

01/04/21 Monday

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South African COVID-19 Variant 'More of a Problem' Than UK One, Health Secretary Matt by Mary F.

A new variant of COVID-19 has been identified in South Africa. Known as 501.V2, the new variant of the virus carries mutations in its spike protein, which it uses to penetrate host cells and cause infection.

British Health Secretary Matt Hancock told BBC Radio on Monday that the new COVID-19 variant identified in South Africa is more worrisome than the highly infectious variant known as B.1.1.7, which was identified in Britain last month in Kent, a country in South East England. The UK variant is more contagious but not deadlier than previous COVID-19 variants, and cases of it have already been recorded in at least 33 countries and in at least three US states, USA Today reported.

"I'm incredibly worried about the South African variant, and that's why we took the action that we did to restrict all flights from South Africa," Hancock BBC Radio 4's Today programme. "This is a very, very significant problem ... even more of a problem than the UK new variant."

"This is a very, very significant problem ... and it's even more of a problem than the UK new variant," Hancock added.

The South African variant was first identified in the Nelson Mandela Bay region of the country. It then spread across the country, including to Cape Town, a popular tourist destination.

ITV political editor Robert Peston revealed Monday that "according to one of the government's scientific advisers, the reason for Matt Hancock's 'incredible worry' about the South African COVID-19 variant is that they [health officials] are not as confident the vaccines will be as effective against it as they are for the UK's variant," Al Jazeera reported.

In addition, John Bell, the regius professor of medicine at the University of Oxford who sits on the UK government's vaccine task force, noted Sunday that the approved COVID-19 vaccines may work on B.1.1.7, but there remains a "big question mark" as to their effectiveness against the South African variant, Al Jazeera reported.

Several countries across the globe have barred travel from Britain and South Africa over fears regarding the new COVID-19 strains.

Initial research into the South African strain indicates that it is linked to higher viral loads and may be more easily transmitted, according to prominent South African infectious disease epidemiologist Salim Abdool Karim, co-chair of the country's advisory committee on COVID-19. However, on December 31, the World Health Organization (WHO) revealed that there is "no clear evidence of the new variant being associated with more severe disease or worse outcomes."

"Further investigations are needed to understand the impact on transmission, clinical severity of infection, laboratory diagnostics, therapeutics, vaccines, or public health preventive measures," the WHO added.

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New York Governor Andrew Cuomo Blames Local Hospitals for Slow Vaccine Rollout  
by [Mary F.](#)

US states are currently in the process of distributing COVID-19 vaccines. However, New York is hitting snags in its vaccine rollout, and hospitals in New York City have only distributed about a third of the doses they've received.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo on Monday blamed the slow COVID-19 vaccine rollout on local leaders, including New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, and threatened to fine hospitals that don't distribute vaccines fast enough up to \$100,000.

"We need the public officials to manage those public hospitals," Cuomo said, noting that vaccine distribution points like New York City's Health and Hospitals system have been slow to administer vaccines.

"I don't want the vaccine in a fridge or a freezer, I want it in somebody's arm," [Cuomo said during an Albany press briefing](#). "If you're not performing this function, it does raise questions about the operating efficiency of the hospital."

According to Cuomo, New York State's 194 hospitals have received 46% of their vaccine allocation. Figures by the US Centers for Disease and Control (CDC) [also show that](#) New York has received an allocation of 895,925 vaccines and has administered first doses to only 274,713 people - meaning roughly 30% of available doses have been given out.

"I need those public officials to step in and manage those systems. You have the allocation; we want it in people's arms as soon as possible," he added.

"I need them to take personal responsibility for their hospitals. This is a management issue of the hospitals. They have to move the vaccine, and they have to move the vaccine faster," Cuomo continued.

When asked whether strict enforcement of vaccine prioritization has contributed to the slow rollout, Cuomo said that there is "no one cause" of delays.

"The federal government sent guidance on prioritization of who should receive the first vaccines. We agreed with the federal prioritization on the top priority... it's all health care workers who come in contact with the public ... because they're most likely to be infected," Cuomo noted, adding that the only excuses he's heard from hospitals regarding the delays are "bureaucracy and their own administration,".

During the Monday briefing, New York State Health Commissioner Dr. Howard Zucker said that NYC Health and Hospitals hasn't done a good job of vaccinating its own employees despite having access to some 38,000 doses of the drugs, [the New York Post reported](#). Out of the system's 23,000 employees who are eligible to receive the vaccine, only 12,000 have been vaccinated, Zucker said.

To incentivize local distributors like Health and Hospitals to quickly distribute the vaccines, the state Department of Health on Sunday told distributors that they could face fines of up to \$100,000 if they haven't used up their current vaccine stocks by the end of the week. In

addition, from now on, providers must use all vaccines within seven days of receiving them or face additional fines and risk not receiving future vaccine shipments, the New York Post reported.

Also on Monday, Cuomo said he is proposing a law to make it a crime to sell or administer COVID-19 vaccines to people attempting to skip ahead in line.

So far, health care workers and those who live in nursing homes or assisted living facilities are eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccines.

The concern about vaccination rollout in the state has increased due to the identification of a [more contagious variant](#) of COVID-19 in the UK. Cuomo [confirmed on Monday](#) that a case of the new strain had been found in New York.

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TSA Screens More Than 3 Million Travelers Over Holiday Weekend Amid COVID-19 Surge  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Ahead of the holiday season, several health professionals and agencies urged Americans against traveling in a bid to help curb the spread of COVID-19 within the US, with the nation's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stressing that the best manner to celebrate festivities would be through remote, virtual gatherings.

The US Transportation Security Administration (TSA) recently reported that over the New Year's holiday weekend, over 3 million individuals were screened at various checkpoints as they moved closer to their final destinations.

[The latest figures released by the security agency](#) indicate that approximately 805,990 individuals traveled on New Year's Eve, and that another 1.1 million took to the skies the following day. By the time Sunday was over, the agency had reported a further 1.3 million checkpoint screenings.

The tally recorded on Sunday marked the highest daily screening count since the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically since around the time the World Health Organization declared a pandemic on March 11.

Additionally, [the agency noted that approximately 324 million passengers](#) were screened through US checkpoints between January 1 and December 31 last year, just 39% of the TSA's 2019 figures. The agency had reported 824 million total passengers screened at checkpoints in 2019.

The latest numbers also highlight that millions of Americans opted to travel nationwide and abroad despite repeated warnings from health officials that remote celebrations and gatherings should be the go-to option amid the pandemic.

[Recent guidelines by the CDC](#) state that "the safest way to celebrate the new year is to celebrate at home with the people who live with you or virtually with friends and family. Staying home is the best way to protect yourself and others."

In November, ahead of the US' Thanksgiving holiday, health officials made similar statements; however, they too were largely ignored as many individuals sought in-person family gatherings

or destination celebrations. In fact, the November holiday weekend saw over 3.5 million individuals screened, according to TSA records.

At the time, officials stated the high-travel weekend saw the greatest number of globetrotters going through TSA checkpoints to date during the pandemic.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert who also serves as a member of the White House coronavirus task force, reiterated on Sunday that the pandemic "could and likely will" take a turn for the worse over the next few weeks as holiday season travels come to an end.

"This is what happens. It's terrible, it's unfortunate, but it was predictable," Fauci, acknowledging how travel warnings were sidestepped, said [during an interview on NBC's "Meet the Press."](#) With the [US' positivity ratio spiking past 13%](#), health officials are seeing devastating COVID-19 surges across the US, with the most severe case number increases being documented in California and in Arizona over the last two weeks.

As of Monday, California, Arizona, Texas, New York and Florida are the five states reporting the highest daily increases, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University. In California, the situation has grown so dire that strict countermeasures have been reimposed, as swamped hospitals attempt to treat the growing number of COVID-19 patients.

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'Biggest Breakthrough': Saudi Arabia, Qatar to Sign US-Brokered Deal to Ease Gulf Dispute by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Saudi Arabia cut off all diplomatic ties with Qatar in 2017, and with a group of fellow Middle Eastern countries imposed a trade and travel embargo on the nation over accusations that Qatar supported terrorism.

Saudi Arabia and its allies are expected to sign a US-brokered deal with Qatar on Tuesday to end a yearslong rift between the Middle Eastern countries prompted by Doha's relations with Iran and alleged support for terror groups.

Citing an official familiar with the development, [Reuters reported](#) White House adviser Jared Kushner, aided by US State Department adviser Brian Hook and Middle East envoy Avi Berkowitz, helped to broker the deal.

Under the agreement, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt will call off their blockade of Qatar; in exchange, Qatar will not pursue any lawsuits related to the blockade that was initiated in June 2017. Earlier this year, Qatar Airways revealed that it was seeking [at least \\$5 billion in compensation](#) over the blocked airspace.

Additionally, as part of the deal, all involved parties will be expected to cease their media campaigns against each other. In [earlier, since-rejected demands](#) issued by Saudi Arabia and company, Qatar was ordered to shut down Al Jazeera and its affiliated stations.

"This is the biggest breakthrough we've had to date," an unidentified senior Trump administration official [told the Wall Street Journal](#). "It doesn't mean they will love each other and be best friends, but it does mean they will be able to work together."

The deal is expected to be signed by leaders on Tuesday during the annual Gulf Cooperation Council summit in the Saudi capital of Riyadh. Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman will be in attendance for the signing.

Kuwait, which served as a mediator during the talks, said during a televised announcement Monday that as part of the eased tensions, Saudi Arabia will open its air, land and sea borders with Qatar for the first time in three years starting on Monday night. Qatar's land border with Saudi Arabia has only been [briefly opened so Qataris can perform the Islamic hajj pilgrimage](#). "The Kuwaiti emir held phone talks on Monday night with the Qatari emir and the Saudi crown prince, who affirmed their commitment to strengthening brotherly relations between countries in the region," [said Ahmed Nasser Al-Sabah](#), Kuwait's foreign minister. "They agreed to sign a pact at the end of the summit in Al Ula that will settle all conflict issues."

