

01/05/21 Tuesday

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Highly Transmissible UK COVID-19 Variant Affecting More People Under 20, Study Finds by [Mary F.](#)

A new variant of COVID-19 known as B.1.1.7 was identified in Britain last month in Kent, a county in South East England. The variant is believed to be more contagious but not deadlier than previous COVID-19 variants and has already been found in at least 33 countries and at least five US states.

In a [recent study](#), researchers at Imperial College London, the University of Edinburgh, Public Health England, the Wellcome Sanger Institute, the University of Birmingham and the COVID-19 Genomics UK Consortium used statistical analysis to evaluate the link between transmission and the frequency of the [new variant](#) across various regions.

According to a [news release](#) describing the study, the researchers found that people under 20 years old make up a higher proportion of cases of B.1.1.7, which the study calls the “variant of concern” (VOC), than they do non-VOC cases.

Despite the finding, researchers still state that it’s too early to “determine the mechanism behind this change.”

“They [researchers] explain that it may partly have been influenced by the variants spread coinciding with a period where lockdown was in force but schools were open. Further research is ongoing on the specific nature of any changes in how the virus affects this age group,” the news release explains.

Some scientists have also suggested that the [new variant of the virus spreads 50% to 70% faster](#) than other strains.

This particular study estimated that the reproduction number for the new variant is between 1.4 and 1.8, which is 0.4 to 0.7 higher compared to other variants of the virus. The reproduction number of an indicator of the number of people expected to be infected by a single person in a homogenous population.

“These analyses, which have informed UK government planning in recent weeks, show that the new variant of concern, B.1.1.7, has substantially higher transmissibility than previous SARS-CoV-2 viruses circulating in the UK. This will make control more difficult and further accentuates the urgency of rolling out vaccination as quickly as possible,” Professor Neil Ferguson of Imperial College London said in the news release.

In addition to the UK variant, another new variant of COVID-19 has been identified in South Africa. Called 501.V2, the variant carries mutations in its spike protein, which allows the virus to penetrate host cells and cause infection.

On Monday, British Health Secretary Matt Hancock [warned](#) that the new COVID-19 variant identified in South Africa is more troubling than the one found in the UK.

“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 told BBC Radio.](#)

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Former US President Carter to Skip President-Elect Biden's Inauguration
by [Evan Craighead](#)

At 96 years old, former US President Jimmy Carter is the oldest living president. Carter's absence from US President-elect Joe Biden's January 20 ceremony will mark his first missed inauguration since being sworn in as the 39th president of the US in 1977.

A spokesperson with the Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia, [confirmed to reporters](#) on Tuesday that Carter and his wife, 93-year-old former first lady Rosalynn Carter, "will not travel to Washington for the inauguration but have sent their best wishes to President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris."

According to the spokesperson, the Carters have expressed they "look forward to a successful administration."

Carter and his wife have attended every presidential inauguration since 1977 and 39 was notably one of the first US presidents to announce intent to attend Trump's 2017 inauguration. The 96-year-old, who in 2019 became the longest-living president in the history of the US, has spent most of the COVID-19 pandemic at his hometown of Plains, Georgia, [the Associated Press reported](#).

Carter announced in August 2015 that his metastatic melanoma had spread to his liver and brain. While the former president [believed he had "two or three weeks"](#) to live following the diagnosis, he announced in December 2015 that he had beaten cancer following experimental treatment.

A reason for the returned invite was not provided, but Carter has made [several visits to the hospital](#) in recent years, including a string of procedures related to a [broken hip in 2019](#).

The Carters' announcement comes around two weeks before Biden's scaled-back, COVID-19 guideline-friendly inauguration.

The president-elect's inaugural committee told Americans last month that the January 20th "ceremony's footprint will be extremely limited, and the parade that follows will be reimaged," [according to Politico](#).

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Scottish FM Says Trump Can't Come Play Golf on Inauguration Day Due to COVID-19 Restrictions
by [Mary F.](#)

US President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration is slated to take place on January 20, while US media has suggested incumbent President Trump was allegedly planning to play golf abroad on that day.

Scotland's First Minister and Leader of the Scottish National Party Nicola Sturgeon said Monday that US President Donald Trump will not be permitted to visit Scotland to play golf at the time of Biden's inauguration, noting that Trump must follow the country's COVID-19 restrictions.

"We are not allowing people to come into Scotland without an essential purpose right now, and that would apply to him just as it would apply to anybody else," Sturgeon said, [AFP reported](#). "And coming to play golf is not what I would consider to be an essential purpose," she added. There had been speculation that Trump, who has yet to concede his electoral defeat to Biden, might not attend the January 20 inauguration and instead travel to his Turnberry golf resort in western Scotland.

The rumors that Trump would go play golf in Scotland instead of attending the inauguration first arose after a Scottish paper, the [Sunday Post](#), reported that an American military version of a Boeing 757, which is sometimes used by Trump, is expected to land at a nearby airport on January 19.

The White House initially declined to comment on the Sunday Post report but later denied Trump had any plans to visit Scotland, [the New York Times reported](#). Scotland issued a stay-at-home order on Monday to stem the spread of a more transmissible variant of COVID-19, B.1.1.7, which was first detected in South East England last month. Following on the heels of Scotland, England has also imposed a new lockdown over fears that the new variant could overwhelm the nation's hospitals. According to the [latest tally by the Times](#), the new variant of the virus has pushed new case numbers to almost 60,000 a day in London and South East England.

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US Congress Using COVID-19 Test That FDA Says May Produce False Results
by [Mary F.](#)

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on Monday alerted patients and health care providers that a COVID-19 test manufactured by the company Curative may produce false-negative results, which can lead to "unintended adverse events," including increased risk of the spread of COVID-19.

On Monday, Brian Monahan, the Capitol physician, commented on the [FDA's warning](#) in a memo obtained by Politico.

"We expect to have additional information in the coming days from the FDA and our expert consultants with regard to any concerns about the ongoing use of this test for the Capitol community," [Monahan wrote](#).

The Curative test has been used to screen House of Representatives and Senate members, with the Office of the Attending Physician offering the test to lawmakers, staff and reporters since at least November. At the time, congressional leaders established a mass testing program to prevent members, who often travel across the country, from unknowingly spreading the virus to others.

In his memo, Monahan noted that the risk of false negatives was not unique to the Curative test, which he called "the most accurate available."

Concerns over the accuracy of the Curative test came as COVID-19 fears increased over the weekend due to lawmakers congregating in the Capitol for the swearing-in of hundreds of members.

More than 50 lawmakers have revealed positive COVID-19 test results to the public, including Rep. Kay Granger (R-TX), who got the result from Curative test at the Capitol over the weekend, Politico reported.

There has also been concern among lawmakers and senior aides that several quarantining House members have been permitted to participate in this week's proceedings from behind a plexiglass barrier.

"We have taken every precaution, we believe, to ensure the safety, not only of our members and the health of our members, but also of our staff," House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) reassured reporters Tuesday, Politico reported.

According to the FDA, the Curative test should not be used as the only means for determining treatment or other patient-management decisions.

"Consider retesting your patients using a different test if you suspect an inaccurate result was given recently by the Curative SARS-CoV-2 test," the FDA alert reads. "If testing was performed more than two weeks ago, and there is no reason to suspect current SARS-CoV-2 infection, it is not necessary to retest."

In a statement to Politico, Curative CEO Fred Turner revealed that the company is aware of the FDA safety alert.

"We are confident in our data, and we are working with the FDA closely on the matter. Testing sensitivity and accuracy on behalf of our patients is at the heart of our work," Turner said.

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Trump Claims Dominion Voting Machines 'Not Working for Over an Hour' in Georgia Runoff Election

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

After months of US President Donald Trump and his campaign team faulting Dominion's machines for his November election loss, the voting hardware company is threatening to bring a lawsuit alleging the claims hurt its business performance.

Trump has claimed that voting machines in certain Republican-majority districts in the US state of Georgia have been malfunctioning during Tuesday's runoff election for its two US Senate seats.

Appearing to cite US Rep. Rick Allen (R-GA), Trump claimed on Twitter on Tuesday afternoon that voting machines owned by Dominion Voting Systems had not been working "for over an hour" in certain Republican strongholds of the state.

"Ballots are being left in lock boxes, hopefully they count them," Trump added.

Trump has pointed to the machines as being behind his November 3, 2020, loss to US President-elect Joe Biden, claiming Dominion changed thousands of votes for Trump into votes

for US President-elect Joe Biden in several key swing states, including Georgia. However, [all of Trump's lawsuits alleging voter fraud have been thrown out](#) by the courts, and after lengthy ballot recounts and audits, the results have all been certified by election authorities.

Earlier on Tuesday, [Dominion CEO John Poulos said the company was preparing](#) a defamation lawsuit against Sidney Powell, a former attorney for Trump's presidential campaign, for "spreading false information" about the company and the veracity of its voting machines "with malicious intent."

It's unclear what Trump's source is for his Tuesday claims. However, right-wing news site [The Gateway Pundit reported that several voters](#) had called in to the radio show of former Trump campaign board member John Fredericks alleging an inability to vote thanks to malfunctioning voting machines. According to the outlet, the voters were given paper ballots instead.

[The Tuesday election is unusual in that both of Georgia's seats](#) in the US Senate are up for election at the same time. One race, between Republican incumbent Sen. David Perdue and Democratic challenger Jon Ossoff, is the result of a failure by either candidate to secure a majority of votes in the November 3 election. However, the second vote is between [Democratic candidate Reverend Raphael Warnock](#) and [sitting Sen. Kelly Loeffler, who was appointed](#) last year to fill the seat after former Sen. Johnny Isakson retired due to health reasons.

With the US Senate almost evenly split between the Republicans and Democrats, Tuesday's vote could decide which party controls Congress' upper house. The Democrats retained their control over the US House of Representatives in November, and with Biden in the White House, a Democratic victory in Georgia could give liberals control over both the legislature and the executive for the first time since 2011.

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In Joint Statement, US Intelligence Agencies Claim SolarWinds Hack 'Likely Russian in Origin' by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In a joint statement on Tuesday, several US intelligence agencies announced their conclusion that a hack attack last month that breached SolarWinds infrastructure monitoring software was Russian in origin and sought to gather information.

The Tuesday statement, issued by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), and the National Security Agency (NSA), said less than 10 US government agencies had been compromised by the hacking of SolarWinds' Orion software.

