

**5/2/23 Tuesday**

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Video: Sirens Blare Across Southern Israel as IDF, Gaza Exchange Barrage of Rockets

The latest barrage of strikes in the region began after Israeli officials revealed that a Palestinian prisoner in their custody who had been on a hunger strike for nearly 90 days had died.

Israeli and Palestinian forces exchanged heavy rocket fire into early Wednesday, marking the latest spike in boiling tensions between the two groups.

The Israel Defense Force initially confirmed earlier Tuesday that Israeli military personnel was conducting airstrikes across the Gaza Strip in response to overnight launches from the region.

A [statement](#) issued Wednesday by the IDF states that Israeli jets fired on various targets, including a Hamas training camp, military outpost and compounds, munitions sites and an underground tunnel, among other locations.

Accompanying the release was also aerial video of strikes.

"The terrorist organization Hamas bears responsibility for what is happening in the Gaza Strip and is the one who will pay the price for the security violations against the State of Israel," the release concludes.

A stream of unconfirmed cellphone footage from the ground surfaced online earlier shortly after news of the first rounds of fire broke out.

Injuries have been reported, although specifics have not been released.

Sirens have sounded in places including but not limited to Sderot, southern Ashkelon, Netiv HaAssara, Nir Am.

A truce had been established between both parties for nearly two hours before reports of rocket exchanges began to surface once again.

The IDF earlier detailed that approximately 21 rockets had been launched from the Gaza Strip toward Israel after news broke of the death of Khader Adnan, a Palestinian prisoner who had been on a hunger strike for nearly three months. Reports note he was found unconscious in his cell.

At the time, Mohammad Shtayyeh, who serves as the Palestinian prime minister, described Adnan's death as a "deliberate assassination" as Israel had repeatedly rejected his release requests.

In the immediate moments after Adnan's death, three rockets had been launched from the Gaza Strip; however, IDF officials detailed at the time that the projectiles had caused no damages as they landed in open areas. Responses were later kicked up after retaliatory tank fire by Israeli officials.

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UK Man Arrested After Allegedly Throwing Shotgun Cartridges Toward Buckingham Palace

Reports have indicated that no members of the royal family had been on the grounds during the incident. Additionally, no motive has been outlined by officials.

A UK man was arrested late Tuesday after allegedly throwing suspected shotgun cartridges onto the grounds of the Buckingham Palace, which was momentarily placed on lockdown. Local media reports detailed that the incident initially broke out around 7 p.m. local time, and that officials quickly acted after the unidentified man approached the gates and proceeded to throw a "number of items" onto the palace grounds.

A police spokesperson told UK media that suspected "shotgun cartridges" were among the items which have since been "taken for specialist examination." It was further noted that there were no reports of shots fired or injuries.

"The man has been arrested on suspicion of possession of an offensive weapon and will be taken into custody," the spokesperson told media. "Cordons are in place after the man was also found to be in possession of a suspicious bag."

Reports have since indicated that a controlled explosion was carried out in the vicinity by law enforcement officials.

Police authorities have remained on the scene amid an ongoing investigation. No motive for the act has yet been detailed by officials.

The Tuesday incident comes days before the highly-anticipated coronation of King Charles III, which is scheduled to take place on May 9 at Westminster Abbey.

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Senate Republicans Trash Short-Term Debt Limit Increase Proposal Amid Looming Default

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned on Monday the US could face default as early as June 1, urging lawmakers to act promptly on extending the debt ceiling in order to avoid a full-out economic crisis.

A number of Senate Republicans declined the passage of a short-term debt limit increase on Tuesday over concerns such an initiative would not result in a faster negotiation process.

Although an extension would provide a temporary bandaid amid ongoing negotiations, many Republicans have largely viewed pushing the deadline as a bluff.

"We've been kicking the can down the road for four and a half years since I've been here," said Sen. Mike Braun (R-IN). "We need to at least agree to something without delaying it."

While Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS) also called the potential extension a "gimmick" he would not support, Senate Majority Whip John Thun (R-SD) underscored that he preferred one quick fix to the debt ceiling talks.

"I would prefer that we get this done the first time. That always gets dicey. And, frankly, I don't even know if there'd be the votes for [a short-term extension]," Thune said. "I think there's going to have to be a really earnest effort made to try and negotiate something that can get passed by the deadline."

Debt ceiling talks have increasingly become politicized and part of negotiating tactics among congressional lawmakers seeking to gain some concessions across the aisle. Republicans are presently seeking to raise the debt ceiling in exchange for high spending cuts outlined in a House bill passed last [week](#).

The GOP-led House bill would roll back some of US President Joe Biden's agenda, including stricter work requirements for those using food assistance programs and Medicaid, ending Biden's green energy tax credits, and cancel his student loan forgiveness program.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) commented earlier Tuesday that Biden would either have to "accept" the House bill or work out a deal with House Speaker Kevin [McCarthy](#).

Biden is scheduled to meet with congressional leadership on the debt ceiling and budget matters on May 9.

"There is no solution in the Senate," the Kentucky lawmaker told media.

The measure presently has little chance of being cleared in the Senate, with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer earlier stating that the upper chamber would be holding hearings to shed light on the "true impact" the Republican-backed legislation would have on working Americans.

The US hit their borrowing limit in January and since then has been using "extraordinary measures" to pay their bills. Since 1960, Congress has had to intervene [78 times](#) to change the debt limit. The US is currently at a debt of about \$31 trillion, according to Pew Research Center and the [US National Debt Clock](#), which tracks the nation's debt in real time.

If the government defaults it will not be able to pay for Social Security, issue tax refunds, or pay federal employee and military salaries. The stock market could also plummet, homes and cars would increase in price and the US could tip into a recession causing some Americans to lose their jobs.

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Loneliness as Deadly as Smoking - US Surgeon General

A new fight for a healthier America is to tackle the epidemic of... loneliness?

US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy released an [advisory](#) on Tuesday titled "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," which details what Murthy believes is a widespread public health concern throughout the US.

"Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death," writes Murthy in his advisory letter.

"The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and even greater than that associated with obesity and physical inactivity." Loneliness, a report reveals, can increase the risk of premature death by almost 30%. Those who have poor social relationships are also at a greater risk of stroke and heart disease.

The advisory references a 2022 study which asked Americans how close they felt to others emotionally, with only 39% of Americans saying they felt very connected to others. Recent

surveys also found that half of Americans reported feelings of loneliness, with the highest rates being among young adults.

Persons aged 15 to 24 reported a 70% drop in the amount of time they spent with friends in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. During that same period, most Americans reported 20 minutes a day in person with friends in 2020, down from 60 minutes daily from two decades earlier.

A decrease in community involvement also grew. In 1999, 70% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque. That number shrunk to 47% of Americans who were able to say the same in 2020. A 2018 survey found only 16% of Americans reported a strong feeling of attachment to their local community.

“These estimates and multiple other studies indicate that loneliness and isolation are more widespread than many of the other major health issues of our day, including smoking (12.5% of U.S. adults), diabetes (14.7%), and obesity (41.9%),” the advisory warns.

Technology, such as social media, when used incorrectly can also contribute to a person’s loneliness. In 2022, 95% of teens reported using social media, and the number of US adults using social media in 2019 jumped to 80% from 5% in 2005.

However, the advisory also warns that while technology can allow friends and family to connect with each other, it also “displaces in-person engagement, monopolizes our attention, reduces the quality of our interactions, and diminishes our self-esteem.”

In fact, one study even found that those who spend two hours or more on social media a day will feel more socially isolated than those who were on the same apps for just 30 minutes a day.

“There’s really no substitute for in-person interaction,” [Murthy](#) said. “As we shifted to use technology more and more for our communication, we lost out on a lot of that in-person interaction. How do we design technology that strengthens our relationships as opposed to weaken them?”

Murthy is calling on workplaces, schools, community organizations, health departments, and even technology companies to address the loneliness epidemic in the US. In the meantime, he is encouraging the public to engage more socially by answering the phone when a friend calls or join a community group.

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Nobody Wants to War - Cartoon

By - Ted Rall

Yet again, the US Army expects to miss its recruiting goal of 65,000 new soldiers to enlist, after having already fallen short of its goal the year prior by 15,000 active-duty recruits. The Army is even seeing issues with retaining their part-time soldiers.

Nearly all branches of the US military are presently struggling with recruiting soldiers.

Army planners say only about 23% of 17 to 24-year-olds who are interested in joining the military are able to meet the requirements to do so, with many failing the entrance exam or being too overweight to serve.

However, those who nearly passed their exam or did not have too high of a body fat count were able to apply for pre-basic training, which allowed for 3,300 out of 4,000 applicants to go onto basic training.

While Army Secretary Christine Wormuth and General James McConville have said they will not lower health standards required for enlisting or commissioning, the same cannot be said for other branches. The Navy has allowed lower exam test scores just as the Air Force is growing more lenient with those who test positive for cannabis use.

In [June](#) of last year, the Army relaxed its tattoo policy in an effort to find more recruits. Following that decision, officials also announced recruits would not need their high school diploma or GED in order to enlist.

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Police: US Gunman Who Killed 5 Neighbors Found Hiding Inside Home 17 Miles From Crime Scene

About 248 people have been killed in US mass shootings in just the first four months of this year, according to Gun Violence Archive. A mass shooting is defined by the nonprofit as four or more people being shot, not including the gunman.

