

06/30/21 Wednesday

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Sales of Chinese Cars Abroad Zip Past Competitors Struggling With Semiconductor Shortages by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

China's electric car market is the world's largest, selling more than half of the world's total in 2020 as the country rushes toward totally phasing out gas-only cars by 2035. Sales-hungry competitors like Tesla are struggling to carve out a corner of the Chinese domestic market, and the voluntary recall of 300,000 Teslas this week isn't helping.

China's automotive exports more than doubled in the first half of 2021 despite a global shortage in semiconductors necessary for car computers, thanks to the country's early reopening after COVID-19 lockdowns, experts announced on Wednesday.

According to data from the China Passenger Car Association (CPCA), exports by automobile manufacturers on mainland China increased by 103% between January and May 2021, as compared to the year prior, shipping a total of 760,000 cars. The comparison period reflects the worst COVID-19 lockdown period for China, but the increase this year is remarkable in that it comes as other carmakers grapple with halted production lines.

"A lack of automotive chips around the world indeed benefited Chinese companies," CPCA secretary general Cui Dongshu told the [South China Morning Post](#). "The disease outbreak abroad has yet to be controlled and there remains growth potential for Chinese carmakers to tap."

After the mass outbreak of COVID-19 in China's Hubei Province in late 2019 and early 2020, Beijing implemented a near-total lockdown, sending millions of residents home for weeks and bringing travel to a halt. Because of the lockdown's thoroughness, the virus' spread was totally broken and the country was able to gradually reopen its society and economy after several weeks of closure, bringing production, trade and consumption roaring back by the middle of the year. However, few nations implemented as thorough a lockdown as China, allowing the virus to continue spreading and infect millions, keeping partial lockdowns in place for more than a year. Peter Chen, an engineer with the car component company ZF TRW in Shanghai, told SCMP that Chinese automakers had beaten the rush by placing their semiconductor orders in early 2020 as China's COVID-19 lockdowns began to end, giving them a decisive advantage in the rush for what has become a necessary part of modern car manufacturing.

"They have been ahead of foreign car plants in securing supplies of the much-needed chips," Chen said.

Globally, the automaking industry is expected to produce 3.9 million less units in 2021 thanks to the shortage, according to an estimate by consulting firm [AlixPartners last month](#). That amounts to \$110 billion in lost revenue.

Many major manufacturers, like Ford, General Motors and Hyundai, have shuttered some of their factories or halted production lines on certain models due to the shortage.

The devices themselves are not expensive, costing between \$1 and \$100, but the average automobile rolling off the production line has 1,400 chips in it, creating a bottleneck. The shortage has come about thanks to a variety of factors, nearly all of which stem from the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns redacted chip output at a time that demand for them was increasing massively - not in cars, but in the electronic devices billions of people rushed to purchase so they could access their work, education and entertainment remotely from the safety of their homes in lieu of in-person gathering that could spread the virus.

Most of the globe's microchip foundries are in China and Taiwan, so trade interruptions due to lockdowns interrupted buyers' access to raw materials as well as finished products, and US [blacklisting of Chinese](#) firms like the Shanghai-based Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation (SMIC) - China's largest foundry - has blocked US carmakers in particular from accessing a major microchip source.

To compensate for this vulnerability, US President Joe Biden declared it a "[national security issue](#)" earlier this year and on Tuesday, [Congress passed](#) a bill backed by Biden that would funnel \$200 billion into supporting US tech competition with Chinese firms, including \$53 billion for the US semiconductor manufacturing industry.

However, despite its advantages, the chip shortage hasn't left China's automakers unscathed, either. Car output fell by 4% in May 2021 as compared to May 2020, after having increased by 6.8% in April 2021.

Overall, Chinese industrial production rose by 8.8% in May 2021 over last year, which was also slower than the 9.8% increase in April. The slowdown has been blamed in part on local lockdowns in the cities of the Pearl River Delta, the center of China's tech industry.

"This is a normal cyclical slowdown after an economic recovery. In a nutshell, we can see the economic rebound is peaking," Hao Zhou, senior EM economist Asia, Commerzbank, [told Reuters](#) earlier this month. "The extent of the slowdown in the second half is key. So far, it's still normal and there's still room for the fiscal policy to play a part later in the year."

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Former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld Dies at 88
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Having served as US defense secretary twice in presidential administrations more than 20 years apart, Donald Rumsfeld is both the youngest and oldest person ever to head the Pentagon. Donald Rumsfeld, who twice served as US secretary of defense, has died at the age of 88, according to a statement released by his family on Wednesday.

"It is with deep sadness that we share the news of the passing of Donald Rumsfeld, an American statesman and devoted husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather. At 88, he was surrounded by family in his beloved Taos, New Mexico," a statement released by his family reads.

"History may remember him for his extraordinary accomplishments over six decades of public service, but for those who knew him best and whose lives were forever changed as a result, we

will remember his unwavering love for his wife Joyce, his family and friends, and the integrity he brought to a life dedicated to country."

Kieth Urbahn, a spokesperson for the family, told the [New York Times](#) the cause of Rumsfeld's death had been multiple myeloma, a type of blood cancer.

Rumsfeld is perhaps best known today for having been then-US President George W. Bush's secretary of defense from 2001 to 2006, during which time he oversaw the beginning of the US War on Terror and the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. Rumsfeld retired in 2006 under heavy pressure from NATO generals and admirals after nearly 3.5 years of a counterinsurgency war in Iraq that Rumsfeld, a major voice in favor of the invasion, had predicted would not happen.

Iraq was just one of several Middle Eastern nations that neoconservatives at the heart of the Bush administration, including Rumsfeld, his deputy secretary of defense, Paul Wolfowitz, and then-Vice President Dick Cheney, has pushed for the US to overthrow the governments of as part of what they called the Project for a New American Century. Others included Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, and Sudan.

Rumsfeld was previously Pentagon chief from 1975 to 1977 as well, under then-US President Gerald R. Ford. He also served in a variety of executive advisory roles, and represented Illinois in the US House of Representatives from 1963 until 1969 as a member of the Republican Party. Rumsfeld was born in Chicago in 1932. He became an Eagle Scout in 1949 and graduated from Princeton University with a degree in politics in 1952. He joined the US Navy in 1954, served as a naval aviator and flight instructor until 1957, and remained in the ready reserve until 1989, when he retired with the rank of captain.

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Freedom is Untidy': Remembering The Late Donald Rumsfeld, Dead at 88
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Donald Rumsfeld's family announced on Wednesday that he had died from multiple myeloma, a type of blood cancer. Rumsfeld, 88, had been retired from politics for several years, but in his time was a titular figure on the world stage. Sputnik takes a look back at some of the major points in Rumsfeld's political career, which spans six decades.

Rumsfeld was born in Chicago, Illinois, on July 9, 1932. His family were German immigrants, and he attended a Congregational church. He graduated from New Trier High School and Princeton University, where he was an accomplished wrestler and majored in politics. He was also part of the Navy Reserve Officer Training Corps, and served as a naval aviator and flight instructor from 1954 until 1957 before shifting to the naval reserve, where he remained until 1989 when he retired at the rank of captain.

He began his political career as an administrative assistant to an Ohio lawmaker in Washington in 1957, but won office for himself as a Republican in 1962, representing Illinois' 13th congressional district from 1962 until 1969. According to his memoir "Known and Unknown," Rumsfeld was critical of the Johnson administration's handling of the Vietnam War, believing

South Vietnam was too dependent on the US, and that the US was too overconfident in its fight against the southern National Liberation Front and North Vietnamese Army.

First Administration Posts

He resigned in 1969 to join the administration of then-US President Richard Nixon, where he headed the Office of Economic Opportunity, an anti-poverty program that he personally opposed. During the year he worked there he hired two men who would later become key political allies: Frank Carlucci and Dick Cheney.

Rumsfeld cycled through several other Nixon administration positions before being tapped to head up Gerald Ford's transition to the presidency after Nixon resigned without a sitting vice president to replace him. He became Ford's defense secretary in 1975, where he directly clashed with George H. W. Bush, who was head of the Central Intelligence Agency, and Henry Kissinger, who was Secretary of State. He left office with Ford in 1977.

After several years in the private sector, Rumsfeld was appointed Middle East envoy by then-US President Ronald Reagan in 1983, putting him in charge of ensuring, among other things, that Iraq win the war it had started with Iran three years earlier. He traveled to Baghdad and met with the Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, for 90 minutes on December 20, 1983, during which time they discussed a number of topics of unity, including their opposition to Syria as well as Iran, and building an oil pipeline through Jordan to the Red Sea port of Aqaba. He left the position when Reagan left office in 1989.

In 1997, Rumsfeld joined the Project for a New American Century, a think tank set up by William Kristol and Robert Kagan to continue and expand Reagan's militaristic policies into the 21st century, where the US had become the world's sole military superpower after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. The think tank regarded the Republican Party's policies at the time as being insufficient to do this, helping to earn them the moniker of "neo-conservative."

Of the 25 politicians who signed PNAC's founding statement of principles, nine would later become members of the George W. Bush administration, including Rumsfeld and Cheney, but also Elliott Abrams, Eliot Cohen, Paula Dobriansky, Paul Wolfowitz, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Zalmay Khalilzad, and Peter Rodman. John Bolton, Richard Perle, and Dov Zakheim were also PNAC members who served in the Bush administration.

Bush Administration

Just months after Bush was declared by the US Supreme Court to have won the 2000 election, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda killed nearly 3,000 Americans, and Rumsfeld ordered the US military to DEFCON 3. At an emergency meeting of the National Security Council, Rumsfeld reportedly asked Bush: "Why shouldn't we go against Iraq, not just al-Qaeda?" The terrorist group was headquartered in Afghanistan.

As Pentagon chief, prosecuting the burgeoning War on Terror became his primary task, and the US launched an air campaign followed by a ground invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, overthrowing the Taliban government and setting up a puppet state against which the Taliban has rebelled ever since.

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, US Army [Gen. Wesley Clark](#) had a discussion with another senior officer in the Pentagon who revealed to him plans to go after not just Afghanistan, but a total of seven other countries in the next five years, including Iraq but also Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, and Sudan, he wrote in a 2003 book.

The plan dovetailed very closely with goals outlined to him by PNAC members like Wolfowitz, who had opined to him in 1991 that “with the end of the Cold War, we can now use our military with impunity. The Soviets won't come in to block us. And we've got five, maybe 10, years to clean up these old Soviet surrogate regimes like Iraq and Syria before the next superpower emerges to challenge us.”

‘There Are Known Knowns’: The Iraq War

Despite the suspicions of US intelligence, no firm evidence had been presented to show Hussein had continued to wield weapons of mass destruction after the 1991 Gulf War. Rumsfeld and other neo-cons continued to press for Iraq to be the next target of the War on Terror, however, creating the Office of Special Plans to [hound out enough evidence](#) to justify an invasion, and in February 2002, he uttered one of his most famous - and baffling - quotes of his career:

“Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns - the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tends to be the difficult ones.”