[According to their statement](#), "an Advanced Persistent Threat (APT) actor, likely Russian in origin, is responsible for most or all of the recently discovered, ongoing cyber compromises of both government and non-governmental networks."

"At this time, we believe this was, and continues to be, an intelligence gathering effort. We are taking all necessary steps to understand the full scope of this campaign and respond accordingly," the agencies added. "This is a serious compromise that will require sustained a effort and dedicated effort to remediate."

The series of hack attacks were first reported last month after hackers managed to penetrate SolarWinds' Orion software, which was used by several major US government agencies and many Fortune 500 companies. [CISA quickly directed US government agencies](#) as well as private users to stop using SolarWinds' products, but not before the hackers penetrated the US Departments of Homeland Security and Commerce, the US Treasury, viewing Microsoft's source code [in the process, the company said](#).

The US government then established the Cyber Unified Coordination Group (UCG) to investigate the incident. The UCG continues to work to understand the scope of the attack and currently believes that a small number of the SolarWinds clients were affected. The UCG said it believes that intelligence gathering was the main purpose of the attack.

Early accusations quickly ran to Russia, with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo saying on December 18 Russia was "pretty clearly" responsible and [US President-elect Joe Biden said his forthcoming](#) administration would consider sanctioning Moscow as punishment.

[In response, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said](#) Russia had no part in the hacking operations and that the accusations were "unfounded" and the result of "blind Russophobia." [The Washington Post claimed](#) in December that a hacking group called APT29, also known as "the Dukes" or "Cozy Bear", allegedly linked to Moscow, was behind intrusions but provided no evidence to back the allegation. According to the newspaper, the hack took place via a Microsoft corporate partner, which handles cloud-access services.

Following the reports, US President Donald Trump, who was "fully briefed" on the matter, said that the attacks were exaggerated by "Fake News Media", alleging that China could have been responsible for the hack, and suggesting alleged election fraud was much of a bigger issue for the United States.

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White House Rumble - Political Cartoon

The latest antics by US President Donald Trump regarding the presidential election results come as the commander-in-chief has hailed congressional lawmakers who have indicated their intentions to object to the upcoming Electoral College certification.

Still refusing to acknowledge his defeat in the 2020 election, [Trump told supporters](#) at a Georgia rally late Monday that the fight for the White House would continue, as he was not going to give up the Oval Office.

Trump appeared in Dalton, Georgia, to drum up support for the Republican candidates of the state's runoff elections; however, the topic of discussion quickly shifted gears toward Trump's voter fraud allegations regarding the presidential election.

"They're not going to take the White House. We're going to fight like hell," [Trump said](#). "When you win in a landslide, and they steal it, and it's rigged, it's not acceptable."

The US Congress is due to [certify the results](#) of the presidential election on Wednesday, a move which is likely to not go down smoothly, since several lawmakers [have voiced their support for challenging](#) the recount.

Only 15 more days until Inauguration Day, folks, and it's anyone's guess as to how the milestone day will go down.

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Trump Signs Executive Order Blacklisting Alipay, Seven Other Chinese Apps
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Trump administration's previous attempt to ban Tencent's WeChat and QQ Wallet apps in October was blocked by a US federal court, which said banning them from app stores was far too broad to be construed as protecting US national security interests.

US President Donald Trump [issued an executive order on Tuesday banning use or financial transactions](#) with eight Chinese apps, including Alipay, the world's largest online payment platform with more than 1 billion users. The company is owned by Ant Group, an affiliate of Alibaba Group that was founded by Alibaba's founder, Chinese billionaire Jack Ma.

The directive also includes CamScanner, SHAREit, WPS Office, VMate, Tencent QQ, WeChat Pay and QQ Wallet, the last three of which are owned by Tencent.

"The continuing activity of the PRC [People's Republic of China] and the CCP [Communist Party of China] to steal or otherwise obtain United States persons' data makes clear that there is an intent to use bulk data collection to advance China's economic and national security agenda," the order reads. "The United States has assessed that a number of Chinese connected software applications automatically capture vast swaths of information from millions of users in the United States, including sensitive personally identifiable information and private information, which would allow the PRC and CCP access to Americans' personal and proprietary information." Last year, Trump also tried to ban QQ Wallet and WeChat, Alipay's principal rival, after the US Justice Department argued the apps were a threat to US national security. [However, federal courts blocked his immediate banning](#) of WeChat in October. Tencent has rejected the DoJ's accusations, claiming it "incorporates the highest standards of user privacy and data security." The Tuesday order tasks the US Department of Commerce with deciding which transactions will be banned.

On the other side of the Pacific, things are looking little better for Ma. [Alibaba's share value declined precipitously](#) after Beijing announced an antitrust probe of Alibaba in December, and the month prior, Ant Group's scheduled [initial public offering was suddenly scuttled](#) after Chinese President Xi Jinping had regulators probe the deal.

Trump has blacklisted hundreds of Chinese companies in various ways over the last few years, claiming their connections to the Communist Party of China or the Chinese government have rendered them insecure. These have included [some of the world's largest tech companies](#), including Huawei, China Mobile and China Telecom. Chinese authorities and corporate figures alike have rejected the US' claims.

However, like the WeChat ban, some of Trump's moves have met pushback in the US, [including an attempt to force the New York Stock Exchange to delist](#) Chinese telecom giants. [Earlier on Tuesday, NYSE announced it had reversed](#) the ban on some of the firms and would continue to allow trading of China Telecom, China Unicom and China Mobile stocks.

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Iran to Increase Uranium Enrichment Eightfold, But Keep Purity Below Bomb-Making Levels
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Israeli government has claimed Iran will soon be capable of building a nuclear bomb, but according to US nuclear scientists, it would be infeasible to do so using the purity to which Iran is now refining its uranium.

On Tuesday, Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), announced the country would increase its production of 20% enriched uranium to eight times its present amount.

"This year, the production of yellowcake will be between 35 and 40 tons, which means that we have 8-folded the production of yellowcake," [Salehi said, according to Fars News Agency](#). He added the country can produce between 17 and 20 grams of uranium with 20% purity per hour. "Until three or four years ago, we used to produce an average of 4 to 5 tons of yellowcake, but for the past two years, we have increased the production of yellowcake to 30 tons," he added. When mined, uranium contains several isotopes, but only U-235 can be used for nuclear fission reactions like those that power nuclear power plants and nuclear weapons. By removing the other uranium isotopes, the enriched uranium becomes more reactive and takes the form of a powdery substance called yellowcake. However, the enrichment process requires fast-spinning centrifuges - Iran's access to which is greatly limited by the terms of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

To that end, Salehi said the country was "currently installing one thousand IR-2m centrifuges" that would speed up Iran's enrichment rate from 8 or 9 kilograms per month to 120 kilograms, in line with the Iranian Parliament's "[Strategic Action to Lift Sanctions](#)" passed last month. However, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi said on Monday that resumption of 20% uranium enrichment remains in compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the JCPOA, citing Article 36 of the 2015 document, which outlines the resolution of disputes with other agreement signatories.

"The IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] had been fully informed about the decision and all the required legal steps had been taken in presence of IAEA inspectors," he added, according to Fars.

Iran Won't Crawl Back to Nuclear Deal

The 2015 nuclear deal saw international economic sanctions lowered against Iran in exchange for its agreement not to develop nuclear weapons and to accept strict limits on its production of refined uranium. The country operates just a handful of nuclear facilities, including refineries in Fordow and Natanz and power plants in Arak and Bushehr that can be powered by the low-grade refined uranium.

In 2018, the US unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA and reimposed economic sanctions on Iran. US President Donald Trump claimed Iran had been secretly violating the terms of the deal, but other partners to the deal disagreed and remained within its confines. The sanctions have

severely damaged Iran's economy and exacerbated the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic there.

US President-elect [Joe Biden has indicated he is willing to return](#) to the deal after being inaugurated on January 20. However, Araqchi noted that [Tehran wouldn't be rushing to meet Washington in the middle](#).

"Westerners are suffering from a delusion and think that due to pressures imposed on the country by US sanction in the past years, the Islamic Republic is ready and will quickly embrace America's return to the deal and so they can set conditions for the lifting of the sanctions. This is a completely wrong and delusional understanding," the diplomat said.

"Steps in reducing JCPOA-related commitments come in response to other parties' failure to fulfill their obligations under the deal after the unilateral withdrawal of the United States," he added.

Iran Rejects Claims of Nuclear Bomb Program

[Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has claimed](#) Iran's decision to produce more uranium at higher purity is proof it is resuming nuclear weapons construction - something Araqchi dismissed on Tuesday.

"We adhere to our principle on nuclear weapons being religiously forbidden. Nukes have no place either in our religious principles or in our defensive and security calculations," he said. [According to the US' Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory](#), which designed much of the United States' nuclear arsenal, while it's technically possible to build a nuclear bomb using 20% enriched uranium, you would need 10 times the amount of fuel as if you used 90% enriched uranium.

"The judgement of the weapons designers, who provided the technical input to the IAEA for formulation of the definition of non-weapons-usable 235U, was that weapons with such large minimum critical masses would not be practicable to design," they wrote.

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UAE to Buy Two More GlobalEye Spy Planes as Opposition Swells Against Saudi Coalition's War in Yemen

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

US President-elect Joe Biden has pledged to end US support for the Saudi-led coalition's war in Yemen, and alliance members including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been racing to complete their weapons buys before Biden's inauguration later this month.

On Monday, [Swedish aerospace company Saab announced Abu Dhabi had](#) placed a \$1 billion order for two more GlobalEye spy aircraft. The airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft is a modified Bombardier Global 6000 business jet with a long-range radar and other surveillance systems attached, and is reinforced against electronic attacks.

"We are proud that the United Arab Emirates continues to show great trust in Saab and our solutions," Saab CEO Micael Johansson was quoted as saying in the release. "It shows that

Saab remains on the cutting edge regarding advanced technology. The Global Eye program is running according to plan and we have an efficient cooperation with the customer.”

The UAE previously bought three GlobalEyes from Saab in 2015, with the second being delivered in April 2020. Monday’s deal is expected to be finished by 2025, according to Saab.

The aircraft’s airborne early warning radar can track not only aircraft in flight out to 450 kilometers away, but also ballistic missiles in flight. However, it also carries a maritime surveillance radar, enabling it to track surface and sea targets while aloft as well.