The suspected gunman accused of killing five of his neighbors, including a 9-year-old, was apprehended in Texas "without incident," law enforcement officials announced late Tuesday. Francisco Oropeza (Oropesa), 38, is accused of using an AR-15-style firearm to kill his neighbors after they asked him to stop shooting his gun because they were trying to put their baby to sleep.

Oropeza was found in the city of Cut and Shoot, Texas, which is located about 17 miles west of where the killings took place last Friday. The San Jacinto County Sheriff's office said in their announcement that the suspected gunman will be held on a \$5 million bond.

San Jacinto County Sheriff Greg Capers told reporters that the alleged gunman, who he deemed a "coward," was found hiding in a closet underneath a pile of laundry. Officials explained that Oropeza was arrested at about 6:30 p.m. local time after a tip was given to an FBI call line at roughly 5:15 p.m. Information on the home where Oropeza was found has not been released.

Officials has earlier offered a reward of \$80,000 for information about Oropeza's location.

"We just want to thank the person who had the courage and bravery to call in the suspect's location," said assistant special agent Jimmy Paul, who is in charge of the FBI's Houston field office.

The capture comes just a day after the hunt for Oropeza was beginning to go cold.

Wilson Garcia, the homeowner of the residence where the Friday shooting took place, said he lost his wife and 9-year-old son when Oropeza opened fire on his property. Garcia and his wife had asked Oropeza to stop shooting his gun, or to do it farther away from their home so they could put their baby to sleep.

Garcia said he had called 911 five times before Oropeza approached their home with a gun.

The gunman allegedly shot and killed his wife before entering and shooting four other people, including Garcia's son. Sixteen members of Garcia's family were home at the time in preparation for a church retreat, and three children were found safe after being shielded by the women in the family.

The victims include three women ages 21 to 31, an 18-year-old man, and a 9-year-old boy. All of the victims are believed to be from Honduras, while Oropeza is from Mexico.

Oropeza had been deported from the US four times, according to Governor Greg Abbott. His wife filed a protective order against him last year after he threatened and physically assaulted her, San Jacinto County District Attorney Todd Dillon said.

Authorities are now investigating how Oropeza obtained his AR-15 style rifle.

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US Lawmakers Reintroduce Bill to Create Sanctions Nominations, Condemn Russia - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan group of US lawmakers are reintroducing legislation to further condemn Russia's special military operation in Ukraine and create a congressional sanctions nomination process, the office of Congressman Jimmy Panetta said in a statement.

"Our bipartisan, bicameral Ukraine Human Rights Policy Act will target Russia's unrelenting human rights abuses by instituting a framework to more swiftly and directly sanction those responsible, including Russian proxy forces, and hold them accountable for their ruthless actions," the statement said.

The legislation was reintroduced by Panetta, Congressman Pat Fallon, Senator Todd Young and Senator Jacky Rosen, the statement said.

The bill would establish a congressional nomination process for human rights sanctions through the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), the statement said.

The bill would also amend the Sense of Congress included in CAATSA to solidify US support for Ukraine and further condemn Russia and its use of "paramilitary organizations," the statement added.

In addition, the legislation requires the US State Department to include details on alleged human rights abuses in Ukraine as part of its annual human rights report, according to the statement.

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Protesters Disrupt Blinken's Live Talk By Calling for Assange's Release

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - A conversation between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Washington Post columnist David Ignatius in Washington, D.C was briefly disrupted by protesters calling for the release of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

"Excuse us. We cant use this day without calling for the freedom of Julian Assange," a female activist said upon coming up on the stage where Blinken and Ignatius had just started their talk on the state of press freedom worldwide.

Two activists from the Code Pink activist group held banners urging the release of Assange. Security personnel quickly removed the activists from the stage.

WikiLeaks was founded by Julian Assange on October 4, 2006, but rose to prominence in 2010 when it began to publish large-scale leaks of classified government information, including from the United States.

Since April 2019, Assange has been held in the high-security Belmarsh prison in London while facing prosecution in the US under the Espionage Act. If convicted, the WikiLeaks founder may get 175 years in prison. In December 2022, he appealed to the European Court of Human Rights to challenge his extradition.

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Blinken Aware of Kremlin Attack Reports, Taking Anything From Moscow With 'Shaker of Salt'

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday he is aware of reports of a suspected Ukrainian drone attack on the Kremlin in Moscow, stating that he would take all information from Moscow "with a very large shaker of salt."

"I've seen the reports. I can't in any way validate them," Blinken said during an interview with The Washington Post. "I'd take anything coming out of the Kremlin with a very large shaker of salt."

When asked about how the US would react "if Ukraine decides" to strike within Russia, Blinken said: "These are decisions for Ukraine to make, about how it's going to defend itself, about how it's going to get its territory back, how it's going to restore its territorial integrity and sovereignty."

Earlier on Wednesday, two drones attempted to strike the Kremlin in Moscow in what Russia says was a Ukrainian assassination attempt against Russian President Vladimir Putin. Ukraine has denied involvement in the attack.

The US is attempting to verify Russia's claims of Ukrainian involvement in the attack, US media reported.

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US Examining Whether to Designate Kara-Murza as 'Wrongfully Detained' by Russia - Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering designating Russian opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza (recognized as a foreign agent in Russia) as being "wrongfully-detained," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"That's correct," Blinken said when asked if the State Department is examining whether to declare Kara-Murza as being wrongfully detained in Russia.

In April, the Moscow City Court sentenced Kara-Murza to 25 years in prison for treason and for discrediting the Russian army.

Kara-Murza holds a Russian and UK citizenship and is a permanent resident of the United States.

The Russian authorities arrested Kara-Murza last month for spreading false information about Russia's special military operation in Ukraine during his speech in the Arizona House of Representatives.

In July, the authorities also opened a criminal case against Kara-Murza for engaging with a foreign or international non-governmental organization that its recognized as "undesirable" in Russia.

In addition, Kara-Murza faced in October the charge of treason for his speeches at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and in the United States.

All three cases were later combined into one investigation by the Russian authorities.

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Blinken Says Told Ukraine That US Regrets Leak of Classified Documents

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday he told Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Minister Dmytro Kuleba last month that the United States regrets the recent leak of classified documents, some of which exposed information regarding the conflict in Ukraine.

"What I told him [Kuleba] is we very much regretted the unauthorized exposure of these documents, that we took very seriously our obligations and responsibilities to protect information," Blinken said during an interview with the Washington Post.

Last month, more than 100 classified US government documents were leaked online, including assessments of Ukraine's military capabilities. The US government has since arrested a servicemember in connection with the leak.

US media reported earlier this week that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy learned about the leak through news reports, not through talks with the US government. Kiev is now keeping sensitive information about a potential counteroffensive with only a few individuals, the reports said.

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### Global Air Cargo Markets Show Continued Decline in 2023 - IATA

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) – The global air cargo industry continues to face a decline in demand, which began more than a year ago, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said on Wednesday.

"The IATA released data for March 2023 global air cargo markets showing a continued decline against the previous year's demand performance. This trend began in March 2022," the statement said.

Global demand, measured in cargo tonne-kilometers (CTKs), fell 7.7% compared to March 2022, and lost 8.1% for international operations, it added.

"At this point, it is unclear if this is a potentially modest start of an improvement trend or the upside of market volatility. Irrespective of this, March performance slipped back into negative territory compared to pre-COVID levels (-8.1%)," the IATA said.

Companies operating in the air cargo industry have to pay close attention to different factors, which could impact their activity, including tightening global financial conditions, weakening global trade, and decrease in the entire global trade, it added.

IATA's Director General Willie Walsh pointed out that airlines are getting help in managing the volatility. "Looking ahead, with inflation reducing in G7 countries policy makers are expected to ease economic cooling measures, and that would stimulate demand," he said.

North American carriers faced the most significant decrease in cargo volumes – 9.4% -among all regions, IATA's data showed. European companies lost 7.8% in March 2023 compared to the same period in 2022. However, their performance has improved compared to February, when losses amounted to almost 16%, it added.

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### US Intensely Engaged With Russia on Release of Reporter Gershkovich - Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - The United States is intensely engaged with Russia on the immediate release of Wall Street Journal correspondent Evan Gershkovich, who was arrested in Russia in March on espionage charges, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"We are intensely engaged with the Russians to seek his freedom, to seek his immediate release," Blinken said at a Washington Post Live event.

Blinken last spoke with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in early April about Russia's detention of Gershkovich.

On April 18, Gershkovich's lawyer Tatyana Nozhkina told Sputnik that the Wall Street Journal reporter did not consider himself guilty and was ready to prove it in court.

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US Private Payrolls for April Double to Expectations But Wage Growth Slows Too - ADP

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - US private sector employment increased by almost 300,000 jobs in April, the payrolls tracker for the sector said on Wednesday as it reported a growth twice more than expected that could be a fresh challenge to the Federal Reserve's fight against inflation.

Economists polled by US media had only expected private employers to add 147,500 jobs last month but the tally reported by payrolls surveyor ADP was 296,000 instead.

The Fed has said it needs to see an appreciable slowing of the labor market in order to win its fight against inflation. What could be heartening to the central bank though is a cap on wages, which grew at a much slower rate than the pace of jobs itself, ADP chief economist Nela Richardson said.