[Sources told Axios](#) the deal nearly "fell apart" over the weekend after a "last-minute miscommunication" sparked new tensions between Saudi and Qatari officials.

Despite allegations made by Saudi Arabia and its allies, Qatar has repeatedly denied that it supports terrorism. After the Arab bloc made its intentions regarding the blockade known in 2017, the Qatari Foreign Ministry issued a statement noting that there was "[no legitimate justification](#)" for the action.

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'They Never Forget': Trump Warns Republican Senator Against Electoral College Certification by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Since the US election was called for Democratic challenger Joe Biden, US President Donald Trump has refused to concede or acknowledge his loss, instead opting to voice unsubstantiated voter fraud allegations. The latest developments have seen Trump back an effort by Republican lawmakers to challenge the results of the Electoral College vote.

Trump took to Twitter on Monday to lash out at close ally US Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AK) after the lawmaker revealed over the weekend that he would not be joining efforts by dozens of Republican officials to contest Biden's win.

The commander-in-chief warned Cotton in a heated Twitter post that while there are many "pluses & minuses" to the party, Republican voters would "never forget" party officials who decided to not support the movement to challenge the Electoral College certification.

Trump followed up his remarks by quoting [Sen. Ted Cruz \(R-TX\)](#) and [Sen. Ron Johnson \(R-MN\)](#), who have both supported efforts to challenge the election outcome, and then moved on to bash fellow Republicans who refused to join the opposition.

"The 'Surrender Caucus' within the Republican Party will go down in infamy as weak and ineffective 'guardians' of our nation, who were willing to accept the certification of fraudulent presidential numbers!" [Trump added](#).

Cotton [announced in a statement late on Sunday](#) that he had parted from anti-certification efforts put forth by his conservative colleagues, explaining that congressional action would "establish unwise precedents."

“The Founders entrusted our elections chiefly to the states - not Congress. They entrusted the election of our president to the people, acting through the Electoral College - not Congress. And they entrusted the adjudication of election disputes to the courts - not Congress,” reads the release.

“Objecting to certified electoral votes won’t give [Trump] a second term - it will only embolden those Democrats who want to erode further our system of constitutional government.”

The US Congress on Wednesday is due to recount the Electoral College ballots, a procedure which formally certifies a winner in a US presidential election.

Trump’s latest antics come amid leaked audio of a call with Brad Raffensperger, Georgia’s secretary of state, in which Trump urges the [official to “find” enough votes](#) to earn the president an electoral victory in the state.

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‘This is Historic’: Google Employees Form Union Amid Disputes Over Company Practices by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Google employees have found themselves at odds with their employer for multiple years over a variety of management decisions, some including the company’s participation in a Pentagon project and the hefty pay-out packages given to top executives who have been accused of sexual misconduct.

Over 200 individuals employed by Google banded together and announced on Monday their intentions to form a union in order to better promote workplace equity and ethical business practices.

The newly-launched group, functioning as the Alphabet Workers Union (AWU), is currently supported by the Communications Workers of America (CWA) labor union. [In a Monday release](#), the AWU revealed the union would be open to any and all employees and contractors working under Google’s parent company Alphabet Inc.

Although the new union won’t have any collective bargaining rights and will only represent a fraction of the tech giant’s workforce, its creation marks a major step, as it is the first union open to all Alphabet-linked employees, including temps, vendors and contractors.

[According to the New York Times](#), individuals who become members of the union will contribute 1% of their annual compensation to fund union efforts, such as paying legal fees and organizing staff.

“This is historic - the first union at a major tech company by and for all tech workers,” Dylan Baker, a software engineer, remarked in a statement accompanying the release. “We will elect representatives, we will make decisions democratically, we will pay dues, and we will hire skilled organizers to ensure all workers at Google know they can work with us if they actually want to see their company reflect their values.”

The Times reported that Google employees began meeting with the CWA in late 2019, but that “several” individuals who participated in petitions and protests against the tech giant had “objected to the CWA’s overtures.”

The outlet explained that “they had declined to join because they worried that the effort had sidelined experienced organizers and played down the risks of organizing as it recruited members.” Although CWA stated that it had not attempted to overtake the cause, one software engineer accused the labor union of being “more concerned about claiming turf.”

Relations between Google employees and company executives have been tense for several years.

In 2018, over 3,000 employees signed a letter to Google CEO Sundar Pichai to end a partnership between the company and the US Department of Defense over Project Maven, an effort to use artificial intelligence to improve targeted drone strikes by the US military. Google would later [cut its ties to the project](#).

Google workers also sounded the alarm after the company gave a multimillion-dollar exit package to former top executive Andy Rubin, who was accused of sexual misconduct. Once the development came to light, [the Times reported Google](#) paid Rubin \$90 million.

The latest development comes after the [National Labor Relations Board filed a complaint](#) that alleged Google fired two workers who were organizing employee protests. It also follows the unexpected departure of AI ethicist Timnit Gebru from the company.

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Trump Reportedly Overruled Pentagon Chief in Decision to Keep USS Nimitz in Middle East by [Evan Craighead](#)

The Pentagon has increased its presence in the Middle East in an apparent counter to rising Iranian activity around the one year anniversary of the death of Qasem Soleimani, a top Iranian major general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

[Politico reported Monday](#) that US President Donald Trump overruled acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller on Sunday when he ordered the USS Nimitz, a supercarrier of the US Navy, remain in the Persian Gulf, despite previously being instructed to return home to Naval Station Everett in Washington amid heightened tensions with Iran.

"Due to the recent threats issued by Iranian leaders against President Trump and other U.S. government officials, I have ordered the USS Nimitz to halt its routine redeployment," Miller [said in a statement released January 1](#). "The USS Nimitz will now remain on station in the U.S.

Central Command area of operations. No one should doubt the resolve of the United States of America."

The move came shortly after Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's judiciary chief, announced that Soleimani's murderers would be brought to justice. The Iranian general was killed near Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020, during an airstrike authorized by Trump.

[Raisi noted](#) that one should not assume Trump, "who appeared as a murderer or ordered a murder, may be immune from justice being carried out."

[According to satellite imagery recently](#) released by US-based company Planet Labs, showed what appeared to be so-called "cluster" activity by IRGC vessels in the Strait of Hormuz.

Two former Mossad chiefs and a former national security council chief [recently spoke with The Jerusalem Post](#) and argued that any action taken by Tehran to avenge Soleimani would likely not occur until after the inauguration of US President-elect Joe Biden on January 20.

Shabtai Shavit, a former Mossad director, highlighted that the November assassination of top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhzadeh was "a double blow against Iran's military activity in the Middle East."

He also went on to suggest that Esmail Ghaani, the current commander of the Quds Force, is not on par with Soleimani in terms of leadership.

"Some say they are not useful because one goes and the next one comes into line and replaces him... the level of talent of the one who entered his [Soleimani's] shoes disproves that argument," Shavit argued, stressing the importance of bracing for a possible retaliatory attack.

"We must take into account that they will respond. They will wait for an opportunity to attack a high-quality target."

Soleimani was killed in a drone attack ordered by President Donald Trump himself on 3 January 2020. The Trump administration claimed they had evidence of Soleimani planning attacks against American embassies in the region, but failed to provide any to the public.

Several days later, Iran reiterated carrying airstrikes against two Iraqi military bases, which hosted US troops. The attack resulted in no deaths, but brought minor injuries to several American servicemen.

However, in November, Hossein Dehghan, Iran's former defence minister-turned adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, called the January missile attack only an "initial slap" of revenge.

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Biden Eyeing Rhode Island Governor for Commerce Secretary Nomination - Report by [Evan Craighead](#)

Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo, a Democrat, made headlines late last year amid reports that she was being considered for the role of health and human services (HHS) secretary in US President-elect Joe Biden's administration. The nomination ultimately went to California Attorney General Xavier Becerra.

Citing "people familiar with the matter," [Axios reported Monday](#) that Raimondo is being regarded as the standout candidate for the US president-elect to nominate for secretary of commerce.

The outlet describes Raimondo, who recently served as a national co-chair for the presidential campaign of Mike Bloomberg, as a "rising star" within the Democratic Party. It was previously reported that [a Republican was being considered](#) for the position.

Prior to becoming the first female governor of Rhode Island in 2015, Raimondo ran Point Judith Capital, an early-stage venture capital firm [that reportedly still provides her revenue](#) via a blind trust.

The company became a point of contention when Raimondo was elected as general treasurer of Rhode Island in 2010. [She would later announce](#) that she had resigned from Point Judith Capital's board of directors and from a position that oversees investments.

While Raimondo has yet to comment on the recent reports regarding Biden's Cabinet, she took a neutral stance toward a possible administration position [during a December interview with WPRI](#).

"I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I truly have nothing more to say on the topic," she told reporter Tim White. "My intention is to be the governor. I am the governor now. I am working constantly and I have nothing else to add."

If Raimondo were to accept the appointment, Lt. Gov. Dan McKee, a Democrat, would take over the position as governor.

"I do think it's certainly a source of pride that a governor of Rhode Island would be considered for a Cabinet position for the president of the United States," McKee [told WPRI](#). "My job has been always to be prepared in that unlikely scenario. I am prepared, and I've been working for the last six years to make sure that I am prepared."

Prior to whispers of a potential commerce secretary appointment, Raimondo's name also came up as a top contender for the role of HHS secretary. [According to Politico](#), Biden's team initially planned "to announce Raimondo as his HHS nominee."

However, reports at the time claimed Raimondo wanted to focus on Rhode Island. Those allegations were made prior to Raimondo's December interview with WPRI.

"They had the person they wanted, and that person isn't doing it. Are there plenty of qualified people? Yes. Do they have the setup they wanted? No," a source "familiar with the transition's efforts" told Politico.