UAE’s F-35 Buy on the Rocks

The announcement of the deal comes as a US group moves to block another aircraft deal with the UAE from proceeding.

On December 30, the New York Center for Foreign Policy Affairs (NYCFPA) think tank announced a lawsuit against the US State Department and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo alleging the sale of as many as 50 F-35 Lightning II stealth aircraft, as well as 8 MQ-9B Reaper drones and a variety of munitions, has been allowed to proceed against US law.

[According to the think tank, the deal has been rushed](#) without guaranteeing Abu Dhabi won’t share proprietary information about the stealthy F-35 with China or Russia. The potential to buy the advanced F-35, which Israel is the only Middle Eastern nation the US has so far allowed to possess, [was part of the deal brokered by Washington last year](#) that saw the UAE and Israel agree to normalize relations.

Federal lawmakers failed in their own bid to [block the sale last month, Sputnik reported](#).

“With this deal going forward, the US is setting a baseline for a very dangerous proliferation of weapons in the region and is enabling an arms race to start in the Middle East.” NYCFPA Principal Director Justin Russell said in a news release, adding, “NYCFPA also calls on the incoming Biden administration to reconsider this deal for the benefit of peace in the region.”

Biden Pressured to End Yemen War Support

Indeed, Biden has pledged to end US support for the catastrophic war in Yemen, which has been waged by Saudi Arabia and its allies, including the UAE, since 2015. Outrage over news that US forces had been operating in Yemen near the Saudi border and that the Pentagon had provided logistical support for the Saudi coalition caused the Trump administration to [step back from some of that support in late 2018](#), but congressional attempts to block future weapons sales to Riyadh and its allies [have been rejected by US President Donald Trump](#).

[Investigations of war materiel in Yemen have revealed](#) extensive support by the UAE as well as Saudi Arabia, with multiple [weapons systems sold solely to Abu Dhabi appearing](#) in the hands of Yemeni militias, including Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

[Biden spoke out against the war in early 2019](#), calling on Trump to end US support for Saudi coalition operations, and many of his senior staff picks [are signatories to a 2018 open letter calling for the same](#), including Antony Blinken, whom Biden has picked to be secretary of state; Avril Hanes, whom he has nominated as director of national intelligence; and Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Biden’s pick as US ambassador to the United Nations.

With that in mind, [the US State Department approved on December 30](#) a new weapons sale to Saudi Arabia. The \$290 million deal would see Riyadh supplied with 3,000 of [Boeing’s GBU-39 SDB I Small Diameter Bombs](#), as well as “containers; weapon support and support equipment; spare and repair parts; US Government and contractor engineering, technical and logistical

support services; and other related elements of logistical and program support," according to the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. Congress will still have to approve the deal.

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Schwarzenegger Slams Trump's Election Claims as 'Un-American Bulls**t'
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Recently leaked audio featured US President Donald Trump requesting Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a Republican, "find 11,780 votes" and flip the state from a win for US President-elect Joe Biden.

Former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger [published an op-ed in The Economist](#) on Tuesday and took aim at the US president's recent claims that he won the 2020 US presidential election by "hundreds of thousands" of votes.

"I once did a Terminator film called 'Judgment Day,'" Schwarzenegger wrote, referring to the 1991 movie "Terminator 2: Judgment Day."

"That's just Hollywood. But January 6th is Judgment Day for a lot of politicians. Will they choose to side with the voters, or will they choose to side with their party and their selfish president?"

As of this article's publication, [at least 13 Senate Republicans have committed to oppose](#) the certification of the Electoral College votes during the Wednesday congressional session led by US Vice President Mike Pence, who is also the president of the Senate.

While Biden got 306 Electoral College votes, well above the 270 needed to secure a victory over Trump, the US president has refused to concede and has challenged the legitimacy of the election via claims of widespread voter fraud.

Schwarzenegger, who took over "The Celebrity Apprentice" when Trump assumed office, also slammed the president's recent call with Raffensperger as "un-American bulls**t."

The audio in question was released by the Washington Post on Sunday and features the US president's asking the Georgia secretary of state to "find votes" purportedly stolen from the president during the November election.

"So look. All I want to do is this. I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have because we won the state," Trump [said in the clip](#). "And flipping the state is a great testament to our country because, you know, this is — it's a testament that they can admit to a mistake or whatever you want to call it."

Georgia Republican Party Chairman David Shafer [has argued on Twitter](#) that the Trump-Raffensperger call was recorded illegally.

Georgia is currently in the middle of critical Senate runoff elections that will decide whether Republicans retain control in the legislative chamber. The voting comes as Trump has vowed to fight for what he calls the legitimate results of the November presidential election, alleging massive voter fraud took place on Election Day.

The former California governor, a Republican, asserted in his Tuesday op-ed that "there is no question about who won the presidential election" and that "continuing this charade is stupid, crazy and evil."

"For those in my party considering standing up against the voters on January 6th, know this: our grandchildren will know your names only as the villains who fought against the great American experiment and the will of the voters. You will live in infamy," Schwarzenegger concluded. At a rally in Georgia on Monday, [Trump said](#) there was "no way we lost Georgia," reiterating his claims that the November presidential election was "rigged" by Democrats.

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'It Doesn't Come Easily': Republican Senator Says Decision to Back Electoral College Was 'Brutal'
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The US Congress is expected to certify the results of the 2020 presidential election on Wednesday, a procedure which formally affirms the winner of the highly contested race; however, multiple lawmakers have voiced their discontent and vowed to object to the ballot recount.

Falling in line with fellow conservative lawmakers, US Sen. Kevin Cramer (R-ND) indicated Tuesday that his decision to not object to the Electoral College certification was not made lightly, as he took into account the stances of his many constituents.

"It was brutal, to be honest," Cramer said [during an interview with MSNBC](#). "But at the end of the day, there are two things. One is my conscience is captive to God, and my oath is to the Constitution of the United States."

Citing the 12th Amendment, Cramer stressed that there is "no role for the Congress to object to the electors," later remarking that both the House of Representatives and the US Senate are solely responsible for counting the "votes that are presented by the states."

According to the US Constitution, the only scenario in which Congress can take a more proactive role in determining the winner of a presidential election is if no candidate wins a majority of electors, which is not the case currently, as US President-elect Joe Biden secured a majority with 306 electoral votes.

Cramer further explained that while he had heard from neither US President Donald Trump nor White House officials regarding his stance, he spent "a lot of time" reviewing evidence and listening to constituents and attorneys familiar with election matters.

"I've put a lot of intellectual rigor and emotion into this decision, so it doesn't come easily," he said. "But I also have to say I'm quite comfortable with it."

The Republican official's Tuesday remarks came hours after [he issued a statement](#) revealing he would not be joining efforts by party members to challenge the ballot certification process.

In a late Monday release, Cramer called it "disappointing" that the vote has become the "exclusive litmus test" for lawmakers to prove whether they stand with Trump. The senator, who is a close ally of Trump, also stated the certification challenge "is not an appropriate or effective way to change the results."

Cramer's stance also mirrors that of [fellow Trump supporter US Sen. Tom Cotton \(R-AK\)](#), who received a special shout-out from the president over Twitter on Monday that warned the lawmaker against approving the electoral ballot count on Wednesday.

Efforts by Republicans to challenge the certification in the Senate were initially launched by Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO) before Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) joined in along with several other members of the chamber. Most recently, Sen. Kelly Loeffler (R-GA), who is currently facing a runoff election in the Peach State against Rev. Raphael Warnock, voiced her support for the count challenge.

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Iran's Zarif Says Settled Gulf Dispute Result of Qatar's 'Brave Resistance to Pressure & Extortion'

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier Tuesday, leadership from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt signed a US-brokered deal to restore diplomatic relations with Qatar, ultimately settling a nearly four-year dispute that deeply divided the region.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif congratulated Qatar on Tuesday for managing to successfully [come to an agreement](#) and begin repairing diplomatic ties with neighboring states that imposed a trade and travel embargo against the energy-rich country in 2017.

The Iranian official [stated in a Twitter post](#) that the settling of the row was rooted in Qatar's "brave resistance to pressure [and] extortion," before issuing a message to its Arab neighbors that Iran is "neither an enemy nor a threat."

"Enough scapegoating - especially with your reckless patron on his way out," Zarif said, referring to outgoing US President Donald Trump, who has exerted a campaign of maximum pressure toward Iran. "Time to take our offer for a strong region. #HOPE."

Zarif's commentary came hours after reports first indicated late Monday that Qatari and Saudi leadership intended to ease tensions and [sign a deal heavily brokered by Kuwaiti and US negotiators](#), including White House adviser Jared Kushner, on Tuesday during the annual Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Saudi Arabia.

Although the deal allows for Saudi Arabia to reopen its air, land and sea borders with Qatar, the historic agreement also paves the way for full diplomatic relations to be restored between the two neighbors; however, it's unclear how soon such steps might be taken by the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt.

"We are extremely pleased with having been able to achieve this very important breakthrough that we believe will contribute very much to the stability and security of all our nations in the region," Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan told reporters during a news conference after the signing, [the Associated Press reported](#).

"We are at a place where everybody is satisfied and happy ... the returning of diplomatic relations, flights, etc., all of that will now go back to normal."

Dania Thafer, executive director of the Gulf International Forum, told the Associated Press the agreement came about over growing concerns from Saudi Arabia that US President-elect Joe Biden would be reversing a variety of the US' Middle East stances, in particular by restarting talks with Iran and lowering the number of US soldiers stationed in the region.

Additionally, Thafer explained that the summit and agreement were more of "confidence-building mechanisms than they were full reconciliation," since the "core tensions" between the involved parties "are still lingering."

"[The development] leaves a major question mark on how they will move forward," she told the outlet.

The dispute with Qatar saw Saudi Arabia and its allies accuse Doha of supporting terror groups and of being too close with Iran, among other allegations, and cut off all ties in June 2017. Since the start of the disagreement, Qatar has firmly rejected accusations of supporting terror.

However, the blockade, which was partially lifted to allow for Qataris to participate in the Islamic hajj pilgrimage, only helped to bolster ties between Qatar and Iran as Doha sought to find ways around the restrictions.