"The slowdown in pay growth gives the clearest signal of what's going on in the labor market right now," Richardson, said. "Employers are hiring aggressively while holding pay gains in check as workers come off the sidelines. Our data also shows fewer people are switching jobs."

The ADP data on private payrolls landed ahead of the more important non-farm payrolls report for April due from the US Labor Department on Friday. Comprising jobs in both the public and private sectors, the non-farm payrolls report is expected to cite a growth of 180,000 positions last month versus the 236,000 in March.

The Fed has a mandate of ensuring maximum employment through a jobless rate of 4% or below and keeping inflation manageable.

To fight inflation, the Fed has hiked rates by a total 4.75% in nine increases since March last year. That has brought rates to a peak of 5%, from just 0.25% at the onset of the pandemic. As a result of the central bank's actions, inflation has slowed to between 4% and 5% per year, though that is still at least double the Fed's 2% per year target.

Economists say the Fed could pause its rate hike cycle from June, after likely adding another quarter point at its May policy meeting later on Wednesday to bring rates to a peak of 5.25%.

A Fed stall on rates, if it comes, will coincide with clear signs that the US economy is slowing and job opportunities are shrinking. Since initial business disruptions from the pandemic that led to a loss of 20 million jobs, the US labor market has added hundreds of thousands of positions each month for more than two years, bringing unemployment to 50-year lows of well below the Fed's 4% target for the jobless rate.

The central bank in the past has said that higher-than-usual spending by Americans due to robust job and wage growth opportunities were among reasons why it could not stop raising rates to tackle inflation. The ADP data on private payrolls has shown that employment and wage catalysts for inflation may be subsiding.

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### US Trying to Verify Russia's Charge That Ukraine Attempted Drone Attack on Putin - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - The United States is attempting to verify Russia's charge that Ukraine attempted to assassinate Russian President Vladimir Putin with a drone attack on the Kremlin in Moscow, CNN reported on Wednesday, citing a US official.

Ukraine gave no warning of the attack to the US if it was indeed involved, the official added.

In response to the attack, Vyacheslav Volodin, speaker of Russia's lower house of parliament, called the government in Kiev a "terrorist regime" and urged Russia to use weapons capable of "stopping and destroying" it.

Ukrainian Presidential Adviser Mykhailo Podolyak denied Ukraine's involvement in the attack.

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### Yellen to Attend G7 Finance Ministers Meeting in Japan Next Week - Treasury

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen will head to Japan next week for the G7 finance ministers' meeting to discuss global economy issues and the Ukraine conflict, the Treasury said on Wednesday.

"Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen will travel to Niigata, Japan, from May 11 to May 13 to participate in the G7 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors Meeting," the Treasury said in a statement.

Yellen will discuss with her counterparts the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and its spillovers to the global economy, the statement added. She will also discuss issues concerning domestic investments, supply chains and economic security.

The secretary is also expected to reaffirm the G7's leadership in the coalition supporting Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, including through the price cap on Russian oil, the Treasury noted.

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### Canada Sanctions 1 Iranian Entity, 9 Individuals – Global Affairs

(Corrects day of the week, adds details in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) – The Canadian government announced on Wednesday a new round of sanctions targeting one entity and nine individuals over alleged human rights violations in Iran.

"Today's sanctions list one entity and nine individuals for their role in gross and systematic human rights violations in Iran and abroad. The entity listed today exemplifies the regime's brutality and disregard of human rights as it is the site of a record number of state executions," Global Affairs Canada said in a statement.

Among those sanctioned are four members of the morality police squad that arrested Mahsa

Amini.

The restrictions also target Parviz Absalan, deputy head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Sistan and Baluchestan Province, as well as four executives of Paravar Pars, an Iranian drone manufacturer that allegedly supplies armament to Russia.

In addition, the list includes Rajaei Shahr Prison.

The measures prohibit any dealings with the listed individuals and entities, freezing any assets they may hold in Canada.

This is the eleventh package of sanctions imposed by Canada on Iran since October 2022.

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Guterres Says Kremlin Looking Into His Grain Deal Proposal

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) – UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday that the Kremlin is looking into his proposal regarding how to improve the Black Sea grain deal.

"I have presented a new proposal for the improvement and the extension of the Black Sea Grain Initiative to the presidents of the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Turkey. I was informed that the Kremlin is looking into the proposal, and that there would be a response to my proposal," Guterres told reporters during his visit to Kenya.

He also noted that the chief of the UN Conference on Trade and Development, Rebeca Grynspan, will be back in Moscow this week.

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## US Targets Senior Al Qaeda Leader in Strike in Northwest Syria - Central Command

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - US forces targeted a senior leader of the Al Qaeda terrorist group (banned in Russia) in a strike in northwestern Syria on Wednesday, the US Central Command said.

"At 11 42 am local time on 3 May, U.S. Central Command forces conducted a unilateral strike in Northwest Syria targeting a senior Al Qaeda leader. We will provide more information as operational details become available," CENTCOM said in a statement.

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## RPT - US Fears Independent Probe of Odessa Massacre Will Expose Nazism in Ukraine - Activist

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is not interested in investigating the mass killing of people in Odessa in 2014 because it will shine a light on the existence of Nazism in Ukraine, US human rights activist and coordinator of the Odessa Solidarity Campaign project Phil Wilayto told Sputnik.

On May 2, 2014, Ukrainian nationalists locked pro-federalism protesters in Odessa's Trade Unions House and set the building on fire. Almost 50 people died and some 250 protesters were injured in clashes with the radicals, according to the United Nations.

"Washington has no interest in exposing the truth about the Odessa Massacre because it would draw attention to the existence of the fascist movement in Ukraine, organizations such as Right Sector, the Azov Battalion, C-14, the Brotherhood [banned in Russia as terrorist organizations] and many more," Wilayto said.

Kiev's tolerance of these groups contradicts US and NATO claims that Ukraine is a freedom-loving democracy that must be supported at any cost, he added.

Wilayto reminded that nine years after the massacre none of the perpetrators have been brought to justice.

"To this date, the Ukrainian government has never allowed an independent international investigation into the massacre," he said.

The Odessa Solidarity Campaign is an independent project organized by such human rights groups as the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality. US activists have visited Odessa in 2016 to stand with the massacre survivors and families of victims. However now they have no sources to receive information from the ground.

"Since the escalation of the war that really began shortly after the 2014 coup, virtually all of our friends in Ukraine have either left the country or have been arrested, so we are not able to monitor the situation as we were before," Wilayto said.

Asked on whether US human rights defenders are facing problems inside the United States, the activist said their movements are pretty popular among the ordinary people, and that makes it more difficult for the government to attack them.

"But the US Department of Justice recently handed down criminal indictments against members

of the African People's Socialist Party, which also has been very outspoken against US and NATO support for Ukraine," Wilayto said.

He also said human rights activists in other Western countries, including Germany, are also facing charges for expressing views on the situation in Ukraine.

To prevent possible similar mass killings in the future, Wilayto urged the international community to investigate the tragic event that happened in Odessa nine years ago.

"This must be an objective investigation, not one that just serves to cover up the atrocity. If there are no consequences for these actions, they will continue, in Ukraine and elsewhere," he said.

The clashes in Odessa became one of the deadliest events during the Maidan and anti-Maidan demonstrations in Ukraine that started in late 2013. Moscow has repeatedly criticized Kiev's steps in the investigation of the deadly tragedy and urged the international community and human rights groups to probe the causes of the massacre.

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Florida Governor DeSantis Signs Bill Targeting State Environmental, Social Investments

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor Ron DeSantis signed a bill that prohibits state officials from investing state funds to promote environmental, social and governance (ESG) benchmarks, the governor's office said in a statement.

"Today, Governor Ron DeSantis signed comprehensive legislation to protect Floridians from the corporatist environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) movement - a worldwide effort to inject woke political ideology across the financial sector, placing politics above the fiduciary duty to make the best financial decisions for beneficiaries," the release said on Tuesday.

Among other provisions, the bill requires all investment decisions the state makes to be driven solely by "pecuniary factors" and forbids sacrificing investment returns to promote factors like ESG.

ESG refers to an investment philosophy that factors in whether companies act conscientiously with respect to equality, equity, the environment, human rights and other factors.

According to the release, the law expands a directive issued by DeSantis and members of the state Cabinet last year that requires investment decisions in the Florida Retirement System Defined Benefit Plan to prioritize the highest returns without consideration of ESG standards.

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US Plans to Allow Afghan Refugees to Renew Temporary Legal Status - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration plans to allow Afghan refugees renew their temporary legal status for another two years as Congress fails to pass legislation to make them permanent legal US residents, CBS news reported citing people familiar with the matter.

The report said on Tuesday that some 77,000 Afghan refugees in the United States are currently allowed to work and protected from deportation.

US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is expected to begin accepting renewal applications in June, the report said.

The first group of Afghan refugees brought to the United States in 2021 were set to lose their temporary protected status in July, the report added.

In August 2021, the Taliban entered Kabul, prompting then-President Ashraf Ghani to resign and hastily leave the country. The United States then quickly withdrew from Afghanistan, while the nation plunged into greater economic disarray with food shortages that pushed it to the brink of a humanitarian crisis. The US military evacuated more than 122,000 people from Afghanistan.

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White House Has Not Discussed Pentagon Leak of Classified Docs With Zelenskyy - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told the Washington Post he has not had discussions with anyone from the White House about highly classified US military intelligence documents that leaked last month, containing critical assessments of Ukraine's military status amid Russia's special military operation.

