

**02/01/21 Monday**

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Iran Tests New Solid Fuel Satellite Launch Vehicle - Video  
by [Mary F.](#)

Tensions between the US and Iran have been especially high ever since Trump in 2018 withdrew from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and reinstated harsh sanctions against Iran. The JCPOA stipulated that Iran would receive waivers from sanctions if it agreed to limit its nuclear programme.

Iran on Monday shared a video of its new domestically-made satellite launch vehicle in action. It is the first Iranian-made carrier rocket powered by a solid-fuel engine, which makes it the country's most powerful.

In a solid rocket, the "fuel and oxidizer are mixed together into a solid propellant which is packed into a solid cylinder," according to a [blog post by NASA](#).

The three-stage rocket utilizes solid fuel in the first and second stages and fluid fuel in the third stage.

The launch was aired on Iranian state TV on Monday. The rocket, named Zol Janah, is believed to reach a height of 310 miles, according to the [Associated Press](#). In addition, the satellite carrier is 25.5 meters long and weighs 52 tons. The rocket did not launch a satellite into orbit. According to Ahmad Hosseini, spokesperson for the country's Defense Ministry's space department, the rocket is capable of launching a single 220-kilogram satellite or up to 10 smaller ones, to the altitude of 500 kilometers [310 miles]. The ministry specified that the launch was experimental.

Iran frequently tests its new military projects around national holidays. The country is expected to celebrate the 42nd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution later this month.

Last month, Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif slammed former US President Donald Trump for imposing new sanctions on Iran's metal industry, targeting companies in China, Europe and the United Kingdom.

Tensions between the US and Iran continue to be high.

In a Monday interview with NBC News, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that Iran was months away from developing a nuclear bomb, noting that the administration of US President Joe Biden will return to the Iran nuclear deal as long as Tehran returns to compliance, [Al-Jazeera reported](#).

In addition, Blinken revealed that the US plans to negotiate a "longer and stronger" nuclear accord with the Middle Eastern country.

However, Iran has said that it would not renegotiate the deal.

"The nuclear accord is a multilateral international agreement ratified by UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which is non-negotiable and parties to it are clear and unchangeable," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh told state media Saturday, [Al-Jazeera reported](#).

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Dubai Establishes 'Space Court' to Settle Disputes Between Countries  
by [Mary F.](#)

Dubai, the most populous city in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the capital of the Emirate of Dubai, is currently in the process of growing its presence in the space sector. Space law is currently dictated by international conventions and resolutions, such as the 1967 UN Outer Space Treaty.

Dubai on Monday announced the creation of a so-called "space court" to settle commercial disputes, [AFP reported](#). The space tribunal will be based at the Dubai International Financial Center Court (DIFC), which has jurisdiction governing civil and commercial disputes. The DIFC Courts was first established in 2004 and has already helped settle commercial disputes among foreign countries. However, the courts were not specialized in settling commercial disputes regarding the space activities of private companies.

"An integrated space industry, supported by human resources, infrastructure, and scientific research, is underway," Zaki Azmi, chief justice at DIFC Courts, said in a statement obtained by AFP, noting that as space commerce becomes increasingly more globalized, the commercial agreements that govern them "will also require an equally innovative judicial system to keep pace."

"The Courts of Space is a global initiative that will operate in parallel, helping to build a new judicial support network to serve the stringent commercial demands of international space exploration in the 21st century," he continued.

In a statement to AFP, Amna Al-Owais, Chief Registrar at DIFC Courts, stressed the importance of having the right infrastructure in place to settle disputes.

"That was for us an eye opener that we need to provide the UAE with the right infrastructure," Amna Al-Owais, Chief Registrar at DIFC Courts, told AFP. "We want to set the scene in terms of what courts can do. We believe that there will be a huge appetite for it," she said, citing disagreements over satellite purchases or collisions between objects in space as examples of disputes.

The UAE has built up its space sector in recent years. After sending its first astronaut into space in 2019, the UAE last year launched a probe called "Hope" to Mars.

The space probe, expected to study daily and seasonal weather cycles, is scheduled to reach Mars this month.

The US has also accelerated its space presence in recent years, establishing the US Space Force as the newest branch of the space service branch of the US Armed Forces in December 2019.

Its mission, according to its [website](#), is to "protect US and allied interests in space and to provide space capabilities to the joint force."

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Elon Musk Questions Robinhood CEO on Why GameStop Trading Was Restricted  
by [Mary F.](#)

Wall Street short-sellers have lost billions of dollars in recent days after a viral online movement of amateur online traders started buying shares and stock options in the company, prompting GameStop's market value to surge exponentially.

Last week, popular trading app Robinhood temporarily restricted stock purchases of GameStop and other shorted stocks, a decision that was met with significant backlash and the launch of investigations by [several congressional committees](#).

In a Monday interview with Tesla founder Elon Musk, Robinhood CEO Vlad Tenev explained why Robinhood restricted traders from buying shares on GameStop.

"Spill the beans, man — what happened last week?" Musk asked Tenev during a broadcast on Clubhouse, an audio-streaming app, [the New York Post reported](#).

