defendant was remanded," Marzulli said.

Ukrainsky was arrested in the Thai resort town of Pattaya in July 2016 under an FBI arrest warrant. He is believed to have been involved in massive credit card fraud against US citizens. He was sentenced by a Thai criminal court to 10 years in prison on money laundering charges. Ukrainsky did not plead guilty and lodged an appeal. Ukrainsky is also wanted in Russia on charges of fraud.

US court papers, unsealed on Tuesday, revealed that Ukrainsky, whose name in documents spelled as Ukrainskiy as well, and his co-conspirers Mikhail Komov and Olga Komova received over \$330,000 from banking accounts of several victims.

"Upon information and belief, in or about between June 2014 though April 2016 ... the defendants ... together with others, did knowingly and intentionally devise a scheme and artifice to defraud, and obtain money and property by means of materially false and fraudulent pretenses, representations and promises, and for the purpose of executing such scheme and artifice, transmit and cause to be transmitted by means of wire communication in interstate and foreign commerce, writings, signs, signals and sounds, to wit: wire transfer," the document said. The document described more than a dozen transactions, when defendants were able to extract different amounts of money from victims' accounts.

"Ukrainskiy received more than \$330,00, Komov received more than \$100,000, and Komova received more than \$30,000," the document said.

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US Inflation Suggests Need to Accelerate Interest Rate Hikes - Powell
(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-15)

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The unyielding inflation growth in the United States suggests that the US central bank needs to accelerate interest rate hikes, probably even make them restrictive, to curb price pressures already at 40-year highs, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said Wednesday.

"I think that the most recent inflation indicators, [the] various kinds, suggest to us that we need to accelerate the pace at which we can get up to a level that is neutral," Powell said in his biannual testimony to the US Senate Banking Committee. "And we know we need to have a restrictive policy and that's where we're headed."

"Neutral" is Federal Reserve speak for bringing inflation back to its target of 2% per year versus real US price pressures, which the Consumer Price Index indicated grew by 8.6% in the year to May. A "restrictive policy" is aimed at raising interest rates high enough that it prohibits price growth from continuing at its present pace.

The Federal reserve announced last week its stiffest interest rate hike in 28 years, adding a three-quarter point that brought key lending rates to as high as 1.75% from May's peak of 1%.

That hike came after US inflation, as indicated by the Consumer Price Index, grew at an annualized rate of 8.6% in May - more than four times the Federal Reserve's target.

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

Economists, however, fear that the Federal Reserve will push the US economy into a recession the way of the interest rate hikes.

The economy experienced a negative growth of 1.4% for the first quarter. If it does not return to positive growth by the second quarter, it will technically be in a recession, given that it takes two straight quarters of negative growth to make a recession.

Powell tried to assuage recessionary concerns on Wednesday by saying the economy was still on solid footing.

"The American economy is very strong and well positioned to handle tighter monetary policy," he said.

Powell also noted that "real gross domestic product growth has picked up this quarter, with consumption spending remaining strong." However, he also said "business investment appears to be slowing" and the housing market was cooling as well as higher mortgage rates made themselves felt.

Business spending, aside from consumer spending, has been identified as one the main drivers of inflation as companies increasingly dole out more money to attract and hold on to workers amid one of the greatest employment markets in US history.

There are currently about two positions open for every jobless person in America.

Unemployment has also remained at 3.6% in April and May - below the 4% jobless target rate that qualifies for maximum employment.

More importantly, or perhaps damagingly for the Federal Reserve, US wages have risen month after month since April 2021, expanding by a cumulative 6.1% over the past 14 months, or an average of 0.4% a month.

That mismatch has further complicated the central bank's efforts in balancing the economy as jobs and wage growth have been significant contributors to inflation.