In March 2003, the US began its attack on Iraq, launching a “shock and awe” aerial bombardment prior to a ground invasion. Rumsfeld dismissed any notion the war would be long, costly, or demand a large number of troops, believing a swift strike to remove Hussein and his immediate cadres from office would be sufficient to turn Iraq into a reliable client state with some sort of democratic governance.

Instead, a massive insurgency erupted against the US occupation, and three-and-a-half years later, the war was no closer to being won and thousands of Americans and Iraqis were dead. Rumsfeld was [at one point in 2004](#) accused of using an automatic signing machine for the condolence letters mailed to the families of fallen US soldiers.

“Freedom is untidy,” [Rumsfeld remarked](#) in April 2003 in response to reports of widespread looting in the Iraqi capital accompanying the fall of Hussein's government, portraying it as part of the cost of the liberation.

Nor were the purported weapons of mass destruction Rumsfeld had claimed Hussein possessed and threatened other nations with ever found, either. Months after the invasion, he continued to claim US intelligence knew the locations of the weapons, which were supposedly in the western desert near the Syrian border.

Rumsfeld also presided over the torture of detainees in US prisons like Guantamao and Abu Ghraib, admitting his culpability in the scandal in 2004. The American Civil Liberties Union and other human rights groups filed several lawsuits against him on behalf of torture victims, but a [federal judge ruled](#) he could not “be held personally responsible for actions taken in connection with his government job.”

Estimates of the number of Iraqis killed in the US war in Iraq range from 110,000 by the [Associated Press](#), covering the years 2003 to 2009, to more than 654,000 [by the Lancet](#) medical journal, covering the years 2003 to 2006. US forces left Iraq in 2011, following the termination of a status of forces agreement by Baghdad. According to [Pentagon statistics](#), 4,418 US soldiers were killed in the Iraq War.

Political Departure and Final Years

As the war continued to worsen, Rumsfeld faced increasing pressure to resign, including from US and NATO generals, to which he eventually gave in on Election Day, 2006.

After his departure, Rumsfeld published his memoir in 2011. He made occasional forays into political life, criticizing then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the NATO overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, and sounding off in support of Donald Trump's presidential bid in 2016. Until the end of his life, Rumsfeld remained adamant that he had made the right decisions about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

[He died in Taos](#), New Mexico, surrounded by family on June 30, 2021, at the age of 88.

"History may remember him for his extraordinary accomplishments over six decades of public service, but for those who knew him best and whose lives were forever changed as a result, we will remember his unwavering love for his wife Joyce, his family and friends, and the integrity he brought to a life dedicated to country," his family said in a statement.

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Spy Chief of Peruvian Ex-Dictator Recorded Trying to Bribe Election Officials to Ensure Fujimori Win

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Keiko Fujimori, presidential candidate for Peru's right-wing party Fuerza Popular, stands accused of corrupt dealings and money laundering and has spent much of the campaign in pretrial detention. She is likely to go to prison if she loses the election, the final result of which she has managed to halt delivery for weeks.

Vladimiro Montesinos, the former head of Peru's National Intelligence Service under right-wing dictator Alberto Fujimori, has been revealed as attempting to bribe several senior election officials to turn the contested presidential election in favor of his former boss' daughter, Keiko Fujimori.

Montesinos made as many as 17 phone calls to Pedro Rejas, a retired military officer and former supporter of Fujimori in which he attempted to coordinate the bribing of three of the four members of Peru's National Jury of Elections (JNE) to make Keiko Fujimori, the candidate from the right-wing Fuerza Popular party, the winner. According to [the Guardian](#), Rejas turned these recordings over to the authorities, revealing the plot.

In one of the recordings, [Montesinos tells Rejas](#) just days after the election that he must "make them understand, the father or the girl ... we are trying to help in a common objective ... I am simply trying to help because if not they will screw themselves, the girl will end up in prison."

Peruvian investigative journalism outlet [IDL - Reporteros revealed](#) on Tuesday the close connections between Montesinos and Luis Arce, the JNE magistrate who attempted to resign last week after the body decided for the tenth time to reject Fujimori's calls to nullify up to 200,000 ballots. Their lasting connection has been Guillermo Sendón, a lawyer, Fujimori supporter and affiliate of Arce's, who Montesinos tells Rejas to use as an intermediary in one of the recordings. Sendón denied having recent contact with Arce in an interview with the outlet.

Fujimori has been [attempting to overturn](#) the results of the June 6 election, in which she received 44,000 less votes than Pedro Castillo, the candidate from the left-wing Peru Libre party. Fujimori has claimed that Peru Libre won through fraud, and has succeeded at stalling the JNE from declaring Castillo the winner for more than three weeks.

Earlier this week, she asked President Francisco Sagasti to appeal to international organizations to [audit the June 6](#) election. However, the Organization of American States, the European Union, the United States and other observers have not reported evidence of fraud, and have hailed Peru's National Office of Electoral Processes (ONPE) for a job well done.

The JNE has until July 28 to declare a winner, or Congress will have to decide.

Montesinos was the feared ex-spymaster of Alberto Fujimori, who ruled Peru with an iron fist from 1990 to 2000. He used the intelligence service to control the military, courts, and the media, ensuring continuing support for Fujimori's harsh neoliberal privatization programs and a brutal counterinsurgency war against the Sendero Luminoso communist movement.

Fujimori has been in prison for corruption and human rights crimes since 2007, and his daughter has pledged to pardon him if she becomes president. Montesinos has also long been imprisoned since 2001, having served 20 years of a 25-year sentence for arms trafficking and corruption committed under Fujimori.

[According to Andina](#), Peru's defense ministry has confirmed that he made the calls from the maximum security naval prison in Callao, and has removed three guards and one officer from their positions for the security breach.

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'Smallville' Actress Allison Mack Receives 3-Year Prison Sentence in Nxivm Sex Cult Case by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Nxivm was founded in the late-1990s as a multi-level marketing company that claimed to offer a variety of self-help seminars for the professional world; however, the firm has since been characterized as a cult that engaged in sex trafficking and forced labor, as well as committing racketeering.

Allison Mack, a high-ranking member of the Nxivm group and former actress of the television series "Smallville," was sentenced to three years in prison on Wednesday on charges that she purposefully manipulated women into becoming sex slaves for the group's leader.

In addition to the prison stay, the disgraced actress is also expected to pay a \$20,000 fine and complete a total of 1,000 community service hours as part of her sentencing, the US Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York has [revealed](#).

Although federal guidelines indicated that Mack faced between 14 and 17.5 years behind bars, prosecutors previously acknowledged that she deserved less time on account of her ongoing cooperation with investigators involved in the Nxivm case.

Ahead of the sentencing, Mack renounced Keith Raniere, the group's former spiritual leader, and told the courtroom that she was consumed with "remorse and guilt" for her past actions as member of Nxivm. "I made choices I will forever regret," she said.

US District Judge Nicholas Garaufis, who oversaw the legal proceedings, later commented that while he believed Mack's apology was sincere, she still deserved a serious sentencing as she was a "willing and proactive ally" of Raniere.

"In Nxivm language, you are a slave as well as a master. It's hard to determine a sentence for a defendant who is also her co-conspirator's victim," Garaufis told Mack. "Your punishment should serve as a forceful deterrent and a serious sentence is important, but I don't doubt that you were also manipulated."

As Garaufis read aloud the sentencing, Mack remained silent. The actress was subsequently allowed to walk free from the courtroom with the stipulation that she surrender herself to authorities by September 29.

Jessica Joan, a victim of the cult who blasted Mack in her courtroom testimony, had previously told Garaufis that Mack deserved no mercy, as she is a "predator and an evil human being" who was "cut from the same cloth" as Raniere. Following the sentencing, Joan [told](#) the New York Post that she respected the sentence.

Mack previously pleaded guilty to one count of racketeering and one count of racketeering conspiracy in April 2019 after prosecutors accused her of recruiting sex slaves for Raniere and DOS, a subgroup of Nxivm described as an all-female secret society that forced individuals to be sexually subservient to Raniere.

After her arrest in 2018, Mack eventually flipped on Raniere and provided a bevy of information on the [inner workings](#) of the Nxivm and Raniere's treatment of members, such as the use of derogatory language and branding practices.

Mack's Wednesday sentencing comes after those of [Raniere](#) and Seagram heiress and Nxivm benefactor [Clare Bronfman](#), who were sentenced to 120 years and nearly 7 years in prison, respectively.

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Top Pentagon Official Placed on Leave Over Suspected Disclosure of Classified Information by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

US government officials have yet to provide a fuller picture surrounding the alleged disclosure of classified information, citing an ongoing investigation into the matter. It's unclear how long it may take for details to be publicly released.

A high-ranking official in the US Department of Defense who has been overseeing the agency's new cybersecurity efforts was recently placed on leave over allegations that the individual was involved in the disclosure of classified information, reports detailed on Tuesday.

Citing an obtained memorandum, [Bloomberg News](#) identified the official at the center of the suspected information leak as Katie Arrington, who served as the chief information security officer for the Pentagon's acquisition and sustainment office.

The Bloomberg report details that Arrington was placed on administrative leave on May 11 after being informed of the security breach.

A memo from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment that was “made available” to the publication states that Arrington’s security clearance was being suspended as “a result of a reported Unauthorized Disclosure of Classified Information and subsequent removal of access by the National Security Agency.”

“If this preliminary decision becomes final, you will not be eligible for access to classified information ... [or] ... assignments to duties that have been designated national security sensitive,” the memo, which provides no details on the alleged information leak, reads.

Mark Zaid, Arrington’s legal representative, relayed to the outlet that his client will remain on leave for the duration of the department’s routine preliminary investigation into such claims.

“She has neither been fired nor had her security clearance revoked,” he underscored.

However, in [comments](#) to The Hill, Zaid explained that the investigation “has been dragging on for weeks with little movement,” as the US intelligence agency has delayed providing Arrington with an explanation for “no reason”.

Zaid further acknowledged that the current circumstance is “causing harm” to his client, and is “denying her due process.” The lawyer described the agency’s behavior as “inexcusable.”

The [biography](#) listed by the Defense Department states that Arrington has over 15 years of cyber experience, and that her time at companies Booz Allen Hamilton, Centuria Corporation and Dispersive Networks granted her a “unique experience” in working alongside the US government at varying scales.

Prior to joining the Pentagon workforce in early 2019, Arrington took to the political field by serving in the South Carolina Legislature as a two-term Republican state representative.

Arrington later lost her [2018 congressional seat](#) when placed against former state Rep. Joe Cunningham.

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CDC Director Reiterates Vaccinated Americans Not Required to Wear Mask at All Times
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The World Health Organization (WHO) recently sparked alarms after officials called on all individuals, including those who have been vaccinated against COVID-19, to adhere to masking protocols in order to curb the spread of the highly contagious delta variant. The strain is presently active in 92 countries.

Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, reiterated on Wednesday that persons vaccinated against COVID-19 are not required to wear masks in most situations.