Becerra, California's Democratic attorney general, was announced as Biden's nominee for HHS secretary in December. If appointed, Becerra would be the first Latino to run the US Department of Health and Human Services.

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US Judge Blocks Trump Sanctions Targeting Lawyers Working With ICC - Filing

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge blocked the Trump administration's sanctions against lawyers working with the International Criminal Court (ICC), a court document revealed.

"Plaintiffs' Motion for a Preliminary Injunction is GRANTED in part. Defendants are hereby enjoined from enforcing IEEPA's [International Economic Emergency Powers Act] civil or criminal penalty provisions against Plaintiffs for conduct specifically addressed in Plaintiff's Complaint and in this Opinion and Order, to the extent that such conduct is alleged to have been committed in violation of Executive Order 13,928," US Judge Katherine Polk Failla wrote in the opinion on Monday.

Failla said the proffered national security justification for seeking to prevent and potentially punish lawyers' speech is inadequate to overstep their First Amendment rights. Last March, the ICC authorized the commencement of an investigation into alleged war crimes committed by parties to the conflict in Afghanistan, including US personnel. In response, on June 11, 2020, US President Donald Trump issued an executive order authorizing sanctions against ICC officials.

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US Awards \$4.9Bln Contract for 3 Next Generation Geosynchronous Satellites - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force has awarded Lockheed Martin a \$4.9 billion contract for the manufacturing, test and delivery of three Next Generation Geosynchronous (NGG) satellites as part of the United States' initiative to develop a space-based missile warning system.

"Lockheed Martin Space, Sunnyvale, California, has been awarded a not-to-exceed \$4,934,360,150 undefinitized modification (P00034) to contract FA8810-18-C-0005 which consists of all work associated with the manufacturing, assembly, integration, test, and delivery of three Next Generation Geosynchronous (NGG) Earth orbiting space vehicles (SV), and delivery of ground mission unique software and ground sensor processing software," the release said on Monday.

Work is expected to be completed by May 31, 2028, the release said.

The United States and Russia are parties to the Outer Space Treaty, which prohibits the militarization of space. China, India, the United Kingdom and over 100 other nations are also part of the treaty.

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US Cybersecurity Agency to Help Support Georgia Runoff Election on Tuesday - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) said in a statement that it will work with other federal agencies to help secure the Senate runoff races in the state of Georgia on Tuesday.

"Our election security work continues," the statement said on Monday evening. "Along with our federal partners, we will be supporting Georgia in their runoff election tomorrow."

The Georgia runoffs pit Republicans David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler against Democratic challengers Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock. The result of the election will determine whether the Republicans or the Democrats will have a majority in the upper chamber of US Congress.

If both Democratic candidates secure two seats in the Senate on Tuesday, Vice President-elect Kamala Harris will be in position to cast the tie-breaking vote when necessary. However, if at least one Republican candidate wins re-election, it will be enough for Republicans to retain the majority in the Senate that will allow them to block much of the Democrat's agenda in a split government situation.

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#### UNSC to Appoint Libya's Envoy Immediately After Guterres' Nomination - President

UNITED NATIONS, January 4 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will appoint a new Special Envoy for Libya as soon as possible after UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' nomination, Tunisian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Tarek Ladeb said in a press briefing. "The Secretariat is thinking of suggesting the new name, instead of Mr. [Nickolay] Mladenov, who couldn't take this position due to personal and family reasons," Ladeb, whose country presides over the Security Council in January, said on Monday. "We think that he [Guterres] will suggest a new Special Envoy and I think the council will adopt it as soon as possible." Ladeb added that nominating a new Special Envoy for Libya is crucial at the moment to give the push to a political process and the settlement of the crisis.

Former UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East peace process Nickolay Mladenov, who long been considered to become a new UN envoy for Libya, in a letter to Guterres informed that he would not take up the role and resigned from the United Nations.

Since March, Stephanie Williams has been serving as Acting Special Envoy following the resignation of Ghassan Salame, who cited stress as the reason to step down.

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#### Biden Calls for Record Voter Turnout in Georgia Senate Runoffs

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden called on voters in the state of Georgia to turn out in record numbers for US Senate runoffs and promised that their choice on Tuesday will chart a course for the next generation.

Runoffs offer Democrats a rare chance to consolidate the executive and legislative branches of power under their control.

"Now we need you to vote again in record numbers, to make your voices heard again and again to change Georgia, to change America again. And this is not an exaggeration... One state can chart the course not just for the next four years, but for the next generation," Biden said at a rally in Atlanta.

The runoffs pitted Republican incumbents David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler against Democratic challengers Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock after no candidate captured 50 percent plus one votes on Election Day in November.

Democrats, who already lead the House of Representatives and have reclaimed the White House in a presidential race victorious for Biden, need to win both seats for a 50-50 majority with Vice President-elect Kamala Harris casting tie-breaking votes. A single seat will be enough for Republicans to retain their sway over the Senate and allow them to block much of Biden's legislative agenda in a split government situation.

Biden promised that a vote for Ossoff and Warnock will have an immediate impact as the Senate under the Democratic control is set to approve \$2,000 cheques to most taxpayers as part of a coronavirus relief package.

"Think about what it mean to your lives. Putting food on the table, paying rent, paying part of your mortgage, paying the other credit card, paying the phone bill, the gas bill, the electric bill," Biden said.

Outgoing US President Donald Trump is also expected to campaign in Georgia ahead of the Senate runoffs on behalf of the Republican party.

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Several Canadian Officials Demoted for International Travel During Holidays

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Several Canadian officials in the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Quebec have been demoted for traveling abroad during the holidays amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

"Last Friday, I took responsibility for not having been clear enough with members of the government caucus and others in positions of leadership that they should not travel abroad... that is why I have accepted the resignation of Municipal Affairs Minister Tracy Allard and have asked my Chief of Staff Jamie Huckabay to step down, which he has done," Alberta Premier Jason Kenney said via Facebook on Monday.

Other members of Alberta's Legislative Assembly that have tendered their resignations from their cabinet roles, include Parliamentary Secretary for Civil Society Jeremy Nixon and Jason Stephan from Treasury Board, Kenney announced. At least seven of Alberta's top officials have resigned from their executive roles over the row.

The string of firings and resignations has touched other provinces, with Saskatchewan's minister of highways and water security czar Joe Hargrave resigning over a trip to California and a Liberal shadow minister in Quebec's legislator also losing his position as metropolis and transport critic.

Canadian politicians have faced intense public and media backlash over travel abroad during the holidays despite urging regular citizens to forego any travel arrangements this holiday season in hopes of stemming the skyrocketing COVID-19 infection count.

The issue first came to light following a report that former Ontario Finance Minister Rod Phillips traveled abroad for the holidays, which was followed by other revelations including about those in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's inner-circle.

To date, at least a dozen officials have been demoted from their posts at all levels of government across the country.

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**US State Department Appoints First-Ever Chief Data Officer - Statement**

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US Department of State said in a press release that Dr. Matthew Graviss has been selected as its first Chief Data Officer.

"The Department of State has selected Dr. Matthew Graviss as its first-ever Chief Data Officer (CDO), responsible for leading the Office of Management Strategy and Solution's Center for Analytics (CfA), the Department's enterprise data capability," the release said on Monday.

Graviss has been tasked with data management and analysis pertinent to the US diplomatic objectives, the release also said.

Graviss served in the same capacity at the Department of Homeland Security's Citizenship and Immigration Services, the release added.

The appointment is in accordance with the US government's objective of implementing new technologies across all federal agencies and departments, according to the release.

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**US Deploys MQ-9 Reaper Reconnaissance Drones in Romania - Air Force**

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US military has stationed a unit of MQ-9 unmanned drones in Romania to conduct reconnaissance and intelligence missions, the Air Force said in a press release.

"The US Air Force has based MQ-9 Reaper aircraft and approximately 90 Airmen to the 71st Air Base in Campia Turzii Air Base, Romania, to conduct intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions in support of NATO operations," the release stated on Monday.

The MQ-9s will be controlled by the 31st Expeditionary Operations Group, Detachment 1, until the squadron is fully operational and both units are subordinate to the 31st Fighter Wing at Aviano Air Base, Italy, the Air Force said.

The forward positioning of MQ-9s is intended to show adversaries that the US can quickly respond to any emergent threat, according to the release.

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**Yaroshenko's Defense Files Reply to US Opposition of Compassionate Release - Lawyer**

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The legal defense of Russian national Konstantin Yaroshenko, who is currently jailed at the Danbury correctional facility in Connecticut, has

responded to the US government's opposition to his early release by January 4, Yaroshenko's lawyer Alexey Tarasov told Sputnik.

"We have filed with the US District Court for the Southern District of New York our reply memorandum to the government's opposition to our motion for the compassionate release of Konstantin Yaroshenko," Tarasov said.

In the 10-page reply, the defense emphasized the fact that Yaroshenko was convicted in conspiracy only, and the crime actually never was fulfilled, he added.

"There were never any narcotics transported to any part of the globe. Yaroshenko personally took part in only two meetings on May 13 and May 15, 2010, he met with the other co-conspirator for about an hour each time," the lawyer noted.

Speaking of the health concerns, Tarasov noted that Yaroshenko has experienced several medical conditions that make the possibility for COVID-19 infection very problematic for him, including hypertension, hyperlipidemia and other deceases.

The prison in Danbury currently faces the second outbreak of the COVID-19 and currently has 20 infections, while there were 57 cases in the middle of December, the lawyer said.

He urged the court "not to wait until Yaroshenko actually gets infected with the virus."

"Based on the fatality of the circumstances presented here, we ask for the court to grant compassionate release to Konstantin Yaroshenko," the lawyer noted.

The defense also mentioned in the reply that Yaroshenko's wife wrote a letter where she has apologized to the American people for what has happened and has expressed profound regret, Tarasov said.

