

7/21/22 Thursday

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Congolese Nobel Laureate Mukwege Says Tshisekedi 'Worsening Instability' With Rwanda Policy

North Kivu Province, in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, is plagued with violence by armed rebel groups, many the legacy of a continent-wide war largely unknown outside of Africa. The violence has ensured that nations involved in the war have remained deeply enmeshed in Congolese politics.

Congolese President Felix Tshisekede received criticism from a new corner this week, after one of the country's most prominent activists tore into his diplomacy with Rwanda.

"While a multilateral partnership with the United Nations and a bilateral agreement between the DR Congo and Uganda are already difficultly and inefficiently superimposed," the imminent deployment of a Regional Force "looks like a chronicle of chaos announced, especially since some of these states are at the root of destabilization, cycles of violence and the looting of natural resources in eastern Congo," Congolese gynecologist and surgeon [Denis Mukwege said on Thursday](#).

Mukwege, who hails from the North Kivu city of Bukavu on the Rwandan border and won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 for his work with female victims of wartime rape, warned that the "regional diplomacy" of Tshisekede "leads us objectively towards a prolongation and aggravation of instability."

He especially warned there was "only one certainty" from the continuation of conflict: "women and children will be affected again, and will be the first victims of this new cycle of violence."

"The profound reform of the FARDC [Armed Forces of the DR Congo], security services and the fight against impunity are the most appropriate measures to ensure pacification and lasting stability in eastern DRC," he added.

Late last month, the East African Community [voted to activate](#) its East African Regional Force (EARF) and sent it to North Kivu, albeit without the participation of Rwandan troops, as Tshisekede has accused Kigali of supporting the M23 rebel group there. A predominantly Tutsi group, the M23 is engaged with other rebel groups in the area as well as the FARDC, but mostly the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a Hutu Power militia that is descended from the groups responsible for the [1994 genocide of Rwandan Tutsis](#) and Twa. Rwanda has accused the DRC of supporting the FDLR instead of fighting them and has denied supporting the M23. However, there is evidence to support both sides' accusations of using the respective rebel groups as proxies.

The accusations, combined with a series of border incidents that have included the kidnapping of Rwandan troops and rockets crossing the border into Rwanda, and the M23 capturing important towns near the border, have led to the two countries pledging their [willingness to go to war](#) over the issue. Regular diplomatic and economic relations have been all but severed, and

Tshisekede's government has banned the Rwandan flag-carrier airline RwandAir from Congolese airspace.

In early July, Angolan President Joao Lourenco organized a [summit and ostensible ceasefire](#) between Congo and Rwanda, including reviving a long-dormant dialogue used to defuse the hostilities of the Congo Wars in the 2000s. However, the M23 rejected the Luanda deal, with a [spokesperson telling AFP](#): "This roadmap does not commit the M23. We are Congolese, we have nothing to do with Rwanda. We are asked to leave here, but to go where? It is impossible." On Thursday, Congolese Tourism Minister Modero Nsimba threatened to "propose militarizing protected areas in eastern DRC," most especially Virunga National Park, an area where Nsimba said the M23 "is killing, looting and ransacking a protected area that is inscribed on the world heritage list."

The continent's oldest national park, Virunga is [home to rare Mountain Gorillas](#), a great ape closely related to humans, but of which there are less than 1,000 still alive. Nsimba said the global community should rally to their defense in the same way it rallied against Daesh* when the historic mosques of Timbuktu were threatened.

In addition to the EAC force, the UN peacekeeping mission in DR Congo, MONUSCO, [has some 14,000 troops](#) in the country, most of them in North Kivu in an attempt to keep the various factions there from engaging in open warfare or in crimes against humanity, such as rape and the empressment of child soldiers.

The intermittent fighting since November has displaced some 70,000 people near the city of Goma on Lake Kivu. Across the country, some 5.6 million people are internally displaced - the most of any African country.

In addition to the FDLR and M23, Congolese and Ugandan forces are engaged with the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an Islamist group that has pledged itself to Daesh. On Monday, the bodies of eight people killed by the ADF were found in Ndimo village in Ituri Province, to the north of North Kivu, coming just days after the ADF torched the village of Otmaber, killing two more people.

Kampala and Kinshasa launched their joint anti-ADF operation in November 2021, around the same time that the M23 again took up arms after claiming the DRC had violated the terms of its earlier demobilization.

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WHO Reconsiders Naming Monkeypox Global Crisis as Worldwide Cases Top 15,300

For the second time in as many months, the World Health Organization's (WHO) emergency committee met on Thursday to consider whether or not to declare the outbreak of monkeypox, a virus related to smallpox that was previously only endemic in parts of West Africa, a global crisis.

"I remain concerned about the number of cases, in an increasing number of countries, that have been reported," WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said at the meeting.

[According to data from](#) the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2,322 cases of monkeypox have been detected in the US in the present outbreak, and 15,378 worldwide. While the total number continues to rise, Tedros noted on Thursday that in several countries, case numbers have fallen.

Fighting Stigma

However, critics have noted that the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) issuing a warning to gay and bisexual men in May about monkeypox, which had spread in a cluster of queer men in Britain, has led to a widespread mischaracterization of the outbreak as one affecting queer men exclusively or primarily.

"We have no concept of the scale of the monkeypox outbreak in the US," Joseph Osmundson, a biologist at New York University, [told NPR in late June](#). "State officials are denying people testing because they're using a narrow definition of monkeypox to decide who receives a test. They're testing in only a very restrictive number of cases."

Those rules, often created by health care providers, require that a patient be a man who has sex with other men before they will be tested for monkeypox, even if they are showing key symptoms of the disease, such as skin lesions.

The CDC [issued new guidance last month](#) that explicitly stated the monkeypox virus (MPXV) is not a sexually transmitted infection (STI) and is likely spreading due to the close physical contact that happens during sex. The British National Health Service ([NHS](#)) [now also explicitly states](#) that "Anyone can get monkeypox. Though currently most cases have been in men who are gay, bisexual or have sex with other men, so it's particularly important to be aware of the symptoms if you're in these groups."

Rush for Vaccines, But Not for Vaccination

The Florida Department of Health [revealed on Thursday](#) that with 208 confirmed and probable cases, the state has nearly 10% of the US' recorded cases of monkeypox, with the highest concentration in Broward County. According to WPBF, the state government has secured 25,000 doses of the vaccine.

With tracing the line of transmission becoming so difficult, US officials have moved toward distributing monkeypox vaccines, but are still restricting them to people exposed instead of mass distribution. Health officials said last week that [more than 100,000 vaccine doses](#) were expected to arrive in the US from places like Denmark in the coming days, with at least 5 million more ordered for the coming months.

It's unclear which vaccines are being obtained, although it's likely Jynneos, a vaccine made by Bavarian Nordic in Denmark. Jynneos is [licensed in the United States](#) to be administered to adults for either smallpox or monkeypox, and [researchers believe the smallpox vaccine](#) could work well against monkeypox since the diseases are so closely related. Indeed, the smallpox vaccine is derived from vaccinia, or cowpox virus, another member of the poxvirus family alongside monkeypox.

However, in May, Bavarian Nordic CEO [Paul Chaplin told NBC](#) "the [US] government have more than a million doses of Jynneos, liquid frozen, at the Strategic National Stockpile or stored in our facility in Europe." In addition, the US keeps a national stockpile of 100 million smallpox vaccines, the CDC said at the time.

Monkeypox Now More Common Outside Africa

The virus is endemic to West Africa, being first discovered in 1971 and typically associated with contact with infected bushmeat. However, with more strains of the virus having been detected outside Africa than inside it, and media imagery the world over showing mostly black-skinned people afflicted with the disease, the [WHO took up a petition](#) by a group of African doctors last month to change its “discriminatory and stigmatizing name.”

No deaths have been recorded from monkeypox in rich nations, but in West Africa, some strains can have a mortality rate of as high as 10%. The virus stays dormant for between 5 and 21 days after infection. [Symptoms of infection are mostly similar](#) to smallpox, although the lesions are fewer and smaller and patients’ lymph nodes commonly swell up. When symptoms appear, they include fever, headache, muscle aches, and the classic lesions that spread across the skin, fill with pus, and burst.

Symptoms can persist for more than four weeks before recovery but often disappear after two. Scarring from the lesions is common.

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Three Syrian Soldiers Killed in Damascus After Air Defenses Engage Incoming Missile Strikes

Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported Friday morning that air defenses had activated in the capital city of Damascus in response to inbound missile strikes.

Explosions were reported in the vicinity of the capital on Friday morning, although the targets of the strike were as yet unclear. [At least seven explosions](#) were reported, in the areas of Al-Sidiyah [Zainab and Qudsayya](#).

Video shared online was purported to be of the Syrian air defenses, but the veracity of the video was uncertain.

Syrian officials said after the strikes that most of the incoming missiles had been successfully intercepted, but that three soldiers had nonetheless been killed and seven others injured. Israel has for years [carried out strikes against targets](#) in Syria, which it typically claims are Iranian and intended for use in attacking Israel. Jerusalem does not have formal diplomatic relations with either Iran or Syria.