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Deputy Treasury Secretary, UAE Officials Discuss Regional Economic Issues - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Wally Adeyemo discussed with United Arab Emirates (UAE) officials a range of regional economic issues, including disrupting terrorist financing networks and the collective West's sanctions imposed on Russia, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

"Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Wally Adeyemo traveled to the United Arab Emirates from June 19 - 22, 2022," the Treasury Department said in a press release. "They discussed regional economic issues, cooperation on disrupting terrorist financing networks, cybersecurity, and implementation of the unprecedented multilateral sanctions on Russia for its war against Ukraine."

Adeyemo met with Minister of State for Financial Affairs Mohamed Hadi Al Hussaini, UAE Central Bank Governor Khalid Balama Al Tamimi and UAE Cyber Security chief Mohamed Hamad Al Kuwaiti, among others, the release said.

Adeyemo also met with Sheikh Ahmed Bin Saeed Al Maktoum, Chairman of the Dubai Civil Aviation Authority and Chairman of Dubai World during a visit to Dubai, the release added. During his stop there, Adeyemo held a roundtable with financial institutions from the UAE Banks Federation to discuss compliance and market issues, according to the release.

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Biden Directs US Government to Assess Aid Responses for Afghan Earthquake - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden directed federal government agencies to assess possible response options to provide aid for those impacted by the recent earthquake in Afghanistan that reportedly killed over 1,000 people, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday.

"President Biden is monitoring developments and has directed USAID [US Agency for International Development] and other federal government partners to assess U.S. response options to help those most affected," Sullivan said in a statement.

The latest data provided by the Paktika province suggests that over 1,000 people were killed and more than 1,500 others wounded in the 6.1 magnitude earthquake. US humanitarian partners are already delivering medical care and shelter supplies on the ground, Sullivan also said.

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Washington Ranked Worst-Run Large City in US Based on Economy, Crime - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The United States' capital of Washington, DC was ranked the worst-run city in the nation when rated by factors including the local economic and safety conditions, according to a report by WalletHub.

The report ranked Washington in last place out of the US's 150 largest cities based on how well city officials managed and spent public funds relative to the quality of services residents receive. While Washington received the 55th spot in quality of city services, its overall ranking was pulled down by its last place spot on total budget per capita due to its high city debt per capita, the report said.

Washington also ranked 84th in education, 73rd in safety and 131st in overall economy, according to the report.

Washington was joined in the bottom three rankings by San Francisco and New York City, the report said. Detroit, Cleveland and Oakland also made it into the report's top ten worst-run cities.

The cities of Nampa and Boise, Idaho, as well as Fort Wayne, Indiana made up the top three best-run cities in the US, the report also said. Other best-run cities in the report's top ten include Nashua, New Hampshire, Lincoln, Nebraska and Missoula, Montana.

The report used data from sources including the US Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics and FBI to create the rankings, which evaluated six key categories using 38 relevant metrics.

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Poland Can Survive Without Russian Gas, Storage Facilities 100% Full - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - Poland is able to survive without gas supplies from Russia and its gas storage facilities are completely full while its infrastructure is ready for diversified deliveries, Polish Secretary of State and Government Plenipotentiary for Strategic Energy Infrastructure Piotr Naimski said on Wednesday.

"We can survive without Russian gas supplies," Naimski said during an event organized by the Atlantic Council. "We can secure supplies for our purposes. We have storages 100% filled already. We have infrastructure ready to accept diversified sources and routes, supplies."

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US Raises Travel Warning Level for Ecuador Citing Crime, Unrest - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The US government has raised the threat level for Ecuador and is advising Americans to reconsider traveling to that country because of dangers posed by crime and political and social unrest, the State Department said on Wednesday.

"Crime is a widespread problem in Ecuador. Violent crime, such as murder, assault, express kidnapping, and armed robbery, is common. Transnational criminal organizations and gangs operate in Carchi, Sucumbios, and the northern part of Esmeraldas provinces, as well as in Guayaquil, south of Portete de Tarquí Avenue," the State Department said in a press release. The State Department warned that demonstrations occur regularly and throughout Ecuador regarding political and economic issues, and can cause the shutdown of roads and highways without prior notice.