Speaking of the future developments, Tarasov noted that the court can schedule the hearing and make the decision after that, or could issue the ruling without a hearing.

"We do not know about the timing, it is entirely up to the court," he said.

On December 19, Yaroshenko's legal defense filed a motion for a compassionate release on health grounds. At the time, Tarasov told Sputnik that Yaroshenko suffers from hypertension, hyperlipidemia and arthritis, which the US health authorities have characterized as severe illnesses in case an individual contracts the novel coronavirus.

Later in December, US government expressed opposition for Yaroshenko's early release.

Yaroshenko was arrested in Liberia in May 2010 on suspicion of drug trafficking. A year later, he was extradited to the United States and sentenced to 20 years in prison for allegedly taking part in a conspiracy to smuggle a large amount of drugs into the country. Yaroshenko has denied all charges.

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US Sees Iran Enriching Uranium as Attempt to Increase Nuclear Extortion - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States views Iran's decision to begin enriching uranium as an attempt to increase its campaign of nuclear extortion, a US Department of State spokesperson told Sputnik.

"Iran enriching uranium to 20 percent at Fordow is a clear attempt to increase its campaign of nuclear extortion, an attempt that will continue to fail," the spokesperson said on Monday.

Earlier in the day, Iranian government spokesman Ali Rabiei said that Iran has started enriching uranium to 20 percent at the Fordow nuclear facility.

The State Department spokesperson said the United States will continue to expect the International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors to report the facts on the ground.

Iran originally developed its nuclear program, including at the Fordow nuclear facility, in secret and the United States and the global community will assess Iran's actions, the spokesperson added.

In December, Iran passed a law to increase its uranium enrichment and stop UN inspections of its nuclear sites in response to the killing of nuclear physicist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh.

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Wall Street Slumps at Start of 2021 on Worries of Higher Taxes, COVID-19

NEW YORK, January 4 (Sputnik) - Wall Street began 2021 with its worst loss since November as US stocks sold off on worries about the protracted coronavirus crisis and fears the incoming president Joe Biden might raise corporate taxes if the Democrat party wins control of the Senate and backs his policies.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, Wall Street's broadest stocks gauge, closed the first trading day of the year down 1.3 percent at 30,224.

The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, settled at 3,701, down 1.5 percent. Last year, it gained 15.8 percent.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, which counts on the performance of tech stock giants such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, led the performance and finished Monday's trade down 1.5 percent at 12,698.

Stocks fell as a new coronavirus variant, initially identified in the United Kingdom, continues to spread in the United States with New York being the third US state that has identified a case.

The US state of Georgia is holding on Tuesday a runoff election for two US Senate seats. If the Democrat candidates Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff win, their victory will equalize the party's representation in the Senate with that of the Republicans, allowing Vice-President elect Kamala Harris a tie-breaking role.

Gaining control of the Senate will give President-elect Biden the opportunity to act true to his pledge to raise corporate taxes.

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New York State Detects First Positive Case of 'UK' Coronavirus Variant - Cuomo

NEW YORK, January 4 (Sputnik) - New York State has detected the first case of the novel coronavirus mutated variant that was discovered in the United Kingdom, Governor Andrew Cuomo said in a statement.

"The Wadsworth Lab has confirmed New York State's first case of the UK variant (B.1.1.7) of the virus that causes COVID-19," Cuomo said via Twitter on Monday. "An individual from Saratoga County, New York, tested positive for the strain."

Cuomo pointed out that the infected individual had no known travel history.

At least three US states have detected the presence of the UK variant of the coronavirus, which the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said spreads more easily and quickly.

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ANALYSIS - Assange Extradition Ruling Strikes Blow to US, Yet No Victory for Free Press

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - A UK court decision to prevent Julian Assange from being extradited to the United States is likely to be overturned although it did show, at least temporarily, that the US long arm of the law has limits, a former British diplomat and legal experts told Sputnik.

London District Judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled on Monday morning that Assange, publisher of WikiLeaks, was at too high a risk of committing suicide if he was handed over to US authorities. Assange's supporters hailed her decision as the most important one in the publisher's two-year struggle to prevent extradition to the United States. Assange could face up to 175 years in prison if convicted on charges of espionage and computer fraud in a US court.

#### DIM PROSPECTS

Analysts cautioned that Baraitser's ruling would likely face appeals from the US government and could still be overturned, delivering Assange to the fate he has feared for so long.

"In basing her ruling on health grounds, and rejecting defense arguments based on rights to free speech, the judge gave comfort to the United States, still able to appeal and still able to threaten whistleblowers with daunting retribution, and struck a chilling blow at defenders of press freedom everywhere," former British ambassador Peter Ford told Sputnik.

By rejecting all the legal arguments based on principles of freedom of the press, Baraitser had avoided setting any new precedent for defending freedom of speech in the case, Ford pointed out.

"On strictly legal grounds the judgment leaves whistleblowers and defenders of freedom of the press generally no further forward than they were," he said.

Based on the long and sustained efforts by the US government to extradite Assange, the embattled publisher could anticipate no let-up in the campaign against him, even under President-elect Joe Biden, Ford advised.

"It seems unlikely that the US security state, which rumbles on regardless of who is President, will drop its temporarily paused game of cat and mouse with Assange," he said.

University of Illinois Professor of Law Francis Boyle warned that a sophisticated legal structure to ensure the rapid and regular extradition of individuals sought by the US government already existed in the UK.

"The dangers are still there for Assange and by the Extradition Treaty for any opponent of the United States government. We must not rest on our laurels today but must continue the campaign to free Assange and ultimately terminate this totalitarian US/UK Extradition Treaty," he said.

University of Pittsburgh Professor of International Affairs Michael Brenner said Assange could still face extradition followed by lifelong incarceration in the United States.

"I think that the decision's [chances of] overturn on appeal is 50-50. If that occurs, Assange will soon be put on a plane and imprisoned for life in a star chamber proceeding," he said.

There would be virtually no criticism of such an outrageous action across the US political spectrum and mainstream media, Brenner predicted.

"No elected official other than Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez will voice any criticism. The "New York Times" et al will keep their mouths shut other than write some mealy-mouthed essay about the challenge of balancing national security and press freedoms," he said.

#### POSSIBLE MOMENTUM

However, Judge Baraitser's decision, even though only reached on very narrow grounds of concern for Assange's health, was likely to have far more profound, longer-term implications in the battle to free Western Media from state control, Ford commented.

"The decision reached, however, to resist the demands of the mighty United States, whatever grounds it has been reached on, creates a precedent and a momentum such that it may come to be seen as historic, possibly marking the high water point for Western security states' ability to keep their misdemeanors secret," he said.

The ruling appeared to have caught US authorities by surprise and generated some confusion about their public stance and legal strategies to try and extradite Assange, Ford maintained. It could prove to be "the point at which they were put on the back foot," he said.

Boyle argued that Baraitser, while fearful of defying the United States on strict legal grounds, had clearly yielded to the enormous international public outrage and concern over Assange.

"The only reason this judge declined to extradite Assange was the massive international pressure campaign mounted on his behalf against his extradition to the United States," he said.

Former New York Times vice chairman and general counsel James Goodale, author of "Fighting for the Press," added that the narrow health issues the London judge had cited would limit the further legal options that the US government might seek to employ to extradite Assange and open the way for his eventual release.

"I do not think the United States can put more pressure on [the] UK. It's in the hands of the court. Since Assange will go free probably that may encourage other whistleblowers," he said.

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High Turnout Expected in Georgia Runoff Election for 2 US Senate Seats - Official

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - A high turnout is expected in the runoff election for two US Senate seats in the state of Georgia on Tuesday, Voting System Implementation Manager Gabriel Sterling said during a press conference.

"I anticipate there will be a high turnout," Sterling told reporters on Monday evening.

Sterling noted that more than three million votes have already been cast, including 2,074,857 ballots cast during early voting and 962,886 received mail-in ballots.

Sterling urged all Georgians to vote, saying that contrary to statements made by US President Donald Trump, among other officials and pundits, every vote counts.

Trump and numerous Republicans have repeatedly criticized Georgia for what they say was a massive election and voter fraud during the November 3 presidential election.

Georgia will hold runoff election for the two US Senate seats on Tuesday that will determine whether Republicans or Democrats will have control of the upper chamber of the US congress. Democrats already have a narrow majority in the US House of Representatives and have reclaimed the White House. If the Democrats win the two seats on Tuesday, Vice President-elect Kamala Harris will cast the tie-breaking votes.

Winning one of the seats will be enough for Republicans to retain their majority in the Senate that will allow them to block much of the Democrat's agenda in a split government situation. The runoffs pit Republican incumbents David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler against Democratic challengers Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock.

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Potential Threats to US Senate Runoff Election Probed in Georgia - Official

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - Law enforcement agencies are investigating a number of unspecified threats to the US Senate runoff election in the state of Georgia, voting systems implementation manager for the Georgia Secretary of State's Office Gabriel Sterling told reporters.

"We anticipate there can be any number of potential threats out there that can be attempting to encourage or discourage turnout... We have discussed with GBI [the Georgia Bureau of Investigation], FBI and Sheriff's departments potentially there being threats and we have seen some of that nature potentially out there under investigation," Sterling said on Monday.

The runoff election for the two US Senate seats will determine which party will control the upper chamber of the Congress and offer Democrats a chance to consolidate the executive and legislative branches of power under their command provided that they win both contested seats. Sterling urged voters to "turn out, be safe, be smart and don't let anybody get in a way of you casting your vote."

The runoffs pitted Republican incumbents David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler against Democratic challengers Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock after no candidate captured 50 percent plus one votes on Election Day in November.

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US Sees Iran Enriching Uranium as Attempt to Increase Nuclear Extortion - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States views Iran's decision to begin enriching uranium as an attempt to increase its campaign of nuclear extortion, a US Department of State spokesperson told Sputnik.