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‘America Has to Leave’: Erdogan Calls on US to Stop Training Kurdish Militias, Leave Eastern Syria

Earlier this year, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan used his veto power over the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO to dragoon the two nations into ending their support for Kurdish groups in Turkey and Syria, which his government considers terrorist organizations. Following [a trilateral summit](#) with the two other Astana Format nations, Iran and Russia, Turkey has demanded that the US - its NATO ally - leave eastern Syria and end its support for Kurdish militia groups there.

"America has to leave east of the Euphrates now. This is an outcome that came out of the Astana process," Erdogan said on Wednesday, according to the [state-owned Anadolu Agency](#). "Türkiye expects this as well because it is America that feeds the terrorist groups there," he said, referring to the People's Defense Units (YPG), a Kurdish militia that forms the core of the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that the US forces in eastern Syria support as a proxy force in order to deny control over the oil-rich region to the Syrian government in Damascus. However, Washington claims it supports the SDF as part of the fight against Daesh*. "You see that the American staff there train members of the terrorist organization," Erdogan continued.

"During this training, they are waving the flag of the regime there. Why? Their job is to commit a terrorist act against the Turkish soldiers there. Here, too, they think they are deceiving the Turkish army by waving the regime's flag there. We won't be fooled," he added.

Turkish forces crossed the Syrian frontier into eastern Syria in October 2019 in what Ankara called Operation Peace Spring, driving more than 300,000 Kurds from a 20-mile-deep strip along the border in order to halt the movement of Kurdish groups across the border. Another Kurdish militia, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), has fought against the Turkish government in eastern Turkey for decades and is closely allied with the YPG in Syria. The PKK also has bases in Iraq's northern Kurdistan region, which Ankara has also launched several military operations against.

The 2019 offensive created a difficult situation for the US, as the YPG was already [receiving US support](#) via the Train and Equip program, and Turkish forces [passed American border posts](#) in the opening stages of the offensive in order to attack their allies.

Turkey also previously intervened to attack Kurdish areas further to the west, in the Afrin and Manbij regions, in 2018, which it called Operation Olive Branch, and continues to support [al-Qaeda**-aligned groups in Idlib](#), the last major outpost of Islamist extremist forces left in Syria after years of civil war. The Astana process was created in 2018 in large part [to avoid open war](#) between Turkey and the Islamist militias on one side, and the Syrian government and its Russian and Iranian allies on the other.

More recently, Erdogan has used his country's membership in the NATO alliance to compel Sweden and Finland, which applied to join NATO earlier this year, to give up their support for Kurdish groups by threatening to veto their NATO applications. A [deal was finally hammered out](#) at the NATO summit in Madrid in late June, although the relevant nations have [continued to quibble](#) over what exactly was agreed to in Madrid.

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Video: Republican Candidate for New York Gubernatorial Race Attacked During Campaign Event

Event guests told Fox News that they had initially believed the unidentified attacker was going on stage to "fix a flag or something that was out of place."

Newly surfaced footage captured the moment that a Republican candidate for New York's gubernatorial race was attacked in an attempted stabbing during a Thursday campaign event. The late Thursday incident involved New York Rep. Lee Zeldin, and took place in Perinton, a town located in New York's Monroe County, which has a population of less than 50,000 people per 2010 census data.

Video of the incident shows Zeldin in the middle of giving a speech on bail reform when the attacker is seen jumping on stage, and then being blocked by another individual who is seen standing in between the GOP candidate and the assailant.

The individual was subsequently detained by Joe Chenelly, the director of the American Veterans organization.

Zeldin did not sustain any injuries during the attempted stabbing. A release issued by Zeldin's campaign staff notes that the congressman had grabbed onto the attacker's wrist to stop the strike before others intervened.

Addressing the development, New York Gov. Kathy Hochul tweeted that she was "relieved" the lawmaker was not injured before condemning the attack. "It has no place in New York," she [wrote](#).

With the suspect in custody, an investigation into the attack remains ongoing.

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Severe Turbulence on American Airlines Flight Diverts Plane to Alabama, Leaves 8 Injured

Although the US National Transportation Safety Board is aware of the incident, it has not yet launched its own investigation into the matter. However, the Federal Aviation Administration has said it would be probing the case.

At least eight travelers aboard an American Airlines flight were injured on Wednesday after the aircraft encountered a severe "unexpected" patch of turbulence, the airline has detailed.

American Airlines flight 3609 had departed from Tampa, Florida, and was en route to Tennessee's Nashville International Airport when passengers encountered turbulence during their travels. Reports have indicated the episode occurred as the plane neared the Florida Panhandle.

The plane was ultimately diverted to the Shuttlesworth International Airport in Birmingham, Alabama. Passengers touched down in the Heart of Dixie at about 3:17 p.m. local time. Upon arrival, several ambulances reported to the plane.

"There were, at the time, as many as 10 people who thought they might have some kind of injury," Kim Hunt, a spokesperson for the Birmingham Airport Authority, [told](#) the Tennessean news outlet. Of the 56 people aboard the flight, eight were transported to a local hospital.

Aside from being described as "minor" injuries, additional details on the condition of the passengers have not been released. According to [CBS News](#), the injuries were among six travelers and two flight staff.

Authorities have since indicated the airline arranged for uninjured passengers to board another plane to continue their flight to Tennessee.

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DHS Watchdog Opens Probe Into Secret Service Texts, Orders Agency to Halt Its Own Investigation

By - Evan Craighead

The US House select committee probing the January 6, 2021, insurrection flagged the Secret Service for suspicious practices in a Wednesday memo, noting the panel has "concerns about a system migration that we have been told resulted in the erasure of Secret Service cell phone data." The DHS watchdog's memo was issued the same day.

The US Secret Service, the agency charged with protecting the nation's heads of state, is at the center of a criminal investigation led by Gladys Ayala, the US Department of Homeland Security's inspector general.

Ayala is probing the supposed disappearance of text messages related to Trump's behavior on January 6, including the former president's [alleged lunge at the steering wheel](#). Trump has denied this allegation.

"This is to notify you that the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General has an ongoing investigation into the facts and circumstances surrounding the collection and preservation of evidence by the United States Secret Service as it relates to the events of January 6, 2021," Ayala wrote in a July 20 memo to Secret Service Director James Murray. The probe focuses on the agency's delivery of a single text thread in response to a subpoena from the January 6 panel that requested text messages sent and received by two dozen Secret Service officials on January 5, 2021, and the date of the insurrection.

The letter also stated the federal law enforcement agency must suspend and refrain from any investigative actions or communications related to the matter.

"To ensure the integrity of our investigation, the USSS must not engage in any further investigative activities regarding the collection and preservation of the evidence referenced above," read the letter. "This includes immediately refraining from interviewing potential witnesses, collecting devices or taking any other action that would interfere with an ongoing criminal investigation."

The Secret Service confirmed receipt of the letter on Thursday, noting it had also communicated the matter to the January 6 panel because there may be conflicting demands.

"We have informed the January 6th Select Committee of the Inspector General's request and will conduct a thorough legal review to ensure we are fully cooperative with all oversight efforts and that they do not conflict with each other," [the federal law enforcement agency told NBC News](#).

Findings from the criminal oversight probe can be referred to federal prosecutors.

"We are unaware of a criminal allegation, but are committed to cooperating with the Inspector General," [a spokesperson for the Secret Service told CNN](#).

The potentially conflicting demand from the DHS inspector general came alongside a scathing, same-day letter from Reps. Bennie Thompson (D-MS) and Liz Cheney (R-WY), chair and vice chair of the Jan. 6 panel, who voiced concerns that law enforcement officials could have violated the Federal Records Act.

"The Select Committee is seeking additional Secret Service records as well," the joint memo highlighted. Thousands of other records have been turned over and are being reviewed by investigative officials, according to the panel.

In addition to congressional and federal requests, the federal agency is also faced with ensuring it is not violating its own policy, which allows for "limited personal use" of US government phones and could complicate what would be deemed as government records.

"That is the crux of the investigation," [a Secret Service official told CBS News](#). "If there is material from Secret Service official to Secret Service official that is deemed a government record, then that should have been uploaded by the employee. That is what the Inspector General and the Secret Service are looking at."

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Cold-Blooded: Pennsylvania Police Fatally Shoot 15-Foot Snake Caught Strangling Owner
By - Evan Craighead

On Wednesday, Upper Merion Township officers responding to reports of a cardiac arrest victim in Fogelsville, Pennsylvania, stumbled upon an unresponsive man lying on the floor with a snake wrapped tightly around his neck.

A 15-foot (4.6-meter) snake looking to devour its already-unconscious owner was served cold steel after officers had to make an in-the-moment decision at the scene in Fogelsville, some 45 miles (72.4 kilometers) north of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The events were fleshed out in a departmental release.

"When patrol officers arrived on the scene, they observed a 28-year-old male who was unresponsive and lying on the floor of the home with the mid portion of a large snake wrapped around the male's neck," read the report.

Police detailed that, "due to the massive size of the reptile," a responding officer was able to neutralize the snake via a headshot that did not present further injury to the unconscious owner.

"Once the snake was injured from the gunshot, the officers were able to pull the male to safety," it read.

Lt. Peter Nickischer, with the Upper Merion Township Police Department, said that the snake did not immediately die, but it did begin to loosen its grip after some time, allowing officers to retrieve the man from the 15-foot serpent's grip.