"Road closures may significantly reduce access to public transportation and airports and may disrupt travel both within and between cities," the release said.

As a consequence, the State Department said it has raised the travel advisory to "Level 3 - Reconsider Travel," which replaces the one issued on April 19.

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US Goal for Economic Soft Landing to Be 'Very Challenging' - Powell

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The US government's goal to achieve economic soft landing through interest rate hikes balanced by a strong jobs market growth has been complicated by events of recent months and could become more challenging going ahead, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Wednesday.

"I think that is our goal, that's our intention," the Fed chief said in testimony before the US Senate Banking Committee. "I think it's going to be very challenging. We've never said it was going to be easy or straightforward. It's going to be challenging and the events of the last few months have certainly made it more challenging. Nonetheless, there are pathways through which that could happen."

The US economy experienced a negative growth of 1.4% for the first quarter. If it does not return to positive growth by the second quarter, it will technically be in a recession, given that it takes just two straight quarters of negative growth to make a recession.

Inflation, as indicated by the Consumer Price Index, grew at an annualized rate of 8.6% in May - more than four times the Federal Reserve's target.

The US central bank's preferred rate of inflation is 2% per year and it has vowed to raise rates as high and long as necessary to bring price growth back to its annual target. The Federal Reserve announced last week its stiffest US rate hike in 28 years to fight inflation, adding a three-quarter point that brought key lending rates to as high as 1.75% from May's peak of 1%. Economists, however, fear the Federal Reserve will push the US economy into a recession with its rate hikes.

The central bank has a dual mandate of keeping inflation manageable for Americans while maximizing their employment opportunities. While it has performed woefully on its first objective, it has excelled with the second. The United States is experiencing the strongest jobs growth in history, with about two positions open for every jobless person. Unemployment has also remained at 3.6% in April and May - below the 4% jobless target rate that qualifies for maximum employment.

More importantly, or perhaps damagingly for the Federal Reserve, US wages have risen month after month since April 2021, expanding by a cumulative 6.1% over the past 14 months, or an average of 0.4% a month.

That mismatch has further complicated the central bank's efforts in balancing the economy as jobs and wage growth has been identified as one of the main contributors of inflation.

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USTR Says US Using Tariffs as Weapon, Punishment Against Russia

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The United States is using tariffs as a weapon and punishment against Russia, Trade Representative Katherine Tai told a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"Tariffs are like 2x4s. They can be used for lots of different purposes. With respect to Russia, these tariffs are punishment. We are using these 2x4s as a kind of a weapon," Tai told a US Senate Appropriations subcommittee.

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Russian Cyber Activities Expanding Beyond Ukraine as Conflict Continues - Microsoft Chief

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - Russia's cyber activities have been expanding to networks in other countries beyond Ukraine as the Russian special military operation approaches the four-month mark, Microsoft President Brad Smith said during a Reagan Foundation on Wednesday.

"Perhaps not surprisingly, as the war has gone on for a longer time, we've seen Russian network penetration expand outside of Ukraine," Smith said. "We ourselves have witnessed 128 different efforts to penetrate organizations, or 128 different organizations, in 42 countries around the world."

Smith said roughly half of those 128 entities were governments and another 12% were non-governmental organizations mainly in the foreign-policy think-tank or humanitarian sectors. The Microsoft president proposed bolstering public-private cooperation on cyber issues as well as increased multilateralism between democratic countries to strengthen their cyber defenses. Reinvigorating traditional journalistic sources like local newspapers could also help combat cyber information operations, Smith said.

Microsoft released in April a report on Russian state cyber activities linked to the special military operation in Ukraine. The report said Russian cyber actors impacted Ukrainian services and information environments before and after the launch of the operation, although Microsoft was unable to determine their broader strategic impact.