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No Officers Will Be Charged Over Jacob Blake Shooting, Wisconsin District Attorney Reveals by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Kenosha, Wisconsin, resident Jacob Blake was shot seven times in the back on August 23, 2020, in front of his children by Officer Rusten Sheskey of the Kenosha Police Department. The shooting, which left Blake paralyzed from the waist down, came amid mass protests across the US over the repeated deaths of Black Americans at the hands of police.

US prosecutors announced Tuesday that neither Sheskey nor any other law enforcement officials present during the shooting would be charged with a crime, and that no charges would be issued against Blake.

Michael Graveley, the Kenosha County district attorney, [told reporters at a news conference](#) that his decision to not file any charges was based on evidence not captured by the graphic cellphone recording of the August shooting. The official further noted that if the matter went to trial, Sheskey could successfully make a case for self-defense, as Blake had a knife in his possession at the time.

"It's really evidence about the perspective of Officer Sheskey at each moment and what would a reasonable officer do at each moment," Graveley said. "Almost none of those things are answered in that deeply disturbing video that we've all seen."

"Officer Sheskey felt he was about to be stabbed," he continued, before noting that the incident itself was also a tragedy for the Blake family and the community as a whole. Graveley also indicated the decision was personally difficult, as he has never experienced a moment in which he has had to "contend with explicit or implicit bias based on my race."

The Blake family was informed of the decision prior to the announcement, according to Graveley.

Ben Crump, the legal representative for the Blake family, [issued a statement](#) following the announcement and called the decision a disappointment.

“This decision failed not only Jacob and his family but the community that protested and demanded justice,” he wrote in a Twitter post. “This isn't the news we hoped for, but our work is not done and hope is not lost. We must broaden the fight for justice on behalf of Jacob Blake and the countless other Black victims of racial injustice and police brutality.”

Hints that charges would not be filed in the case emerged late Monday, when a state of emergency was declared in Kenosha and Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers authorized the deployment of the National Guard to ensure order and protect city infrastructure.

The Blake shooting unfolded three months after the officer-involved death of Minnesota man George Floyd, and was similarly captured on bystander video.

The footage, filmed by Raysean White, showed Blake walking to the driver's side door of an SUV as officers followed closely behind with guns drawn and issued commands. It wasn't until Blake opened the door and leaned into the vehicle that Sheskey grabbed onto Blake and discharged his firearm. Blake's young children were seated in the car at the time of the shooting.

Investigators later explained that officers had seen a knife in Blake's possession, with Sheskey making the decision to fire his department-issued handgun after he noticed Blake turned toward the officer with the knife in hand. However, upon further examination it was unclear whether Blake had actually threatened anyone with the weapon, since none of the officers on the scene were equipped with body cameras.

Days after the shooting, Kenosha was propelled into the national spotlight as widespread protests erupted, and the incident became a topic of discussion for both US President Donald Trump and US President-elect Joe Biden. While Biden suggested charges against Sheskey appeared warranted, Trump sided with police and preached law and order.

Protests in the city subsequently turned deadly on the third night, when then-17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse fatally shot Anthony Huber and Joseph Rosenbaum with an assault rifle, also wounding Gaige Greusskreutz. The teen was later hit with homicide and attempted homicide charges, to which [he pleaded not guilty on Tuesday](#). He is currently free on a \$2 million bond and arguing that he acted in self-defense.

Since the events that unfolded in August, Blake has returned home after months of hospitalization and rehab. He is currently serving a two-year probation as part of a deal in which he pleaded guilty to two misdemeanor counts of disorderly conduct.

As recently as December, Sheskey was still on administrative leave from the Kenosha Police Department over the shooting, [according to the New York Times](#). Incidentally, the officer has been the subject of at least five internal investigations over the seven years he's been with the force, the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported](#).

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New York Stock Exchange May Move Ahead With Plans to Delist Chinese Companies - Report by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

In light of a November executive order signed by US President Donald Trump, the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) recently briefly decided to delist three Chinese telecommunication companies from its listing before reverting its decision. However, new reports suggest the exchange may be changing its mind once again.

The NYSE is reportedly considering going forward with its original plans to delist three major Chinese companies after US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin allegedly reached out to a top official.

Citing sources familiar with the matter, [Bloomberg News reported](#) the notion of reversing back to the NYSE's initial intention became clear after Mnuchin reached out to NYSE President Stacey Cunningham on Tuesday and relayed that he disagreed with allowing the companies to keep trading under the exchange.

Also involved in the discussion were White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows, national security adviser Robert O'Brien and National Economic Council Director Larry Kudlow.

At the center of the conflict are Chinese companies China Mobile Ltd., China Telecom Corp. and China Unicom Hong Kong Ltd.

The latest developments stem from a November 2020 executive order from Trump that aimed to ban individuals from buying and selling with Chinese companies accused of having ties to the Chinese military. The order is expected to take effect on January 11, days before Trump is due to leave the Oval Office.

The NYSE had first announced it would be delisting the companies on December 31, before subsequently changing course late Monday, [explaining in a statement](#) that "further consultation with relevant authorities in connection with Office of Foreign Assets Control" prompted the decision.

[According to Fox Business](#), the exchange had planned to suspend trading for the three companies sometime between January 7 and January 11.

Sources told Bloomberg that the previously changed plans came about after questions emerged over whether or not the three telecommunication companies "were actually banned."

China previously [weighed in on the development](#) when reports first emerged and called the NYSE's move politically-rooted, with the Chinese Securities Regulatory Commission stressing that the three companies have "always adhered to market rules and regulatory requirements." Unidentified officials also informed the outlet that the exchange intends to move ahead with its plans once it receives "confirmation" from the US government.

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Dems Take Early Lead in 2 Senate Control-Deciding Georgia Runoffs - Results

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Democrats have taken the early lead in two Senate races in Georgia that will decide whether Republicans retain control of the upper chamber with almost 20 percent reporting, results posted by Fox News show.

The results on Tuesday night showed Democratic candidate Jon Ossoff leading Republican incumbent David Perdue 56.3 - 43.8 percent with 16 percent of precincts reporting. The second Georgia race showed Democratic candidate Raphael Warnock leading Republican incumbent Kelly Loeffler 56.6 - 43.4 percent with 16 percent of precincts reporting. If both Democratic candidates secure two seats in the Senate, 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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Canadian Man Takes Own Life Following Arrest for Violating COVID-19 Restrictions – Police

TORONTO, January 5 (Sputnik) - A Canadian man whose arrest for violating COVID-19 restrictions was captured on video and went viral has committed suicide, the Toronto Police Service (TPS) said in a statement.

Moses Demian, 24, was arrested by the Toronto Police Service on Sunday night for allegedly obstructing a peace officer during a meeting of car enthusiasts, which was broken up by law enforcement. Earlier in the day, a source with knowledge of the situation told Sputnik that Demian may have taken his life sometime after that.

"During the arrest, the person stated they were in crisis. Officers responded immediately by taking the person to the hospital. The person was assessed by a doctor and released by the hospital to his family. The person had no further contact with the Toronto Police. Since then, we have learned the person died at their home in Durham Region on Monday," the TPS said in a statement obtained by the Toronto Sun.

The original video posted to social media showed TPS officers dispersing the crowd, while three officers handcuffed Demian and placed him in a squad car despite vocal protests from the young man.

A GoFundMe page set up to cover funeral and memorial expenses has raised over \$16,000.

A number of Canadian police departments have incurred backlash in recent weeks over allegations of heavy-handed tactics in enforcing COVID-19 related restrictions.

The Policing the Pandemic project, a Canadian research group tracking police enforcement of pandemic related restrictions, said in a report on Tuesday that there have been over 700 COVID-19 related citations and charges laid by the various levels of Canadian law enforcement since the health crisis began.

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Canadian Hospital Begins Transfer of Overflow COVID Patients as Beds Fill Up Nation Wide

TORONTO, January 5 (Sputnik) – A hospital in the Canadian province of Ontario has announced that it will transfer overflow COVID-19 patients to hospitals over an hour away as the number of available hospital beds dwindles across the province and country.

As many as 20 patients from the Windsor Regional Hospital in the eponymously named city will be moved to Sarnia and Chatham-Kent, both of which are over an hour away, the hospital said in a statement.

"We anticipate as many as 20 patients may require transfer this week to our partners at Chatham-Kent Health Alliance (CKHA) and Bluewater Health in Sarnia," the Windsor Regional Hospital said on Tuesday.

The regional hospital's decision reflects a growing problem across the province and country. A day earlier, the Joseph Brant Hospital in Burlington, Ontario announced that operations began at its field hospital – the first in Ontario and one of now several across the nation – as the Toronto-area hospital and others in the region become increasingly overstretched.

Additionally, the London Health Sciences Centre (LHSC) in London, Ontario confirmed reports that it is bringing in a refrigerated trailer to store excess bodies after the medical facility's morgue filled up.

Speaking to reporters earlier in the day, Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said that on average 4,000 Canadians are receiving in-patient care at any given moment, including 770 individuals in intensive care, up over 50 percent from a month earlier.

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Most Polls Close in Georgia Senate Runoffs That Will Determine Control of US Congress

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Voting has ended in most districts in the state of Georgia for the last two US senate races that will determine the balance of power in the 50-seat chamber, with a couple locations ordered to remain open for another thirty minutes.

Most polling stations closed Tuesday night at 7:00 p.m. EST (11:00 p.m. GMT) with results expected to start rolling in within the hour, although final results may not be known until late in the evening or Wednesday.

A judge ordered at least two polling stations to stay open for an extra 30 minutes or so due to downtime from technical issues.

Incumbent Republican Senators David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler are defending their seats 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, 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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Trump Bans 8 Chinese Software Apps From Processing US Transactions - White House

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump has issued an executive order banning several Chinese applications from processing US transactions due to national security concerns, the White House said in a press release.

"The following actions shall be prohibited beginning 45 days after the date of this order, to the extent permitted under applicable law: any transaction by any person, or with respect to any property, subject to the jurisdiction of the United States, with persons that develop or control the following Chinese connected software applications, or with their subsidiaries, as those transactions and persons are identified by the Secretary of Commerce (Secretary) under subsection (e) of this section: Alipay, CamScanner, QQ Wallet, SHAREit, Tencent QQ, VMate, WeChat Pay, and WPS Office," the release said on Tuesday.

The release claims that Chinese software applications collect personal information from US citizens that could be accessed by the Chinese government.

Within 45 days, the US Secretary of Commerce will provide Trump with a report identifying which individuals and transactions have been banned under the new executive order.