"It started to slither away, luckily away from the officers, away from the direction that they were trying to pull this gentleman," Nickischer said, [as reported by ABC 6](#). "They realized it was a

matter of life and death with seconds to make that decision. Praise the officers. They did what they had to do. It was a safe shoot.”

The snake was later identified as a pet of the Pennsylvania man, who received emergency medical care before being sent to an area hospital for further treatment.

The unnamed man’s condition has not been disclosed.

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January 6 Hearings, Day 8: Key Takeaways & Unseen Footage Shown During Thursday’s Presentation

By - Evan Craighead

Thursday’s proceedings marked the eighth public hearing held in the congressional chamber. The July 21 hearing primarily focused on then-President Donald Trump’s alleged refusal to act during the 187 minutes between the riot’s inception and the publication of a video plea for supporters to cease the violence in Washington, DC, and go home.

The overarching message of the latest hearing was clear: January 6 panelists believe Trump’s period of inaction after learning his supporters’ demonstration devolved into an insurrection represents a dereliction of his duty and comes in violation of his oath to the US.

Panelists: Trump Watched Television, Refused to Act

Rep. Elaine Luria (D-VA), a panelist leading Thursday’s hearing, accused Trump of sitting on the sidelines and making deliberate moves to delay carrying out the appropriate action to address the attack occurring at the nearby US Capitol housing US lawmakers and former Vice President Mike Pence, who was tasked with leading the certification of Electoral College votes that day.

“What you will learn is that President Trump sat in his dining room and watched the attack on television,” Luria said, accusing the 45th US president of ignoring phone calls from both senior staffers and family members who were urging intervention.

“When lives and our democracy hung in the balance, President Trump refused to act because of his selfish desire to stay in power,” said the US lawmaker from Virginia.

Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, recounted his confusion to the panelists during a pre-taped interview that was played in part on Thursday.

“You’re the Commander in Chief. You’ve got an assault going on on the Capitol of the United States of America, and there’s nothing?” Milley said in the audio. “No call? Nothing? Zero?”

The panel noted Trump was watching Fox News during a portion of the 187 minutes in question. A compilation of the channel’s broadcast was shown during the hearing to demonstrate the information taken in by the president at the time.

Several Staffers Pressed Trump to Swiftly Issue Brief Public Statement, Witnesses Claim

Former White House Deputy Press Secretary Sarah Matthews testified there was little preventing the president from getting out a statement, as it would have taken Trump about 60 seconds to walk to the press briefing room from the Oval Office dining room.

“If the president wanted to make a statement and address the American people, he could have been on camera almost instantly,” Matthews testified.

The former deputy press secretary added the White House press corps could have been assembled in a "matter of minutes."

Ex-Trump Official: 45's Anti-Pence Tweet Incensed Rioters at the Insurrection's Height
A tweet published by Trump at 2:24 p.m. local time served as a breaking point for rioters and many of Trump's staffers.

"Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done," opened Trump's tweet, decrying his vice president's role in the electoral process.

Matt Pottinger, Trump's former deputy national security adviser, told the committee: "The tweet looked to me like the opposite of what we really needed at that moment, which was a deescalation."

Panelists highlighted that the situation got even worse after the 2:24 p.m. tweet, with videos showing pro-Trump rioters punching cops and launching projectiles in the wake of the message.
Trump Struggles to Accept Defeat in Never-Before-Seen Video Clip

Panelists notably debuted footage that was left on the cutting room floor as Trump prepared to address the nation just one day after the deadly incident.

Trump takes several pauses during the brief clip and, at one point, states "I don't want to say the election is over," arguing he simply "can't say that."

"I'm not gonna—I already said, 'You will pay,'" Trump said, referring to his pre-taped message for rioters.

Overheard in the video is then-adviser Ivanka Trump, the former US president's eldest daughter and one of several individuals Trump has accused of mentally "checking out" from their duties toward the end of his presidency.

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Nord Stream Turbine Delivery Delays Not Entirely in Hands of Siemens – Spokesperson

OTTAWA, July 22 (Sputnik) – Siemens wants to deliver the Nord Stream 1 turbine as soon as possible, but the timing depends not only on the company's actions, the company told Sputnik amid reports that the turbine is stuck in Germany as it allegedly waits for Russia's greenlight for its transit to the country.

"Under normal circumstances, the maintenance of turbines is a routine operation for us. Naturally, we want to transport the turbine to its place of operation as quickly as possible. However, the time it takes is not exclusively within our control," Siemens said.

Reuters reported on Thursday, citing sources that the turbine for the Nord Stream gas pipeline, which is being transported from Canada, got stuck in transit in Germany due to the alleged lack of permission from Russia for its return.

Earlier today, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that media reports about Russia not granting the permission are nonsense.

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Local Sheriff Says Illegal Migration on Southern Border 'Out of Control,' Biden of No Help

EAGLE PASS, Texas, July 22 (Sputnik) - The record number of illegal migrants coming to the US southern border is out of control and President Joe Biden appears to be doing nothing to help local law enforcement deal with the crisis, Maverick County Sheriff Tom Schmerber told Sputnik.

The border town has become a hot spot with apprehensions at an all-time high of about 2,000 per day, an official told local media last week after the agency opened a new temporary facility in Eagle Pass to expedite processing of migrants in custody. The town is located in what Customs and Border Protection (CPB) call the Del Rio sector, where more than 326,000 illegal migrants have been apprehended since October, an increase of nearly 120% compared to the same period last year, according to government data.

A Sputnik correspondent in a ride-along with local police observed unmarked buses chartered by the federal government and Border Patrol vans are constantly seen on the road transporting illegal migrants from the banks of the Rio Grande river to processing centers, including a temporary camp on the outskirts of Eagle Pass that can house up to one thousand migrants. Biden, who came into office vowing to secure the border in an "orderly and humane fashion," has seen a record 3 million illegal crossings so far under his watch, which many in his own party told CNN they fear could give Republicans an edge in the midterm elections in November. Earlier this week, the mayors of New York City and Washington, DC, two Democratic strongholds, even called on Biden to take action to help stem the influx of migrants overwhelming city homeless shelters.

"It's getting worse - from worse to real bad," Schmerber said about the flood of illegal immigrants in his area. "[And] I don't see any help from the Biden administration."

The sheriff said it seems like Biden is not interested or concerned and now the situation is "out of control."

"I'm a Democrat, but I'm disappointed," Schmerber said. "The Governor of Texas [Greg Abbott], he's a Republican, but he's been helping us a lot. He took action."

The sheriff said he is thankful Abbott deployed thousands of state police officers and National Guard troops to support federal and local law enforcement struggling with manpower.

However, despite this help the heavy flow of illegal migrants continues, he added.

A Maverick County sheriff deputy told Sputnik about 80 percent of their calls while on duty now deal with illegal immigration. Texas game wardens, who usually work to enforce laws related to hunting and fishing, are now helping federal agents patrol the Rio Grande river.

Schmerber, who retired from the Border Patrol 14 years ago, said he has never seen it this bad.

"When I retired from Border Patrol I never thought I was going to do immigration work again," Schmerber said. "So it's taking a lot of attention away from the security of the county to [focus on] immigration problems."

Schmerber said ranchers have complained about migrants going through their land and cutting fences, which leads to cattle getting loose and going out onto the highways. Some migrants have also burglarized ranchers' homes and stolen items such as weapons, he added.

Former US officials have warned that the Biden administration should address the issue before a major humanitarian crisis occurs on the US-Mexico border involving migrants, such as the event that left 53 illegal migrants dead after smugglers abandoned them inside a tractor-trailer in the Texas city of San Antonio in sweltering heat conditions.

Schmerber said the heat is already taking a fatal toll on migrants crossing the desert to the US southern border.

"We find a lot of bodies, we have a drought here in Texas," Schmerber said without disclosing any specific numbers.

Schmerber said they have mostly seen migrants in his area from Honduras and Venezuela, but overall they come from numerous countries.

The sheriff said some migrants avoid being apprehended because they are not eligible for political asylum. Moreover, smugglers sometimes send large groups over the US-Mexico border so they can distract US law enforcement officers while they smuggle drugs into the United States through gaps along the border with no American authorities present.

"The community is afraid because they don't know what's coming in," Schmerber said. "It's not only immigrants who are looking for a better life, but you also have people who take advantage. So the criminal element takes advantage of all of this. They're making money crossing dope [drugs]... and smuggling people."

The only way the border crisis can be reversed is for Biden to take action to deter the influx of migrants, Schmerber said.

"I think that the solution should be in DC, take that action by doing something like zero tolerance [policy]," Schmerber said, referring to the Trump administration's strict restrictions on immigration.

MIGRANTS CONVEY BIDEN CAUSE OF INFLUX, SAY MORE GROUPS OF MIGRANTS COMING

The fact Biden reversed many Trump-era immigration restrictions and vowed to treat migrants more humanely has been welcomed by asylum seekers, although the administration has several times warned them against making the journey. But migrants at the southern border who talked to Sputnik indicated that many more will be coming, seeking "opportunities" in America.

A local shelter in Eagle Pass called Mission Border Hope helps migrants that have been processed by US immigration officers and released onto the streets. Dozens were seen unloading from buses and going into the shelter while others boarded to an unknown destination. A sheriff deputy told Sputnik the organization gives migrants a cell phone and cash to help them get to their next destination in the United States. He added that they have had to respond to calls at the shelter to address issues involving migrants.