Walensky relayed to the American public during a Wednesday interview on NBC’s “Today” that the health agency is effectively leaving it up to local officials to establish set guidelines for masking practices.

“Local policymakers need to make policies for their local environment,” the director said, emphasizing that such steps need to be especially taken in places where low vaccinations have

prompted a surge in new infections. "Those masking policies are not to protect the vaccinated, they're to protect the unvaccinated."

"If you are vaccinated, you are safe from the variants that are circulating here in the United States," she later underscored.

Speaking to the WHO's recent call for those vaccinated to mask up, Walensky conceded that the recommendation was issued with a global aspect in mind, a consideration that mostly touches on the rising delta cases abroad.

"The WHO really does have to make recommendations for an entire world," the official acknowledged. "Here in the United States we're fortunate... and really quite protected from the variants that we have circulating here."

To date, at least 66.5% of US adults have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, with another 57.4% of adults having been fully vaccinated. Mask mandates were widely lifted in late April for vaccinated individuals, although some restrictions have remained when indoors. However, [data](#) from California-based genomics company Helix has indicated that delta cases make up about 40% of new COVID-19 cases, as the strain has emerged in hundreds of communities across the US. Health officials have warned that the delta strain is more than likely to become the dominant variant nationwide, as well as globally.

Aside from the WHO, calls for Americans to prolong masking practices have also come from officials in [Illinois](#) and California's [Los Angeles County](#) after suffering devastating waves of the delta variant.

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Bill Cosby Exits Prison After Pennsylvania's Highest Court Overturns Sexual Assault Convictions

by [Evan Craighead](#)

In September 2018, Pennsylvania Judge Steven T. O'Neill sentenced Bill Cosby to three to 10 years behind bars, five months after Cosby was convicted of sexually assaulting former Temple University employee Andrea Constand in January 2004. Cosby, once heralded as "America's Dad," was convicted on three counts of aggravated indecent sexual assault.

Bill Cosby exited the State Correctional Institution Phoenix in Shippack, Pennsylvania, on Wednesday, just hours after the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania overturned the 2019 sexual assault convictions against the 83-year-old.

At the time of his release on June 30, Cosby had already served more than two years of the now-vacated [three to 10-year sentence](#).

Per the high court's ruling, the initial 2005 "non-prosecution agreement" with then-Montgomery County District Attorney Bruce L. Castor Jr. should have prevented Cosby from being charged in relation to the case some 10 years later.

"In light of these circumstances, the subsequent decision by successor D.A.s to prosecute Cosby violated Cosby's due process rights," wrote Justice David Wecht. "There is only one

remedy that can completely restore Cosby to the status quo ante. He must be discharged, and any future prosecution on these particular charges must be barred."

After Castor left office in 2008, his successors moved to reopen the case and [ultimately slapped Cosby with charges](#) related to the drugging and molestation of Andrea Constand.

Montgomery County DA Kevin Steele issued charges shortly before the 12-year period expired for the crime's statute of limitations.

Constand, who is gay, alleged that on a night in January 2004, Cosby gave her what he referred to as a type of herbal medication, according to a [probable cause affidavit](#). At the time, Constand was in a relationship with a woman, and claimed she saw Cosby as her mentor.

"I said, 'One night around this time last year I was invited to Mr. Cosby's house and he gave me pills and he sexually violated me without me consenting,'" Constand said, recounting to detectives what she told her mother.

An arrest affidavit declared that Cosby was "fondling [Constand's] breasts, put his hand in her pants" and "penetrated her vagina with his fingers." The affidavit also claimed Cosby - 35 years Constand's senior - "took her right hand and placed it on his penis."

[Numerous sexual assault allegations](#) were leveled against the now-83-year-old during the inception of the #MeToo movement, which seeks to highlight allegations of sexual assault and/or the abuse of power. The polarizing movement has primarily focused on rich and powerful men, including male celebrities.

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Watch: Virgin Orbit Launches Seven Research Satellites Into Earth's Orbit
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Back in January, Virgin Group subsidiary Virgin Orbit confirmed that its LauncherOne rocket reached Earth's orbit and deployed 10 payloads for the Launch Services Program of the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The launch came as Virgin Orbit's second LauncherOne mission, and the first successful demonstration.

California-based satellite launch company Virgin Orbit successfully launched a total of seven space research satellites - or CubeSats - into Earth's orbit on Wednesday, marking the company's first commercial payload mission with its LauncherOne rocket.

To begin its "Tubular Bells: Part One" mission, Virgin Orbit's Cosmic Girl - a modified Boeing 747 jet - traveled from the Mojave Air and Space Port in Mojave, California, to a drop point off the coast of Southern California.

Around 7:47 a.m. local time, Cosmic Girl released its LauncherOne rocket, which then completed a two-stage separation that allowed it to "perfectly hit" the target orbit and deploy its payload.

Virgin Orbit disclosed via Twitter that two of the launched satellites - 3U CubeSats STORK-4 and STORK-5 - belong to Polish developer SatRevolution. The company [noted in a Tuesday release](#) that it had signed a "Memorandum of Understanding" with the Wrocław, Poland-based developer, agreeing to potentially launch "hundreds of additional satellites."

BRIK-II, another payload launched on Wednesday, is a 6U military CubeSat military of the Royal Netherlands Air Force. The military satellite will reportedly allow the Dutch military to test communications technologies to determine the usability of CubeSats to support combat operations.

Names of the remaining four satellites were not divulged, but the launch company did note the CubeSats were linked to the Rapid Agile Launch Initiative of the US Department of Defense's Space Test Program.

The Pentagon program's mission, dubbed STP-27VPA, is the first of its kind.

"The team did a phenomenal job," said Virgin Orbit Chief Executive Officer Dan Hart, [as reported by SpaceNews](#). "Every single countdown has its own personality. This one had a couple of little, tiny turns along the way. The team just jumped on those, resolved them quickly." Virgin Orbit conducted a livestream of the event that has since been archived on YouTube. Wednesday's mission marks the third demonstration of the LauncherOne, and the [second consecutive successful launch](#) for Virgin One.

The company's first successful demonstration [took place on January 17](#), when Virgin One's Cosmic Girl Launch Demo 2 mission successfully deployed 10 payloads for a NASA-affiliated program

Virgin Group founder Richard Branson said the launch company's "magnificent flight is the culmination of many years of hard work and will also unleash a whole new generation of innovators on the path to orbit."

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James Franco to Pay More Than \$2.2 Million to Settle Sexual Exploitation Lawsuit by [Evan Craighead](#)

Last year, two former students of Oscar-nominated US actor James Franco claimed that they, along with their Studio 4 Film School classmates, were encouraged to perform explicit sex scenes while studying under Franco. The former students alleged that they were taken advantage of financially and sexually at the school, which was shuttered in 2017.

Franco and his associates have agreed to pay \$2,235,000 to settle a 2020 lawsuit alleging that he and his business partners at the Studio 4 Film School engaged in inappropriate behavior with students and, at times, forced them to perform sex scenes on camera, The Hollywood Reporter revealed on Wednesday.

[The lawsuit in question](#), filed by former students Sarah Tither-Kaplan and Toni Gaal, alleged that Franco and his associates "created and maintained a pipeline of young, impressionable women who were funneled to Franco and his 'boys' with the intent to exploit them financially and sexually."

Some scenes recorded on camera were performed in an ["orgy type setting"](#) that went beyond industry standards, according to the complaint.

Franco has denied the allegations.

Per the tentative agreement, Tither-Kaplan would receive \$670,500, while Gaal would get \$223,500 -- both before lawyer fees.

Other students would receive the remaining funds, totaling around \$1.341 million.

"While Defendants continue to deny the allegations in the Complaint, they acknowledge that Plaintiffs have raised important issues; and all parties strongly believe that now is a critical time to focus on addressing the mistreatment of women in Hollywood," read part of the settlement, as reported by the outlet. "All agree on the need to make sure that no one in the entertainment industry — regardless of race, religion, disability, ethnicity, background, gender or sexual orientation — faces discrimination, harassment or prejudice of any kind."

Prior to the formal allegations, Franco told "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert" host Stephen Colbert in 2018 that the emerging accusations of misconduct were false.

"If I've done something wrong, I will fix it," he said.

The proposed settlement deal now awaits approval by a Los Angeles judge.

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US, UK Intelligence Agencies Accuse Russia's GRU of 'Malicious Cyber Activities - Advisory

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The US and UK intelligence communities issued an advisory on Thursday warning of alleged malicious cyber activities by the Russian military intelligence unit, known as the GRU.

"The National Security Agency (NSA), Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) released a Cybersecurity Advisory today exposing malicious cyber activities by Russian military intelligence against US and global organizations, starting from mid-2019 and likely ongoing," the advisory said.

The advisory details the methods the GRU may use to breach networks.

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Biden Briefed on Rescue Efforts at Collapsed Florida Building by Governor, Mayor

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden has received a briefing on rescue efforts at the collapsed residential building site in Surfside, Florida as the search and rescue operations have entered the eighth day.

Florida governor Ron DeSantis and Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava were among the officials at the briefing.

"We're not going anywhere," Biden said, urging those at the table to "tell me what you need." He added that it is necessary to provide families of the victims with psychological help in the days and months that follow.

The tragedy in Surfside took place in the early hours of Thursday morning last week when a 12-story residential building partially collapsed. The death toll in the incident stands at 18 with 147 residents still unaccounted for. The US Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology has launched a probe into the incident.

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Non-Fossil Fuels Provide 21% of US Energy in 2020, Highest Since Early 1900s- Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Nuclear power and renewables supplied more than 20 percent of the energy used in the United States last year, a level not seen for non-fossil fuels in the past century, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said on Thursday.

"Fossil fuels - specifically petroleum, natural gas, and coal - accounted for 79 percent of total US energy consumption in 2020. About 21 percent of US energy consumption in 2020 came from non-fossil fuel sources such as renewables and nuclear - the highest share since the early 1900s," an EIA report said.

Among US non-fossil fuel energy sources, renewable energy consumption increased from 11.4 quadrillion British thermal units (quads) in 2019 to a record high of 11.6 quads in 2020.

Renewable energy was the only U.S. fuel source whose share of total energy consumption increased in 2020, the report added.

In the early 20th century, hydropower provided the biggest source of energy in the United States with wood a distant second, according to reports.

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UN Urges Israel to Allow Aid Into Gaza, Both Sides to Return to Talks

UNITED NATIONS, June 30 (Sputnik) - UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo on Thursday called on Israel to facilitate the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza and urged both sides to return to negotiations supported by the Middle East Quartet.

DiCarlo asked the international community to generously respond to the Gaza humanitarian appeal seeking \$164 million to deliver reconstruction aid after the most recent escalation between Hamas and Israel in May.

"I join the appeals to Israel to facilitate the entry of humanitarian aid and reconstruction materials into Gaza," DiCarlo said at the UN International Conference on the Question of Jerusalem.

"I urge Israeli and Palestinian leaders, supported by a revitalized Quartet, to recommit to a path of credible negotiations to address all the key outstanding permanent status issues," she added.