Chinese officials have repeatedly refuted such allegations made by the US.

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Trump Awards \$3.7Bln to Puerto Rico for Water Infrastructure Damaged in Hurricane Maria

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration has awarded Puerto Rico \$3.7 billion to rebuild its infrastructure damaged in Hurricane Maria in 2017, the White House said in a statement.

"Under the leadership of President Trump, Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) will award \$3.7 billion to help rebuild Puerto Rico's water and wastewater treatment plants, pumping stations, dams, and reservoirs," the release said on Tuesday evening.

In September, the Trump administration announced it awarded Puerto Rico with \$13 billion to help rebuild the territory's electrical grid and to support its education system following the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

An independent study conducted by the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health concluded that Hurricane Maria caused the deaths of 2,975 people in Puerto Rico between September 2017 and February 2018.

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Trump to Speak at Rally Near White House on Wednesday as Congress Verifies Election

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump will speak at the rally near the White House on Wednesday as Congress convenes for a joint session to verify the results of the 2020 presidential election.

"I will be speaking at the SAVE AMERICA RALLY tomorrow on the Ellipse at 11AM Eastern. Arrive early - doors open at 7AM Eastern. BIG CROWDS," Trump said via Twitter on Tuesday evening.

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 so far that they will object to the result and have demanded an independent commission to conduct a forensic audit 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 on procedural grounds.

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US Export-Import Bank Inks Deal With Oman to Promote American Products - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Oman agreed to expand trade with the United States by allowing US exports financed with credit from the Export-Import Bank of the United States (EXIM) with a tentative agreement initialed by bank Chairwoman Kimberly Reed and the Oman's foreign minister.

"Chairman Reed initialed an MOU [memorandum of understanding] with His Excellency [Foreign] Minister Badr Albusaidi at an evening ceremony which followed bilateral discussions that took place earlier in the day at the Foreign Ministry in Muscat and on December 5, 2020, on the margins of the 16th International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Manama Dialogue in Bahrain," an EXIM press release said on Tuesday. "The official signing of the MOU will take place in the near future."

Under the agreement, EXIM and the Oman Foreign Ministry will identify potential opportunities for EXIM financing and opportunities in fields such as but not limited to, 5G wireless communications equipment; biotechnology; renewable energy, energy efficiency, and energy storage; agriculture; water treatment and sanitation; mining; and manufacturing sectors, the release said.

EXIM is an independent US agency that promotes American jobs by providing competitive export credit for sales of American goods and services to international buyers.

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US Welcomes 'Breakthrough' Pledge by Gulf Arab Nations to End Qatar Embargo - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urged Persian Gulf nations to expand on a breakthrough pledge by their leaders to renew economic, military and cultural ties with Qatar following an embargo that lasted more than three years.

"We are encouraged by the breakthrough made with the Al-Ula Declaration today at the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] summit, which marks a positive step toward restoring Gulf and Arab unity," Pompeo said in a press release on Tuesday. "Restoring full diplomatic relations is imperative for all parties in the region to unite against common threats."

The declaration signed at a Gulf Cooperation Summit in the Saudi Arabian city of Al-Ula followed a Monday announcement that the Saudis had reopened their airspace to flights two and from the tiny, energy rich nation.

Saudi Arabia also said they would restore full diplomatic relations with Qatar, opening a path for the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt to follow suit.

In June 2017, the four nations severed ties with Qatar and imposed a naval, air and land blockade on the country over allegations the nation supported terrorist groups.

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US Intelligence Says SolarWinds Hack 'Likely Russian in Origin' - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - US intelligence agencies have concluded that the recent cyber attack against the tech company SolarWinds is "likely Russian in origin," the FBI, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, Office of Director of National Intelligence and National Security Agency said in a joint statement.

"[Intelligence] work indicates that an Advanced Persistent Threat (APT) actor, likely Russian in origin, is responsible for most or all of the recently discovered, ongoing cyber compromises of both government and non-governmental networks. At this time, we believe this was, and continues to be, an intelligence gathering effort," the statement said on Tuesday.

In December, media reported that numerous US federal government entities and companies had been targeted in a massive cyberattack after they corrupted the SolarWinds software and blamed the hack on a foreign actor while some instantly named Russia. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov refuted claims that Russia was behind the cyberattack.

The US government then established the Cyber Unified Coordination Group (UCG) to investigate the incident. The UCG continues to work to understand the scope of the attack and currently believes that a small number of the SolarWinds clients were affected.

"The UCG believes that, of the approximately 18,000 affected public and private sector customers of Solar Winds' Orion product, a much smaller number have been compromised by

follow-on activity on their systems," the statement said. "We have so far identified fewer than ten US government agencies that fall into this category, and are working to identify and notify the nongovernment entities who also may be impacted."

The USG also said it believes that intelligence gathering was the main purpose of the attack, the statement said.

"This is a serious compromise that will require a sustained and dedicated effort to remediate," the statement said. "The UCG will continue taking every necessary action to investigate, remediate, and share information with our partners and the American people."

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Wisconsin Prosecutors Decline to Charge White Police Officer in Shooting of Jacob Blake

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Wisconsin prosecutors will not file charges against the white police officers involved in the shooting of African-American Jacob Black in the city of Kenosha, District Attorney Michael Gravely said in a news conference.

"No Kenosha law enforcement officer in this case will be charged with any criminal offense based on the facts and the laws as I will describe them to you now. So it is our decision that no charge will be filed," Gravely said on Tuesday.

Gravely added that no charge will be filed against Blake, who was left paralyzed after the shooting.

In August, violent protests erupted in Kenosha after a police officer shot 29-year-old African American man Jacob Blake Jr. in the back seven times.

The protests turned into riots complete with violence against police and civilians as well as acts of arson and destruction.

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US State of Georgia Confirms First Case of New COVID-19 Strain Found in UK - Health Dept.

NEW YORK, January 5 (Sputnik) - The US state of Georgia has detected its first case of a highly infectious variant of the coronavirus that was first detected in the United Kingdom, the state's Department of Public Health said in a statement.

"Georgia's first case of COVID-19 variant B.1.1.7, the same variant discovered in the UK and in several other countries and US states ... was discovered during analysis of a specimen sent by a pharmacy in Georgia to a commercial lab," the statement said on Tuesday. "The emergence of this variant in our state should be a wake-up call for all Georgians."

The infected Georgian is an 18-year-old male with no travel history, and is currently in isolation at home, the department said, adding that it was "working to identify close contacts of the individual and will monitor them closely and test them for the variant" as well.

Georgia's discovery of the UK coronavirus variant comes just a day after New York State announced a similar finding. Colorado and California are the two other US states with such cases.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said the UK coronavirus variant spreads more easily and quickly than other COVID strains.

More than 40 countries have banned UK arrivals due to concerns about the new COVID variant.

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In mid-December, reports emerged that hundreds of US federal government entities and companies had been targeted by a massive cyberattack, which was instantly blamed on a foreign actor by US media. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has refuted claims that Russia was behind the cyberattack on US government agencies.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) -

OPEC+ MEETING

* The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) confirmed on Tuesday that only Russia and Kazakhstan had been allowed to slightly increase production over the next two months, while the other participants in the OPEC+ deal would keep slashing the same amount of oil as in January.

* Saudi Arabia will contribute a voluntary oil production cut of 1 million barrels a day (mbd) beyond the required OPEC+ quotas in February and March, while other OPEC+ members will additional slash 425,000 barrels daily over the same period, Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman said.

* Nigeria aims to fully offset shortcomings with the OPEC+ oil production cuts by March after failing to comply with the quota in the previous months, Nigerian Minister of State for Petroleum Resources Timipre Sylva said.

* The next meeting of the entire alliance of the OPEC and non-OPEC nations will be held on March 4 and will be preceded by a meeting of a Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee on February 3 and March 3, the OPEC said.

NEW US SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAN

* The United States imposed sanctions on a Chinese supplier of graphite electrodes to Iran, 12 Iranian steel producers and three foreign-based sales agents of a major Iranian mining holding company, the US Treasury Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

WORLD BANK GLOBAL ECONOMY FORECAST

* The global economy is expected to grow by 4.0 percent in 2021 and vaccine deployments and investments will be key to sustaining the economic recovery, the World Bank said in its annual economic outlook published on Tuesday.

* Russia's economy is expected to grow by 2.6 percent in 2021, regaining some of the previous year's losses at a slower pace than many of its regional neighbors, the World Bank said.

* The World Bank said that it expects US and China's economies to grow in 2021 by 3.5 and 7.9 percent, respectively.

EU, RUSSIA REACTIONS TO IRAN ENRICHING URANIUM

* Iran's move to resume 20 percent uranium enrichment at the Fordow nuclear facility is a step back from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), but the root cause of for Tehran's decision is the United States' actions, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* European Union's lead foreign policy spokesman Peter Stano said that the bloc is highly concerned by Iran's decision to start enriching uranium, adding that this action poses a threat to the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

QATAR AGREEMENT

* Persian Gulf leaders wrapped up a regional summit in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday by signing an agreement that seeks to mend their ties with Qatar.

* The United Nations welcomes the decision by Saudi Arabia to restore diplomatic relations and reopen its airspace and borders to Qatar, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said.

CORONAVIRUS MEASURES

* Germany will stay in lockdown until the end of January, Chancellor Angela Merkel said after a meeting with regional governors on Tuesday.

* UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson canceled his upcoming official visit India in light of the rapid spreading of the new coronavirus strain in the United Kingdom that has forced him to impose a fresh national lockdown in England, the UK government announced.

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PREVIEW - US Congress to Certify Biden's Win Amid Pro-Trump Protests

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - US legislators will meet on Wednesday to certify Joe Biden's win in a presidential race with President Donald Trump's supporters expected to mount vociferous, perhaps even violent, opposition both inside and outside the Capitol building, demonstrations that will hardly be sufficient to change the outcome of the election.

Hundreds of National Guard troopers were activated to assist regular police units in maintaining order in Washington, DC, where the incumbent's fans will stage a rally in defense of Trump's claims that he was deprived of a victory through an elaborate voting scheme in several swing states.

The Congress certification is viewed as the final and under normal circumstances a purely procedural step of determining the next US President, preceding the Inauguration Day on January 20.