Migrants waiting for Border Patrol agents to pick them up shared food and exchanged stories about the hardships they have faced on their journeys to the US southern border. In particular, migrants from Venezuela described to Sputnik a horrific journey through the Darien Gap, a jungle between Colombia and Panama, during which people died including children.

"I spent eight days inside the jungle," 24-year-old Caled told Sputnik. "A lot of kids have died, a lot of older people got injured."

Francisco, a 26-year migrant from Venezuela, said he almost drowned crossing the Rio Grande river, which represents the southern border between Texas and Mexico, but was rescued by US law enforcement.

"If we risked our lives to come here, believe me, that means it's not easy to be there [in Venezuela]," Francisco said. "Honestly, I almost lost my life a bit ago."

Caed further said some migrants committed suicide after losing a member of their family while traveling to the United States. Edgar, 58, said he knew two people who died after they fell behind.

Moises, 31, who was also almost taken under by the Rio Grande river, said he has seen migrants coming from Cuba, Italy, Senegal, Bangladesh, Haiti, Ecuador, Colombia, Nicaragua, Honduras, and other parts of Africa. As for Venezuela, he too said it was hard for people like him to live in the country right now.

"As a human, we have a right to life, to good health, education, and work, but they close doors on us everywhere simply because we're in opposition," Moises said. "We've gone through a difficult time going through hunger, cold, lack of sleep, but thank God that we arrived here alive."

A 22-year-old migrant from Honduras, Jorge, said violence and poverty in his home country drove him to make the trek to the United States. He also said they appreciate Biden for giving opportunities to immigrants.

"I came with my partner. We came on [the] train but we've suffered, we've slept on the street. We've starved. They've treated us bad in Mexico but thank god we're here," Jorge told Sputnik.

Jessie, 33, a single mother from Honduras, started her journey in a caravan that was made up of like 6,000 other US-bound migrants. She said she risked everything to bring her two young daughters to the United States. The three of them were picked up by game wardens along the river.

"I've suffered through a lot, my kids have seen a lot of things," Jessie said. "A specialist told me that my daughter is living with trauma, she can't talk well. She used to be able to talk well but she's seen so many things, like robberies, [and] people with guns and knives."

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UPDATE - US Secret Service Under Criminal Probe for Deleting January 6 Texts - Reports
(Adds more details, background in paras 5-8)

WASHINGTON, July 22 (Sputnik) - The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Inspector General has launched a criminal investigation to determine how and why the US Secret Service destroyed text messages that could have shed light on the January 6 riot, NBC reported citing two sources familiar with the matter.

Last week, the DHS inspector general informed two congressional committees that many Secret Service text messages from January 5-6, 2021, on agency telephones had been erased after the watchdog asked for all records tied to the Capitol riot.

Homeland Security Deputy Inspector General Gladys Ayala in a letter told the Secret Service to halt its internal investigations on the missing text messages because the watchdog's probe could be referred to federal prosecutors, the report said on Thursday.

US Secret Service Communications Chief Anthony Guglielmi in a statement on July 14 denied the agency maliciously deleted text messages following a request. He said data was lost because the department reset mobile phones to factory settings as part of a pre-planned system migration. He said the DHS watchdog requested electronic communications for the first time on February 26, 2021 - after the migration was under way.

In a July 19 letter to the US House Capitol riot panel, Secret Service Assistant Director Ronald Rowe said the agency could find only one text message to meet the DHS request. Rowe was responding to a House Capitol riot committee subpoena dated July 15.

On June 11, 2021, DHS inspector general requested text messages sent or received by 24 Secret Service personnel from December 7, 2020 through January 8, 2021, Rowe said in the letter obtained by CNN.

US Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren, a member of the House January 6 committee, told CNN Wednesday the information the Secret Service provided was "insufficient," and more requests were forthcoming.

The US Secret Service (USSS) is a federal law-enforcement agency which has been under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) since 2003. DHS hence is responsible for oversight of the agency.

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Canada to Fund With \$1.9M In Projects to Fight Russian 'Disinformation' - Heritage Ministry

OTTAWA, July 22 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government will allocate C\$2.4 million (US\$1.9 million) in funding to projects intended to fight Russian so-called disinformation regarding the conflict in Ukraine, the Heritage Ministry said in a statement.

"The Minister of Canadian Heritage, Pablo Rodriguez, and the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities, Dominic LeBlanc, today announced over \$2.4 million in funding for projects that will help citizens determine for themselves what is fact and what is fiction online. Most of these projects will focus on fighting Russian disinformation in the face of its unjustifiable invasion of Ukraine," the statement said Thursday.

The government believes that Canadian citizens should have access to multiple sources of information for them to form their own opinions, the statement added, while saying this is part of any "healthy democracy."

Rodriguez considers that Canadians most valuable tool is to be "armed with facts" as they face constant "disinformation" regarding the conflict in Ukraine.

"These projects will give Canadians skills and tools to tell fact from fiction online," Rodriguez said as quoted by Canadian Heritage, adding that society gets along better when everyone shares common facts.

The announcement answers to a proposal from March 2022, to come up with civilian projects promoting digital literacy through the Digital Citizen Initiative (DCI), by various means such as but not limited to workshops and documentaries.

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US Supreme Court Denies Reinstating Biden Admin. Immigration Enforcement Policy - Order
WASHINGTON, July 22 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court denied reinstating the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) guidelines that limit immigration enforcement after a district court in Texas barred them, according to a court document.

On September 30, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas issued a memorandum barring US immigration enforcement to do arrests in so-called "protected areas" such as schools, hospitals and places of worship in the United States and authorized taking action only in safe spaces if there is a serious national security threat or risk of violence and death.

The memorandum also prohibited arrests at recreation centers and parks, social services facilities, disaster relief sites, funerals, demonstrations and rallies.

On June 10, the US District Court for the Southern District of Texas issued a final judgment vacating the memorandum. The Biden administration responded by filing a request with the US Supreme Court to rescind the ruling.

"The application for stay presented to Justice Alito and by him referred to the Court is denied," the document said on Thursday.

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Wall Street Up 3rd Day in Row on Tempered Optimism Over US Earnings

NEW YORK, July 22 (Sputnik) - Wall Street rallied for a third day in a row on Thursday amid tempered optimism over US company earnings as e-commerce giant Amazon reported a new diversification into healthcare while electric carmaker Tesla beat second-quarter profit expectations despite weaker operating conditions in China.

"The overall lack of fireworks on earnings means boring is beautiful," Stephen Innes of SPI Asset Management said. "And while supply chain and inflation conversations are improving, a significant consumer-driven earnings headwind remains."

The S&P 500 index, representing the top 500 US stocks, closed up 1% extending to 3.5% this week's gains. For the year though, the S&P 500 remained down 16%. That was still better than the 20% annual loss it showed as of mid-June, when it pointed at a bear market.

The Nasdaq Composite, which comprises major technology companies such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, settled up 1.4%, nearing a week-to-date gain of 5.3%. For the year, the tech barometer was down 23%.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, comprising stocks of 30 large US corporations, rose 0.5% on the day. For the year, it was down 12%.

Earlier on Thursday, Amazon said it was buying the San Francisco-based One Medical for \$3.9 billion to get into the healthcare business with the aim of making the sort of innovations it had achieved with online retail. The purchase will be one of Amazon's biggest after its \$13.7 billion buyout of Whole Foods in 2017 and \$8.5 billion acquisition of Hollywood studio MGM earlier this year.

Shares of Tesla, a Nasdaq stock, surged almost 10% after it reported at the close of Wednesday's trade an earnings per share of \$2.27 versus forecasts for \$1.81 despite tough operating conditions in China due to new coronavirus measures.

Streaming service Netflix, another Nasdaq powerhouse, saw an 18% price surge this week after saying it lost only around 970,000 subscribers during the second quarter, far less than the projected 2 million. The company also said it aims to unveil its lower-cost, advertisement-supported streaming tier in early 2023 and it expects to add some 1 million net new subscribers.

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US Aware of Threat Against Free Iran Summit, Urges Americans to Avoid Event - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 22 (Sputnik) - The US government is aware of a possible threat against the Free Iran World Summit being held by the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) in Albania this weekend, the State Department said in a security alert.

"The US government is aware of a potential threat targeting the Free Iran World Summit to be held near Durres, Albania on July 23-24, 2022," the US Embassy in Albania said on Thursday. The alert also urged US citizens to avoid the event, monitor local media, and maintain a low profile and situational awareness.

Participants of the summit will discuss prospects for regime change in Iran and promotion of more assertive policies for dealing with Iran on the world stage, according to the NCRI. The NCRI is a political opposition coalition against the regime of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in Iran. The group is connected to the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) organization.

The European Union removed the MEK from its list of designated terrorist organizations in 2009, followed by the United States in 2012.

Speakers at the summit include former US Ambassador to the UN Human Rights Commission Ken Blackwell, former US Attorney General Michael Mukasey and former US Senator Joe Lieberman, according to the event's website.

The summit will take place amid continued efforts to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal with Iran, which would require Iran to scale back its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief.

In 2015, Iran signed JCPOA with the P5+1 group, which includes the United States, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and Germany as well as with the European Union. In 2018, then US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from the JCPOA and re-imposed comprehensive sanctions on Iran. Iran responded with a gradual abandoning of its own commitments under the deal.