"Iran enriching uranium to 20 percent at Fordow is a clear attempt to increase its campaign of nuclear extortion, an attempt that will continue to fail," the spokesperson said on Monday.

Earlier in the day, Iranian government spokesman Ali Rabiei said that Iran has started enriching uranium to 20 percent at the Fordow nuclear facility.

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US Calls on Iran to Immediately Release South Korean Tanker - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States calls on Iran to immediately release the South Korean tanker that it seized earlier in the Persian Gulf, a US Department of State spokesperson told Sputnik.

"The United States is tracking reports that the Iranian regime has detained a Republic of Korea-flagged tanker. The regime continues to threaten navigational rights and freedoms in the Persian Gulf as part of a clear attempt to extort the international community into relieving the pressure of sanctions," the spokesperson said on Monday. "We join the Republic of Korea's call for Iran to immediately release the tanker."

The Iranian state-run Fars news agency reported earlier that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had seized the South Korean-flagged tanker MT Hankuk Chemi in the Persian Gulf. Media reports said the vessel was bound for the United Arab Emirates and was seized because it carried chemicals that polluted the waters. MarineTraffic.com real-time tracker satellite data showed the tanker had entered Iran's territorial waters.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik)

UK COURT BLOCKS ASSANGE EXTRADITION

\* UK district judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled on Monday against the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the United States.

\* The US government will continue to seek the extradition of Assange to the United States, Department of Justice spokesperson Marc Raimondi said.

\* Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said he would grant Assange political asylum if the United Kingdom freed him from jail.

#### SAUDI ARABIA, QATAR AGREE TO END STANDOFF

\* Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and Saudi Arabia's ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, agreed to sign a deal to end a standoff between their countries during a summit on Tuesday, the Kuwaiti foreign minister said after three-way phone talks.

\* Saudi Arabia will lift the three-and-a-half-year-long sea, air and land blockade of Qatar ahead of Tuesday's summit of Persian Gulf leaders, Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Ahmed Nasser Al-Sabah said.

\* Al-Thani will attend the summit of the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday, which will mark a breakthrough in the regional crisis, the emir's office said.

#### OPEC+ MEETING

\* The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) confirmed that the OPEC+ Ministerial Meeting would reconvene on Tuesday after the members had reportedly failed to reach a consensus on the volume of the February oil production cuts.

\* The OPEC+ participants on Monday failed to reach a consensus on the level of oil production in February, and decided to continue the meeting on Tuesday, several sources in the alliance's delegations told Sputnik.

\* Russia is in favor of boosting OPEC+ oil production by 500,000 barrels per day in February, but many participating countries continue to stand against it, two sources at the OPEC+ meeting told Sputnik.

#### IRAN URANIUM ENRICHING PROGRAM

\* Iran has started enriching uranium to 20 percent at the Fordow nuclear facility, government spokesman Ali Rabiei said on Monday.

#### US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

\* Russia is open to engaging in a dialogue with the next US administration over climate change, expecting a depoliticized approach from the counterparts in Washington, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin told Sputnik in an interview.

\* The United States' unilateral anti-doping law known as the "Rodchenkov Act," which Moscow considers politicized, is expected to receive appropriate assessments internationally, Vershinin told Sputnik.

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PREVIEW - Republicans, Democrats Vie for US Senate Control in Georgia Runoffs

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US state of Georgia holds on Tuesday two runoff elections for the Senate which will determine if the Republican Party can halt the Democratic bid to consolidate control over the executive and legislative branches of power.

Democrats, who already lead the House of Representatives and have reclaimed the White House in a presidential race victorious for Joe Biden, need to win both seats for a 50-50 majority with Vice President-elect Kamala Harris being able to cast tie-breaking votes in the upper chamber of the Congress.

One seat will be enough for Republicans to retain their sway over the Senate allowing them to block much of Biden's legislative agenda in a split government situation.

The stakes are so high that both Biden and the outgoing President Donald Trump are expected to campaign in Georgia ahead of the election in support of their parties' candidates.

The runoffs pit Republican incumbents David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler against Democratic challengers Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock. According to FiveThirtyEight's polling averages as of January 3, Ossoff and Warnock lead Perdue and Loeffler 49.2 to 47.4 percent and 49.5 to 47.2 percent respectively.

Over the last 30 years, Democrats have won only once in eight statewide runoffs, Inside Elections, the nonpartisan political newsletter, calculated. Senate runoffs were called in Georgia, the only state where elections are subject to an absolute majority threshold, after no candidate captured 50 percent plus one votes last November.

Georgia is also a focal point of Trump's efforts to overturn his election defeat to Biden. The incumbent was caught on tape over the weekend as he was trying to convince state officials, also Republicans, to help him find 11,780 votes needed to reclaim the presidency.

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**US Judge Rejects Republican Bid to Overturn Election Results in Key States - Filing**

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge has rejected a lawsuit from Republicans in the state of Wisconsin seeking to give Vice President Mike Pence full authority to overturn the election results in favor of President Donald Trump, court documents revealed on Monday.

"As Plaintiffs have established no likelihood of success on the merits here, the Court will deny their Motion for Preliminary Injunction," US Judge James Boasberg wrote in the opinion.

Moreover, Boasberg said that his court - the US District Court for the District of Columbia - is the wrong jurisdiction for the case, adding that it lacks authority to compel Pence to do anything.

Last week, US Congressman Louie Gohmert and 11 electors from Arizona - all Republicans - filed a similar lawsuit arguing Pence has the authority under the 12th Amendment to determine which of the so called "dueling" elector slates from contested US states will be taken into account by Congress.

However, the lawsuit was rejected by a federal judge in Texas for lacking standing and jurisdiction over the case.

Pence, via the Justice Department, asked the court to reject the Republican bid.

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## US Fines French Bank \$8.5Mln for Violating Syria Sanctions - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States has fined a French bank \$8.5 million for allegedly violating Washington's sanctions regime against Syria, the US Treasury Department said in a press release on Monday.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) today announced a settlement with Union de Banques Arabes et Françaises ("UBAF"), a bank based in France that facilitates trade finance between Europe and the Middle East, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia. UBAF agreed to remit \$8,572,500 to settle its potential civil liability for 127 apparent violations of Syria-related sanctions," the press release said.

The bank allegedly made financial transactions on behalf of US-designated Syrian entities, including transfers through the US financial system, the Treasury Department said.

Syria has been engulfed in a protracted civil war since 2011, with the Syrian government's forces fighting against various insurgent groups, devastating the country's economy and infrastructure in the process. The US has heavily sanctioned the country's public and private entities citing alleged human rights abuses by the government of Bashar Assad.

1/4/2021 2:40:31 PM -05:00

## Over 2,000 Faith Leaders Urge Congress to Certify Presidential Election Results - Letter

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - More than 2,000 faith and community leaders in the United States on Monday signed a letter urging Congress to certify the result of the 2020 presidential election amid the declarations by some lawmakers that they will object to the result. "As faithful citizens, we are praying for a peaceful, smooth, and dignified transfer of power. A delayed and drawn out objection on January 6th would not overturn the will of the American people and change the outcome of the election," the letter said.

Organizations such as Vote Common Good Faith 2020, Bend the Arc, Jewish Action, and the Union Theological Seminary co-signed the letter.

Congress will meet in a joint session on Wednesday to certify the results of the presidential election with Vice President Mike Pence presiding over the session to count the votes. At least 140 members of the House of Representatives and 12 members of the Senate have said they will object to the result and are demanding an independent commission to conduct a forensic audit in battleground US states.

President Donald Trump attributes his Democratic rival Joe Biden's victory to a massive fraud and said will not concede until only legal votes are counted and the illegal ones are discounted. More than 60 legal cases that Trump and the Republican party filed in challenging the election results and acts of impropriety have been rejected by state and federal courts.

Union Theological Seminary Executive Vice President Fred Davie said Trump was attacking the US democracy and called on Congress certify voters' decision.

"It's now time to put an end to this assault and certify the will of the people: Joe Biden as the next President and Kamala Harris as the next Vice President of the United States of America," Davie said.

Biden was confirmed the winner of the November presidential election by the Electoral College on December 14 after all 50 states certified the voting results totaling 306 electoral votes for Biden and 232 electoral votes for Trump.

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**UN Declines to Comment on UK Court Ruling Blocking Assange Extradition - Spokesman**

UNITED NATIONS, January 4 (Sputnik) - United Nations spokesman Farhan Haq said on Monday that the world body trusts in the independence of judiciaries and declined to comment on the United Kingdom court's decision to block the extradition of the WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the United States.

"We, as you know, trust in the independence of different judiciaries, so we wouldn't comment on the judiciary proceeding that's been going on," Haq said. "And sovereign judicial bodies are entitled to go about their work."

Earlier on Monday, UK district judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled against the extradition of Assange to the United States, where he could face up to 175 years in jail for publishing classified information on the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as thousands of diplomatic cables. The US Department of Justice said it was extremely disappointed by the ruling, adding that it would appeal because the court had backed every point of law raised by the United States. Assange's legal defense plans to seek bail at a hearing on Wednesday.

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**National Guard to Assist With Security During Pro-Trump Rally in US Capital - Police Chief**

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The District of Columbia National Guard will assist police in Washington, DC in providing security this week during the demonstrations called by President Donald Trump, Metropolitan Police Department Chief Robert Contee III said during a virtual press conference on Monday.

"We have received confirmation that the DC National Guard will be assisting the Metropolitan Police Department beginning tomorrow through the life cycle of this event," the police chief said. "They will be deployed to assist us with crowd management as well as traffic control in our nation's capital. That will allow for the police officers to focus on anyone who's intent on instigating, agitating or participating in violence in our city."

Contee said firearms will not be permitted in the demonstration area while noting that the police department has received information some individuals were intent on bringing firearms in the city.