The report said on Tuesday that Zelenskyy learned about the leaks through the news, adding that he received no prior notification about the incident from the White House or Pentagon.

Ukraine's leader said the leaks are not beneficial to the reputation of the United States, and he questioned whether these leaks could be deliberate manipulation or an actual accident.

The report said Zelenskyy refused to give his personal opinion on the matter in order to avoid damaging the prospects of receiving further assistance from the United States.

Zelenskyy believes the leaks ultimately aid Russia, the report said.

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Ukraine Keeping Counteroffensive Plans Private After US Leak of Classified Docs - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - Kiev is keeping sensitive information about its counteroffensive plans private from Western allies after a US airman allegedly leaked highly classified intelligence related to the conflict in Ukraine, Politico reported citing two European officials.

In early April, more than 100 classified US government documents were leaked on social media, apparently showing sensitive intelligence documents on the state of the Ukrainian military, and the United States' and NATO's efforts to strengthen it.

The report said on Tuesday that Ukraine is specifically withholding information about when and where it plans to launch its counteroffensive against Russian armed forces, including how many troops will participate in the operation.

Ukrainian military leaders, according to the report, are concerned sharing too much information about their counteroffensive could compromise it. Kiev's decision to keep battle plans private are directly linked to Massachusetts Air Guardsman Jack Teixeira's alleged leak of classified military intelligence, which included detailed information about the conflict in Ukraine.

An Ukrainian lawmaker told Politico that only a few people in the country know details about the counteroffensive plan.

Ukraine still shares basic intelligence with the United States and other Western allies that have provided security assistance to Kiev, the report noted.

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Trump Will Skip Early Republican Party Debates for 2024 Presidential Nomination - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump is likely to skip at least one early debate for Republican Party candidates for the 2024 presidential election, The New York Times reported, citing five people familiar with the matter.

Trump has told associates in recent weeks that he does not want to bring attention to Republican challengers by sharing a debate stage with them, the report said on Tuesday.

Trump reportedly said he is "up by too many points" in the polls to debate other potential Republican Party nominees.

Polls show that Florida Governor Ron DeSantis poses the biggest challenge to Trump so far, receiving approximately 30% of support, the report said. All other Republican contenders have received single-digit support, the report added.

Last month, Republican National Committee Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel announced the first Republican primary debate will be held in Milwaukee in August. A second debate will be held in California at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

In response to the debate announcements, Trump said via social media that nobody consulted him or his campaign before releasing the event dates. Trump expressed concerns about "hostile" news networks and the potential to be "libeled and abused."

Trump's non-participation in Republican debates will shrink the viewing audience and limit challengers' chances to create a breakout moment, the report said.

Trump told advisers that he is not interested in the debate at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, citing its ties to library board of trustees chairman Frederick J. Ryan Jr., who also serves as CEO of The Washington Post, the report said.

Trump is also hesitant to attend the Fox News debate after years of feuding with the network, following its decision to declare Joe Biden the winner of the state of Arizona on election night in

2020, the report said.

Moreover, Trump pointed to his past skirmish with anchor Megyn Kelly as a reason not to attend the network's debate, the report said.

However, Trump is set to hold a "town hall" style discussion on CNN next week with Republicans and undeclared voters in New Hampshire.

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Oil Prices Close at 5-Week Lows Amid U.S. Debt Drama

NEW YORK, May 3 (Sputnik) - Oil settled at five-week lows in US trading as fears of a possible debt default by the Biden administration added to weak industrial data in the world's largest economy.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, the benchmark for US crude, settled down \$4, or 5.3%, at \$71.66 per barrel. London-traded Brent, the global crude benchmark, finished down \$3.99, or 5%, at \$75.32. Tuesday's closing was the lowest since March 24 for both WTI and Brent.

Since this week began, WTI has lost 6%, adding to the 1.2% decline from last week and another 6% drop from the prior week. Brent was nursing a 5% drop on the week after last week's 2.6% decline and the prior week's 5% slump.

Tuesday's drop came a day after Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said the US government could run out of money within a month as Biden-aligned Democrat lawmakers and their Republican rivals wrangled over how much to raise the Congressional debt limit by to pay down America's obligations.

The cost of insuring against a US default hit fresh highs after Yellen said on Monday that the Biden administration might not meet all payment obligations by "early June," prompting the president to summon four top congressional leaders to the White House next week.

Adding to the concerns over a debt default were the latest readings on US factory orders and durable goods that came in lower than expected. Job openings for March, meanwhile, fell as layoffs and discharges rose, the Labor Department reported.

A month after a major production cut announced by the OPEC+ oil producing alliance that got a barrel up by about \$10 or more, crude prices have shifted direction completely, heading into deeper red territory, analysts observed.

"OPEC+ will surely hate how oil prices have turned again in just a month but that's what the reality is," said John Kilduff, partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital. "The economy's always a greater concern, especially if there's a potential debt default at hand."

OPEC+, which groups the 13-member Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries with 10 independent oil producers, including Russia, said it will cut a further 1.7 million barrels from its daily output, adding to an earlier pledge from November to take off 2.0M barrels per day.

In terms of absolute pricing, WTI had gone from a high of \$83.53 in days after the OPEC+ production maneuver to Monday's session low of \$71.44. Brent went from a peak of \$86.90 to

the latest session low of \$75.09.

WTI could break \$70 support next though a rebound is also likely due to oversold conditions, Sunil Kumar Dixit, chief technical strategist at SKCharting.com, said.

One relief for not just the oil market but risk investors in general might come from signs that the Federal Reserve will pause on its more than one-year of rate hikes after another quarter point increase on Wednesday that will leave US rates at a peak of 5.25% versus inflation trending at 4.0-5.0%.

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Military Readiness of US Ground Forces Increased, Declined for Sea Forces - GAO

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - The military readiness of US ground forces, the Army and Marine Corps, has increased and declined for sea forces over the course of the 2017-2021 financial years while aviation and space domains showed mixed results, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a new report.

"Readiness ratings increased in the ground domain and declined in the sea domain from the fiscal year 2017 through the fiscal year 2021... with mixed changes in the air and space domains," the report said on Tuesday.

GOA found that US air forces are facing maintenance and supply challenges that limit the availability of aging aircraft. Thus, the most advanced US fighter jet, F-35, also faces sustainment and operational challenges. Moreover, the F-35 does not meet its targets for mission-capable rates or its reliability and maintainability metrics. In 2021, each F-35 variant in the fiscal year 2021 did not meet its target for mission-capable minimum performance by at least about 9 percentage points.

The biggest difficulties are in the sea domain, where the US Navy has a maintenance backlog of \$1.8 billion which worsened over the past years paired with the poor condition of infrastructure at shipyards, and fatigue and crewing shortfalls that affect surface fleet, the report said.

GOA recommends the US Army and Marine Corps take action to prevent tactical vehicle accidents.

GOA also pointed out that the US Department of Defense will have to find a balance between rebuilding the readiness of its existing forces and modernization targets as in its view the Pentagon will depend on "much of today's force for decades to come."

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Biden Admin. to Support Energy Approval Changes Proposed by Senator Manchin - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will support US Senator Joe Manchin's proposed sweeping changes to the review-and-approval processes of energy infrastructure projects, John Podesta, an adviser to President Joe Biden, said in an interview.

Earlier on Tuesday, Manchin laid out his measure, dubbed Building American Energy Security Act of 2023, to extend the legislation he pursued in 2022. In his latest bill, Manchin proposed a 150-day statute of limitations for court challenges to energy infrastructure projects.

"We supported it last year, we'll support it this year," Podesta said as quoted by Reuters on Tuesday.

Manchin also said he wants the US president to designate and periodically update a list of at least 25 high-priority energy infrastructure projects and prioritize permitting for such projects.

Manchin, a conservative Democrat, provides crucial support for Democrats' control of the Senate but often opposes Biden and comes across as more of a Republican rival to the administration - not surprisingly since many of his proposals have won the approval and admiration of Biden's political foes.

At the heart of the Biden administration is its deep embrace of green, renewable energy.

Manchin, on the other hand, is a supporter of the fossil fuel lobby, particularly coal, an industry that employed over 11,000 people in his state in 2021, according to Statista.

The West Virginia Democrat also sought last year to repeal parts of Biden's Inflation Reduction Act that has \$369 billion in clean energy and electric vehicle tax credits.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 3 (Sputnik) -

##### CONFLICT IN SUDAN

\* At least 550 people have been killed and nearly 5,000 have been injured in Sudan in clashes between the Sudanese military and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the Health Ministry said on Tuesday.

\* Mediators of the ongoing conflict in Sudan have proposed holding negotiations between the Sudanese military and the RSF in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Sudanese military spokesman Nabil Abdallah told Sputnik.

\* The leaders of the Sudanese military and the RSF have agreed to a truce from May 4 to May 11, the South Sudan Ministry of Foreign Affairs said.

##### MIDDLE EAST

\* Two Israeli fighter jets attacked civilian infrastructure in Syria's Aleppo province on Monday and killed one person, Rear Adm. Oleg Gurinov, deputy head of the Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syria, said on Tuesday.

\* The Israeli military is striking at targets in the Gaza Strip in response to series of rocket launches from the enclave on southern regions of the country, the Israeli Defense Forces said.