Talks have been organized in Vienna since April 2021 to revive the nuclear agreement.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 22 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* The Russian military strike in the Odesa region on July 16 killed more than 600 militants, including 120 mercenaries, the Russian Defense Ministry told reporters on Thursday.

* Kiev is attempting to provoke a nuclear catastrophe in Europe, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Thursday in comments on the Ukrainian drone attack on the Zaporozhie nuclear power plant.

GRAIN EXPORTS NEGOTIATIONS

* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres arrived in Istanbul in an effort to broker a grain deal between Russia and Ukraine, spokesman Farhan Haq said on Thursday.

* The United States applauds the work of Guterres and the Turkish leaders on reaching a deal on Ukraine grain exports, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

* All issues regarding the Ukraine grain deal have been resolved and the agreement will be signed tomorrow in Istanbul, a United Nations source told Sputnik.

ELECTIONS IN ITALY

* Italian President Sergio Mattarella signed decrees to organize snap elections to the country's parliament on September 25 and the first meeting of its chambers on October 13, the Office of the President said.

* Mattarella dissolved the national parliament, according to a statement from the presidential office.

GLOBAL ENERGY

* Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak discussed with Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto the supply of Russian natural gas and cooperation on peaceful nuclear energy, the Russian government said in a statement.

* The turbine for the Nord Stream 1 gas pipeline, which is being transported from Canada, got stuck in transit in Germany due to an alleged lack of permission from Russia for its return, US media reported.

* Hungary has taken measures to receive additional volumes of gas through the southern direction and the interconnector on the border with Austria and Slovakia, Szijjarto said.

RUSSIA-HUNGARY TALKS

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday that the visit of his Hungarian counterpart, Peter Szijjarto, is well-timed, including for the discussion of the international agenda.

* Russia and Hungary are stepping up economic cooperation despite sanctions pressure, Lavrov said.

* Russia and Hungary are determined to promote partnership and implement major projects, including in the fields of energy and transport, Lavrov said.

ANTI-RUSSIA SANCTIONS

* No sanctions - even the toughest ones - have ever led to a change in the positions of countries, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday, commenting on new sanctions imposed against Russia.

* The European Council approved on Thursday another package of sanctions against Russia in connection with Moscow's operation in Ukraine.

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Light Sentence for Ex-US Police Officer Involved in Floyd Killing Angers Family

WASHINGTON. July 21 (Sputnik) - A US District Court Judge's decision to sentence one of four police officers involved in the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 to 2½ years has angered members of his family who were demanding the maximum sentence.

"I think that it's insulting that he didn't get the maximum amount of time," said Floyd's brother Philonise during a press conference following the sentence on Thursday. "I think this whole criminal system just needs to be torn down and rebuilt... If it was me, they would have given me the maximum amount of time."

Judge Paul Magnuson sentenced Thomas Lane to a sentence below the 5.25 years that was at the low end of sentencing guidelines, The Washington Post reported. Prosecutors had asked the judge to sentence Lane to as much as 6 1/2 years, arguing that Lane, a white man, had a chance to stop his colleague, Derek Chauvin, from kneeling on Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes but opted not to.

Floyd's girlfriend Courtney Ross also expressed her displeasure and disappointment at a press conference reported by Pauline Le, an Emmy-nominated reporter with WCCO, CBS Minnesota and posted on Twitter.

"He didn't do the right thing. He fell to the pressures of a man that he should have no respect for," said Ross about Lane while answering media questions with Philonise Floyd and Floyd's nephew Brandon Williams. "And like my brothers here said, if it was anybody else that was part of a crime, they would be held accountable, they would be held to the highest standard. And I believe officers should be held to the higher standard and yet once again, we're disappointed by the verdict."

On May 25, 2020, 17-year-old Darnella Frazier videotaped former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes while Floyd was handcuffed and lying face down on the ground. Chauvin was convicted of second-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in state court and is serving a 22 1/2-year state sentence simultaneously with a 21-year sentence for federal civil rights charges.

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US Crude Oil Drops Further Below \$100 as Trade Reacts to Huge Gasoline Build

NEW YORK, July 21 (Sputnik) - US crude oil continued its descent below \$100 per barrel on Thursday, after reacting again to the massive build in gasoline inventories over the past two weeks that hinted at demand destruction for fuel from high prices.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude settled down \$3.53, or 3.5%, at \$96.35 per barrel, after an intraday low at \$94.62.

WTI closed down 86 cents, or 0.9%, in the previous session after the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) reported back-to-back builds of 3.5 million barrels and 5.8 million barrels in gasoline for the weeks that ended on July 15 and July 8, respectively. It was the biggest back-to-back gasoline build in six months, since the accumulation of some 14 million barrels between the weeks of January 7th and January 15th.

Talk of demand destruction in fuel is gathering pace in the United States as the price of gasoline at the pump averages \$4.44 per gallon, down just 11% from the mid-June record-high of \$5.01. The inventory data released by the EIA showed last week's pump demand for gasoline at 8.5 million barrels, down from the 9.3 million a year ago.

"Gasoline demand usually is quite strong during the US mid-summer months," Stephen Innes of SPI Asset Management said. "The situation remains volatile and will keep traders on edge." Prior to the price drop of the past two days, WTI hit a near five-month low of \$90.58 on July 14. London-traded Brent crude settled Thursday's trade down \$3.06, or 2.8%, at \$103.86 a barrel, after a session low at \$101.53. Brent fell 43 cents, or 0.4%, on Wednesday. A week earlier, the global crude benchmark plunged to \$95.42, its lowest since February 25. Analysts said trading volumes in oil have been thin of late, exacerbating moves either way, as traders attempt to square off the weakening of US energy demand on fears of a recession with generally tighter global supplies due to the loss of Russian barrels from sanctions imposed by the collective West.

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US to Verify 'Facts' Before Designating Russia State Sponsor of Terrorism - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States will make its decision whether to designate Russia a state sponsor of terrorism (SST) based on criteria provided by existing laws and "facts on the ground," State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday. "Our task is to take the criteria that Congress has written into law and to compare that to the facts on the ground, whether it's the SST statute or any other authority available to us. That's what we've done throughout the course of this war," Price said.

In order for the United States to designate Russia a state sponsor of terrorism, laws and protocols that are already in place must be followed, Price said.

The State Department spokesperson pointed out there are specific criteria defined by Congress that must be followed in this particular case.

Price noted the United States and its allies and partners continue to impose and maintain comprehensive sanctions against Russia, with more than 30 countries around the world participating in the restrictive measures.

"In short, the costs that we've imposed on Russia are in line with the consequences of an SST designation," Price said.

Earlier on Thursday, US media reported that US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had warned Secretary of State Antony Blinken Congress would designate Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism if the State Department failed to do so.

State sponsors of terrorism are countries which, according to the US government, have systematically supported or dealt with acts of international terrorism on their own or on behalf of government agencies. Designated countries include Cuba, Iran, North Korea and Syria, and are subject to economic and political sanctions.

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UN High-Level Week's Events Will Require Masks But No COVID Vaccination - Letter

UNITED NATIONS, July 21 (Sputnik) - All those participating in the UN high-level week's events this fall will be required to wear masks, but will not have to show proof of COVID-19 vaccination, the Office of the President of the General Assembly (PGA) said on Thursday.

"Masks are to be worn by all attendees at all times when indoors, except when directly addressing a meeting or consuming food/beverages ... All persons will be required to attest that they have not had symptoms of, or been diagnosed with, COVID-19 in the last 5 days," a letter from the PGA office said.

The letter also suggests that all side events should be held off-site or virtually.

The UN high-level week takes place annually in September in New York, bringing world leaders together. This year, it kicks off on September 13, and the General Debate starts on September 20.

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US Approves Possible \$1.2 Billion Sale of Patriot Missiles to Netherlands - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) – The United States has approved a possible sale of up to 96 PATRIOT Guidance Enhanced Missile-Tactical (GEM-T) ballistic missiles and other equipment and software for an estimated cost of more than \$1.2 billion to the Netherlands, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Thursday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of the Netherlands of PATRIOT MIM-104E Guidance Enhanced Missile-Tactical (GEM-T) Ballistic Missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$1.219 billion," DSCA said in a press release.

The prime contractor of the potential supply will be Raytheon Corporation, the release said.

Patriot is a long-range defense system intended for countering ballistic and cruise missiles, as well as advanced aircraft. The systems have been deployed in Germany, Greece, Israel, Japan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Poland, Sweden, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Romania, Spain, and Taiwan.

On June 1, Dutch Minister of Defense Kaja Ollongre introduced a Defense White Paper dubbed "A Stronger Netherlands, A Safer Europe: Investing in a Robust NATO and EU." The document contains the government's plans to increase the annual defense spending by \$5 billion.

Among others, the Netherlands' new defense plan includes the purchase of six F-35 aircraft, bringing the total number of such jets to 52, according to reports.

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Russia Does Not Threaten Israel, Important to Have Dialogue With Moscow - Defense Minister

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Russia does not pose a direct threat to Israel and having communications with Moscow is important because the two countries share an aerial border over Syria, Israel Defense Minister Benjamin Gantz said on Thursday.