Both legislative chambers - the House of Representatives and the Senate - will convene at 1.00 p.m. EST (6:00 p.m. GMT) for a joint session to count and confirm Electoral College votes that were cast on December 14 and certified in 50 states and DC. The tally to be presented to lawmakers supports Biden by 306 to 232, fully mirroring a November 3 popular endorsements pattern.

The rules require US Vice President Mike Pence, who will be presiding over the joint session, to unseal states' certificates in alphabetical order and pass them to four "tellers" - a Democrat and a Republican from each chamber of the Congress - for reviewing and pronouncing the contents. The procedure may be interrupted by an objection that has to be initiated by at least one Senator and member of the House. If it's the case, chambers split up and have up to two hours

to debate each motion and vote on it before converging for a continued count. For an objection to matter, it needs a bicameral approval, an improbable outcome with the Democratic-led House of Representatives and many Republicans weary of Trump's unsuccessful efforts to overturn the defeat.

Yet, all hiccups may delay the certification until Thursday.

A dozen of Senators, a clear minority in the chamber, said they will oppose the certification unless a commission is established to perform an "emergency 10-day audit" of the election returns in states they view as "disputed." Conspicuously absent among the group is Mitch McConnell, the Senate Republican leader, who has recognized Biden as President-elect. Trump has repeatedly entertained the possibility of Pence stepping in to block the certification. He tweeted on Tuesday that the Vice President has the power "to reject fraudulently chosen electors." Pence, however, made no indication that he is willing to stretch a largely ceremonial interpretation of his role likened by some in the media to that of a presenter at the Oscar awards event.

As thousands of his supporters are expected to take to the streets in Washington, DC, starting on Tuesday, Trump predicted that the gathering will be "wild" and promised to address it outside the White House. Wary of violence that marred two previous pro-Trump rallies, the capital requested an assistance from the National Guard. About 340 personnel will be activated to assist police with controlling crowds at metro stations and enforcing street closures, the National Guard said in a release.

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US Air Forces Orders Removal of Potentially Offensive Unit Emblems, Mottos - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - US Air Force commanders have been ordered to review unofficial unit emblems, morale patches, mottos, nicknames, coins and other forms of unit recognition in a bid to eliminate potentially offensive images, according to a press release on Tuesday.

"It is critical for the Department of the Air Force to embody an environment of dignity, respect and inclusivity for all Airmen and Guardians. Our core values demand we hold ourselves to high standards and maintain a culture of respect and trust in our chain of command," Air Force Secretary Barbara Barrett, Chief of Staff Charles Brown and Space Force Chief John Raymond said in a memorandum disclosed in the release.

The memorandum targeted images that could be considered "derogatory to any race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, age or disability status."

For more than a decade, the Air Force has discouraged the use of cartoonish, sexually suggestive "nose art" that decorated military aircraft from an earlier era.

The latest order recommends images that depict a unit's history, reflect favorably on the Air Force, and are in good taste and non-controversial, according to the release.

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US Earmarks \$7Mln in Seized Iranian Funds For Terror Victims – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) – The United States plans to give \$7 million in seized Iranian funds to victims of state-sponsored terrorism, the Justice Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

“The \$7 million will be allocated to the US Victims of State Sponsored Terrorism Fund, which Congress established to provide compensation to certain individuals who were injured in acts of international state-sponsored terrorism, including victims of the 1979 US embassy hostage situation in Iran, among others,” the release said.

The United States collected the funds as its share of a civil forfeiture investigation into the fraudulent transfer of \$1 billion of Iranian funds through South Korean banks, the Justice Department said.

The Justice Department successfully prosecuted in both US and South Korean courts a father-son team consisting of Kenneth and Mitchell Zong for fraudulently transferring nearly \$1 billion from South Korean banks to global financial markets from 2011 to 2014, the release said. The \$7 million was obtained by the US in a related civil forfeiture action based on a deal in which conspirators purchased a Sheraton Hotel in Tbilisi, Georgia. In a separate but related forfeiture action, the Zong family has been ordered to pay the US an additional \$10 million, according to the release.

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Pennsylvania Legislature Sinks Into Chaos as Republicans Refuse to Seat Elected Democrat

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The Pennsylvania state Senate devolved into chaos on Tuesday after the Republican majority refused to seat Senator-elect Jim Brewster.

Republican lawmakers in the state Senate removed Pennsylvania Lieutenant Governor John Fetterman from presiding over the swearing-in ceremony after he refused to approve a motion to prevent Brewster from being sworn in.

Majority Leader of Pennsylvania's Senate, Jake Corman, took over presiding duties and denied Brewster the opportunity to be sworn in.

Democratic leadership in the state Senate is arguing that Brewster's victory has been certified. Republicans are waiting to administer Brewster's oath until a legal battle is over challenging his narrow win.

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US Judge Denies Trump Bid to Decertify Election Results in Georgia - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge has denied President Donald Trump's lawsuit seeking to decertify the presidential election results in the battleground state of Georgia, a court document revealed on Tuesday.

"The parties presented argument in regards to Motion for Preliminary Injunction and Declaratory Relief. Court denied the motion and advised that an order will be forthcoming today," the court document said.

The Trump campaign and Republican party have lost 62 out of 63 total lawsuits filed since the November 3 vote as part of an effort to overturn President-elect Joe Biden's win in the 2020 presidential election. Courts have found they had no credible evidence of massive voter fraud. Biden was confirmed the winner of the November presidential election by the Electoral College on December 14 after all 50 states officially certified the voting results. Trump, however, has refused to concede, alleging voter fraud.

Biden's inauguration is scheduled for January 20, however, on Wednesday several Republican lawmakers during the verification process intend to challenge the Electoral College votes for Biden in several swing states where the results have been disputed.

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Trump Claims Voting Machines Down in Republican Georgia District, Election Official Denies

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump in a statement on Tuesday claimed that Dominion voting machines are down in a Republican district in the state of Georgia during the Senate runoff elections, but a top election official swiftly rejected his allegations.

"Reports are coming out of the 12th Congressional District of Georgia that Dominion Machines are not working in certain Republican Strongholds for over an hour," Trump said via Twitter.

"Ballots are being left in lock boxes, hopefully they count them. Thank you Congressman Rick Allen."

However, Georgia's top election official Gabriel Sterling in a separate statement said the issue was resolved hours ago and the public had been notified immediately. Sterling added that every vote will be protected and counted.

"And this issue in Columbia Co. was resolved hours ago and our office informed the public about it in real time. The votes of everyone will be protected and counted. Sorry you received old intel Mr. President," Sterling said.

The two Senate runoff races ongoing in Georgia will determine the balance of power in the chamber.

Incumbent Republican Senators David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler are defending their seats 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, 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.

Trump and top Georgia officials, including Governor Brian Kemp, have been feuding as the president pressures them to invalidate certain votes in the presidential election in order to give him the win in the battleground state.

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Trudeau Says Frustrated by Slow Coronavirus Vaccine Rollout in Canada

TORONTO, January 5 (Sputnik) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday that he is frustrated like other Canadians by the slow rollout of the coronavirus vaccine in Canada. The latest data shows the Canadian authorities are increasingly falling behind the vaccination regimes of other nations with only 0.32 percent of the population having been immunized against the coronavirus to date.

"I think all Canadians, including me, are frustrated to see vaccines in freezers and not in people's arms," Trudeau said during a press briefing.

Government data shows that 35 percent of vaccines procured to date have been administered, with provinces like Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador utilizing less than 30 percent of available vaccine doses.

Speaking to reporters later in the day, Canada's vaccine distribution czar Maj. Gen. Dany Fortin shot down the suggestion that vaccine manufacturers would repurpose vaccine distribution to other nations considering Canada's slow rollout.

Trudeau noted that Canada is on track to receive its millionth dose of the coronavirus vaccine later this month.

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Biden Plans to Invite More Former Obama Senior Officials to His Administration - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden is considering inviting additional former senior Obama administration officials with experience in foreign affairs to his cabinet, Politico reported on Tuesday.

Veteran diplomat Wendy Sherman, the lead negotiator for the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, will likely be nominated for the position Deputy Secretary of State, the report said citing sources close to the Biden transition team.

Another veteran diplomat, Victoria Nuland, may become Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs. Nuland served as Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs during the Obama administration, the report said.

Two other former State Department officials will likely be placed at the National Security Council (NSC), the report said, adding that Biden plans to pick his former foreign policy speechwriter Jon Finer as a Deputy National Security Advisor.

Amanda Sloat, who served as Assistant Secretary of State for Southern Europe and Eastern Mediterranean during the Obama administration, will likely be offered the position director for European Affairs at the NSC, according to the report.

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UN Welcomes Announcement to Open Airspace, Borders Between S. Arabia, Qatar - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 5 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has welcomed the decision by Saudi Arabia to restore diplomatic relations and reopen its airspace and borders to Qatar, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

On Monday, Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Ahmed Nasser Al-Sabah said that Saudi Arabia would lift its sea, air and land blockade of Qatar ahead of Tuesday's summit of Persian Gulf leaders.

"We welcome the announcement to open the airspace, land and sea borders between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the State of Qatar," Haq said. "We hope that all countries involved in the dispute will act positively to continue to resolve their differences and stress the importance of Gulf unity for regional peace and development."

Final arrangements on the travel resumption are expected to be made at the ongoing Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Riyadh. Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani is attending the event for the first time since 2017.

Qatar has been under a diplomatic and economic blockade since June 2017, when Saudi Arabia and other monarchies accused it of meddling and sponsoring terrorism. Doha has consistently denied the accusations, insisting that the neighbors' discontent with its economic successes was behind their hostile policies.

The reconciliation has been brokered by the United States over the past few months, especially by White House senior adviser Jared Kushner, who will be among attendees at the GCC summit.

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UN Special Rapporteur Says Assange Must Be 'Immediately' Set Free, Compensated for Abuses

UNITED NATIONS, January 5 (Sputnik) - UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment Nils Melzer said in a statement on Tuesday that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange must be immediately released from the high-security prison in the United Kingdom and be compensated for the abuses he has suffered.

UK district judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled on Monday not to extradite Assange to the United States, citing health reasons and the risk of suicide in the US prison system, but did not release him from the Belmarsh high-security prison where he is detained. US prosecutors were given two weeks to appeal the verdict.

"Mr. Assange must now be immediately set free, rehabilitated and compensated for the abuse and arbitrariness he has been exposed to," Melzer said. "Even with a pending appeal, his continued isolation in a high-security prison is completely unnecessary and disproportionate. There is no justification whatsoever for preventing him from awaiting the final judgment in a setting where he can recover his health and live a normal family and professional life."