#### TRAIN DERAILMENT IN RUSSIA

\* The locomotive and wagons of a freight train derailed in the Bryansk region as a result of interference by unknown individuals, Russian Railways said on Tuesday.

\* The derailment was caused by an explosion of an unidentified device, regional governor Alexander Bogomaz said.

#### CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

\* Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the Wagner Group private military company (PMC), on Tuesday said that an armored car presumably with Commander of Ukrainian Territorial Defense Force Ihor Tantsiura inside was destroyed.

\* Ukraine has lost up to 290 military and mercenaries, as well as 12 pieces of military equipment, in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

\* The United States cannot know Russia's casualties in the special operation, they are pulling the figures out of a hat, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

\* Germany is not able to ensure that Ukraine does not use the weapons supplied by the West to attack Russia, Kiev is already shelling the territory of Russia, Peskov said.

\* Ukrainian troops have lost more than 15,000 service people in April, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

#### BLACK SEA GRAIN DEAL

\* Negotiations on the grain deal with the participation of Ankara, Moscow and Kiev may take place in Turkey this week, but there is no final date yet, a source familiar with the talks told Sputnik on Tuesday.

\* Russia did not receive any information about negotiations on the grain deal this week, the Russian Foreign Ministry told Sputnik.

\* The terms of the grain deal regarding the Russian agricultural sector have still not been fulfilled, the dialogue will continue, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

\* Head of United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Rebeca Grynspan will pay a visit to Moscow this week to discuss the grain deal, UNCTAD spokeswoman Catherine Huissoud said.

#### POLAND-RUSSIA DIPLOMATIC TENSIONS

\* The Russian Embassy in Poland told Sputnik on Tuesday that it had sent a protest note to the Polish Foreign Affairs Ministry in connection with the forcible seizure of the school building in Warsaw.

\* Russia has lodged a strong protest to Polish Charge d'Affaires in Moscow, Jacek Sladewski, over the forcible seizure of the school building in Warsaw, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

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## Sending 1,500 More Troops to Southern Border Won't Deter Illegal Migrants - Texas Governor

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's decision to send an additional 1,500 troops to the US-Mexico border will do nothing to deter an anticipated surge of illegal migrants in the region, Texas Governor Greg Abbott said on Tuesday.

The surge is expected to occur after the Title 42 health emergency order - which allowed the US government to turn away thousands of illegal migrants at the border to prevent the spread of COVID-19 - is set to expire on May 11.

"[President Joe] Biden says he will deploy 1,500 troops to the border — primarily to do paperwork. And only for 90 days," Abbott said via Twitter. "This does nothing to stop illegal immigration."

Texas has deployed some 10,000 National Guardsmen over the last several years to support local, state and federal agencies dealing with the influx of migrants arriving on the southern border, according to Abbott.

Earlier on Tuesday, Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said in a statement that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin approved a request from the Homeland Security Department for 1,500 active duty troops to support immigration enforcement and law enforcement agencies dealing with the crisis on the southern border.

Ryder said the US troops are expected to arrive at the US southern border next week, but they will not directly participate in law enforcement activities. The troops deploying to the southern border will work on providing ground-based detection and monitoring, data entry and warehouse support.

An all-time record number of migrants have arrived at the US southern border under the Biden administration, hitting two consecutive records in 2021 and 2022, exceeding 2.3 million people. In fiscal year 2023, the US authorities said they have encountered more than 1.2 million migrants.

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## Czech Foreign Minister Says NATO Summit Will Discuss Ukraine's Future Membership

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - Czech Foreign Affairs Minister Jan Lipavsky on Tuesday expressed hope that the upcoming NATO summit will consider the possible ways for Ukraine to become a member of the alliance.

"I wish for Ukraine to be part of NATO one day," Lipavsky said during a discussion at the Hudson Institute. "I hope the NATO summit will at least show direction for that."

Lipavsky said that Ukraine will become one of the mightiest military powers in the world after it defeats Russia.

"Of course, I do not know what the NATO allies will agree as a policy on Ukraine. It is quite a wide debate being held internally in NATO so I am not ready to share much about that," he said. "But, definitely, NATO will say something about Ukraine."

Lipavsky also expressed hope that Sweden will join alliance before the summit.

"I wish for Sweden to be a full member of NATO," he said.

Sweden, together with Finland, submitted applications for NATO membership in May 2022. On March 31, Finland's application was ratified by all 30 members of the alliance. Sweden's bid is still pending approval by Hungary and Turkey.

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US Military Readiness Declines in Sea, Air And Space Domains - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - US military readiness has declined in the sea, air and space domains since 2017, US Defense Capabilities and Management, Government Accountability Office (GAO) Director Diana Maurer said on Tuesday.

"What we have found is rather troubling. Broadly speaking, mission capability, can units execute their missions, has declined since 2017," Maurer told a Senate panel. "While the Army and Marine Corps improved in the ground domain, we found declines in the sea, air and space domains."

Maurer added that the F-35 program in particular suffers from a variety of sustainment woes, and fleet wide mission capable rates have declined every year since 2020.

The Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps face substantial gaps between what it costs to operate the F-35 aircraft and what they can afford to maintain it, according to Maurer.

In addition, Maurer said the Navy had nearly \$1.8 billion in deferred ship maintenance, mainly in its cruisers and amphibious ships, and maintenance delays went up over a 10-year period.

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US On Track to Open New Embassy in Tonga This Month - State Department

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is on track to open a new embassy in Tonga later this month, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink said on Tuesday.

"We're on track this month to open our new embassy in Tonga," Kritenbrink said during a Senate hearing.

In July, the US announced its intention to open embassies in the Pacific island nations of Tonga and Kiribati.

The Biden administration has focused on developing partnerships in the Indo-Pacific as part of its regional strategy, which is designed to bolster US competitiveness with China.

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Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Says Would Pardon Several Whistleblowers if Elected US President

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. said on Tuesday that he would pardon journalists and whistleblowers such as Julian Assange and Edward Snowden if elected as US president in 2024.

"Instead of championing free speech, the US actively persecutes journalists and whistleblowers. I'll pardon brave truth-tellers like Julian Assange and investigate the corruption and crimes they exposed," Kennedy said in a statement via Twitter.

Kennedy also listed Snowden, Chelsea Manning, John Kiriakou and Reality Winner among other "truth-tellers" slated for pardon under his administration.

The aforementioned individuals were attempting to return the United States to its "democratic and humanitarian ideals," Kennedy said.

Earlier this month, Kennedy announced his 2024 presidential campaign and intent to seek the Democratic Party's nomination.

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Bipartisan Legislation Introduced to Ban US Lawmakers From Owning Stocks - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan group of Congressmen introduced legislation that would ban US lawmakers and their families from owning stocks, Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick's office said on Tuesday.

"Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick, alongside Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Congressmen Matt Gaetz and Raja Krishnamoorthi, introduced the bipartisan Bipartisan Restoring Faith in Government Act to prohibit financial investments by members of Congress, their spouses, and any dependents," Fitzpatrick's office said in a press release.

Ocasio-Cortez, in the release, emphasized that members of Congress should not be allowed to trade stock when they have access to classified information that the general public does not.

Gaetz added that Congress will never regain the trust of the American public so long as concerns remain about insider trading among lawmakers.

According to US media, five members of Congress dumped personal stock shares in First Republic Bank in mid-March as the bank began to nosedive. The lawmakers who jumped ship includes Congresswoman Lois Frankel, and Congressmen Ro Khanna, John Curtis, Earl Blumenauer and Dan Goldman.

Last year, US media reported that then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi' net worth grew substantially after the 2008 financial crisis with the help of her husband Paul Pelosi's stock trades, which reportedly coincided with major congressional decisions.

Pelosi denied sharing any information with her husband, but last June, Paul Pelosi used call options to purchase up to \$5 million in graphics card manufacturer Nvidia several weeks before the House of Representatives considered a bill to provide more than \$50 billion in subsidies to

support domestic semiconductor manufacturing in the United States.

Moreover, Paul Pelosi also purchased Tesla stock last year while Nancy Pelosi was pushing for electric vehicle subsidies.

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Austin, Philippine Leader to Discuss Expanding Cooperation in South China Sea – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. are planning to discuss support for the Philippines' defense modernization efforts and expanding operational cooperation in the South China Sea during their meeting on May 3 at the Pentagon, Department of Defense spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Tuesday.

"Secretary Austin and President Marcos will discuss a wide range of security topics, including support for the Philippines' defense modernization efforts and expanding operational cooperation in the South China Sea," Ryder said during a press briefing.

Ryder noted that the United States-Philippines alliance is currently at a "transformational point" following the announcement of four new Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement sites and the successful completion of the largest iteration of the annual bilateral exercise Balikatan, which concluded on April 27.

On Monday, the White House announced that the United States is planning to transfer four patrol vessels and three C-130H military transport aircraft to the Philippines to enhance the country's defense capabilities. The announcement was made following the bilateral meeting between US President Joe Biden and President Marcos at the White House.

The Philippine leader is currently on a visit to Washington. He said on Monday that Manila is against military provocations and will not turn into a "staging post" for any country's military campaign.

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US Approves Possible \$110M In Sale of Naval Strike Defense System to Latvia - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - The United States approved a potential \$110 million sale of a Naval Strike Missile Coastal Defense System and related equipment to Latvia, the Pentagon said on Tuesday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Latvia of Naval Strike Missile Coastal Defense System and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$110 million," the Pentagon said in a press release.