DiCarlo also appealed to Hamas and other militant groups in Gaza to refrain from attacks and provocations that risk destabilizing the situation.

Deadly clashes in East Jerusalem over evictions of Palestinians early last month led to the worst violence between Israel and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip in recent years. Palestinian militants launched several thousand rockets toward Israel. In response, Israel fired retaliatory strikes against Gaza. In Israel, 12 people were killed and over 50 were seriously wounded during the hostilities. The death toll among Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, Jerusalem and the West Bank topped 270.

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Rescuers at Miami Collapse Site Heard Female Voices For Several Hours - Rescue Chief

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) – The rescue teams operating at the site of the collapsed residential building in Surfside heard audible female voices coming from the rubble for several hours but then the voices stopped, Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Chief Alan Cominsky said on Thursday, adding that the teams will continue searching for survivors.

"We did hear audible sounds, and they were searching for female voices. We heard [these voices] for several hours but eventually, we did not hear a voice anymore," he said at a briefing to the press.

He added that the teams have been working in an unsafe environment and reiterated that the operation aims to rescue victims and continue search efforts.

Rescue operations have been underway at the collapse site since the building in the outskirts of Miami, Florida collapsed last week. The death toll currently stands at 18, with 147 residents being still unaccounted for. The US Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology has launched a probe into the incident.

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Biden Visit Not to Impact Rescue Operations at Florida Building Collapse Site - Mayor

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's visit to the collapsed residential building site in Surfside, Florida, will not affect the search and rescue operations there, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said on Thursday.

Biden left Washington earlier in the day and is currently meeting with rescue crews and relatives of those still unaccounted for in building collapse incident.

"President Biden's visit today will have no impact on what happens at the site. The search and rescue operation will continue as soon as it is safe to do so," Cava said.

The 12-story residential building in Surfside partially collapsed in the early hours last Thursday. Since, massive search and rescue operations have been undertaken to pull residents out from the rubble. The death toll in the incident stands at 18 with 147 residents still unaccounted for. The US Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology has recently launched an investigation into the causes of the building collapse. According to US media reports, an engineer who inspected the building three years ago warned the owners of major structural damage and recommended repairs.

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Blue Origin First Human Spaceflight to Include 82-Year-Old Female Pilot - Bezos

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - An octogenarian female pilot, who completed astronaut training with NASA's project Mercury only to have the Women in Space program canceled, will finally make it to outer space later this month on the private rocket company Blue Origin's first human space flight, company founder Jeff Bezos said on Thursday.

"No one has waited longer," Bezos said of 82-year-old Wally Funk in a Twitter message. "In 1961, Wally Funk was at the top of her class as part of the 'Mercury 13' Woman in Space program. Despite completing their training, the program was cancelled, and none of the thirteen flew."

Fulfilling a lifelong mission to become an astronaut, Funk will fly to space on Blue Origin's first human flight on July 20 as an "honored guest," joining Jeff Bezos, his brother Mark Bezos and the winner of an auction for a fourth seat, a company press release said.

In the 1960s, Funk was the youngest graduate of the Women in Space Program, a privately-funded project that tested female pilots for astronaut fitness. Later known as the Mercury 13 - thirteen American women successfully underwent the same physiological and psychological screening tests as the astronauts selected by NASA for Project Mercury, but they never flew to space, the release said.

Funk later became the first female inspector for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the first female air safety investigator for the National Transportation Safety Board, the release added.

Blue Origin created a vertical takeoff and landing system called New Shepard in a bid to open outer space to tourists. The system consists of a rocket designed to jettison a crew capsule at a height of more than 60 miles. The capsule then lingers in zero gravity space for several minutes before returning to earth in a parachute-assisted landing.

A live auction prior to the maiden July 20 flight will award the fourth seat to the highest bidder, the company said earlier.

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Brazil Auto Parts Giant Agrees to Revise Teksid Takeover Deal – Justice Department

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) – Brazilian engine parts company Tupy has agreed to restructure its takeover agreement with the automotive metal castings firm Teksid because of US antitrust concerns, the Department of Justice announced on Thursday.

“Auto parts supplier Tupy agreed to restructure its acquisition of Teksid after the Department of Justice raised concerns that the merger would result in higher prices and reduced quality and timeliness of production for crucial components used in heavy-duty engines,” the Justice Department explained in a news release.

As initially proposed, the deal would have combined the two most significant suppliers of engine blocks and cylinder heads for heavy-duty engines to customers in North America as key inputs for engines used in large trucks, construction and agricultural equipment and many other vehicles, the release said.

“Following the restructuring, Tupy will acquire only Teksid’s iron operations in Brazil and Portugal. Teksid will retain its iron operations in Mexico and continue to compete with Teksid to supply US customers,” the Justice Department said.

Tupy, a Brazilian company, is the largest supplier of iron blocks and heads for heavy-duty engines to customers in North America. Tupy owns four iron foundries, two in Brazil and two in Mexico.

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Search Paused at Florida Collapse Site Due to Structure Stability Concerns - Mayor

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) – Search and rescue efforts were halted overnight at the building collapse site in Surfside, Florida due to concerns about the standing structure’s stability and will resume once it is safe to do so, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said on Thursday.

“We were forced to halt operations on flaps in the early hours of the morning due to structural concerns about the standing structure. We are doing everything we can to ensure that the safety of our first responders is paramount, and will continue our search and rescue operation as soon as it is safe to do so,” Cava told reporters during a press briefing.

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Trudeau Congratulates Canadians on National Holiday, Urges Reflection on Indigenous Issues

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Thursday extended his best wishes to Canadians on the country’s national holiday, but noted the occasion is a time for

reflection amid the discovery of the remains of hundreds of children at sites of former forced assimilation schools.

In recent weeks, Canadian First Nations communities have uncovered hundreds of unmarked graves at the sites of former residential schools, where indigenous children were forcibly sent to be assimilated into European Canadian society.

"Today, we celebrate our country and everyone who calls it home. We also reflect on everything we have accomplished, and look forward to what more we have to do," Trudeau said in a statement. "While we acknowledge our successes, we must also recognize that, for some, Canada Day is not yet a day of celebration."

Trudeau pointed out that while the past cannot be changed, Canadians can recommit to building a better, fairer and more equitable country.

While the majority of Canadians still plan to commemorate the country's national holiday, according to polls, protests are still planned throughout the country amid an effort to "cancel" Canada Day.

Groups are planned at various locations, including in Vancouver, throughout Ontario and some planning to stage demonstrations in front of Canadian flags.

There have been calls by various groups to cancel the annual Canada Day celebration in commemoration of the country's confederation on July 1 before, however, the grisly discovery has ignited widespread anger throughout the country leading to calls for the country to entirely distance itself from its colonial history.

According to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, released in 2015, roughly 150,000 aboriginal children were forcibly assimilated through the residential schools from 1883 to 1998, in a process equated to "cultural genocide."

The report discovered that around 3,200 died in the schools, with the greatest number of deaths taking place before 1940. Schools also had high rates of tuberculosis and other health incidences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with death rates remaining high until the 1950s.

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Trump's Organization Executive to Plead Not Guilty, Fight Tax Charges – Lawyer

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) – Chief financial officer of the Trump Organization Allen Weisselberg will plead not guilty and plans to fight criminal tax charges, the defendant's lawyer said on Thursday.

"Mr. Weisselberg intends to plead not guilty and he will fight these charges in court," the lawyer said in a statement quoted by several US media outlets.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Drop by Over 50,000, Returning Below 400,000 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Weekly filings for jobless benefits in the United States fell by 51,000 last week, the Labor Department said Thursday, bringing the figure below the key 400,000 mark crucial for job market recovery amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending June 26, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 364,000, a decrease of 51,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a statement. "This is the lowest level for initial claims since March 14, 2020 when it was 256,000." The four-week moving average for jobless claims was 392,750, a decrease of 6,000 from the previous week's revised average. This was also the lowest level since March 14, 2020, when it was at 225,500.

The numbers came before the Labor Department's more important monthly non-farm payrolls report for June, due on Friday. Economists polled by US media are expecting a jobs growth of 700,000 for all of last month versus the May expansion of 559,000.

The jobless claims of 364,000 for last week, however, fell short of the anticipated 388,000, raising questions about the target for the monthly number.

"The initial jobless claims have been quirky of late with claims rising over 400,000 the prior two weeks," economist Greg Michalowski said in a comment posted on ForexLive.

Continuing claims for the week ended June 19 — reported with a one-week lag — rose to 3.47 million from 3.41 million during the week to June 12. The small change did not impact the weekly unemployment reading, which remained at 2.5 percent.

More than a year into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring job growth remains one of the main concerns of US policymakers.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. About 8 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, although first-quarter data for 2021 showed a dynamic rebound of 6.4 percent.

The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent economic growth for all of 2021 although Jerome Powell, chairman of the central bank, says he does not expect "full employment" — defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower — to occur anytime soon. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 5.8 percent in May.

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Trump Organization CFO Surrenders to Authorities to Face Tax-Crime Charges

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Trump Organization chief financial officer (CFO) Allen Weisselberg surrendered himself to authorities on Thursday to face charges in a probe of alleged tax-related crimes committed by the former US president's company. Weisselberg and his lawyer entered the Manhattan District Attorney's office at about 6:20 a.m. local time, television footage showed. The attorney's office is expected to announce the criminal charges against Weisselberg and the Trump Organization later in the day. Shortly after Weisselberg turned himself over, the Trump Organization issued a statement denying that the CFO had committed any crimes during his 48 years at the company. "He is now being used by the Manhattan District Attorney as a pawn in a scorched earth attempt to harm the former President," the statement said. "This is not justice; this is politics." The indictment marks the first criminal charges against the former US president's company since prosecutors began investigating the organization more than two years ago. The Manhattan District Attorney's Office and New York Attorney General's Office have been investigating whether Weisselberg and other employees illegally avoided paying taxes on perks - such as cars, apartments and private-school tuition - received from the Trump Organization.

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RPT - US Still Feeling Consequences of Rumsfeld's 'False Step' on Iraq - Ex-CIA Officer

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The world is still feeling the devastating consequences of decisions made by former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his leading role in America's attack and occupation of Iraq, former CIA officer Phil Giraldi told Sputnik. Rumsfeld, widely considered the architect of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, died at the age of 88 in Taos, New Mexico, his family announced on Wednesday. Rumsfeld served as US Defense Secretary twice, under President Gerald Ford in the 1970s and in the George W. Bush administration from 2001-2006. "With eyes open he allowed himself to be manipulated into attacking a country [Iraq] that in no way threatened the United States," Giraldi said. "The consequences of that false step are still being experienced to this day, with a continued presence of US forces in Iraq as well as in neighboring Syria against the wishes and stability of both countries."

Both military presences, Giraldi added, remained "part and parcel of an ongoing war crime by the United States."

Rumsfeld was also known for witty - yet controversial - quotes including the now famous (or infamous) "there are known unknowns" about intelligence matters. He also once rhetorically posed the question: "Are we [the United States] creating more terrorists than we're killing?" He also came under fire over the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and enhanced interrogation techniques that many rights groups believe amounted to torture.