"The people demand an answer, and they want to know the details and the truth," he added.

According to Tenev, Robinhood restricted trading after facing pressure from the National Securities Clearing Corporation (NSCC), an organization that settles stock trades between brokers.

Robinhood is required to deposit money with the NSCC based on several factors including the volatility of trading activity, Tenev explained. Last Thursday, Robinhood received a request from the NSCC for a deposit of around \$3 billion, which is much larger than usual.

"Just to give context, Robinhood, up until that point, has raised ... around \$2 billion in total venture capital up until now," Tenev said. "So it's a big number."

In response to the NSCC's deposit request, Robinhood temporarily blocked traders from buying GameStop shares, Tenev explained.

The NSCC eventually lowered its deposit request to \$700 million after Robinhood devised a plan to manage risk in GameStop and other volatile stocks.

During the interview, Musk said that the NSCC should be more transparent about why it asked Robinhood for such a large deposit.

"I guess people really just want to know — if you had no choice, then you had no choice, it's a gun-to-the-head situation. And then that's understandable," Musk told Tenev. "But then whoever put that gun to your head should be willing to answer to the public."

In a statement to the New York Post, the NSCC's parent company, the Depository Trust & Clearing Corporation, said the NSCC collects money "according to calculations that are set forth in its rules."

"When volatility increases, portfolio margin requirements increase too, and NSCC clearing members may pass on these costs to their clients, including brokerages that clear through them ... Margin requirements protect the entire industry against defaults and systemic risk in volatile markets," the Depository Trust & Clearing Corporation [told The Post](#).

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Zarif Suggests EU High Representative Borrell 'Choreograph' US-Iran Joint Return to JCPOA by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Earlier on Monday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken claimed Iran would be just "a matter of weeks" away from building an atomic bomb if it further strayed from its commitments under the 2015 nuclear deal. However, Tehran has dismissed the claims, saying it is sworn against producing such a weapon.

During an [interview aired by CNN](#) on Monday, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif noted that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) contains a solution to the impasse between Tehran and Washington about the latter rejoining the deal and the former returning to its confines.

CNN journalist Christiane Amanpour asked Zarif how he thought the US and Iran could escape the "Mexican standoff" situation as each nation urges the other to return to the deal first. "There can be a mechanism to basically either synchronize it or coordinate what can be done," Zarif said.

"As you know, JCPOA has a mechanism built into the deal: that is the joint commission. And the joint commission has a coordinator. The coordinator has two hats - it used to be Federica Mogherini, now it is [European Union High Representative] Josep Borrell - he has two hats. One hat is representative of the European Union for foreign defense policy; the other hat is the coordinator of the joint commission. He can put [on] his hat as the coordinator of the joint commission and sort of choreograph the actions that are needed to be taken by the United States and the actions that are needed to be taken by Iran," Zarif said.

The Joint Commission is a body created by the JCPOA consisting of representatives from all eight parties to the agreement - the US, UK, France, Germany, Russia, China, Iran, and the EU - that is tasked with monitoring compliance with the deal. It is chaired by the EU High Representative, who represents the EU member states' joint foreign and security interests on the world stage.

**US Must 'Prove its Bona Fides'**

Zarif noted that in terms of the JCPOA itself, it was the US who withdrew and who must prove itself worthy of returning to the deal, which includes winning the trust of the other seven members of the deal that never left it.

The 2015 deal saw Iran give up its nuclear program and accept strict limitations on the quantity and quality of enriched uranium it could produce. In return, the international community lowered economic sanctions against Iran. However, when Trump claimed in May 2018 that Iran had secretly broken the terms of the deal, he unilaterally withdrew the US and reimposed "maximum pressure" economic sanctions intended to eliminate Iran's huge oil exports. The sanctions have heavily damaged Iran's economy and frustrated its ability to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Clearly, actions that Iran takes have always been monitored and verified by the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] and we have shown that we fulfill our promises. The side that has not been able to show that it fulfills its promises has been the United States and as I

said, the United States needs to prove its bona fides. We have already proven our bona fides. If we are away from the strict limitations of the nuclear agreement, it's because the United States tried to impose a full economic war on Iran. Now, [if] it stops that, we will go back into full compliance," the foreign minister told CNN.

He noted that some of the outstanding issues, such as Iran's stockpile of 8,000 pounds of enriched uranium, can be addressed "in less than a day," citing the existing mechanism for Iran to trade away its excess uranium for yellowcake.

"Some may take a few days or weeks, but it won't take any longer [than] it would take the United States to implement executive orders that are necessary to put back Iran's oil, banking, transportation, and other areas that President Trump violated, back into operation."

#### Iran's Parliament Pushes Away From Deal

On Sunday, Iran's ambassador to Vienna-based international organizations such as the IAEA delivered a letter to the agency alerting it about impending consequences of a bill passed by the Iranian parliament in December that mandates a staged reduction of Tehran's commitments to the deal, according to Iran's [Tasnim News Agency](#).