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US COVID-19 Relief Package to Keep US Deficit Over 10% of GDP in 2021 - Advocacy Group

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The recent COVID-19 relief package will push the United States' budget deficit to \$2.3 trillion in 2021, down from last year but still more than 10 percent of gross domestic product, the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget warned in a press release on Tuesday.

"In light of the enactment of the year-end spending and COVID relief deal, we estimate the deficit will total \$2.3 trillion for fiscal year (FY) 2021. This would be lower than the \$3.1 trillion deficit in FY 2020 but at an estimated 10.4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), the release said.

The Congressional Budget Office has estimated the 2020 deficit at 16 percent of GDP, the largest since the final year of World War II in 1945, when the shortfall exceeded 25 percent of GDP.

On December 28, President Donald Trump signed a \$900 billion COVID-19 relief package into law, extending unemployment benefits that had been set to expire for millions of Americans.

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US Imposes Iran-Related Sanctions on Chinese Firm, 15 Other Entities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on a Chinese supplier of graphite electrodes to Iran, 12 Iranian steel producers and three foreign-based sales agents of a major Iranian mining holding company, the US Treasury Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The Iranian metals sector is an important revenue source for the Iranian regime, generating wealth for its corrupt leaders and financing a range of nefarious activities, including the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, support for foreign terrorist groups, and a variety of human rights abuses, at home and abroad," the statement said. The sanctions target China-based Kaifeng Pingmei New Carbon Materials Technology Co., Ltd. (KFCC), which specializes in the manufacture of carbon materials that are key elements in the production of steel, the statement said.

The Treasury Department explained in the statement that the KFCC fulfilled orders totaling thousands of metric tons of materials for several Iranian steel companies between December 2019 and June 2020. KFCC sold 300 metric tons of graphite electrodes and miscellaneous equipment to Pasargad Steel Complex in Iran in mid-2020, the statement said.

The Pasargad Steel Complex is able to produce 1.5 million tons of steel billets annually, while another designated entity - the Gilan Steel Complex operating two rolling mills with total capacity of 3 million ton, the statement also said.

The United State is also designated an Iran-based Middle East Mines and Mineral Industries Development Holding Company (MIDHCO), which produces over 19 million tons of steel, iron, and copper products, the statement added.

The measures were taken pursuant to Executive Order 13871, which imposes sanctions on several sectors of Iran's economy that continue to generate significant revenue for the government, according to the statement.

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Global Economy to Expand by 4% in 2021, Vaccines Key to Sustaining Recovery - World Bank

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The global economy is expected to grow by 4.0 percent in 2021, with coronavirus vaccine deployments and investments being key to sustaining the economic recovery, the World Bank said in its 2021 Global Economic Prospects on Tuesday.

"The global economy is expected to expand 4 percent in 2021, assuming an initial COVID-19 vaccine rollout becomes widespread throughout the year," the World Bank said. "Although the global economy is growing again after a 4.3 percent contraction in 2020, the pandemic has caused a heavy toll of deaths and illness, plunged millions into poverty, and may depress economic activity and incomes for a prolonged period."

Russia's economy is expected to grow by 2.6 percent in 2021, regaining some of the previous year's losses at a slower pace than many of its regional neighbors, the World Bank said.

"Growth in Russia, the region's largest economy, is envisioned to pick up only modestly in 2021, to 2.6 percent, as the country grapples with a renewed acceleration in COVID-19 infections," it added.

In its economic outlook published last October, the World Bank anticipated Russia's GDP to contract by 5 percent in 2020 - an 11-year low - and rebound by 2.8 and 2.4 percent in 2021 and 2022, respectively. The renewed growth is expected to be supported by the rollout of a

coronavirus vaccine, a rise of industrial commodity prices and continuation of supportive policy measures.

The World Bank said to projects the Turkish economy, the second largest in the region, to grow 4.5 percent in 2021 and growth in Central Europe to reach 3.6 percent.

The two largest economies, those of the United States and China, are expected to grow by 3.5 and 7.9 percent, respectively, the World Bank noted.

"US GDP is forecast to expand 3.5 percent in 2021, after an estimated 3.6% contraction in 2020," it said. "China's economy is expected to expand by 7.9 percent this year following 2 percent growth last year."

Economic activity in Japan, which shrank by 5.3 percent last year, is forecast to grow by 2.5 percent in 2021, the World Bank added.

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US, Cyprus Sign Declaration to Boost Border Security Cooperation - DHS

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The United States and Cyprus signed a joint declaration on border security to combat terrorism and transnational crime, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Today, Acting DHS Secretary Chad F. Wolf signed a joint declaration on border security cooperation and management with Cypriot Foreign Affairs Minister Nikos Christodoulides. The declaration deepens the ties between the Government of the Republic of Cyprus and DHS and furthers both our countries' cooperation and security goals in critical areas," the release said.

"This Declaration of Intent between the United States and the Republic of Cyprus will strengthen crucial efforts to bolster border security and information sharing."

The declaration provides a framework to finalize agreements on border security and information sharing, Wolf said in the release.

The United States and Cyprus, he added, share a mutual goal of countering threats from terrorism and managing irregular migration.

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US GDP to Grow 3.5% in 2021, China's Economy to Expand by 7.9% - World Bank Forecast

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The World Bank said in its annual global economic forecast on Tuesday that it expects US and China's economies to grow in 2021 by 3.5 and 7.9 percent, respectively.

"US GDP is forecast to expand 3.5% in 2021, after an estimated 3.6% contraction in 2020," the World Bank said in its 2021 Global Economic Prospects report. "China's economy is expected to expand by 7.9% this year following 2% growth last year."

In the euro area, output is anticipated to grow 3.6 percent this year, following a projected 7.4 percent decline in 2020. Activity in Japan, which shrank by 5.3 percent last year, is forecast to grow by 2.5 percent in 2021, according to the outlook.

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Russia's GDP to Grow by 2.6% in 2021 - World Bank Forecast

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Russia's economy is expected to grow by 2.6 percent in 2021, regaining some of the previous year's losses at a slower pace than many of its regional neighbors, the World Bank said in its annual forecast on Tuesday.

"Growth in Russia, the region's largest economy, is envisioned to pick up only modestly in 2021, to 2.6%, as the country grapples with a renewed acceleration in COVID-19 infections," the World Bank said in its 2021 Global Economic Prospects.

In an outlook published last October the World Bank anticipated Russia's GDP to contract by 5 percent, an 11-year low, in 2020 with a rebound by 2.8 and 2.4 percent in 2021 and 2022, respectively, in the baseline scenario. Renewed growth is expected to be supported by the rollout of a coronavirus vaccine, a rise of industrial commodity prices, and continuation of supportive policy measures.

The Turkish economy, the second largest in the region, is projected to grow 4.5 percent in 2021. Growth in Central Europe is envisioned to firm to 3.6%, the World Bank said.

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Global Economy to Expand by 4% in 2021, Vaccines Key to Sustaining Recovery - World Bank

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The global economy is expected to grow by 4.0 percent in 2021, but vaccine deployments and investments will be key to sustaining the recovery, the World Bank said in its annual economic outlook published on Tuesday.

"The global economy is expected to expand 4% in 2021, assuming an initial COVID-19 vaccine rollout becomes widespread throughout the year," the World Bank said in its January 2021 Global Economic Prospects. "Although the global economy is growing again after a 4.3% contraction in 2020, the pandemic has caused a heavy toll of deaths and illness, plunged millions into poverty, and may depress economic activity and incomes for a prolonged period."

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Nearly Half of Pandemic-Wary Americans Want to Live in Small Towns, Rural Areas - Poll

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Life in small towns and rural areas in the United States has become increasingly attractive for Americans during the coronavirus crisis, with 48 percent saying that given a choice, they would flee big cities and suburbs, a new Gallup poll revealed on Tuesday.

"About half of Americans (48 percent) at the end of 2020 said that, if able to live anywhere they wished, they would choose a town (17 percent) or rural area (31 percent) rather than a city or suburb. This is a shift from 2018, when 39 percent thought a town or rural area would be ideal," a press release explaining the poll said.

The increase in Americans' penchant for country living has been accompanied by a decline in those preferring to live in a suburb, down six percentage points to 25 percent. The percentage favoring cities has been steadier, with 27 percent today - close to the 29 percent in 2018 - saying they would prefer living in a big (11 percent) or small (16 percent) city, the release also said.

The shift in preferences since 2018 was seen across demographic groups, including equal proportions of men and women, the release added.

But three groups - namely, non-White Americans, Republicans and residents of the South - have shifted more strongly, with 12- or 13-point increases in a desire to exit big cities and suburbs, according to the release.

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US Imposes Iran-Related Sanctions on Chinese Firm, 15 Other Entities - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The United States imposed sanctions on a Chinese supplier of graphite electrodes to Iran, 12 Iranian steel producers, and three foreign-based sales agents of a major Iranian mining holding company, the US Treasury Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The Iranian metals sector is an important revenue source for the Iranian regime, generating wealth for its corrupt leaders and financing a range of nefarious activities, including the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, support for foreign terrorist groups, and a variety of human rights abuses, at home and abroad," the Treasury said. The sanctions target China-based Kaifeng Pingmei New Carbon Materials Technology Co., Ltd. (KFCC) which specializes in the manufacture of carbon materials, key elements in steel production.

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RPT: YEAR IN REVIEW - Black Lives Matter Protests Rock US Political Landscape, Yet Lead to Limited Reforms

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The year 2020 was marked by social upheaval and attempts to reinvent America, including through the pain and passion of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement - a nationwide wave of protests in the name of racial equity and opposition to police violence.

What started as an outburst of anger against a random case of police brutality grew to claim a prominent place in a centuries-long struggle for emancipation of communities of color, drawing a direct ancestry line to epic victories over slavery and segregation.

Intrinsically woven into an unprecedented tangle of 2020 crises, the BLM movement tapped its rage from coronavirus pandemic disparities, fed on quarantine constraints, was exploited by warring political camps for electoral gains and used them in return.

SAY HIS NAME

The wheels of history were set in motion on May 25 when Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis policeman, used a chokehold detention technique on George Floyd, an African American man suspected of passing a \$20 counterfeit bill. The officer knelt on his neck, pinning it to the ground for nearly eight minutes, as Floyd begged for mercy until he became unresponsive.