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UPDATE 2 - Ex-US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld Dies at 88

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, a major architect of the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq, has died at the age of 88, his family said.

"It is with deep sadness that we share the news of the passing of Donald Rumsfeld, an American statesman and devoted husband, father and great-grandfather," the family said in a statement on Wednesday. "At 88, he was surrounded by family in his beloved Taos, New Mexico."

A family spokesperson told the New York Times the cause of Rumsfeld's death was multiple myeloma, a type of blood cancer.

Rumsfeld served as Defense Secretary twice, from 1975 to 1977 under President Gerald Ford, for whom he was also White House Chief of Staff, and from 2001 to 2006 for President George W. Bush.

He was a driving force behind the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan but failed during his five years in power to win either war or to capture or kill al-Qaeda (terrorist group banned in Russia) leader Osama bin Laden.

Rumsfeld was the subject of intense criticism for his policies, especially on Iraq and Afghanistan. He also approved several of the most expensive and unsuccessful military systems in recorded history, the Future Combat System, the F-35 aircraft and the Zumwalt-class warship, of which only three were completed instead of the 32 originally planned.

A hard line hawk on national security policies, Rumsfeld also championed the expansion of NATO to include the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. He was a strong supporter of the 2001 PATRIOT Act which vastly increased the powers and surveillance capabilities of the US national security apparatus.

He was also condemned by human rights groups over abuse of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and enhanced interrogation techniques.

Rumsfeld was also known for witty - yet controversial - quotes including the now famous (or infamous) "there are known unknowns" about intelligence matters. He also once rhetorically posed the question: "Are we [the United States] creating more terrorists than we're killing?" Current Pentagon Chief Lloyd Austin in a statement extended his condolences to the family and hailed the former leader's "probing intellect" and abiding commitment to the US.

Austin also said Rumsfeld served in the US Navy from 1954 to 1957 as a pilot and a flight instructor, then continued his service as a reservist until 1975, when he first became Secretary of Defense.

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US Safety Agency Launches Technical Probe Into Miami Building Collapse - Official

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology said in a press release it will launch a technical investigation into what caused the collapse of the 12-story Surfside condo building last week.

"Today the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) announced it would launch a full technical investigation into what caused the partial collapse of the Champlain Towers South Condominium in Surfside, Florida, on June 24, 2021," the release said on Wednesday.

NIST officials are on site of the incident but will not enter the actual ground of the collapse until it is considered safe to do so, the release said.

The agency said its investigation could reveal potential issues for other buildings near the collapse, along the coastline.

The investigation will not interfere with search and rescue operations, and the agency is cooperating with all levels of government responding to the collapse, the release said.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Miami-Dade County mayor said the death toll is currently 18 and 147 residents of the Surfside condo building are still unaccounted for.

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Pentagon Chief Austin Extends Condolences to Rumsfeld Family, Hails Ex-Leader's Commitment

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in a statement said he is saddened by the passing of former Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld and hailed his extensive duty to the United States.

Rumsfeld died in Taos, New Mexico, at the age of 88, his family said on Wednesday. He served as US Defense Secretary twice, under President Gerald Ford in the 1970s and in the George W. Bush administration from 2001-2006.

"I was saddened to hear today of the passing of former Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld," Austin said on Wednesday. "Over the decades of his remarkable career, from Congress to the White House to the Pentagon, Secretary Rumsfeld was propelled by his boundless energy, probing intellect, and abiding commitment to serve his country."

Austin extended his condolences to Rumsfeld's family on behalf of the Defense Department.

Rumsfeld also served in the US Navy from 1954 to 1957 as a pilot and a flight instructor, then continued his service as a reservist until 1975, when he first became Secretary of Defense, Austin added.

Rumsfeld, widely considered the architect of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, faced heavy criticism for the rush to war and the occupation of the middle eastern country as well as for abuse of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and enhanced interrogation techniques.

Rumsfeld was also known for witty - yet controversial - quotes including the now famous (or infamous) "there are known unknowns" about intelligence matters. He also once rhetorically posed the question: "Are we [the United States] creating more terrorists than we're killing?"

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US Still Feeling Consequences of Rumsfeld's 'False Step' on Iraq - Ex-CIA Officer

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"With eyes open he allowed himself to be manipulated into attacking a country [Iraq] that in no way threatened the United States," Giraldi said. "The consequences of that false step are still being experienced to this day, with a continued presence of US forces in Iraq as well as in neighboring Syria against the wishes and stability of both countries."

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Saudi Arabia Prepared to Be Regional Hub for Production of COVID-19 Vaccines - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Saudi Arabia is ready to become a regional hub for the production of COVID-19 vaccines so that it may serve underserved surrounding communities, the Saudi government said in a press release.

Supervisor General of King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre, Dr. Abdullah Al Rabeeah conveyed this message during a G20 event in Brindisi, Italy.

"In his remarks at the gathering, Dr. Al Rabeeah stated that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was uniquely equipped and ready to be a regional hub for the production of COVID-19 vaccines and other medicines and supplies, as well as for logistics activities," the release said on Wednesday. Al Rabeeah emphasized that Saudi Arabia would be able to get COVID-19 vaccines to countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia that are still experiencing high rates of infections. Al Rabeeah also said the regional hub could be used as a distribution center for medical gases, protective equipment, and other items.

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Miami Building Collapse Death Toll Rises to 18 After Finding 2 Children - Mayor

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The death toll in the 12-story Surfside condo collapse has risen to 18 after two bodies were found in the rubble, ages four and ten, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava told reporters.

"Since our last briefing, I am very pained to tell you we found two additional bodies in the rubble, which brings our total count to 18," Cava said on Wednesday evening. "It is also with great sorrow, a real pain, that I have to share with you that the two of these [bodies] were children, age four and ten."

Cava noted 147 residents of the building are still unaccounted for.

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Multnomah County in Oregon Registers 45 Deaths Since Friday Due to Excessive Heat

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Multnomah County in the state Oregon said in a press release that 45 residents have died due to excessive hot weather conditions since last Friday.

"The Multnomah County Medical Examiner Program has identified 45 deaths related to excessive heat since Friday, June 25," the release said on Wednesday. "The preliminary cause of death is hyperthermia. Hyperthermia is an abnormally high body temperature caused by a failure of the body to deal with heat coming from the environment."

The release added that the county has received a record number of emergency calls during this period,

The people who died ranged from ages 44 to 97, the release said. By comparison, between 2017 to 2019 12 people died in the county from hyperthermia.

Between Friday and Monday, the county set up three cooling centers and used nine libraries as cooling space, the release said, adding that some 8,000 residents came into these cooling space.

The county has distributed nearly 80,000 water bottles to residents, the release added. The Pacific Northwest was hit with a heat wave over the weekend, with temperatures reaching all-time record high of 116 degrees Fahrenheit on Monday.

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Multnomah County in Oregon Registers 45 Deaths Since Friday Due to Excessive Heat

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Multnomah County in the state Oregon said in a press release that 45 residents have died due to excessive hot weather conditions since last Friday. "The Multnomah County Medical Examiner Program has identified 45 deaths related to excessive heat since Friday, June 25," the release said on Wednesday. "The preliminary cause of death is hyperthermia. Hyperthermia is an abnormally high body temperature caused by a failure of the body to deal with heat coming from the environment." The release added that the county has received a record number of emergency calls during this period.

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Biden Signs Bill to Restore Obama Rule to Limit Methane Emissions from Oil, Gas Wells
WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden signed a bill to reinstate an Obama-era rule to limit methane emissions from new oil and gas wells in the United States. "The first bill is going to help us to drastically cut methane pollution," Biden said during a signing ceremony on Wednesday. In August 2020, then President Donald Trump rescinded standards aimed at limiting methane emissions from oil and gas production, processing, transmission and storage. The Trump rule also abolished limits for substances called volatile organic compounds from oil and gas transmission and storage. By terminating Trump's rule, the bill restores 2016 Obama-era laws that required companies to capture methane leaks.

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Report Credits Biden Win to Drop in Trump Support Among Suburban Voters From 2016 Election

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Shifts in US suburban voters' preferences largely explain President Joe Biden's 2020 election victory over former President Donald Trump, according to a report by the PEW Research Center.

"Biden did considerably better among suburban voters in 2020 than [Hillary] Clinton did in 2016 (54 percent for Biden, 45 percent for Clinton), the report released on Wednesday said.

Biden also scored better than Clinton among White voters without a college degree, who proved critical to Trump's victory in 2016, when he won the group by 64-to-28 percent. Biden received 33 percent of votes from this group, the report said.

The report was based on a survey of 11,818 members of Pew's nationally representative American Trends Panel conducted Nov. 12-17, 2020, shortly after the general election.

Researchers then correlated the results using three different commercial voter files that contain official records of voter registration and turnout for 2016, 2018 and 2020.

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Trudeau Says Hopes Pope Will Apologize on Canadian Soil for Forced Assimilation Schools

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is hoping Pope Francis will visit Canada and apologize for the Roman Catholic Church's role in forced assimilation schools after meeting with Indigenous leaders later in the year.

In recent weeks, Canadian First Nations communities have uncovered hundreds of unmarked graves at the sites of former residential schools, where, indigenous children were forcibly sent to be assimilated into European Canadian society. Hours before Trudeau spoke, the Lower Kootenay Band announced they located the remains of 182 individuals at the site of the former St. Eugene's Mission School in Cranbrook, British Columbia.

"I think it is a good piece of news there are going to be meetings of indigenous leaders with His Holiness... I really hope that this time it will lead towards the Pope coming onto Canadian soil and apologizing directly for the responsibility the Catholic Church shares in this part of our history," Trudeau said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

Pope Francis has said that he was pained by the findings of the remains of indigenous children, but has not issued a formal apology on behalf of the Vatican.

According to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, released in 2015, roughly 150,000 aboriginal children were forcibly assimilated through the residential schools from 1883 to 1998, in a process equated to "cultural genocide."

The report discovered that around 3,200 died in the schools, with the greatest number of deaths taking place before 1940. Schools also had high rates of tuberculosis and other health incidences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with death rates remaining high until the 1950s.

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Canada Allots \$145Mln to Advance Gender Equality - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government is allotting \$145.13 million to advance gender equality, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's office (PMO) said.

"Prime Minister Justin Trudeau today participated in the opening ceremony of the Generation Equality Forum and announced nearly \$180 million [US\$145.13 million] to advance gender equality around the world," the PMO said in a statement on Wednesday.

Over \$80 million of the sum will go toward addressing inequalities in unpaid and paid care work, the statement said.

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US Indicts Belgian Firm, 3 Executives For Rigging Defense Contract Bids - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The Belgian security company Seris and three former executives face criminal charges of price fixing and bid rigging for defense-related security services, including a multimillion-dollar contract issued in 2020 to provide services for US Defense Department facilities in Belgium, the Justice Department said.