Mayor Muriel Bowser urged residents to avoid the downtown area during the demonstrations scheduled to take place Tuesday and Wednesday.

Trump's supporters are expected to gather in large numbers in front of the Capitol, where the two chambers of Congress will meet in a joint session on Wednesday to certify the results of the presidential election. At least 140 members of the House of Representatives and 12 members

of the Senate said they will object to the result and are demanding an independent commission conduct forensic audit of the results in battleground US states.

Trump attributes his Democratic rival Joe Biden's victory to a massive fraud and said will not concede until only legal votes are counted and the illegal ones are discounted. More than 60 legal cases that Trump and the Republican party filed in challenging the election results and acts of impropriety have been rejected by state and federal courts.

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UN Urges Iran to Uphold JCPOA After Uranium Enrichment Announcement - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United Nations called on Iran to continue to uphold the 2015 nuclear agreement - formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – after the Islamic Republic announced it has resumed enriching uranium, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Monday.

Earlier in the day, Iranian government spokesman Ali Rabiei said that Iran has started enriching uranium to 20 percent at the Fordow nuclear facility.

"We have made it very clear that we believe that all parties need to continue to uphold the [JCPOA]," Haq said. "And we would urge Iran as well to uphold the terms of the JCPOA and to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency."

When asked about Iran's seizure of a South Korean-flagged tanker in the Persian Gulf that also took place on Monday, Haq said the United Nations hopes the issue will be solved bilaterally.

The Iranian state-run Fars news agency reported that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had seized the South Korean-flagged tanker in the Persian Gulf. Media reported the vessel bound for the United Arab Emirates was carrying chemicals and was seized for polluting the waters. Satellite data by MarineTraffic.com real-time tracker showed the South-Korean tanker MT Hankuk Chemi changed its course and entered Iran's territorial waters.

Both moves came just a day after the one-year anniversary of the killing of IRGC Commander Qasem Soleimani by a US drone strike in Iraq.

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UPDATE - US House Democrats Ask FBI to Open Criminal Probe Into Trump 'Election Crimes'

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - US House Democratic lawmakers Ted Lieu and Kathleen Rice on Monday sent a letter to FBI Director Christopher Wray urging him to open a criminal investigation into President Donald Trump's conspiracy to commit election crimes during a recent telephone call with Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger.

"We believe Donald Trump engaged in solicitation of, or conspiracy to commit, a number of election crimes. We ask you to open an immediate criminal investigation into the President," the letter said.

Lieu and Rice said the evidence that Trump was trying to solicit election fraud in violation of United States federal and Georgia state law is now in the open.

On Sunday, the Washington Post published a leaked recording of the January 2 call between Trump and Raffensperger. Trump said during the call that he won in Georgia by hundreds of thousands of votes but did not need to prove the entire election fraud and asked Raffensperger to "find" 11,780 votes in order to affirm his victory.

According to the transcript, Trump criticized Raffensperger and warned that the voter fraud, on which the president blames his defeat, is a criminal offense, and suggested to Georgia's official that he "can't let that happen."

Georgia, a traditionally Republican state, has already recounted its ballots three times, each time revealing that Democrat Joe Biden beat Trump by a narrow margin. As a result, Biden, whose inauguration is slated for January 20, won all 16 electors from Georgia.

However, in what appeared to contradict Lieu's effort, Democratic Caucus Chairman Hakeem Jeffries in a separate press briefing signaled that the party would not pursue impeachment. "[At] this particular point in time, our focus as House Democrats will remain on addressing the public health crisis and the economic crisis that has resulted in more than 350,000 Americans dying and over 20 million Americans infected by the coronavirus," Jeffries told a news conference. "The chaos, confusion, conflict and corruption that Donald Trump has inflicted upon this country is something to be evaluated by the historians."

Aside from Raffensperger, Trump is also pressuring outgoing Vice President Mike Pence to defy Biden's victory in a Congress procedure on Wednesday where the Constitution assigns the vice president the task of tallying the November election results and declaring the winner. Several Republican lawmakers have declared support for this maneuver of Trump.

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#### Trump Gives Medal of Freedom to Congressman for Thwarting Russiagate - White House

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump is set to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Congressman Devin Nunes, who exposed key elements of the Russiagate hoax, including the British spy Christopher Steele's dossier, the White House announced in a statement on Monday.

"On Monday, President Donald Trump will award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Devin Nunes," the statement said. "This prestigious award is the Nation's highest civilian honor, which is awarded by the President to individuals who have made especially meritorious contributions to the security or national interests of the United States."

In 2017, Nunes launched an investigation into the Obama-Biden administration's alleged misconduct during the 2016 presidential election and discovered that the Steele dossier was funded by the Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton's campaign and the Democratic National Committee, the White House noted.

"He found that a senior Justice Department attorney was married to one of the architects of the document. He learned that the Obama-Biden administration had issued Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) warrants to spy on President Trump's campaign and illegitimately unmasked several innocent spying victims for political gain," the statement said.

Nunes' actions helped thwart a plot to take down a sitting US president and led to the firing, demotion or resignation of more than a dozen FBI and Department of Justice employees, the statement said.

Moreover, Nunes forced the disclosure of documents that proved the FBI had pursued a politically motivated persecution of General Michael Flynn absent of a crime, the statement added.

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**Biden Says Looking Forward to Working With UN General Assembly on Global Challenges**

UNITED NATIONS, January 4 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden sent a letter to UN General Assembly President Volkan Bozkir in which he said his incoming administration looks forward to cooperating on addressing global challenges.

"Vice President-elect [Kamala] Harris and I will take office at a time of great global challenges - from the coronavirus to climate change - that transcend borders and require international cooperation," Biden said. "We look forward to working with you and the UN General Assembly on addressing the range of challenges and opportunities for which global cooperation is paramount."

In the letter, which Bozkir posted on his Twitter account earlier on Monday, Biden also apologized for not yet having the opportunity to speak over the telephone.

Biden was confirmed the winner of the 2020 US presidential election by the Electoral College on December 14 after all 50 states officially certified the voting results. His inauguration is scheduled for January 20.

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**US House Democrats Ask FBI to Open Criminal Probe Into Trump 'Election Crimes' - Letter**

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - US House Democratic lawmakers Ted Lieu and Kathleen Rice on Monday sent a letter to FBI Director Christopher Wray urging him to open a criminal investigation into President Donald Trump's conspiracy to commit election crimes during a recent telephone call with Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger.

"We believe Donald Trump engaged in solicitation of, or conspiracy to commit, a number of election crimes. We ask you to open an immediate criminal investigation into the President," the letter said.

Lieu and Rice said the evidence that Trump was trying to solicit election fraud in violation of United States federal and Georgia state law is now in the open.

On Sunday, the Washington Post published a leaked recording of the January 2 call between Trump and Raffensperger. Trump said during the call that he won in Georgia by hundreds of thousands of votes but did not need to prove the entire election fraud and asked Raffensperger to "find" 11,780 votes in order to affirm his victory.

According to the transcript, Trump criticized Raffensperger and warned that the voter fraud, on which the president blames his defeat, is a criminal offense, and suggested to Georgia's official that he "can't let that happen."

Georgia, a traditionally Republican state, has already recounted its ballots three times, each time revealing that Democrat Joe Biden beat Trump by a narrow margin. As a result, Biden, whose inauguration is slated for January 20, won all 16 electors from Georgia.

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US Screened 61% Less Passengers in 2020 Compared to 2019 - Transportation Security Agency

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States screened 61 percent less passengers during the coronavirus pandemic-marred year 2020 compared to the previous year, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) said in a press release on Monday.

"Between Jan. 1 and Dec. 31, 2020, the agency screened a total of approximately 324 million passengers throughout its airport security checkpoints. That figure represents just 39 percent of the approximately 824 million total passengers screened in 2019," the release said.

The TSA said travel volume bottomed on April 14, 2020 when only 87,500 passengers were screen at security checkpoints throughout the United States - a 96 percent drop over the previous year.

Travel volume rebounded around the time of the major US holidays, including Thanksgiving and Christmas, it added.

The TSA also said it expects passenger traffic to remain below the pre-pandemic levels for most of 2021.

TSA data focuses primarily on air passengers and underscores the difficulties felt by the airline industry amid the severe restrictions imposed amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Last month, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) urged European Union nations and the United Kingdom to end quarantine rules for airline travelers, citing a new series of studies showing restrictions do little to prevent contracting the novel coronavirus.

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New York City Pharmacies to Start Providing Vaccines by Next Week - Health Commissioner

UNITED NATIONS, January 4 (Sputnik) - New York City could become the first city in the United States with the largest chain pharmacies to begin providing COVID-19 vaccines to the general population as soon as next week, Health and Mental Hygiene Department Commissioner Dave Chokshi said in a press briefing on Monday.

In October, the US government signed an agreement with CVS and Walgreens pharmacy store chains to administer vaccines to residents of nursing homes.

"Having CVS and Walgreens vaccinate in the communities across New York City, not just through that nursing home program, does also require some federal coordination," Chokshi said. "We have been very aggressive in petitioning for New York City to be the very first place where that will be activated, which I expect will happen as soon as next week."

Chokshi said that other large chain pharmacies, such as Rite Aids, will also join the initiative and start to provide vaccines particularly in priority neighborhoods throughout the city.

Mayor Bill de Blasio at the same briefing said that by the end of January 1 million vaccine doses will be given to New York City residents. He added that besides healthcare workers, school employees and first-responders will start receiving their first doses.

This week, New York City healthcare personnel will receive their second doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. The city also aims to double the current number of sites where New Yorkers can get vaccinated from 125 to at least 250 by the end of the month, de Blasio said.

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US Justice Dept. Declines to Comment on Mexico's Asylum Offer to Assange

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department declined to comment on reports that Mexico said its ready to provide asylum to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, a department spokesperson told Sputnik on Monday.