"I can't breathe," the man's final words, made a rallying cry for many thousands of Americans who took to the streets from coast to coast, shocked and infuriated by the torment that was captured on video in every disturbing detail.

"Say his name!" chanted crowds in New York and Philadelphia. "George Floyd!" responded Seattle and Los Angeles.

"Defund the police!" demanded protesters whose appearance at the very gates of the White House reportedly prompted the Secret Service to hastily evacuate President Donald Trump to a safe bunker.

More than 7,750 BLM demonstrations were held in 2,440 locations across all 50 US states and the nation's capital during the 90 days following Floyd's death, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

BLM became one of the largest protest movements in US history partly due to socioeconomic factors, which were exacerbated by a pandemic that hit African Americans disproportionately hard due to their working in front-line jobs, earning less and lacking access to adequate healthcare, researchers have said.

Protesters were mobilized by Floyd's death, but demanded justice for other African American victims in 2020, such as Breonna Taylor, 26, who was shot during a police raid in Louisville, Kentucky after her boyfriend fired upon officers. They also demanded justice for Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year old Black man murdered by three white residents while jogging in Georgia. Even as the campaign went on, more names were appearing on the remembrance list - from Rayshard Brooks killed in Atlanta to Jacob Blake shot seven times and severely wounded by police in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

Devoid of a unified command and coherent agenda, protests across the country pressed mostly for the lowest common denominator - a prosecution of culprits and sweeping police reforms - something some federal and state authorities swiftly committed to. However, they stopped short of slashing law-enforcement budgets as many activists demanded.

"Instead of using strange men with guns to inflict violence on people you reduce harm and prevent it ahead of time by serving people, keeping their basic needs met, creating

community-oriented solutions that doesn't involve men with guns arresting people," an activist in rebellious Portland told Sputnik when asked to explain the concept behind calls for defunding police.

However, "defunding police" may have sounded like a grand rallying cry for protesters, there was a huge gap between reform theory and practice. The Minneapolis city council, for example, reversed its decision to dismantle the police after a 25% spike in violent crime. Instead, the city ended up cutting the police budget by less than 5 percent.

Many BLM activists have a more ambitious goal in mind though. They seek to eradicate the remnants of racist mentality and behavior still permeating American society.

"Getting in an elevator with a white person, you can see the fear by the look on their face. You can see it when you walk to a shopping mall and they get over to the other side of the street. You can see they clasp their purse, lock their doors when they pull out next to you waiting for a bus on the street corner," a black resident of Houston, Texas, told Sputnik on the fringes of Floyd's funeral.

"Microaggressions" they speak about sound like a routine evil, not brazen enough to make headlines, but it poisons - drop by drop - everyday lives of many African Americans, who are less and less eager to condone it.

RAGE AND TEARS

Demonstrations often devolved into violent clashes between protesters and police, with members of the media at times finding themselves targeted by both sides.

A Russian reporter was hit by a non-lethal projectile on a night of riots in front of the White House - a foam-tipped sponge bullet - as big as a champagne cork. It did not penetrate the skin but left a visible bruise. It marked the journalist's first frontline injury in a career that included covering the Second Lebanon war, a military coup in Egypt, and multiple rounds of hostilities in the Gaza Strip.

His compatriots and colleagues were attacked, beaten and had their equipment destroyed by law enforcement officers during clashes in Portland. Another crew from a major Russian broadcaster survived an attack of a marauding gang in Philadelphia that was pillaging a footwear store on the margins of citywide demonstrations against another instance of law enforcement brutality.

Protests were frequently hijacked by radicals, marred by violence and looting, police overreaction or inaction. It took the authorities three days to quench the unrest in Washington, DC by enforcing a curfew and deploying thousands of National Guard soldiers, Secret Service and Drug Enforcement agents, Border Protection officers, and policemen of all stripes. They patrolled streets, closed major intersections, isolated neighborhoods, dispersed crowds and pushed their remains away from the White House.

The capital police came under fire by some critics for allegedly being on the defensive at best, allowing violent rioters to reach the gates of the presidential compound, torch buildings, burn cars, smash windows and vandalize historic landmarks in the heart of city.

Supporters of the protests often downplayed the millions of dollars' worth of damage rendered by rioters and looters who destroyed property, stole merchandise and forced businesses to close. Or they justified the wreckage as a necessary byproduct of fighting police injustice.

"We are tired of this shit. Police brutality over and over again," two African-Americans in similar balaclavas and assault vests told Sputnik after protesters crushed with wooden sticks a

Mercedes sedan. "If I die by the police, burn America down. They say George Floyd didn't want it. How do they know? Did he write it down somewhere?"

In Seattle, BLM protesters established around an abandoned police precinct an "autonomous zone," independent of government control. The city authorities were initially supportive of the experiment, but three weeks later forcefully reclaimed the area when it spawned an upsurge of criminal violence, including four shootings that left two teenagers dead.

Federal law enforcement agents were deployed to Portland, the whitest city in the United States, to protect court buildings from a handful of anarchists. However, they alienated the entire city by tear-gassing, beating, arresting and shooting indiscriminately scores of people - peaceful and violent protesters, journalists, volunteer medics, and human right activists. Thousands would turn out for nightly demonstrations that embraced BLM rhetoric and aesthetics until the contingent was withdrawn.

Tensions were further exacerbated across the country when counter-protesters stepped in to defend communities and back the police, whom they believe needed help because their hands were tied by the politicians. According to ACLED, over 360 counter-protests were recorded around the country, of which 43 - nearly 12 percent - turned violent.

A Sputnik reporter observed hundreds of antiracism protesters and self-defined "American patriots" from predominantly white militias confronting each other in central Louisville. Both sides wielded an impressive array of fire arms with magazines attached, but didn't go beyond verbal barbs and occasional fist fights in the stunning absence of the police.

"The police get their orders from the government and have been told several times to stand down. They can't show force," a militiaman, who introduced himself as Squelch, said. "Guess what? We are not police - we are allowed to speak out, to say 'Enough is enough.'"

Altercations did not always stay bloodless, however. In Kenosha a 17-year-old militiaman shot and killed two protesters who apparently attacked him. In Portland a member of the right-wing Patriot Prayer group was shot dead by a suspect allegedly associated with the Antifa movement.

More recently, dozens of members from the Proud Boys, a far-right wing movement, easily recognizable in their yellow and black outfits, spearheaded two major rallies in Washington, DC in support of Trump's bid to overturn the election defeat. Both times they engaged in massive hand-to-hand brawls with equally belligerent BLM and Antifa activists.

A popular perception of BLM as an essentially violent phenomenon is not supported by scientific data though. ACLED study claims that more than 93 percent of all summer protests were peaceful with "violent demonstrations" reported from fewer than 220 locations.

Researchers attribute the aberration to "the media focus on looting and vandalism."

VOTE LIKE NEVER BEFORE

The BLM movement predictably became a major issue in the 2020 Presidential race with Joe Biden and his Democratic camp seen as sympathetic to protesters' demands while their Republican rivals, including Trump, focused more on the "law and order" agenda - an upsurge of violence and the need to counter it.

On the campaign trail, Biden would comfort victims of police brutality and running mate Kamala Harris, a Black, Asian American woman, addressed one the largest BLM demonstration timed to Martin Luther King's March on Washington.

During protest events political activists would routinely urge everyone to vote "like we never voted before," use mail-in ballots and assist neighbors in coming to polling stations. Pro-Biden mainstream media were frequently criticized for overlooking and downplaying violent riots, while outlets sympathetic to the incumbent, fewer in number and weaker in voice, were accused of sowing fears among well-off suburban dwellers and ignoring fundamental causes of the BLM movement.

Trump himself chose sides when 25 minutes before a curfew he sent the police to disperse a demonstration near the White House. Law enforcement used flash bangs, pepper spray and sheer physical force on the crowd, all in order to secure passage for a presidential photo-op at the historic St John's Episcopal church that had caught fire during earlier riots. ACLED estimated that Trump during the year 2020 ordered over 55 federal and National Guard deployments across the country. He ruthlessly criticized governors, mostly from the Democratic Party, who refused to cooperate with his law and order effort and sought to outlaw Antifa as a terrorist organization.

Trump also seized on the issue of cultural wars when protesters mounted attacks on monuments seen as celebrating America's colonial and racism legacy and even attempted to knock down President Andrew Jackson's equestrian figure in front of the White House. He issued an executive order authorizing federal agents to pursue demonstrators who pulled down statues, putting a lid on the phenomenon that threatened to spare neither Christopher Columbus nor Abraham Lincoln.

Russian historical monuments were also targeted. In July, Alaska's Sitka adopted a resolution to relocate the statue of explorer and city founder Alexander Baranov after a group of local activists called for its removal, citing mistreatment of indigenous peoples during the colonial era. Baranov founded Sitka in 1799, then called Novo-Archangelsk, as the capital of the Russian colonies in North America. In October, the Baranov statue was moved from its downtown location to the Sitka Historical Society Museum.

Symbolically, Washingtonians celebrated en masse Biden's victory over Trump at a newly founded BLM Square - the 16th and H streets intersection, a few thousand feet away from the White House. The same motto - Black Lives Matter - is painted in giant yellow letters on the pavement.

From the outset the president-elect had stayed true to his promise to address equality issues and is compiling the most diverse administration ever. He has thus far nominated at least seven women and nine people of color for Cabinet-level positions, including Lloyd Austin, the first African American to be Secretary of Defense, Janet Yellen, the first female Secretary of the Treasury, Alejandro Mayorkas, the first immigrant to lead the Department of Homeland Security. "I don't see this election as being about choosing a candidate who will be able to lead us in the right direction. That will be about choosing a candidate who can be most effectively pressured into allowing more space for the evolving antiracism movement," Angela Davis, a veteran and an icon of America's antiracism campaign, said in an interview to RT. "Biden is very problematic in many ways. But - I say 'but' - Biden is far more likely to take mass demands seriously, far more likely than the current occupant of the White House."

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

WASHINGTON, January 5 (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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RPT - Yaroshenko's Defense Files Reply to US Opposition of Compassionate Release - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, January 5 (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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RPT: ANALYSIS - Assange Extradition Ruling Strikes Blow to US, Yet No Victory for Free Press

WASHINGTON, January 5 (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.