"The companies and individuals indicted are alleged to have rigged bids submitted to the U.S. Department of Defense and others, and abused the public trust placed in them as providers of security services at critical locations," Acting Assistant US Attorney General Richard Powers said in a press release on Wednesday.

The indictment charges former Seris CEO Danny Vandormael, former Seris Director Peter Verpoort, and former CEO of subcontracting firm G4S Jean Paul Van Avermaet with conspiring to fix prices, rig bids and allocate customers for security contracts. The three defendants worked in Belgium and are Belgian nationals, the release said.

The conspirators agreed in advance which company would win certain security services contracts, and the price that each would bid for the contracts. As a result, the US government received non-competitive and inflated bids, and was deprived of a competitive bidding process. The effort began early as spring 2019 and continued until the summer of 2020, the release added.

The defendants are each charged with a violation of the Sherman Act, which carries a maximum penalty of ten years in prison and a \$1 million fine for individuals and a \$100 million fine for corporations, according to the release.

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Wall Street Has Roaring 2nd Quarter With S&P 500 at Record High, Nasdaq Rising 10%

NEW YORK, June 30 (Sputnik) - Key stocks on Wall Street had a roaring second quarter, with the blue-chip S&P500 notching a record high and the tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite posting a 10 percent gain on Wednesday.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, raced to an all-time high of 4,3003 before closing at 4,297. It was up 0.1 percent on the day, 2 percent on the month and 8 percent for the quarter.

Nasdaq, which includes high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google, settled at 14,504. It was down 0.2 percent on the day but up almost 6 percent for the month and nearly 10 percent higher for the quarter.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, finished at 34,502. It was up 0.6 percent for the day, flat on the month and down 4.6 percent for the quarter.

Most US economic data have been bullish in recent months as the US economy makes progress from exiting the restrictive measures imposed during the coronavirus pandemic.

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SpaceX Sends Over 80 Commercial, Government Spacecraft Into Orbit in 2nd Rideshare Mission

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - SpaceX's second dedicated SmallSat Rideshare Program mission successfully hoisted more than 80 spacecraft into orbit, using a recycled booster and nosecone faring from earlier missions in a successful launch from Cape Canaveral in Florida.

"On board this launch are 85 commercial and government spacecraft (including CubeSats, microsats, and orbital transfer vehicles) and three Starlink satellites. While there are fewer spacecraft on board compared to Transporter-1, this mission is actually launching more mass to orbit for SpaceX's customers," a SpaceX press release said Wednesday.

The Rideshare Program provides launch services for customers that pay SpaceX based on the weight of their respective payloads.

The Falcon 9 launch vehicle's first stage booster previously supported launches of a third generation GPS satellite, the Turksat 5A communications satellite, and five missions to deploy satellites for SpaceX's Starlink internet service, the release said.

The nosecone faring atop the rocket, which protects payloads during launch, was also recycled from two earlier flights, the release added.

The private rocket company led by US entrepreneur Elon Musk has pioneered the recovery and recycling of previously used rocket parts in an attempt to lower costs of spaceflight.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) -

EU-BELARUS TENSIONS

- * EU Delegation to Belarus head Dirk Schuebel went to Brussels for consultations, the European Union's representative office in Minsk told Sputnik on Wednesday.
- * The Belarusian authorities are demanding the Goethe-Institut and the German Academic Exchange Service cease their activities in the country, the German Foreign Ministry said.
- * The Belarusian Foreign Ministry issued a report on human rights violations in Western countries and pointed to the frequent deaths in German prisons and the murder of African-Americans in the United States.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

- * President Joe Biden is eager to start soon US-Russia talks on issues of mutual concern and many of the discussions will be below the level of presidents, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.
- * Russia is ready to search for a balance of interests with the United States, and not only on the issues of strategic stability, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

NATO

- * NATO said on Wednesday that Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg met with Georgian Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze in Brussels to discuss cooperation and security in the Black Sea region.
- * Stoltenberg is scheduled to visit the alliance-led international peacekeeping force KFOR in Kosovo on July 1.

CANADA INDIGENOUS CHILDREN SCANDAL

- * The Lower Kootenay Band said on Wednesday that they have located the remains of 182 individuals at the site of a former Canadian forced assimilation school. The remains were located at the site of the former St. Eugene's Mission School in Cranbrook, British Columbia, which was operated by the Roman Catholic Church between 1912 and the 1970s, the statement said.

RUSSIA OUTLAWS 4 EUROPEAN NGOs

- * The Russian General Prosecutor's Office on Wednesday recognized the activities of four European NGOs, including the Khodorkovsky Foundation, as undesirable in Russia.

TURKEY-RUSSIA COOPERATION

- * Russia values Turkey's position on the development of military cooperation and Ankara's stance to use the first regiment of the S-400 air defense system to ensure its defenses, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said after meeting with his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu on Wednesday.
- * Russia is satisfied with the Moscow-Ankara cooperation on the Montreux Convention, Lavrov said.

* Russia and Turkey are cooperating on the issue of joint production of the Russia coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V, Cavusoglu said.

* Turkey is ready to ensure the safety of Russian tourists, Cavusoglu said.

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US Disburses Over \$13.1Bln in COVID-19 Relief to Tribal Governments - Treasury

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Native American tribal governments received more than \$13.1 billion in COVID-19 relief budgeted in the American Rescue Plan, the US Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

"This represents the disbursement of over 65 percent of the \$20 billion in funding appropriated for Tribal governments in the American Rescue Plan... a key milestone in the whole-of government effort to help communities fight the pandemic, address its economic fallout, and lay the groundwork for a strong recovery," a Treasury Department press release said.

The Treasury Department also began a second distribution consisting of the remaining \$6.65 billion, using a formula based on employment levels, the release said.

In addition, the Treasury Department said it had established a minimum distribution of \$1 million to all tribal governments to "provide a meaningful amount of funding" for each community.

The tribal set-aside reflected a Biden administration effort to deliver support to populations and communities disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, according to the release.

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Rep. Maxine Waters calls on California Governor Newsom to Reduce Barriers to COVID-19 Aid

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - US Congresswoman and Chair of the House Financial Services Committee Maxine Waters called on California Governor Gavin Newsom and Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti to reduce barriers to receiving COVID-19 assistance in a letter sent on Wednesday.

"While I appreciate efforts to improve the distribution of emergency rental assistance and ensure renters are receiving sufficient aid, I urge you to continue to reduce barriers to assistance so that families are not cut off from relief provided by Congress," Waters said.

She said that although she was able to secure \$46.6 billion in emergency rental assistance between the December aid package and the American Rescue Plan, both California and the City of Los Angeles alike have only provided a fraction of the money to landlords.

Waters also added that even prior to the economic hardship brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, California had "crisis levels" of homelessness in the state, with 161,000 Californians living on the streets. She told Newsom and Garcetti in the letter that she was glad to see that California and LA received a large share of the \$5 billion in emergency housing vouchers that

Waters helped secure for homeless and at-risk populations, and looks forward to hearing how the funds assist residents of the state.

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Former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld Dies at 88

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, a major architect of the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq, has died at the age of 88, his family said on Wednesday.

"It is with deep sadness that we share the news of the passing of Donald Rumsfeld, an American statesman and devoted husband, father and great-grandfather," the family said in a statement. "At 88, he was surrounded by family in his beloved Taos, New Mexico."

Rumsfeld served as Defense Secretary twice, from 1975 to 1977 under President Gerald Ford, for whom he was also White House Chief of Staff, and from 2001 to 2006 for President George W. Bush.

He was a driving force behind the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan but failed during his five years in power to win either war or to capture or kill al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

Rumsfeld was the subject of intense criticism for his policies, especially on Iraq and Afghanistan. He also approved several of the most expensive and unsuccessful military systems in recorded history, the Future Combat System, the F-35 aircraft and the Zumwalt-class warship, of which only three were completed instead of the 32 originally planned.

A hard line hawk on national security policies, Rumsfeld also championed the expansion of NATO to include the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. He was a strong supporter of the 2001 PATRIOT Act which vastly increased the powers and surveillance capabilities of the US national security apparatus.

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US House Approves Resolution to Create Committee to Probe January 6 Capitol Unrest

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Wednesday passed a resolution to create a committee in the lower chamber that will investigate the January 6 riot at the Capitol building.

The House approved the measure with a 222-190 vote.

The panel to investigate the January 6 riot will be made up of 13 lawmakers from the House of Representatives, eight will be appointed by Speaker Nancy Pelosi and another five will be appointed in consultation with House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy.

The committee will investigate and report the facts, circumstances, and causes of the January 6 riot at the Capitol building. The panel will also probe the readiness and response of the US

Capitol Police and other federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, including the National Guard and US intelligence agencies.

The committee will be terminated 30 days after it issues a final report of its findings.

Only two Republican lawmakers broke with their party and joined Democrats in backing the formation of the January 6 committee.

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Trump Hints During Visit to US Southern Border He May Run for President in 2024

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump hinted during a visit to the United States' border with Mexico on Wednesday that he may run for for a second term as president in 2024.

"Are you going to be my campaign manager if I do this again?" Trump asked Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick, who chaired his presidential campaign in Texas. "You think I should do it again? Maybe we don't have to, maybe we won't even have to."

Trump made the remarks during a visit to the US-Mexico border in the state of Texas, joined by Governor Greg Abbott. The two criticized the Biden administration on the lack of effort to address the migrant crisis.

Trump said President Joe Biden is destroying the United States and blasted Biden for rolling back his strict immigration policies and for canceling the Keystone XL pipeline.

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"It is with deep sadness that we share the news of the passing of Donald Rumsfeld, an American statesman and devoted husband, father and great-grandfather," the family said in a statement. "At, 88, he was surrounded by family in his beloved Taos, New Mexico."

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US Trade Chief Asks Mexico, Canada for Help Fighting Forced Labor as USMCA Marks Year 1
WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - US Trade Representative Katherine Tai on Wednesday called for greater cooperation from Mexico and Canada in fighting the issue of forced labor as the countries' historic trilateral trade pact approached its first anniversary.

The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) entered into force on July 1, 2020, replacing the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The new pact essentially modernizes NAFTA, including rules regarding labor standards.

"A good next step in this increased cooperation can be on the issue of forced labor," the US trade chief said on the eve of the pact's first year. "The USMCA includes a strong obligation to prohibit the importation of goods produced with forced labor. Working together to address this critical economic and moral issue would send a powerful message to the world."

Hailing the USMA for setting the "strongest labor and environmental standards in any agreement ever," Tai said there was more for the pact to achieve.

Tai noted that the USMCA had a new labor-specific enforcement mechanism to enable greater protection of worker rights in the region.

The agreement, enacted in the US Congress on bilateral support from Republicans led by former president Donald Trump and Democrats aligned to the current Biden administration, also contains intellectual property provisions meant to make things like medicine more affordable for regular people.

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Bill Cosby Released from Prison After Having His Conviction Overturned - Corrections Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Actor and comedian Bill Cosby has been released from prison following the Pennsylvania Supreme Court's decision to overturn his 2018 sexual assault conviction, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections said on Wednesday.