"We are sharing an aerial border with the Russians above Syria," Gantz said during a panel discussion at the Aspen Security Forum. "They [Russians] are not threatening us directly, but we have to make sure that we have a dialogue, connections with them."

Speaking about Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, Gantz pointed out that Israel is "definitely" on the side of the collective West on this issue, i.e., on the side of Ukraine.

Earlier this week, Russia, Iran and Turkey condemned Israel's continuing strikes in Syria, including on civilian targets, after the three countries held a summit in Tehran.

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UN Chief Lands in Istanbul for Talks to Finalize Ukraine Grain Deal - Spokesman

(Updates headline, lede, adds background in paras 3-6)

UNITED NATIONS, July 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has arrived in Istanbul in an effort to help finalize a grain deal between Russia and Ukraine, spokesman Farhan Haq told Sputnik on Thursday.

"The SG has landed in Istanbul," Haq said.

Guterres has been on vacation this week, but continues to finalize the deal, according to his office.

Last week, the UN chief said a deal was "technically done" and he would interrupt his vacation to travel to Istanbul for the signing of it.

A source earlier told Sputnik that the deal provides for setting up a security zone to inspect vessels off Ukraine's Black Sea coast, not in ports themselves. Inspections will be carried out jointly by Turkey and the United Nations.

In an interview with Sputnik and RT this week, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Russia has sent a signal to Guterres about the need to include a clause on Russian grain in the Istanbul agreement.

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Condemnation of Russia by African Countries in UN Weakens Over Time - Kenyan Envoy

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Condemnation of Russia's military operation in Ukraine by African countries in the United Nations has weakened over time, Permanent Representative of Kenya to the UN Martin Kimani said on Thursday.

"As far as how African countries have reacted, especially in the UN General Assembly - approximately half the countries voted condemn the invasion of Ukraine, another half broadly abstained. As the votes have increased to condemn Russia, the amount of Africa support for those votes has reduced," Kinani said during the conversation at the Aspen Security Forum. This trend led to a situation when Africa showed very low support of the idea to expel Russia from the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), he added.

Kimani also said any war in Europe creates significant problems for the African continent and can lead to great suffering of people there.

On April 7, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution suspending Russia from the UNHRC due to its special military operation in Ukraine. As soon as the resolution was adopted, Russia suspended its membership in the UNHRC to remain an observer.

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US Applauds Work of UN Secretary-General, Turkey on Reaching Ukraine Grain Deal

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States applauds the work of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Turkey on reaching a Ukraine grain deal, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, the UN said that Guterres is about to depart to Turkey in an effort to broker a grain deal between Russia and Ukraine.

"We applaud the hard work of the UN Secretary-General. We applaud the diligent work of our Turkish allies," he told reporters.

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Biden Risk of Severe COVID-19 Symptoms Low, Contact Tracing Being Conducted - White House

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's risk of experiencing severe COVID-19 symptoms is made lower by being fully vaccinated, White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator Ashish Jha said on Thursday.

"Because the president is fully vaccinated, double-boosted, his risk of serious illness is dramatically lower," Jha said during a White House press briefing.

Biden earlier on Thursday tested positive for COVID-19 and is experiencing mild symptoms. The White House is conducting sequencing to determine the subvariant that infected Biden, Jha said.

The White House is also conducting contact tracing and reaching out to those considered close contacts by public health guidelines, Jha added.

Biden is currently isolating and working from his residence, and will continue to do so for at least five days and until he receives a negative test, according to Jha.

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US Declines Comment on Withdrawing Request to Extradite Russia's Vinnik From France

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Justice declines to comment on reports of the United States withdrawing its request for France to extradite Russian citizen Alexander Vinnik, spokesperson Nicole Navas Oxman told Sputnik on Thursday.

"We decline comment," Oxman said.

Earlier in the day, Vinnik's lawyer Frederic Belot told RIA Novosti that the US has withdrawn its request to extradite Vinnik, which it submitted to France in 2020. This decision was made to ensure that Vinnik not only remains in prison, but is also returned to Greece, from where he will be sent to the US as soon as possible, according to Belot.

Vinnik was detained in Greece in 2017 at the request of the US, which accused him of laundering \$4 billion worth of funds through a cryptocurrency trading platform. In the US, Vinnik faces 55 years in prison. France also filed charges against Vinnik. On January 23, 2020, Vinnik was extradited to France, where he was sentenced to five years in prison and a 100,000 euro (\$119,433) fine in December that year. Vinnik has denied committing any criminal or administrative offenses.

After serving his sentence in France, Vinnik was to be returned to Greece for extradition to the US. However, in late June, the European Court of Human Rights banned France from extraditing the Russian citizen to Greece.

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US Temporarily Halts Flights at Washington Airport Due to Drone Activity - Advisory

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said in an advisory on Thursday that it has temporarily stopped flights at Ronald Reagan National Airport, which serves the Washington, DC area, because of a drone activity near the runway. Both arrivals and departures have been halted at the airport due to an authorized drone located near one of its three runways, the advisory said. At present, operations have resumed at the airport, according to the FAA dashboard. The airspace near the airport is governed by Special Flights Rules established by the FAA. The rules prohibit flying unmanned aircraft within a 15-mile radius of Ronald Reagan National Airport and violators may be subject to civil and criminal liability.

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US Charges 3 Men in Cryptocurrency Insider Trading Plot - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The federal government unsealed an indictment against three men for their involvement in a cryptocurrency insider trading plot using confidential information from the crypto exchange Coinbase, the US Justice Department said in a press release Thursday.

"On at least 14 occasions beginning at least in June 2021 and continuing through April 2022, Ishan Wahi knew in advance both that Coinbase planned to list particular crypto assets and the timing of Coinbase's public announcements of those asset listings and misappropriated that Coinbase confidential information by tipping either his brother, Nikhil Wahi, or Ishan Wahi's friend and associate, Sameer Ramani, so that they could place profitable trades in those crypto assets in advance of Coinbase's public listing announcements," the release said.

The three men got unpublished Coinbase listings, bought significant amounts of crypto assets and used anonymous Ethereum blockchain wallets to hide the crypto assets they received before Coinbase publicly announced what it planned to list or was considering, the release said. The trio then sold the crypto assets for a profit and made \$1.5 million from the sales, the release said.

To conceal the money they made, the three used accounts in their names at centralized exchanges and transferred the money, crypto assets and other proceeds of their scheme through a number of anonymous Ethereum blockchain wallets, the release also said. Coinbase officials discovered the scheme and began investigating, but when they contacted Ishan Wahi to come in for an in-person meeting, he tried to escape to India, the release added. Ishan Wahi 32, is charged with two counts of wire fraud conspiracy and two counts of wire fraud. Nikhil Wahi, 26, and Sameer Ramani, 33, are each charged with one count of wire fraud conspiracy and one count of wire fraud. Each charge is carrying a maximum sentence of 20 years, according to the release.

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Amazon Says Buying One Medical for \$3.9Bln to 'Innovate' Healthcare

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Amazon announced on Thursday that it was buying the San Francisco-based company One Medical for \$3.9 billion in order to get into the healthcare business with the aim of making the sort of innovations it had achieved with online retail.

"We love inventing to make what should be easy easier and we want to be one of the companies that helps dramatically improve the healthcare experience over the next several years," Amazon Health Services Senior Vice President Neil Lindsay said in a statement. One Medical is a membership-based service that offers virtual care as well as in-person visits. One Medical also works with more than 8,000 companies to provide health benefits to their employees.

As of this March, One Medical had about 767,000 members and 188 medical offices in 25 markets.

The company's revenue amounted to \$254.1 million in the first quarter of this year, suffering losses of \$90.9 million. Amazon said the losses would be amortized into the acquisition.

The purchase will be one of Amazon's biggest in years, after its \$13.7 billion buyout of Whole Foods in 2017 and \$8.5 billion acquisition of Hollywood studio MGM earlier this year.

Lindsay said Amazon was excited about the innovations it could bring to the process of individuals seeing a doctor and getting required medications.

"We think health care is high on the list of experiences that need reinvention," he said. "Booking an appointment, waiting weeks or even months to be seen, taking time off work, driving to a clinic, finding a parking spot, waiting in the waiting room then the exam room for what is too often a rushed few minutes with a doctor, then making another trip to a pharmacy - we see lots of opportunity to both improve the quality of the experience and give people back valuable time in their days."

Amazon shares were up almost 1% at \$123.59 by 1:45 p.m. ET (17:45 GMT) on the news of the acquisition of One Medical. The e-commerce giant said it will pay \$18 for each share of One Medical.

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New York Authorities Say Detected First Polio Case Originating in US Since 1979

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - A first case of polio originating in the United States since 1979 has been detected, the New York State Department of Health said in a statement on Thursday.

"The New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) and the Rockland County Department of Health today alerted the public to a case of polio in a Rockland County resident," the statement said. "State and County health officials are advising medical practitioners and healthcare providers to be vigilant for additional cases."

The last polio case in the United States was when an infected traveler entered the country in 1993, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The NYSDOH said the polio vaccine is included on the CDC's standard child immunization schedule, making those already vaccinated face a lower risk of contracting the disease. It strongly recommends unvaccinated individuals to get vaccinated or boosted.

Polio is a highly contagious viral disease whose symptoms include fatigue, fever, stiffness and muscle pain, the NYSDOH said.