The proposed sale, according to the Pentagon, does not affect US military readiness in Europe, but serves to support US national security interests by improving the security of a NATO ally.

Earlier in the day, the Euractiv news outlet reported, citing sources, that Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are asking fellow NATO members to step up air defense support to bolster the Baltic part of the military alliance's eastern flank.

NATO states agreed at the Madrid Summit in June 2022 to increase their presence on the military alliance's eastern flank in order to better deter possible attacks on members and increase their defense readiness.

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Ex-Minneapolis Cop Involved in Floyd Murder Found Guilty of Manslaughter - Verdict

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill found former Minneapolis police officer Tou Thao guilty of aiding and abetting the death of George Floyd in May of 2020, court documents revealed.

"The Court concludes the State has proven Thao's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt on the charge of aiding and abetting second-degree manslaughter in the death of George Floyd," the verdict, filed on Monday, said.

The judge said Thao knew his three fellow officers were on top of Floyd and restraining him in the prone position with knees forcefully pinning down his neck, middle back, and lower back and arms restraining Floyd's legs and arms - which had been handcuffed behind his back.

Cahill said Thao, 37, who waived his right to a jury trial, "actively encouraged the other three officers and assisted their crime by holding back concerned bystanders, declining to render medical aid to Floyd, not instructing any of the other three officers to render medical aid to Floyd, and not permitting any of the bystanders to render medical aid to Floyd, including the off-duty Minneapolis firefighter on the scene trained in CPR."

Three other officers who were involved in restraining Floyd have been convicted on state and federal charges. All of the officers involved in his murder were fired the day after he was killed. Derek Chauvin was found guilty of murder in April 2021 and later pleaded guilty to a federal charge of violating Floyd's civil rights. He will spend more than 20 years in prison.

J. Alexander Kueng, a Black man, who helped to pin Floyd to the concrete as he struggled for air and who had his knee on Floyd's torso, pleaded guilty to manslaughter last October. In February 2022, Kueng was also convicted of violating Floyd's constitutional rights by not providing medical care or intervening to stop Chauvin. He is serving a three-year sentence and a three-and-a-half-year sentence concurrently.

Thomas Lane, who pinned Floyd's legs, pleaded guilty in May 2022 to a state charge of aiding and abetting second-degree manslaughter. Lane was also convicted of violating Floyd's rights. He is serving two sentences - two-and-a-half years and three years - concurrently.

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## House Democratic Leader Says Fast Tracking Bill to Raise US Debt Ceiling, Avoid Default

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - House Democrats are attempting to fast track legislation past Republican leadership that would raise the United States' debt ceiling and avoid default, House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries said on Tuesday.

House Democrats introduced legislation at the beginning of the 118th Congress that could be used to avert a "Republican-manufactured" default crisis, Jeffries said in a letter to colleagues.

On Monday, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen indicated that the US may exhaust extraordinary measures to avoid default as soon as June 1 if the debt ceiling is not raised.

"Given yesterday's announcement by the Treasury Department, [House Rules Committee] Ranking Member Jim McGovern has just filed a special rule that would allow for Floor consideration of a bipartisan measure to avoid a dangerous default," the letter said.

The rule initiates a process that allows Democrats to begin collecting signatures as early as May 16 for a petition to force action on their debt ceiling bill. However, the measure requires a majority of members to agree, with Democrats currently holding a minority in the House.

The move comes after House Republicans passed legislation that would raise the debt ceiling in exchange for cuts to government spending and other measures to reduce the deficit. Senate Democrats and US President Joe Biden have rejected the proposal, stating it has no chance of becoming law.

Inversely, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy has said that a "no-strings-attached" debt limit increase would not pass the lower chamber.

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## Major Floods in Quebec Force Three Municipalities to Declare State of Emergency - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - Three municipalities in the Canadian Province of Quebec have been forced to declare a state of emergency and to evacuate hundreds of civilians due to major floods, CBC reported on Tuesday.

In the Charlevoix region, the municipality of Baie-Saint-Paul had to evacuate over 500 civilians after the river running through the town spiked on Monday, the report said.

More than 1,000 houses have been cut from Hydro-Quebec electricity supply while less than 10 homes still have a drinkable water supply, according to the release.

Meanwhile, several roads and motorhomes were reportedly washed up by the floods, some of them crashing on the town's bridges.

The authorities of Baie-Saint-Paul requested that inhabitants wait to be given the greenlight before returning to their homes, the report said citing town officials.

Quebec's Minister of Public Security Francois Bonnardel reportedly surveyed the damages earlier today, and informed that the Red-Cross was taking care of the evacuated individuals, the report continued.

As two firefighters are currently missing, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and Coast Guard have also been deployed to assist in the searches, the report added.

In the Lanaudiere region, the towns and villages of Sainte-Come and Sainte-Emilie-de-l'Energie have also declared emergencies, the report said, noting they were hardly hit by the flooding, with water levels rising by almost 12 inches in some parts.

Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) is still forecasting between 12-20 inches of rain for Lanaudiere until late Wednesday, adding that there is a risk of a thunderstorm.

In the Laurentians, authorities have issued warnings over rising waters which threaten to cut emergency routes to some areas.

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Senators Urge Fed to Stop Rate Hikes That Could 'Throw Millions of Americans Out of Work'

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell has been urged by senators aligned to President Joe Biden to stop rate hikes that have the "potential to throw millions of Americans out of work," according to a letter by the lawmakers to the central bank's leadership.

"We write regarding our concern about the Federal Reserve's (Fed's) monetary policy strategy and its potential to throw millions of Americans out of work ... [W]e strongly urge you to respect the Fed's dual mandate, pause your rate hikes, and avoid engineering a recession that destroys jobs and crushes small businesses," a group of 10 Democratic senators that included Elizabeth Warren said in the letter.

The Fed has a mandate of ensuring "maximum employment" through a jobless rate of 4% or below, and keeping inflation "manageable." The last was a task easily achieved before the COVID-19 breakout, when prices expanded less than 2% a year. The pandemic and the trillions of dollars of relief spending by the government, however, caused inflation to hit four-decade highs of more than 9% a year by June last year.

The Fed, in response, hiked rates by a total 4.75% in nine increases since March last year, bringing them to a peak of 5%, from just 0.25% at the onset of the pandemic. As a result of the central bank's actions, inflation has slowed to between 4% and 5% per annum, though that is still at least double the Fed's 2% per year target.

Also, in a relief to businesses, economists say the Fed could pause its rate hike cycle from June, after likely adding another quarter point at its May policy meeting on Wednesday to bring rates to a peak of 5.25%.

The Fed stall on rates, if it comes, will coincide with clear signs that the US economy is slowing and job opportunities are shrinking. Since initial business disruptions from the pandemic that led to a loss of 20 million jobs, the US labor market has added hundreds of thousands of positions each month for more than two years, bringing unemployment to 50-year lows of well below the Fed's 4% target for the jobless rate. The central bank in the past has said that higher-than-usual spending by Americans due to robust job and wage growth opportunities were among reasons why it could not stop raising rates to tackle inflation.

In Tuesday's letter to Powell, the lawmakers argued that more rate hikes would "needlessly" threaten American livelihoods.

"While the Fed should remain flexible to incoming data as it assesses the economy's progress toward achieving lower inflation, the evidence to date suggests that progress can continue to be made without slamming the brakes on the economy and costing millions of Americans their jobs," the senators wrote.

In order to gauge the Fed's latest economic projections, the lawmakers requested a list of the central bank's data points, including expected trends for wage growth and the jobless rate over the next year.

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US Has Tools to Support Banks, Protect Depositors - White House

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - The US government has tools to keep its banking system safe and to protect American depositors, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Monday.

San Francisco-based First Republic Bank became the third casualty in the country's banking crisis. Top US bank JPMorgan Chase this week bought assets and deposits worth over \$330 billion that belonged to First Republic, which has struggled since the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank in March,

"We have the tools necessary to keep our banking system safe and protect depositors," Jean-Pierre told reporters.

US President Joe Biden, she added, wants his team to lead efforts on supporting the country's banking system, and said the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp (FDIC) is monitoring the situation.

The White House spokesperson also said the Biden administration is taking decisive and forceful actions to make sure that the US banking system continues to have access to resources and meet depositors' needs.

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Biden Willing to Negotiate Over Budget, But Not Debt Ceiling – White House

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden will not negotiate on the debt ceiling with the Republicans but is willing to have a separate talk about the budget and appropriations, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday.

"He's [Biden] willing to have a separate conversation about their spending, what they want to do with the budget, how they see appropriations process moving forward," Jean-Pierre said during a press conference.

The spokesperson stated that it is time for the MAGA Republicans to act and prevent the US from a possible default on its debt, considering the potential repercussions on the country's population, and that Biden would not negotiate on the debt ceiling.

In addition, Jean-Pierre said it is the "constitutional" obligation of Congress to act on the debt ceiling, and not hold the credit of the US "hostage."

Moreover, the debt ceiling was increased three times under the Trump administration, Jean-Pierre said, adding the process shouldn't be any different this time.

After spending the past week analyzing the Republican proposal on raising the debt ceiling, Biden decided to convene a meeting with congressional party leaders on May 9, Jean-Pierre added.