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US Raised Tariffs on 75% of Imports From Russia After Suspending Normal Trade Ties - Tai

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The suspension of normal trade ties with Russia allowed the United States to increase tariff rates on more than 75% of its imports from Russia, Trade Representative Katherine Tai said on Wednesday.

"As a result of the bill that Congress passed and that the president signed into law earlier this spring, the United States has with respect to trade suspended permanent normal trade relations with Russia. And that means we've imposed non-MFN [most favored nation] tariffs on imports

from Russia. That action alone has increased tariff rates on over 75% of US imports from Russia," she said.

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US, Allies Looking at Tariff Authorities to Impose New Consequences on Russia -Trade Chief

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies are looking into tariffs authorities to impose new consequences on Russia, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"We are continuing to engage in the administration through our conversations also with other partners and allies to look at how we can use these new authority to impose additional consequences on imports from Russia," Tai told a US Senate Appropriations subcommittee.

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Guterres Extends Condolences to People of Afghanistan After Deadly Earthquake

UNITED NATIONS, June 22 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres expressed his condolences to the people of Afghanistan after a deadly earthquake hit the country on Wednesday.

"My heart goes out to the people of Afghanistan who are already reeling from the impact of years of conflict, economic hardship and hunger. I convey my deep condolences to the families of the victims and wish speedy recovery to the injured," Guterres said.

He noted that the UN in Afghanistan is fully mobilized.

"Our teams are already on the ground assessing the needs and providing initial support. We count on the international community to help support the hundreds of families hit by this latest disaster. Now is the time for solidarity," the UN chief added.

The latest data provided by the Paktika province suggests that more than 1,000 people were killed and over 1,500 others were injured in the magnitude 6.1 earthquake.

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Zelenskyy Expects Ukraine to Receive Candidate Status at June 23-24 EU Summit

OTTAWA, June 22 (Sputnik) – Ukraine expects to receive candidate status to join the European Union at the EU leaders' summit this week, Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Wednesday.

"Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, these decisive days, Ukraine will get the candidate status for the European Union. We have been going to this point of time for many years, several revolutions; that's a very crucial moment for us," Zelenskyy said in a virtual address to students of the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy.

On June 21, French Secretary of State for European Affairs Clement Beaune announced that EU countries had reached a full consensus on granting Ukraine candidate status.

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US Supports UN Efforts to Re-Open Odessa Port for Food Exports - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The United States supports the United Nations efforts to re-open the ports within the city of Odessa for export of food and other products, US Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs, Ramin Toloui said on Wednesday.

"The United Nations... is working very hard to find an accommodation that will allow one of these ports to re-open, or several ports within Odessa. We in the US government are fully supportive of that," Toloui said during a telephonic press briefing.

Toloui said the United States wants to see grain and other products coming out of those ports be able to get to markets worldwide, particularly in the Middle East in Africa.

"We will continue to have close coordination with the UN delegation and the government of Ukraine on way to mitigate the impacts on global food security of Russia's war," he said.

Toloui accused Russia of allegedly weaponizing food, but acknowledged that the current food crisis began well before Russia launched its special military operation and Ukraine, saying the coronavirus pandemic and climate change were some of the causes.

Russia has repeatedly said that it does not hinder the export of Ukrainian grain and has secured not one but two sea corridors for such exports, noting that Ukraine had heavily mined the Black Sea.

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EU Encouraged by Progress Made to Export Grain From Ukraine - Official

WASHINGTON, June 22 (Sputnik) - The European union is encouraged by progress achieved in efforts to export grain from Ukraine, the deputy director-general for agriculture and rural development at the European Commission said on Wednesday.

"We're looking at all the options, whether it's through rail, road, and barge and a combination of all three, working very closely with the Ukrainian authorities themselves, obviously, but also with the neighboring EU member states," Michael Scannell said at the US-EU Defense and Future forum. "It's a huge task, but we're encouraged with the progress we've made to date. We have a

specific so-called solidarity corridor network established, and we are pouring a lot of time, resources and efforts into it."