"Mr. Cosby was released from SCI Phoenix just before 2:30 p.m.," the department said on their official Twitter account.

Cosby was convicted of sexual assault using incriminating statements that he made during a previous civil suit under oath, based on a decision by the then-District Attorney not to charge

him criminally. However, the subsequent District Attorney decided to prosecute Cosby nevertheless.

The Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled earlier in the day that the initial District Attorney's decision not to criminally charge Cosby was unconditional and binding, ultimately resulting in them overturning his conviction and securing his release from prison.

Cosby, a former comedian and TV personality, has been accused by more than 60 women of various forms of sexual misconduct dating back to the 1960's. He consistently continues to deny the allegations of impropriety.

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Switzerland to Add F-35 Lightning II Aircraft to Its Fighter Fleet – Lockheed Martin
WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) – Switzerland selects the US-made F-35 Lightning II fighter aircraft to become a part of the country's fighter fleet, defense manufacturer Lockheed Martin said on Wednesday.

"The Swiss Federal Council announced Lockheed Martin's F-35 Lightning II is the aircraft selected from its New Fighter Aircraft competition," Lockheed Martin said in a release. "The Swiss Air Force will receive F-35A aircraft, a sustainment solution tailored to Swiss autonomy requirements, and a comprehensive training program."

Switzerland will become the fifteenth nation to join the F-35 program after several European nations and will provide Swiss industry with an opportunity to participate in research and development, and production processes, the release said.

As of today, F-35 aircraft operate from 21 bases worldwide while nine nations operate F-35s on their home soil. In total, there are more than 655 F-35s in service, with more than 1,380 pilots and 10,670 maintainers trained on the aircraft, according to the release.

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US Repatriates 11 Cuban Migrants Interdicted Near Florida - Coast Guard

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Eleven Cuban refugees in a boat seized near the Florida Coast were returned to the Caribbean Island, the US Coast Guard said on Wednesday.

"A good Samaritan reported a vessel with 11 people aboard to Coast Guard Sector Key West watchstanders at 12:20 p.m. Monday. [Coast Guard cutter] Charles David Jr.'s crews arrived on scene and the migrants were brought aboard and reported in good health," a Coast Guard press release said.

Wednesday's repatriation brought the number of Cuban migrants interdicted since October 1, 2020, to 512, the release said.

Once aboard a Coast Guard vessel, migrants receive food, water, shelter and basic medical attention, the release added.

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State Department to Update Policy on US Passport Gender Markers

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The State Department is proposing changes to the gender marker policies and procedures for US passports and Consular Reports of Birth Abroad (CRBA), Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"Today, I am pleased to announce that the Department will be taking further steps toward ensuring the fair treatment of LGBTQI+ U.S. citizens, regardless of their gender or sex, by beginning the process of updating our procedures for the issuance of U.S. Passports and Consular Reports of Birth Abroad," Blinken said in a press statement.

He added that the department will most immediately begin updating procedures to allow applicants to self-select their gender as "M" or "F" without the need for medical certification if their self-selected gender does not match the gender on their other documents.

The State Department will also move to add new gender markers for non-binary, intersex, and gender non-conforming persons applying for a passport or CRBA. Blinken said that they are currently evaluating the best approach to achieve this goal, but that the process of adding a gender marker for non-binary, intersex, and gender non-conforming persons to these documents is "technologically complex" and will take time to update the system.

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Malaria Vaccine Trials Show Unprecedented Levels Durable Protection - US Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Two phase 1 clinical trials of a new malaria vaccine candidate conferred unprecedentedly high levels of durable protection when volunteers were later exposed to disease-causing malaria parasites, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) said on Wednesday.

"The vaccine combines live parasites with either of two widely used antimalarial drugs - an approach termed chemoprophylaxis vaccination," an NIH press release said.

If the approach proves successful there, chemoprophylaxis vaccination, or CVac, potentially could help reverse the stalled decline of global malaria, the release said.

A Phase 2 clinical trial of the vaccine is now underway in the African nation of Mali, a malaria-endemic country, the release added.

Malaria, a disease caused by a mosquito-borne parasite, killed an estimated 409,000 people in 2019, compared with 411,000 in 2018, according to the latest data from the World Health Organization (WHO). Children account for about two thirds of malaria deaths.

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Biden Eager to Get US-Russia Talks Going Soon - White House

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is eager to start soon US-Russia talks on issues of mutual concern and many of the discussions will be below the level of presidents, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.

"I know that the President was eager to get those going as soon as we could," Psaki said when asked about the status of the talks agreed to be set up during Biden's summit with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in Geneva.

"Many of those will be happening below the presidential level," Psaki added.

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Pentagon COVID-19 Task Force Will Switch to Normal Operations in Coming Days - Official

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department will transition its COVID-19 task force to normal operations in the coming days, senior Pentagon adviser Max Rose said on Wednesday.

"As the department continues to transition to fortify its pandemic preparedness, and to support vaccination efforts across the country and the globe, I could not be any more confident today that we are, as a Department [of Defense] and yes, as a nation, on a solid path," Rose said during a briefing. "In the coming days the functions of the COVID-19 task force will transition to normal operations."

Rose, the Pentagon chief's special adviser on COVID-19, underscored that the US Defense Department will continue to support fighting the pandemic until it is over on a global scale. At the same time, acting Assistant US Defense Secretary for Health Affairs Terry Adirim said during the briefing that the new Delta variant of the novel coronavirus poses a threat to return to normal in the US as this more dangerous variant will soon become the predominant variant and is able to cause more serious disease in unvaccinated people than other virus mutations. The Defense Department established the task force in 2020 to support other agencies efforts during the COVID-19 response.

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EPA Engaged With Florida Officials to Ensure Safety at Collapsed Building - Administrator

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is actively engaged with officials on the ground in Surfside, Florida, to mitigate the potentially harmful exposure to debris from the recently collapsed building, EPA Administrator Michael Regan told reporters on Wednesday.

"We're actively engaged with all of the elected officials on the ground. Our regional offices are deploying air monitoring systems to be sure that we keep the public safe, [that] people that are searching the rubble are getting the protection that they need," Regan said during a press briefing.

When asked about a possible role played by climate change in the collapse of the 13-story building, Regan said the EPA did not have enough data to make such an assumption.

The Champlain Towers South condominium building partially collapsed in the early hours of Thursday. The authorities have said they do not know how many occupants were in the building at the time of the incident.

Earlier on Wednesday, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said that the death toll of the building collapse in Surfside has increased to 16 while 147 residents remain unaccounted for.

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US, France, Germany Offer \$711Mln for S. Africa COVID-19 Vaccine Production - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The United States, France and Germany will provide more than \$700 million for South Africa's Aspen Pharmacare to expand manufacturing capacity for coronavirus vaccines, the US State Department said on Wednesday.

"The package will help increase capacity to support Aspen's efforts to produce COVID-19 vaccines with Stringent Regulatory Authorization (SRA) and/or World Health Organization (WHO) Emergency Use Listing, including the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine," State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

The US International Development Finance Corporation announced the joint financing package of \$711 million with agencies in Germany and France, as well as the World Bank's International Finance Corporation to fund the effort, the release said.

The vaccines will be primarily distributed to the African Union, South African Government and the global vaccine distribution network COVAX, according to the release.

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Pennsylvania Supreme Court Overturns Actor Bill Cosby's 2018 Sexual Assault Conviction

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The Pennsylvania Supreme Court announced on Wednesday that it has overturned on appeal actor and comedian Bill Cosby's 2018 sexual assault conviction.

Cosby appealed the conviction on the grounds that the original District Attorney involved in the case decided that Pennsylvania would decline to criminally prosecute Cosby for the incident, forcing him to provide four sworn depositions in a civil suit without the same legal protections, during which he made several incriminating statements.

"There is only one remedy that can completely restore Cosby to the status quo ante. He must be discharged, and any future prosecution on these particular charges must be barred... For these reasons, Cosby's convictions and judgment of sentence are vacated, and he is discharged," Justice David Wecht wrote in the Court's opinion.

Wecht argued that the unconditional charging decision was made publicly and with the intent to induce action by the defendant and denying him the benefit of that decision is unfair.

The dissenting opinion argued that the decision to not criminally prosecute Cosby was not unconditional, but rather, an announcement that bound neither the original District Attorney nor his successor to the decision in future decision-making processes.

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Canadian First Nation Uncovers 182 Graves at Another Former Forced Assimilation School

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The Lower Kootenay Band said on Wednesday that they have located the remains of 182 individuals at the site of a former Canadian forced assimilation school.

"In the ground search conducted by the community of Aqam, the findings revealed 182 human remains in unmarked graves," the Lower Kootenay Band said in a statement.

The remains were located at the site of the former St. Eugene's Mission School in Cranbrook, British Columbia, which was operated by the Roman Catholic Church between 1912 and the 1970s, the statement said.

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Over 68% of US Military Active Duty Personnel Vaccinated Against COVID-19 - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Nearly 70 percent of the US active duty service members have received at least one dose of coronavirus vaccines, Senior Adviser to the Secretary of Defense on COVID-19 Max Rose said on Wednesday.

"Over 68 percent of our active duty service members have received at least one [vaccine] dose," Rose said during a briefing.

As per service branch, 77 percent of Navy, 70 percent of Army, 61 percent of Air Force and 58 percent of Marine Corps active duty personnel have been vaccinated with at least one dose. The US Defense Department has also supported over 17 million vaccinations to Americans as well as additional 4 million to its personnel, Rose added.

According to the data compiled by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 180 million of Americans have been vaccinated with at least one does while 155 million have been fully vaccinated.

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Some Taking Advantage of Florida Building Collapse With Fake GoFundMe Accounts - Official WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Some people tried to profit from the building collapse in Surfside, Florida, by using fraudulet accounts for the GoFundMe service that is used for fundraising purposes, Deputy Incident Commander at Miami-Dade Office of Emergency Management Charles Cyrille said on Wednesday.

"There have unfortunately been some people trying to take advantage with fraudulent GoFundMe accounts," Cyrille said during a press conference.

Cyrille has encouraged those who want to make a donation to the victims of the building collapse go to www.miamidade.gov/emergency to choose an agency to support or register as a volunteer.

Earlier on Wednesday, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said that the death toll of the building collapse in Surfside has increased to 16 while 147 residents remain unaccounted for.

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US Lawmaker Presses Biden Admin. For Ethiopia 'Genocide' Label Over Tigray Massacres

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) – US acting Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Robert Godec faced calls for the Biden administration to label famine in Ethiopia's Tigray region the result of war crimes and genocide from Congressman Michael McCaul during a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on Tuesday.

"Almost one million people are starving, and according to the UN, systematic rape and sexual violence is rampant... In my assessment, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and acts of genocide have been carried out against the Tigrayan people," committee ranking Republican McCaul said at the outset of the hearing.

When McCaul later pressed Godec on when a genocide declaration would be made, he replied: "The Secretary needs to make a decision and when he's ready, I'm sure that will happen."