The Biden administration wants the Congress to raise the debt ceiling without attaching other economic policy proposals. However, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy has said a "no-strings-attached" debt limit increase will not pass the lower chamber.

Last week, House Republicans passed the Limit, Save, Grow Act, which would raise the United States' debt ceiling and reduce the deficit by cutting government spending. The bill would also recover unspent COVID-19 relief funds.

The US government will likely begin defaulting on its debt by June 1 if the congressional limit on the country's debt servicing is not raised by then, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a letter to McCarthy.

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Three in 10 Americans Know Someone Affected by Opioid Addiction - Survey

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - About thirty percent of Americans say they know someone affected by the opioid crisis, a Morning Consult survey revealed on Tuesday.

"3 in 10 US adults know someone who has been directly impacted by opioid addiction, and more than half of that group said they know someone who has died because of opioid use. Another 1 in 7 US adults said they have been directly impacted by opioid addiction," a release accompanying the survey said.

The CDC projected that drug overdose deaths surpassed 108,000 for the 12-month period ending in November 2022, with opioids making up the majority of fatalities, the release said.

Although the rate of deaths has declined in the past few months, the latest figures are still about 35,000-40,000 more than pre-pandemic levels, according to the release.

The director of the White House's Office of National Drug Control Policy, Dr. Rahul Gupta, was quoted in the release as saying the numbers are not surprising, while noting that the figure is likely even higher among school teachers who interact more with people affected by drug addiction.

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Pentagon to Send 1,500 Additional Troops to Southern Border Ahead of Surge - Statement

(Updates with more details, background in paras 2, 4-7)

EL PASO, May 2 (Sputnik) - The Department of Homeland Security said on Tuesday that it requested the Defense Department to send an additional 1,500 troops to the US border with Mexico in anticipation of an expected migrant surge when COVID-era restrictions end next week.

The Title 42 health emergency order - which allowed the US government to turn away thousands of illegal migrants at the border to prevent the spread of COVID-19 - is set to expire on May 11.

"Due to an anticipated increase in migration, DHS requested that the Department of Defense (DoD) augment the 2,500 military personnel currently providing support at the Southwest Border with an additional 1,500 personnel for a period of 90 days," DHS said in a press release.

Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said in a statement that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had approved the request and said military personnel will not directly participate in law enforcement activities on the border.

Ryder also said the 1,500 active duty troops deploying to the US border with Mexico for 90 days will work on providing ground-based detection and monitoring, data entry and warehouse support.

An all-time record number of migrants have arrived at the US southern border under the Biden administration, hitting two consecutive records in 2021 and 2022, exceeding 2.3 million people. In fiscal year 2023, the US authorities said they have encountered more than 1.2 million migrants.

The Biden administration has said its plan to deter the surge includes admitting into the United States up to 30,000 migrants from Venezuela, Haiti, Nicaragua and Cuba each month as well as up to 20,000 migrant refugees from other countries in South America and the Caribbean.

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US Will Announce \$300M In Military Aid Package for Ukraine on Wednesday - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is expected to announce a new military aid package for Ukraine valued at \$300 million, including artillery and mortar ammunition, Politico reported on Tuesday.

The Biden administration will announce the \$300 million package on Wednesday, the report said, citing US officials.

The package will include ammunition for artillery and mortars, trucks, heavy equipment and spare parts, the report said.

In addition, the package will include Hydra-70 rockets, typically used in an air-to-ground function, the report said.

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UN Working on Solutions for Russian Banks to Conduct Payments - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, May 2 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is trying to find solutions for Russian banks, including the country's agricultural bank, to conduct payments and transactions amid Western sanctions, spokesman Farhan Haq said on Tuesday.

"One of the things [UNCTAD chief] Rebeca Grynspan and her team have been working on is trying to find solutions that allow Russian banks, including the Russian Agricultural Bank, to conduct payments and transactions," Haq told a briefing.

The grain deal was brokered by the United Nations and Turkey between Russia and Ukraine in July 2022 to facilitate exports of agricultural products from Black Sea ports during the conflict. The package agreement also includes a memorandum of understanding between Russia and the UN to unblock Russian grain and fertilizer exports.

The deal has since been extended twice and is due to expire on May 18 unless Russia agrees to renew it.

Moscow has repeatedly raised concerns that the part of the deal concerning Russian exports has not been fulfilled. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov raised this issue at a meeting with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in New York last month.

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DHS Asks Pentagon to Send 1,500 More Troops to Southern Border Ahead of Surge - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - The Department of Homeland Security said on Tuesday that it requested the Defense Department to send an additional 1,500 troops to the US southern border in anticipation of a surge of migrants expected to arrive in the region when COVID-era restrictions end next week.

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Regulations Must Be Put in Place to Avoid Abuses in Artificial Intelligence - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, May 2 (Sputnik) - Regulations and standards must be put in place to avoid potential abuses in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI), United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Tuesday.

"As artificial intelligence develops, it needs to be monitored carefully," Haq said during a press briefing. "The right regulations and standards need to be put in place so that this type of technology is not open to abuse."

Haq said the people who are involved in developing AI should give the United Nations and member states' governments "space" to work on this matter.

Various governments are trying to catch up with AI developments in order to possibly regulate the field.

At the end of April, the European Union said it intends to agree on common regulations for the use of so-called generative AI like ChatGPT by the end of 2023.

ChatGPT gained popularity after its launch in November, acquiring a million users in less than a week. Microsoft announced in January that it would invest billions of dollars in OpenAI and introduced in March a new multimodal AI model - GPT-4 - capable of recognizing text and images as well as solving complex problems with great accuracy.

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US Fears Independent Probe of Odessa Massacre Will Expose Nazism in Ukraine - Activist

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is not interested in investigating the mass killing of people in Odessa in 2014 because it will shine a light on the existence of Nazism in Ukraine, US human rights activist and coordinator of the Odessa Solidarity Campaign project Phil Wilayto told Sputnik.

On May 2, 2014, Ukrainian nationalists locked pro-federalism protesters in Odessa's Trade Unions House and set the building on fire. Almost 50 people died and some 250 protesters were injured in clashes with the radicals, according to the United Nations.

"Washington has no interest in exposing the truth about the Odessa Massacre because it would draw attention to the existence of the fascist movement in Ukraine, organizations such as Right Sector, the Azov Battalion, C-14, the Brotherhood [banned in Russia as terrorist organizations] and many more," Wilayto said.

Kiev's tolerance of these groups contradicts US and NATO claims that Ukraine is a freedom-loving democracy that must be supported at any cost, he added.

Wilayto reminded that nine years after the massacre none of the perpetrators have been brought to justice.

"To this date, the Ukrainian government has never allowed an independent international investigation into the massacre," he said.

The Odessa Solidarity Campaign is an independent project organized by such human rights groups as the Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality. US activists have visited Odessa in 2016 to stand with the massacre survivors and families of victims. However now they have no sources to receive information from the ground.

"Since the escalation of the war that really began shortly after the 2014 coup, virtually all of our friends in Ukraine have either left the country or have been arrested, so we are not able to monitor the situation as we were before," Wilayto said.

Asked on whether US human rights defenders are facing problems inside the United States, the activist said their movements are pretty popular among the ordinary people, and that makes it more difficult for the government to attack them.

"But the US Department of Justice recently handed down criminal indictments against members of the African People's Socialist Party, which also has been very outspoken against US and NATO support for Ukraine," Wilayto said.

He also said human rights activists in other Western countries, including Germany, are also facing charges for expressing views on the situation in Ukraine.

To prevent possible similar mass killings in the future, Wilayto urged the international community to investigate the tragic event that happened in Odessa nine years ago.

"This must be an objective investigation, not one that just serves to cover up the atrocity. If there are no consequences for these actions, they will continue, in Ukraine and elsewhere," he said.

The clashes in Odessa became one of the deadliest events during the Maidan and anti-Maidan demonstrations in Ukraine that started in late 2013. Moscow has repeatedly criticized Kiev's steps in the investigation of the deadly tragedy and urged the international community and human rights groups to probe the causes of the massacre.

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Milley Says Russia, Ukraine Unlikely to Achieve Political Objectives of Conflict

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - The chances of either Russia or Ukraine achieving their political objectives related to the conflict this year are slim, US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said on Tuesday.

"I do think, though, that the probability of either side achieving their political objectives... I think that's going to be very difficult, very challenging. And frankly, I don't think the probability of that is likely in this year," Milley said during an interview with Foreign Affairs.

A potential Ukrainian offensive against Russia this spring or summer could have a range of outcomes, from the collapse of the frontline to no success at all, Milley said.

Ukraine could also set up a defensive operation and task Russia with the challenge of mounting an offensive, Milley added.

Milley predicted that Russia will conclude its special military operation in Ukraine within the span of the next several months to a couple of years given that the costs of the operation will exceed the benefits.

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US Senators Accuse Blinken of Lying to Congress About Contacts With Hunter Biden – Letter

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) – Republican senators Ron Johnson and Chuck Grassley in a letter, published on Tuesday, accused Secretary of State Antony Blinken of lying to Congress in December 2020 when he said that he never had contact with Hunter Biden.

“On December 22, 2020, you provided false testimony to Congress during your voluntary transcribed interview,” the letter said. “Despite this clear warning that it is a crime to make false statements to Congress and congressional staff, you did not provide truthful testimony during the interview when you denied corresponding with Hunter Biden via email when you served as Deputy Secretary of State under the Obama administration.”