Polio in rare cases results in paralysis or death, the NYSDOH added.

The polio vaccine, developed by Jonas Salk, was first introduced in 1955. Since 1988, polio cases have dropped by more than 99%, with only six cases reported in 2021, according to the World Health Organization.

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Western Allegations Against Russia Regarding Syria 'Clearly Wrong' - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, July 21 (Sputnik) - Western countries' allegations that Russia wants the Syrian people to freeze by depriving them of humanitarian aid are "wrong," Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Thursday.

The comment was part of the debate at the UN General Assembly in an attempt to explain the rationale for why Russia vetoed the draft resolution on extending the Syria cross-border mechanism.

"The lamentations from Western countries... they clearly were wrong and you will once again hear these lamentations today, most likely, with allegations that Russia is to deprive people of basic necessities and wishes to cause same women and children to freeze in six months. You know that this is not correct," Polyanskiy said.

Russia is ready to extend the mechanism for another six months if the UN Security Council members comply with the agreement, Polyanskiy added.

Explaining the use of a veto by UN Security Council permanent members is part of the new rules whereby they have to provide the rationale for their decision to all members of the United Nations.

The proposed resolution on Syria, drafted by humanitarian pen-holders Norway and Ireland, largely mirrored Russia's proposal that had previously been voted down.

The Western countries, led by the United States, wanted to extend the cross-border mechanism for 12 months, but Russia said it could only support a six-month extension.

The Western countries said a 12-month extension is critical because it would leave the Syrian people without necessities in winter, when the six-month extension would be concluded.

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Guterres May Meet With Russian, Ukrainian, Turkish Officials While in Istanbul – UN

(Adds details, background in paras 4-6)

UNITED NATIONS, July 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres may meet with representatives and leaders of Turkey, Russia and Ukraine in Istanbul, yet there is no confirmation at this point, spokesman Farhan Haq said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, the UN said that Guterres is about to depart to Turkey in an effort to broker a grain deal between Russia and Ukraine.

"It is possible but I do not have a confirmation at this point," Haq told reporters when asked whether Guterres will meet with Turkish, Russian and Ukrainian representatives and possibly their leaders in Istanbul.

He clarified that he cannot say anything specific "at this stage".

"We will try to get a full list of people with whom he meets ... As you know, when he [Secretary-General] comes to a country, he tends to meet with their most senior officials," Haq said, when asked if the UN chief would meet with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during his trip.

The United Nations, assisted by Turkey, is trying to broker a Russia-Ukraine deal on grain exports. All the parties to the negotiations met in Istanbul last week and reported certain progress.

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Syria to Be Sovereign When No Western-Trained Terrorists Present - Russian Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, July 21 (Sputnik) - Syria would re-gain its sovereignty when it achieves that no Western-trained terrorists seeking to topple the country's legitimate government are present on its territory, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitriy Polyanskiy said during a General Assembly debate on Thursday.

"However, nothing is preventing Syrian sovereignty from being respected in this matter, nothing other than the unwillingness of Western countries to stop supporting international terrorists, whom they trained and equipped to oust the legitimate Syrian authorities," Polyanskiy said.

The General Assembly debate was held to explain Russia rationale for vetoing the Irish-Norwegian resolution on granting an extension for the cross-border mechanism for Syria at the UN Security Council.

Explaining the use of a veto by UN Security Council permanent members is part of the new rules whereby they have to provide the rationale for their decisions to all members of the United Nations.

The proposed resolution on Syria, drafted by humanitarian pen-holders Norway and Ireland, largely mirrored Russia's proposal that had previously been voted down.

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US House Passes Legislation Providing Federal Protections for Contraception

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday passed the Right to Contraception Act - sponsored by Congresswoman Kathy Manning - that provides federal protections for access to, and use of, contraceptives.

The lawmakers passed the bill in a 228-195 vote, with two members voting present. Eight Republicans joined Democrats in support of the legislation.

"A person has a statutory right under this Act to obtain contraceptives and to engage in contraception, and a health care provider has a corresponding right to provide contraceptives, contraception, and information related to contraception," the text of the bill says.

Congressional action is necessary to protect access to contraceptives, further public health and combat efforts to restrict access to reproductive health care, the bill also says.

The bill came in response to the June US Supreme Court decision overturning federal abortion protections granted by the Roe v. Wade ruling. Justice Clarence Thomas wrote that previous decisions, including the Griswold v. Connecticut ruling that protects the right of married couples to use contraceptives, could be reconsidered by the high court.

According to the bill of the text, the US Attorney General may commence a civil action against any state or government official that violates the bill's protections for contraceptives. Private individuals and entities can also sue any state or official that violates the protections granted by the bill.

The bill defines contraception as any action taken to prevent pregnancy, including contraceptives, fertility-awareness methods and sterilization procedures.

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UN Cannot Predict Timeline for Signing Ukraine Grain Deal - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations cannot predict a timeline for signing the Ukraine grain deal, as the situation remains fluid, spokesman Farhan Haq said on Thursday. Earlier in the day, the UN confirmed that Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is about to depart to Turkey in an effort to reach a grain deal between Russia and Ukraine.

"The situation remains fluid. I can't say when something will be signed," Haq told a briefing.

"We are not there yet," he added.

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First Lady Says US President 'Feeling Good' After COVID-19 Diagnosis

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is feeling good despite testing positive for the novel coronavirus, First Lady Jill Biden said on Thursday.

"I talked to him just a few minutes ago. He's doing fine. He's feeling good. I tested negative this morning. I am going to keep my schedule. According to CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] guidelines, I am keeping masked," Jill Biden said.

Earlier on Thursday, the US president tested positive for the novel coronavirus and is experiencing mild symptoms, the White House said.

Biden is vaccinated and has received two additional "booster" vaccines against COVID-19, the White House added.

Biden will continue carrying out his duties as US president and will begin taking the anti-viral therapy medication Paxlovid, according to the White House.

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Inflation Top Issue for US Voters Ahead of Mid-Term Elections – Poll

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) – Inflation is the top issue for registered voters ahead of the November mid-term elections in the United States, according to a Marist national survey.

"Inflation is top of mind for U.S. voters as they look toward November's midterm elections," according to a release, with 37% of respondents citing it as their priority. It is also the leading issue for both Republicans (57%) and independents (42%). For Democrats, the top issue is abortion (29%) compared to 14% citing inflation.

The poll found that other key issues for voters are abortion, guns, healthcare, and the January 6 hearings. While 57% say former President Donald Trump deserves blame for the Capitol attack, 61% do not believe he will face any criminal charges.

The poll of 1,160 adults was conducted from July 11 to July 17 by Marist Poll, sponsored by NPR and PBS NewsHour.

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UN Confirms Guterres Will Travel to Turkey This Evening for Grain Talks

UNITED NATIONS, July 21 (Sputnik) - Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will travel to Istanbul this evening in an effort to reach an agreement between Russia and Ukraine on exporting food and fertilizers, spokesman Farhan Haq said on Thursday.

"The Secretary-General will travel to Istanbul, Turkey, this evening, as part of his efforts to ensure full global access to Ukraine's food products, and Russian food and fertilizer," Haq told a briefing.

Earlier in the day, a UN source told Sputnik that the deal should be sealed this week. However, another source said "there are still outstanding issues to be sorted out before the deal could be concluded."

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Mi6 Chief Says 'Skeptical' About Reaching Agreement on Iran Nuclear Deal

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - United Kingdom Secret Intelligence Service Mi6 chief Richard Moore said on Thursday that he is "skeptical" about the possibility to reach an agreement on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal with Iran.

"I'm skeptical that the Supreme Leader [of Iran Ali Khamenei] will go for the deal. I think the deal is absolutely on the table," Moore said during a panel discussion at the Aspen Security Forum.

"It [JCPOA] is probably the best means still available to constrain the Iranian nuclear program. I'm not convinced we're gonna get there."

Moore said if a deal with Iran is reached there still will be "plenty of work" for his service in terms of combating alleged destabilizing activity of Iran around the region.

In 2015, Iran signed JCPOA with the P5+1 group, which includes the United States, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and Germany as well as with the European Union. The agreement required Iran to scale back its nuclear program and reduce its uranium reserves in exchange for sanctions relief, including the lifting of an arms embargo five years after the accord was signed.

In 2018, then US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from the JCPOA and re-imposed comprehensive sanctions on Iran. Iran responded with a gradual abandoning of its own commitments under the deal.

Talks have been organized in Vienna since April 2021 to revive the nuclear agreement.

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Biden Has Runny Nose, Fatigue After Testing Positive for COVID - Doctor

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has a runny nose and dry cough and is experiencing fatigue after he tested positive for COVID-19 on Thursday, according to physician to the President Kevin O'Connor.

"On questioning, President Biden is currently experiencing mild symptoms, mostly rhinorrhea (or 'runny nose') and fatigue, with an occasional dry cough, which started yesterday evening," O'Connor wrote in a memo to Assistant to the President and White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre.

The president is taking Paxlovid, and the physician anticipates that Biden "will respond favorably, as most maximally protected patients do."

O'Connor said the president would isolate himself according to CDC recommendations.

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Russia-China Relations Not Equal, Ukraine Made Them Even Less So - MI6 Chief

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The relationship between China and Russia is not equal and the situation in Ukraine has made it even less so, Chief of the UK's Secret Intelligence Service MI6 Richard Moore said on Thursday.