McCaul emphasized the gravity of the situation and underscored the role that Congress plays in drawing attention to this crisis.

"The timing of this hearing couldn't be more appropriate with the ceasefire called just yesterday. For them to know that the eyes of Congress are watching, and the American people are watching this, and it needs to stop," McCaul said.

Ethiopia's government declared a unilateral ceasefire in the Tigray region, with a promise to halt fighting until the end of a crucial planting season in September, according to media reports. Tigray is teetering on the edge of famine after more than seven months of fighting, prompting charges from the United Nations of Ethiopian soldiers "using starvation as a weapon of war." Tigray rebels back a party that for years dominated Ethiopia's government before being sidelined by the new prime minister. The government's ceasefire announcement followed the recent rebel capture of the regional capital of Mekele.

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Canadian Economy Shrinks in April for First Time in 12 Months - Statistics Agency

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The Canadian economy shrank by 0.3 percent in April, the first decline in 12 months, the state statistics agency said on Wednesday.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) contracted 0.3 percent in April after 11 consecutive monthly increases," Statistics Canada said in its monthly economic report.

However, the decline was smaller than expected, the agency noted. In its March report, Statistics Canada projected a 0.8 percent contraction.

The largest declines were recorded in the retail - hit by reintroduced lockdowns across the country in April - and manufacturing sectors, the report said. Losses were partially offset by gains in the public and construction sectors.

The Canadian economy remains 1 percent below pre-pandemic levels, the agency said.

Canada expects its GDP and employment levels to reach pre-pandemic levels at some point during 2021, according to the federal budget delivered in April.

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US Sues COVID-19 Protective Equipment Marketer Over Failure to Deliver Goods - Regulator

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - An online marketer faces charges in a lawsuit over promises to quickly deliver facemasks and other personal protective equipment (PPE) during the pandemic and then failing to deliver on customer orders or offer cancellations and refunds, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) said on Wednesday.

"In a federal court complaint filed today, the FTC alleges that Frank Romero (d/b/a Trend Deploy) took advantage of consumers' fear of COVID-19 by advertising the availability and quick delivery of PPE, including N95 facemasks, even though he had no basis to make those promises," an FTC press release said.

Romero failed to deliver PPE on time, if at all, failed to notify consumers of delayed shipments, and failed to offer the cancellations and refunds required by the FTC's Mail Order Rule. He also failed to honor requests for refunds so consumers could buy these products elsewhere, the FTC charged in the complaint.

When Romero eventually did deliver, the complaint states, he often sent products inferior to those consumers ordered. Most notably, he advertised N95 masks, but allegedly delivered cloth masks instead, the release said.

FTC commissioners voted 4-0 to authorize the complaint, which was filed in a US District Court for the state of Florida, according to the release.

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US Should Immediately Return to Full Compliance With JCPOA, Iran Should React - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, June 30 (Sputnik) - The United States should, without delay, return to full compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with Iran immediately reacting to this step by resuming its obligations under the deal, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Wednesday.

"The United States must immediately return to full compliance with the provisions of resolution 2231 and the JCPOA, and Iran must immediately react to these steps and ensure the unfreezing of all the obligations that were suspended earlier, first and foremost, in terms of ensuring transparency in its nuclear program and cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency," Nebenzia said at the UN Security Council meeting on non-proliferation, adding that there is no alternative to the JCPOA.

Russian representatives participating in the JCPOA negotiations in Vienna are ready to do everything to ensure the convergence of the United States' and Iran's positions, and other member states of the UN Security Council should do the same, Nebenzia stated.

In 2018, former US President Donald Trump pulled Washington out of the nuclear deal and reimposed a sanctions policy against Tehran, which began to gradually abandon its commitments under the agreement in response.

Since April, the Austrian capital of Vienna has been hosting the meetings of the JCPOA joint commission, as well as informal gatherings designed to restore the deal, including the return of the US to the agreement.

The sixth round of negotiations ended on June 20. The parties declared a break in negotiations over the presidential elections in Iran.

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Biden Says Threat of US Wildfires This Year Severe as Ever, Extreme Heat Amplifies Risk

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that the threat of wildfires this year is as severe as it has ever been.

"The threat of western wildfires this year is as severe as it's ever been," Biden said during a roundtable event with governors from states in the western United States.

The president added that extreme temperatures this summer are amplifying the threat of US wildfires and the federal government must act fast.

There are currently some 36 uncontained wildfires burning in the western United States and about 9,000 firefighters deployed throughout the region to fight them, Biden said.

Biden announced the federal government will use satellite technology to help detect wildfires, boost aviation assets, ensure there are more than 15,000 federal firefighters on standby, and increase wages for firefighters to more than \$15 an hour, among other initiatives.

Last year, California suffered a record-breaking fire season, with an estimated 4.3 million acres burned, about 4 percent of the entire state, according to CAL FIRE.

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NSA Refused to Deny Spying on Fox Broadcaster's Private Emails, Texts – Tucker Carlson

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) – The National Security Agency (NSA) has refused to deny that it illegally monitored the private emails and texts of Fox News commentator Tucker Carlson, the broadcaster said on Wednesday.

On Sunday, Carlson alleged that the NSA had been monitoring his program's electronic communications and was planning to leak them in an attempt to take his show off the air.

"On Sunday we heard from a whistleblower who warned us that the NSA was reading our email and texts," Carlson said in a morning broadcast. "It was not a delusion, it was entirely real. This person had details from my emails that no one but the recipient could have known."

The NSA issued a statement on Wednesday that refused to deny the allegation, Carlson noted. "The NSA sent us an entire paragraph of lies written for their lackey's at CNN and MSNBC.

... Tonight's statement from the NSA said, 'Tucker Carlson has never been an intelligence target of the agency.' The question remains did they read my emails and again and again, they refused to say and they refused to say why they can't answer that question," Carlson commented. The behavior of the NSA was completely wrong and illegal, and it threatened to totally destroy democracy in the United States, Carlson warned.

"If we let them continue to do it, democracy can't function with semi-politicized intelligence agencies. It's the end of democracy: Democracy can't function like this. ... The NSA does spy on Americans, millions of Americans and everyone knows this: in Washington, this is considered fine," he said.

The Biden administration had ignored the story because they could not deny it as they knew it was true, Carlson stated.

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Canada Announces Funding for 4 Projects to Boost COVID-19 Vaccine Uptake - Statement

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Canada will fund four projects intended to increase coronavirus vaccine uptake, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) said on Wednesday. "These projects are using tailored strategies to address why some people have not yet received the COVID-19 vaccine. Supporting community-based solutions helps remove systemic barriers to vaccination and will protect more people - and communities - from COVID-19," Minister of Health Patty Hajdu said in a statement.

The unspecified amount of funding will be provided to the Eastern Ontario Health Unit, Nova Scotia's Department of Health and Wellness, the University of British Columbia and advocacy group, Women's Health in Women's Hands, to encourage vaccination in populations that have been hard-hit by the pandemic and where vaccine uptake has been lukewarm.

The projects will be funded through the Immunization Partnership Fund (IPF), which, to date, has received over \$50 million in taxpayer money.

According to Our World in Data, 68 percent of Canadians have received their first dose of the coronavirus vaccine, however, the country currently ranks just 57th for fully vaccinated individuals.

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Trump Organization, CFO Allen Weisselberg to Be Charged With Tax-Related Crimes - Reports

NEW YORK, June 30 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump's business organization and its CEO Allen Weisselberg, are expected to be charged with tax-related crimes on Thursday, the Wall Street Journal reported.

"The Manhattan district attorney's office is expected to charge the Trump Organization and its chief financial officer with tax-related crimes on Thursday," the report said, citing people familiar with the matter.

The indictment would be the first criminal charge against the former US president's company since prosecutors began investigating the firm three years ago.

According to the report, the Trump Organization and Weisselberg are to be charged with tax evasion on fringe benefits. The Manhattan District Attorney's Office and New York Attorney General's Office have been investigating whether Weisselberg and other employees illegally avoided paying taxes on perks - such as cars, apartments and private-school tuition - received from the Trump Organization.

If prosecutors could show the Trump Organization and its executives systematically avoided paying taxes, they could file more serious charges alleging a scheme, the report said.

Trump has denied wrongdoing and said the investigations, conducted by offices led by rival Democrats aligned to President Joe Biden, were politically motivated.

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US Urges Russia to Immediately End Violence in CAR, Remove 'Mercenaries' - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, June 30 (Sputnik) - The United States calls on Russia to immediately stop the violence allegedly perpetrated against civilians in the Central African Republic (CAR) and withdraw its military personnel, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said in a statement on Wednesday.

A report by the UN Panel of Experts on the CAR, dated June 25, claims that Russian military instructors, along with the Central African Armed Forces (FACA), are responsible for committing human rights abuses, including indiscriminate killings of civilians and looting of humanitarian organizations.

"Russia must immediately stop the violence, hold those responsible accountable, and remove mercenaries endangering UN peacekeepers and undermining their crucial work in support of peace and security in the CAR," Thomas-Greenfield said.

The US ambassador pointed out that the United Nations had provided evidence detailing abuses carried out by Russian instructors working as an arm of Russia's Ministry of Defense in the CAR.

Earlier in the day, Russia's Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said the report was based on unfounded accusations, containing insufficient evidence with elements of photoshop.

According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, there are more than 500 Russian instructors in the CAR and are working there under a UN Security Council authorization.

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US Weekly Crude Draw Again Beats Forecast as Refiners Race to Pump Gasoline - EIA Data

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - Oil refiners drew nearly twice more crude than forecast from stockpiles across the United States last week on expectations of summer demand for fuel in a reopening economy, Energy Information Administration (EIA) data showed on Wednesday. Stockpiles of crude in the world's largest oil consuming country fell by 6.72 million barrels last week, the data showed. Industry analysts polled by US media had anticipated a drawdown of just about 4.69 million barrels for crude during the week that ended June 25.

The big crude draw came as US refiners operated last week at 92.9 percent of capacity, a level last seen in the summer of 2019, well before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic last year.

Stockpiles of gasoline increased by 1.52 million barrels last week, versus forecasts for a drawdown of 886,000 barrels, demonstrating the stepped-up refining activity.

Inventories of distillates that include diesel and heating oil fell by 869,000 barrels versus forecasts for a build of 486,000.

Aside from domestic consumption, exports of US crude also rose last week to an average of 3.72 million barrels per day from the previous week's average of 3.65 million.

Production of US crude, meanwhile, remained stagnant at 11.2 million barrels per day.

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Death Toll in Florida Building Collapse Rises to 16, 147 Unaccounted For - Mayor

WASHINGTON, June 30 (Sputnik) - The death toll in the collapse of the residential building in Surfside, Florida has risen to 16 following the discovery of four more victims in the rubble, leaving 147 individuals still unaccounted for, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said on Wednesday.

"We've now recovered four additional victims. The number of deceased is at 16... As of now, the number of accounted for is 139, the number of unaccounted, 147," Cava said.