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said earlier in the day that his country is ready to offer political asylum to Assange and supports the decision of a British judge to deny extradition of the WikiLeaks founder to the United States.

"No," the spokesperson said when asked about the reports.

UK district judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled earlier on Monday against the extradition of Assange to the US, where he could face up to 175 years in jail for the publication of classified information on the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as thousands of US diplomatic cables between 2010 and 2011.

The US Department of Justice initially said that Washington will continue to seek Assange's extradition.

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US Authorities to Boost Security for Lawmakers Amid Pro-Trump Protests - Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - US authorities are expected to enhance security for lawmakers and staff who may be targeted by supporters of President Donald Trump as they make their way to certify Joe Biden's win in the White House race, House Democratic Caucus Chairman Hakeem Jeffries told reporters on Monday.

"The [US] authorities are going to take all necessary precautions... to protect members of Congress who may be in harms way," Jeffries said during a press briefing.

Trump's supporters are expected to stage a protest in front of the Capitol building where on Wednesday both law-making chambers are to certify the results of the presidential elections. The Republican incumbent refuses to concede and attributes his Democratic rival's victory to massive fraud. Every election security agency has refuted Trump's claims while his campaign has lost some 60 lawsuits in a bid to reverse the results.

Jeffries said that he expects a serious and solemn procedure as voters, the Electoral College and courts have all spoken in support of Biden.

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UN Chief Urges Pakistan to Prosecute Gunmen Responsible for Killing 11 Miners - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 4 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned the killing of coal miners in Pakistan and called on the country's authorities to bring the perpetrators to justice, United Nations spokesman Farhan Haq said in a statement on Monday. On Sunday, 11 coal miners belonging to the Shia Hazara community were abducted and shot dead in Pakistan's province of Balochistan. Pakistani officials said they believe the miners were executed because of their faith.

"The Secretary-General strongly condemns the terrorist attack and killing of at least 11 coal miners in the Balochistan province of Pakistan yesterday," Haq said. "He trusts the Pakistani authorities will do everything possible to bring the perpetrators of this terrorist act to justice."

Members of the Shia Hazara community in Balochistan were also targeted in 2019 when a suicide bomb attack in a marketplace killed at least 21 people.

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#### US Treasury Allows Transactions With Venezuela's Opposition - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department said in a statement on Monday that it has excluded "transactions and activities" involving Venezuela's opposition leader Juan Guaido, his supporters and appointees from the executive order that blocks all government property.

"On January 4, 2021, OFAC [Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control] issued General License 31A authorizing transactions and activities involving the current Interim President of Venezuela, the IV Venezuela National Assembly seated on January 5, 2016... and its Delegated Commission, including respective members and staff, that are otherwise prohibited by E.O. 13884," the statement said.

Executive Order 13884 of August 5, 2019, blocks all property and interests in property of the government of Venezuela.

In addition, General License 31A authorizes transactions and activities involving "any official, designee, or representative appointed or designated by Guaido to act on behalf of the government of Venezuela," the statement said.

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#### US Special Envoy Khalilzad to Encourage Peace Process in Meetings With Afghan Delegations

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad will meet with the delegations of the conflicting parties a bid to accelerate the peace process, the State Department said in a statement on Monday.

Khalilzad embarked on Sunday on a diplomatic trip to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Qatar and Turkmenistan.

"In Doha he will meet with the two Afghan teams, encourage them and offer US support to accelerate the peace process - an immediate, significant reduction in violence and ceasefire and an agreement on a political roadmap and power-sharing as soon as possible," the State Department said.

Qatar is hosting the intra-Afghan peace negotiations that began in September. Both sides have said that they agreed on the framework of the talks, allowing for discussions on substantive issues to kick off. The progress is hampered, however, by an ongoing violence, including clashes between the government forces and the Taliban opposition movement.

In early November, the Trump administration announced plans to reduce by January 15 the number of US troops in Afghanistan to 2,500.

The State Department said Khalilzad will meet with Afghan leaders during his visit to Kabul and convey the United States' support "for the Afghan people and security forces."

During stops in Pakistan and Turkmenistan, Khalilzad will also encourage Afghanistan's neighbors to support an end to the violence and a political settlement as soon as possible, it added.

The State Department also said that Khalilzad will continue to encourage "projects and plans for expanded regional connectivity, trade, and development" which will be aided by an Afghan reconciliation and will help sustain peace.

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Washington Will Continue to Seek Extradition of Julian Assange to US - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US government will continue to seek the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the United States, Department of Justice spokesperson Marc Raimondi said in a statement on Monday.

"We will continue to seek Mr. Assange's extradition to the United States," Raimondi said.

Earlier on Monday, UK district judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled against the extradition of Assange to the United States, where he could face up to 175 years in jail for the publication of classified information on the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as of thousands of US diplomatic cables between 2010 and 2011.

"While we are extremely disappointed in the court's ultimate decision, but we are gratified that the United States prevailed on every point of law raised," Raimondi said. "In particular, the court rejected all of Mr. Assange's arguments regarding political motivation, political offense, fair trial and freedom of speech."

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UN Refugee Agency Condemns Killing of 100 Civilians in Niger - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, January 4 (Sputnik) - The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said in a statement on Monday that it condemns the attacks in Niger in which at least 100 civilians were killed and hundreds of others were forced to leave their homes.

"UNHCR condemns in the strongest terms the twin attacks in western Niger that killed at least 100 people, injured 25 others, and forced hundreds to flee on 2 January," the statement said. Armed groups opened fire on the villages of Tchamo-Bangou and Zaroumdareye in the region of Tillaberi near Niger's the border with Mali. Some of those injured were evacuated to Ouallam and Niamey.

According to the UNHCR, the population of four of the neighboring villages has fled. At least 1,000 people are now on the move trying to reach Ouallam, where UNHCR and its partners are providing humanitarian assistance to refugees.

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Qatar is hosting the intra-Afghan peace negotiations that began in September. Both sides have announced that they agreed on the framework of the talks, allowing for discussions on substantive issues to kick off. At the same time, clashes between the government forces and the Taliban opposition movement, as well as bombings, continue in Afghanistan.

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RPT: YEAR IN REVIEW - Trump Re-Election Bid Upended by Pandemic

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - A fierce struggle for the White House dominated US headlines in 2020, culminating in an election that saw historic turnout, a record number of mail-in votes amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and chaos sown by the incumbent's refusal to concede.

The 2020 election, pitting Republican President Donald Trump against Democratic challenger Joe Biden, was at its core a struggle for legitimacy. Since the day he was elected in 2016, adversaries accused Trump of being an illegitimate president based on charges that were later found to be baseless.

Four years later Republicans are peddling claims of large-scale vote fraud despite conclusions to the contrary by the Justice Department and several election security agencies. However, the only thing truly surprising about these developments is that Democrats would be surprised at the Republican strategy. Reciprocity, after all, is a natural law in politics.

Trump has embraced this principle until the bitter end, however, pushing allegations that voting machines were manipulated and the record deluge of mail-in ballots fueled widespread fraud.

Even after the election results were officially certified by mid-December, effectively clearing the way for Joe Biden to occupy the White House on January 20, the president remained defiant. "Tremendous evidence pouring in on voter fraud. There has never been anything like this in our Country!" Trump said in a tweet on December 15, a day after the Electoral College met to officially confirm Biden's victory.

#### ACQUITTAL

The Democratic Party's initial strategy to ensure Trump would not be a threat in 2020 failed when the Senate acquitted the president of impeachment charges stemming from the prior year over allegations of freezing aid to Kiev in exchange for a probe of the Biden family's business dealings in Ukraine.

The Democratic-controlled House easily impeached Trump at the end of last year, but removing the president required 67 of 100 votes in the Republican-majority Senate. In the end, the Senate voted 52-48 to acquit Trump on the first article of impeachment charging him with abuse of power and 53-47 on the second article regarding obstruction of Congress.

Trump prevailed largely because impeachment is a political process and Republicans in the Senate saw no reason to take the risk of crossing party lines.

"The short answer is that there was nothing there. Even hyping the Ukraine/good, Russia/bad meme - to which virtually all [Republican] Senators subscribe - was insufficient to overcome Trump's popularity with the Republican voter base," former Senate Republican adviser Jim Jatras told Sputnik after the acquittal in February.

Trump, emerging stronger from the impeachment battle with his approval rating hitting a high of 49%, was now more prepared to focus on the race. Meanwhile, the Democratic primaries had kicked-off, which would ultimately end with the party consolidating around Biden as the safest pick.

#### PANDEMIC, PROTESTS

With Trump surviving impeachment and Biden surviving the Democratic primaries, the two candidates were set for a general election collision of mammoth proportions amid two ongoing national crises. The pandemic and protests over police violence would have a profound impact on the 2020 race, with Trump drawing criticism on his handling of the former and Biden coming under fire for his reaction to the latter.

The United States under Trump's watch became the world leader in confirmed cases of COVID-19 - which has now infected about 17 million Americans. Critics have argued that the numbers could be much lower if the Trump took the crisis more seriously.

The Trump administration, instead of choosing to take any responsibility, decided to blame the crisis on China. The vicious campaign to smear Beijing included outrageous claims, top among them being that the virus came out of a Wuhan lab when, in fact, the genetic code released in January showed it was naturally derived.

In September, Trump controversially admitted that he knew the virus was a bigger threat than the way he represented it publicly, arguing that he had to show calm as the country's leader.

"You cannot show a sense of panic, or you can have bigger problems than you have had before," Trump told reporters in response to an audio clip released by a journalist from an interview earlier in the year revealing the president's admission.

Less than a month before election day Trump made matters worse by continuing to downplay the virus even after contracting it. After about a three-day hospital stay for COVID-19 treatment,

Trump warned Americans not to be frightened of the pandemic because the United States has the best equipment.