In support of their accusations, the senators provide quotes from the hearing which show Blinken repeatedly saying “no” to questions about whether he spoke with Hunter Biden via email, phone, or text.

The senators refer to emails found on the laptop of the US President’s son, according to which Hunter Biden and Blinken communicated by email at least twice in 2015, in May and July.

“Based on evidence now available, your above statement is patently false. Emails contained on Hunter Biden’s laptop and recent reports have revealed that you did in fact email Hunter Biden on at least two occasions, contradicting what you told congressional investigators,” the letter read.

The lawmakers also said in the letter that they find it highly unlikely that the US top diplomat had no knowledge of Hunter Biden being on the board at Ukrainian gas company Burisma Holdings because according to uncovered emails, Blinken’s wife, Evan Ryan, was coordinating with Hunter Biden to connect him with Burisma’s US representatives.

In conclusion, Johnson and Grassley request Blinken to hand over all records related to Hunter Biden, his or his family’s business dealings, and all correspondence sent or received from his personal email accounts and phones, including those of his wife, no later than May 15.

In April, US House lawmakers also requested information from Blinken after new testimony revealed the top diplomat’s ties to a statement falsely claiming that reports about Hunter Biden’s abandoned laptop were Russian disinformation.

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Top US General Says Not Escalating Ukraine Conflict in ‘Everyone’s Interests’

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley said in an interview published on Tuesday that not escalating the conflict in Ukraine is in "everyone’s interests."

"Well, I think that it’s in everyone’s interests not to escalate," Milley told Foreign Affairs magazine. "Russia does not want a war with NATO or the United States, and NATO and the United States don’t want a war with Russia. So it’s in everyone’s interests in that regard, and Ukraine certainly doesn’t want that scale of war in its territory. So it’s in everyone’s interests not to escalate."

However, Milley also said that the possibility of escalation of the conflict in Ukraine is very real. The general also said that the probability of either side achieving their political objectives in

Ukraine will be very difficult and challenging.

Western countries have been supplying military aid to Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022. The aid includes light and heavy weapons, including tanks, armored and other vehicles, missiles, drones, artillery and munitions.

Kiev has also asked the collective West, and specifically the United States, to supply Ukraine with fighter jets but the request has so far been met with reluctance.

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Canada Becomes Fifth State to Accept WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies - Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - Canada became the fifth country to accept the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, Global Affairs Canada said on Tuesday.

"The Honourable Mary Ng, Minister of International Trade, Export Promotion, Small Business and Economic Development, announced today that Canada has formally accepted the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies," Global Affairs Canada said in a statement.

By accepting it, Canada officially became the fifth member state to do so, the statement said, noting that the agreement will only be enforced once two-thirds of the WTO signatories have accepted it.

Ng, in the same release, said the WTO's Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies will help ensure the sustainability of fishing operations around the globe.

The Canadian government remains committed to strengthening the so called "rules-based" international trade system, Ng continued, noting that the agreement will allow countries to act against illegal fishing activities.

The WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies was adopted at the 12th Ministerial Conference held in June 2022. Its goals range from fighting against "harmful" subsidies notably related to illegal fishing, to ensuring the industry's sustainability.

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US Must Avoid Driving Further Military Cooperation Between Russia, China - Milley

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - The United States must avoid driving Russia and China to cooperate more closely in the military realm, US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said on Tuesday.

"Unlike the Cold War, now, you've got three great powers in the world: the United States, China, and Russia," Milley said during an interview with Foreign Affairs. "So what we have to be conscious of, is not to drive China and Russia close together in a military sense."

A so-called tripolar world is more complicated than the bipolar world of the Cold War, Milley added.

There are "indicators" that Russia and China are moving closer together, which bears watching carefully, Milley said.

However, the US has not yet seen a "full-fledged" geopolitical alliance form between Russia and China, Milley said.

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US, International Partners Make Record Drug-Related Arrests, Seizures - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - Nearly 300 people have been arrested and a record amount of drugs, firearms and cash seized on three continents as a result of a major crackdown on opioids and fentanyl trafficking, the US Justice Department said on Tuesday.

"Operation SpecTor was a coordinated international law enforcement effort, spanning three continents, to disrupt drug trafficking on the dark web and represents the most funds seized and the highest number of arrests in any coordinated international action led by the Justice Department against drug traffickers on the dark web," the Justice Department said in a press release.

The operation involved the Justice Department, its Joint Criminal Opioid and Darknet Enforcement (JCODE) team and international partners.

Law enforcement made 288 arrests and seized 117 firearms, 850 kilograms of drugs, including 64 kilograms of fentanyl or fentanyl-laced narcotics, and \$53.4 million in cash and virtual currencies, the release said.

The operation focused on disrupting the trafficking of fentanyl, opioids and other illegal goods and services on the Darknet across the United States, Europe and South America, the release added.

Operation SpecTor has overseen more than 100 federal operations against the manufacture, sale and distribution of illegal drugs, according to the release.

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US Surgeon General Says Health Impacts of Loneliness Comparable to Smoking Daily

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - The negative health impacts of loneliness are comparable to the consequences of smoking daily, and greater than those of obesity, US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy said on Tuesday.

"The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and even greater than that associated with obesity and physical inactivity," Murthy said in a government advisory on the effects of loneliness and isolation.

Loneliness is associated with greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety and premature death, the advisory said.

The advisory draws attention to the issue of loneliness and provides information on how to build more connected lives and a more connected society. Loneliness and isolation represent "profound threats" to health and well-being in the United States, the advisory said.

Moreover, lack of social connection can have significant economic costs to individuals, communities and society, the advisory said.

Social isolation among older adults alone accounts for an estimated \$6.7 billion in excess Medicare spending every year, the advisory said. Stress-related absenteeism attributed to loneliness costs employers in the US an estimated \$154 billion annually, the advisory also said.

From 2003 to 2020, time spent alone by individuals increased, while time spent on in-person social engagement declined, the advisory said. Social engagement with friends has decreased by an average of 20 hours per month, while social isolation increased by an average of 24 hours per month, the advisory said.

The advisory proposes developing social connection in the US by strengthening social infrastructure, enacting pro-connection public policies, mobilizing the health sector, reforming digital environments, deepening knowledge of the issue and building a culture of connection.

Individual relationships are an "untapped resource" that can help people live healthier and more productive lives, the advisory said.

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US to Send 50-60 Airmen to Australia for Training on E-7 Aircraft in June – Air Force

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) – The United States will send 50 to 60 of its airmen to Australia in June to get training on E-7 Early Warning aircraft to accelerate bringing into operation the US fleet of E-7s that is currently under construction, Chief of Staff of the Air Force Gen. Charles Brown said on Tuesday.

"We're going to be able to send here [to Australia] in June close to 50 to 60 of our airmen to actually start training on the E-7 aircraft. When we do get our aircraft, we will have trained operational maintainers to help accelerate bringing the seven [E-7] into our inventory," Brown told a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing.

In February, Boeing announced that it had won a \$1.2 billion US Air Force contract for its new E-7A Wedgetail design to replace the venerable E-3 AWACS Early Warning Aircraft. The Air Force plans to have 26 E-7 aircraft by 2032, according to media reports.

Australia, Turkey, and South Korea already own and operate the aircraft, while the first E-7s are being produced for the British fleet at the moment, according to Defense News.

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US Conducting Cybersecurity 'Hunt Forward Missions' in 22 Countries - CYBERCOM Chief

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) - US cybersecurity services are currently conducting 50 "hunt forward missions" in 22 countries, US Cyber Command (CYBERCOM) chief Gen. Paul Nakasone said on Tuesday.

"[CYBERCOM] is] conducting 50 hunt forward missions in 22 countries and across 70 networks," Nakasone told the AFCEA TechNet Cyber 2023 conference at the Baltimore Convention Center.

Hunt Forward Operations are defensive missions that allow countries to better understand the shared threats and enhance the security of critical networks that US allies and partners depend on.

Russia is an acute threat to US cybersecurity operations while China remains the main pacing challenge as US cybersecurity services work to protect the enormous Department of Defense cyber domain that includes 3 million users and 4.2 million computers, Nakasone stated.

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US, Turkey Sanction Two 'Financial Facilitators' of Terrorist Groups in Syria – Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 2 (Sputnik) – The U.S. and Turkish governments have imposed sanctions on two "financial facilitators" of terrorist groups operating on the territory of Syria, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"The United States continues to cooperate with the Republic of Türkiye to counter the financing of terrorist groups that perpetuate violence and instability in the region. Today, we are imposing sanctions on two financial facilitators for designated terrorist groups Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, both of which operate in Syria," Blinken said in a statement.

Accordingly, Omar Alsheak and Kubilay Sari have been sanctioned, the statement said, adding that following in the steps of Washington, the Turkish Ministry of Treasury and Ministry of Interior have frozen all assets related to the facilitators.

Today's designations are a follow up of the U.S.-Turkish January 5 action which disrupted key ISIS (banned in Russia), financial networks, the statement added.

The joint action underscores Washington's and Ankara's commitment to erode terrorist finance networks in the region, the statement said, and more actions will be taken to disrupt the global flows of capital which are feeding terrorist organizations.

The Treasury's sanctions were imposed under Executive Order 13224 which targets terrorist groups and their facilitators.