"It feels pretty tight but it's not an equal partnership and Ukraine has made it less equal. Moscow is very much the junior partner and the Chinese are very much in the driving seat," Moore said at the Aspen Security Forum.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping have noted that bilateral relations are at an unprecedented high level and are constantly improving, the Kremlin said following the two leaders' talks in June.

Putin and Xi emphasized that Russia and China had common or very close positions on many international issues and reaffirmed their readiness to tighten coordination and mutual support at the United Nations.

The two leaders agreed to continue bilateral contacts both, at the level of heads of state and through various ministries and departments.

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Canada's Rogers Names New Technology Chief After July 9 Nationwide Outage – Report

OTTAWA, July 21 (Sputnik) – The communications giant Rogers Inc has appointed Ron McKenzie to the role of technology chief, just weeks after a 19-hour nationwide outage affected customers across Canada, Reuters reported on Thursday.

McKenzie will replace Jorge Fernandes effective immediately, the company said, according to the report.

On July 8, Rogers, a telecommunications giant with over 10 million wireless subscribers and 2 million internet customers, reported a massive outage that affected the entire Canadian network. The country's banking system experienced interruptions, consumers had difficulties conducting daily transactions through their Interac cards, and emergency numbers such as 911 were offline, impeding the contact of police and fire departments.

On July 11, Canadian Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry Francois-Phillipe Champagne demanded that major Canadian telecommunications companies bolster their reliability after the massive outage at Rogers impacted millions of residents.

The following day, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) ordered Rogers Communication to provide a thorough explanation about the nationwide outage by July 22.

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UN Chief to Depart for Turkey Soon With View to Sealing Grain Deal - Source

UNITED NATIONS, July 21 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is about to depart to Turkey with the intention of sealing a grain deal between Russia and Ukraine, a United Nations source told Sputnik on Thursday.

"Secretary-General will be departing Turkey soon. It (signing of the deal) should be this week. That was the target," the UN source said.

However, another source told Sputnik "there are still outstanding issues to be sorted out before the deal could be concluded."

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Majority Leader Says US Senate Introducing Federal Cannabis Legalization Bill

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The US Senate is introducing legislation to legalize cannabis and allow states to regulate it, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Thursday.

Schumer released last year a discussion draft of the Cannabis Administration and Opportunity Act. After receiving more than 1,800 public comments, the Senate will now introduce the legislation.

"I am proud to be the first Majority Leader ever to say that it is time to end the federal prohibition on cannabis, and this bill provides the best framework for updating our cannabis laws and reversing decades of harm inflicted by the War on Drugs," Schumer said on the Senate floor. Schumer pointed out that he has held productive discussions with both, Republican and Democratic colleagues, on cannabis reform.

The bill would remove cannabis from the federal Controlled Substances Act and authorize US states to regulate its use, Schumer said.

The bill will also expunge the criminal records of individuals with non-violent cannabis convictions, as well as allow those currently serving sentences for cannabis possession and use to appeal their cases, Schumer also said.

Additionally, the bill will reinvest in communities impacted by the War on Drugs, Schumer added. Cannabis is legal for recreational use in 19 US states, Washington DC and Guam. However, it is still listed as a Schedule I substance by the US federal government, placing it alongside drugs like heroin and so-called "bath salts."

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Canadian Government to Invest \$198Mln in Wind Turbines, Batteries - Trudeau

OTTAWA, July 21 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government will invest C\$255 million (US\$198 million) to build wind turbines and batteries to store so-called "clean" energy in the province of Nova Scotia, the Office of the Prime Minister said in a statement on Thursday.

"The Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, today announced a new federal investment of up to \$255 million to deliver clean power to homes across Nova Scotia and create hundreds of good middle-class jobs," the statement said.

The investment will be used for two projects. The first, worth US\$97 million, seeks to build new wind turbines to power some 350,000 homes in Nova Scotia, the statement said.

The second, worth US\$101 million, will focus on constructing new batteries at four different locations in the province to store clean energy, the statement added.

Trudeau made the announcement as his government tries to significantly reduce the use of coal power plants, to meet Canada's climate objectives.

"Today's announcement is an important step toward our goal of achieving a net-zero-emitting electricity system by 2035," Minister of Natural Resources Jonathan Wilkinson said.

Upon the completion of the project, Canada will have built one of the biggest battery systems in North America, according to the statement.

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MI6 Chief Says Possible War Between West, China 'Not Inevitable'

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The Chief of the UK's Secret Intelligence Service MI6 said on Thursday that a military conflict between the United States and its allies on one side and China on the other is not inevitable.

When asked whether he believes that such a war is inevitable, Moore stated, "I don't think it's inevitable at all."

"And it's still very much I think the desire of all of us to see the differences between the peoples on either side of the Taiwan Strait settled in through peaceful means," he added.

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Pelosi Says Will Not Discuss Reported Taiwan Travel Plans, Calls Matter 'Security Issue'

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Thursday declined to discuss reported plans of hers to travel to Taiwan in August, citing security concerns.

"I don't ever discuss my travel plans. It's a security issue. You never even hear me say if I'm going to London, because it is a security issue, and so I won't be discussing that now," Pelosi said at a press conference when asked about a potential visit to Taiwan.

The US military does not consider a visit by Pelosi to Taiwan a good idea, President Joe Biden said on Wednesday.

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Biden Tests Positive for COVID-19, Has Very Mild Symptoms – White House

(Adds details, background in paras 5-8)

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden tested positive for COVID-19 in the morning on Thursday and is experiencing very mild symptoms, the White House said.

"This morning, President Biden tested positive for COVID-19. He is fully vaccinated and twice boosted and experiencing very mild symptoms," the White House said in a press release. "The President's last previous test for COVID was Tuesday, when he had a negative test result."

Biden will isolate at the White House and continue to "carry out all of his duties fully during that time."

This is the first time Biden has tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

The US president has started taking Paxlovid, an anti-viral therapy medication, according to the press release.

Paxlovid was granted an emergency use authorization by the Food and Drug Administration in December for anyone who is at high risk for severe disease.

Biden recently returned from a trip to the Middle East, where he had a chance to meet with the regional leaders in Israel and Saudi Arabia and to take part in a Gulf Cooperation Council

(GCC) summit. The US President used a fist bump to greet Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman following his doctor's recommendation to avoid shaking hands due to a rise in COVID-19 cases in the region.

On Tuesday, Biden hosted Ukrainian First Lady Olena Zelenska at the White House.

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UN Envoy Works on Extending Truce in Yemen Beyond August 2 - Office

UNITED NATIONS, July 21 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg is working on extending the truce in Yemen beyond August 2, the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen said on Thursday.

"An extended and expanded truce will increase the benefits to the Yemeni people. It will also provide a platform to build more confidence between the parties and start serious discussions on economic priorities, particularly on revenues and salaries, as well as security priorities, including a ceasefire. Ultimately, the aim is to move toward a political settlement that comprehensively ends the conflict," Grundberg said in a statement.

The envoy noted that the current ceasefire, which expires on August 2, has been largely effective for almost four months.

Grundberg said he will focus on connecting the Sanaa airport with more destinations as a possible part of the extended truce. He will also continue efforts to ensure a smooth flow of fuel to the country, the statement added.

The current truce took effect in early April.

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US Jobless Claims Tick to 5-Month High Above 250,000 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims rose for a third straight week and above 250,000 the first time in five months, according to Labor Department data on Thursday that suggested the red-hot labor market may be slowing as businesses face stress from Federal Reserve rate hikes.

Jobless claims came in at 251,000 last week, the first time they have done so since the week ended January 22, the department said.

Economists polled by US media had anticipated 240,000 claims for the latest week ended July 16.

"Jobless claims continue to tick higher as the impact from higher rates and expected slower growth work its way to the jobs market slowly," economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on the ForexLive forum.

The Federal Reserve left US interest rates at between zero and 0.25% for two years after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic and only raised them in March this year. Since then, it has instituted two more hikes, bringing rates to between 1.5% and 1.75%.

Economists say the central bank risks pushing the economy into a recession if it accelerates rate hikes any further. US gross domestic product already declined 1.6% in the first quarter. A negative second quarter GDP is all that is needed to technically send the economy into a recession.

US employers added 372,000 jobs in June, the Labor Department said earlier this month as it reported a figure more than 100,000 above economists' expectations while keeping the jobless rate unchanged at 3.6% in what would likely be a stiffer challenge for the Federal Reserve in fighting inflation.

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Over Half of Americans Doubt US Elections Reflect Will of People – Poll

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Fifty-eight percent of Americans doubt that US elections reflect the will of the people, according to a poll by research company SSRS for CNN out Thursday.

The respondents were asked: "In general, how confident are you that elections in America today reflect the will of the people?" Thirty-three percent said they are "not at all confident," and 25% answered they are "just a little confident."

Only 16% of respondents are "very confident" that elections do reflect the people's will, and another 26% are "somewhat confident."

The survey also showed that almost half of respondents (48%) believe it is likely that some elected officials will overturn results of an election in the US if their party did not win.

The survey was conducted from June 13-July 13, 2022 among 1,459 adult US citizens. The margin of error is plus or minus 3.3 percentage points.