"I'm back because I am a perfect physical specimen and I'm extremely young. And so I'm lucky in that way," Trump said.

Biden, in contrast, strictly followed the COVID-19 guidelines and called on Trump to listen to the scientists and do the same.

The pandemic of course directly affected the race because it fundamentally altered the voting process, with several states changing rules to expand mail-in or absentee voting. Because Democrats took the virus more seriously, the influx of mail-in ballots was expected to boost Biden. Trump, as a result, repeatedly claimed the mailed ballots would fuel widespread vote fraud.

The other major crisis that impacted the election, protests against police violence, turned into a double-edged sword for Trump. On one hand he was criticized for deploying federal agents to quell protests in several Democratic-run cities. On the other hand, polls showed independent voters were worried about the scenes of violence and looting, as Biden took heat for failing to immediately call on rioters to stop.

The national conventions in August showed how radically different the two candidates approached both crises. The Democratic Party held a nearly all-virtual affair where they promoted a message of racial equality.

Trump, in contrast, ran as the "law and order" candidate, warning Americans that Biden would allow radical anarchists to destroy the country. His remark came at a gala on the White House lawn with no social-distancing or masks to be seen.

#### OTHER ELECTION ISSUES

The candidates sparred during two debates over a range of domestic issues such as immigration, tax cuts, trade and energy, among others. Trump threatened to harm Biden's chances in some rust belt battleground states by claiming the former vice president wanted to ban fracking. Biden did however suggest during one of the debates that he wanted to transition the US economy from fossil fuels.

The race was so dominated by domestic crises and issues, little attention was paid to any foreign policy issues outside of repeated exchanges about which candidate could be tougher on China.

Trump did try to contrast himself from Biden on foreign interventions, especially by underscoring how his administration struck a peace deal with the Taliban which activated a US troop exit from Afghanistan after 19 years. Trump has even attempted to accelerate the process and before the election vowed to bring all US troops home by Christmas.

There was also little time to focus on the typical foreign meddling claims. As the election neared, US intelligence leaders accused China, Russia, and Iran of obtaining voter registration data. Yet officials from all three countries denied the allegations and said they supported no particular candidate.

Scandals of course played a role in the race with the president and his allies hoping to pull a game-changing "October surprise," by capitalizing on Biden's alleged role in Hunter Biden's business dealings in Ukraine. Focus groups revealed that it had some impact among independent voters, who felt the media failed to appropriately cover the allegations.

#### ELECTION DAY(S)

The US Electoral College format requires candidates to win statewide elections, not national popular vote. The winner of the election must secure at least 270 of 538 electoral votes that are apportioned across 50 states. For example, although Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by around 2% in 2016, she lost the election because Trump won more electoral votes.

The election boiled down to about 12 so-called battleground states, the biggest prizes being Texas, Florida, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Georgia. Although Biden held a national lead of 8% on the eve of the election, the margins in key swing states were much tighter.

The first wave of election results pouring in on November 3 looked positive for Trump, especially when he was projected to win Florida.

Trump was trailing Biden in projected electoral votes but was leading in five out of six critical states before the night ended with both candidates declaring victory.

"I'm here to tell you tonight we believe we're on track to win this election," Biden said at a press conference.

At his presser, Trump took the stage to the tune of "Hail to the Chief" a song played at presidential inauguration ceremonies.

"This is a fraud on the American public - this is an embarrassment to our country," Trump said in the early hours of November 4. "We were getting ready to win this election, frankly, we did win this election."

Trump said his campaign was going to the US Supreme Court to halt the vote count.

"We will be going to [the] US Supreme Court. We want all voting to stop. We don't want them to find any ballots at 4 o'clock in the morning and add them to the list," Trump said.

Many Trump supporters were severely disappointed on November 5, considering before they went to sleep the prior night it appeared their candidate was on track to win pivotal states and had a clear path to victory. However, most of some 65 million mail-in ballots had yet to be counted. The fact states continued to receive and count mail-in ballots after the actual election day, only helped fuel fraud claims and spark protests.

In any event, four days later every US media outlet projected Biden the winner of the election the moment he captured the tipping point state of Pennsylvania. Most outlets had him securing at least 290 electoral votes with the state of Georgia still too close the call. After several recounts Georgia would eventually fall to Biden weeks later.

Biden would ultimately end up capturing a record 81.2 million votes overall, more than 51% of the total, to Trump's 74.2 million (47%). More importantly, Biden ended up winning 306 electoral votes, which represented 56% of the total.

The 2020 election also set the all-time record for total votes cast with nearly 160 million, about 20% more than 2016.

#### DIAGNOSIS

Of all the factors identified, Trump's behavior in the face of the pandemic might have been the largest contributing factor to his failure. Even his allies admitted the crisis, which also erased historic economic gains, led to his downfall.

"If he loses, it's going to be because of covid," Ronna McDaniel, chairwoman of the Republican National Committee, said shortly before Election Day.

In March, a Navigator Research poll showed 53% of Americans supported Trump's handling of the crisis, a level that would plummet 26 percent by October.

Post-election analyses revealed that Trump lost votes in large suburban areas in key battleground states, especially among women. Going into election night, both campaigns knew Trump would likely continue to perform strongly in rural areas and smaller suburbs while Biden would dominate in urban areas. Hence, voters in large suburbs just outside the big cities were seen as potentially decisive in many states. Trump's mishandling of the pandemic may have tilted the balance in Biden's favor in suburbia.

According to a New York Times analysis, Biden improved on Hillary Clinton's performance in 373 suburban counties by nearly 5 points, which helped him prevail in the key Midwestern states of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin as well as Arizona and Georgia. Although the overall movement in the suburbs was not massive, a slight nudge is all Biden needed in these states where his gap with Trump ended up being razor-thin.

Minorities voted in record numbers in Democratic strongholds in all of these states, especially the urban areas, although Trump, remarkably, defied expectations by improving his performance among Blacks and Hispanic voters.

With respect to pre-election polls, although they were accurate in projecting Biden as the winner, the surveys once again underestimated support for Trump, largely because his base distrusts pollsters. On election eve, most polls had Biden ahead nationally by 8%, yet he ended up winning by less than 5 percent.

The top three poll aggregators were inflated in Biden's favor in 11 of the top 12 battleground states by an average of more than 5 percent.

The polls were also considerably off in the congressional races, where the Democrats expected to expand the number of seats controlled in the House and secure more than 50 seats in the 100-member Senate, neither of which happened.

#### POST-ELECTION CRUSADE

Shortly prior to the election, Trump fast-tracked confirmation of Supreme Court pick Amy Coney Barrett because he felt the election would be decided before the high court. His prediction was accurate, but he would end up disappointed with the ultimate ruling.

Trump repeatedly claimed massive fraud took place despite the fact several US federal and state election security agencies said the 2020 vote was the safest in US history. Moreover, Trump's own Justice Department said they found no fraud at a scale that would affect the results.

Bill Boerum a former state of California Election Inspector, predicted – accurately - that the 2020 US presidential election would be "the most litigated" in American history.

At the center of Trump's objections was the unprecedented amount of mail-in ballots. Several states moved the mail-in ballot deadline, which many Republicans felt was unconstitutional. However, courts at every level disagreed with the Trump campaign's legal arguments. Voting rights advocacy group Democracy Docket said the Trump campaign and its allies, as of December 14, had lost 59 of 60 lawsuits filed to reverse the results in at least six battleground states.

Trump's crusade at times bordered on the Lovecraftian. At one press conference the president's personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani -with hair dye running down both of his cheeks – claimed foreign powers had manipulated election systems to flip votes from Trump to Biden.

The dagger through the heart of Trump's cause may have been a Supreme Court decision on December 11. The high court's decision was effectively unanimous – with all three Trump-appointed justices siding with the majority.

The decision prompted a backlash in Trumpdom, with Texas Republican Party Chairman Allen West calling on states to secede from the Union. The setback did not change the president's outlook.

"The Supreme Court really let us down. No Wisdom, No Courage!" Trump said in a tweet after the ruling.

Trump's court challenges also hindered the beginning of the transition process, although the president agreed to allow some of the procedures to begin. Biden, for his part, generally ignored Trump's lawsuits and has already named several cabinet ministers, many of whom have troubling track records.

#### BIDEN'S AGENDA AND THE FUTURE OF TRUMPDOM

Biden on the campaign trail has made clear that he will differ from Trump in terms of both substance and style, beginning with reversing many of the president's decisions to exit treaties. Biden said he wants to see the US reenter the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal and wants to extend the New START treaty. Biden also plans to end Trump's travel ban and rollback other stringent immigration-related policies.

However, some of his top cabinet picks, including Antony Blinken as Secretary of State, have track records of supporting interventions in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan and Ukraine, among others. Former UK ambassador to Syria Peter Ford believes Biden's cabinet selection means the US may escalate interference in Syria and elsewhere.

"The scene is set for more counter-productive US belligerence and interference in the Middle East," Ford told Sputnik after Biden announced Blinken would be his top diplomat.

Meanwhile, despite the outcome of the 2020 election, Trump himself – and the phenomenon known as Trumpism - will not be going away anytime soon. Trump at a rally in early December did not rule out a 2024 presidential run and predicted that the Republican Party would seize the House in 2022.

Trump has also been involved in trying to shape two runoff senate races that will affect who controls the US Senate. The Democrats need to win at least one of the races to secure 50 seats, which gives them an effective majority because the vice president will play the role of tiebreaker in votes.

Former Green Party vice presidential candidate Ajamu Baraka told Sputnik that he believes Trump could exert more influence on US politics even in defeat, potentially complicating any efforts at uniting the country.

US Congressman Jim Banks, the next head of the Republican Study Committee – a caucus of social conservatives - said Trumpism will certainly persist despite the election result.

"Trump taught us how to fight and win with an agenda that appeals to a popular base," Banks told reporters after the election. "House conservatives must follow his example and carry the Trump message the next two years."