The Strategic Action Plan to Counter Sanctions calls for increasing the number of centrifuges in operation, the purity of the uranium being refined as well as the overall volume of refined uranium, among other stipulations. Some of these [have already begun](#); however, another measure will be [triggered on February 21](#) - one month after US President Joe Biden was sworn in - if the US has not returned to the deal by then: the expulsion of IAEA inspectors from the country.

The law was controversial when passed: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who [has sparred with](#) the legislature several times in the past year, condemned the decision as ["harmful" to diplomacy](#). It immediately followed the murder of [Mohsen Fakhrizadeh](#), a top Iranian nuclear scientist, by a hit squad on the highway outside Tehran in November 2020.

When Amanpour asked Zarif about the impact of these moves, which will begin later this month, he said these would not be violations of the deal but "part of reducing our commitments, because these are voluntary commitments that we made," noting it would mean reducing and limiting IAEA inspections, not eliminating them or kicking the IAEA out of the country. However, the US can eliminate this problem by returning to the deal before February 21, Zarif said.

#### US Revives Imminent Bomb Narrative

Also on Monday, US Secretary of State [Antony Blinken revived](#) a claim made for years by Israeli [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu](#): that Iran was just "a matter of weeks" away from having enough fissile material to build an atomic bomb if it were to step further away from the 2015 deal. He promised the Biden administration would seek a "longer and stronger" deal with Iran. In response, Zarif said Blinken's statement "is more addressed to the public opinion than to reality."

"Iran does not seek a nuclear weapon. If we wanted to build a nuclear weapon, we could have done it some time ago, but we decided that nuclear weapons would not augment our security and are in contradiction to our ideological views," Zarif said.

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'We Hear You Loud and Clear!' Staffer for Rep. Gaetz Cheered on Insurrectionists on Parler by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Democrats have pushed for an investigation into the abnormally high number of guided group tours of the Capitol in the days immediately prior to the January 6 insurrection over fears that some may have been insurrectionists being led by sympathetic Republican lawmakers. An assistant to Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL), a fierce loyalist of former US President Donald Trump, cheered on the insurrectionists as they stormed the US Capitol on January 6, posting a video from across the street on the Parler messaging site used by Trump supporters to plan the assault.

"From the top of the Capitol office buildings, WE HEAR YOU LOUD AND CLEAR!" The message posted on Parler by Joel Valdez, an assistant to Gaetz, was accompanied by [a 5-second video shot](#) from the roof of the Longworth House Office Building, a massive structure that overlooks the southern side of the US Capitol, and the hashtag #StopTheSteal. [Gizmodo first reported](#) on the message, but noted that ProPublica had published the metadata of Valdez's video last month without connecting it to the staffer. According to the outlet, the video was posted at 1:14 pm on January 6, by which time the insurrectionists had broken through US Capitol Police lines at several points and were engaged in a close-in fight with security forces on the Capitol steps, meaning they were just moments from entering the building itself.

The rioters had marched to the national legislature from the White House's south lawn at the other end of the National Mall, where Trump hosted a "Stop the Steal" rally and encouraged his supporters to take action against the certification of the November 3, 2020 election, which he lost but maintained was fraudulent. Congress at that time was assembled in a joint session at which they were doing just that, but dispersed to find safety as Trump's supporters flooded into the Capitol halls.

However, Jillian Lane Wyant, Gaetz's chief of staff, told Gizmodo that Valdez believed he only witnessing a protest, not an insurrection.

"A staff member in our office posted on his personal Parlor [sic] account about the President's rally before the Capitol had been breached or anyone was harmed," Wyant told the outlet. "He also immediately amplified President Trump's call on social media for those in attendance to go home. He regrets that the post has been misinterpreted as support for violence by some. It was not."

Gizmodo noted there was no sign Valdez had amplified Trump's later calls for an end to the violence at the Capitol - only the calls to "stop the steal."

A Trump Stalwart

Gaetz has been a fierce defender of Trump, pledging to challenge the votes of Electoral College electors whose states Trump claimed ran fraudulent elections. After the insurrection, he has defended Trump against the impeachment trial for allegedly inciting the insurrection, and [has sought the ouster](#) of Republican lawmakers who voted for impeachment, including Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY).

The day after the riot, Gaetz attempted to blame the Capitol [violence on Antifa](#), the ill-organized left-wing anti-fascist protesters that he called "terrorists" he wanted to "hunt down" during the

protests against [police violence](#) and white supremacy that rocked the country last summer. However, his claims were quickly disproven, as the people observers claimed were Antifa were [instead revealed to be](#) far-right and neo-Nazi instigators and adherents to the QAnon conspiracy theory movement.

This isn't the first incident involving one of Gaetz's aides, either: in 2017, [Foreign Policy revealed](#) that Devin Murphy, an legislative aide to the congressman, had effectively crowd-sourced legislation aiming to hijack a Democratic resolution by using content from "The\_Donald," a subreddit on the Reddit message board site. [The subreddit was banned](#) in June 2020 for orchestrating targeted harassment and was known as a hotbed of conspiracy theories and hateful ideas.

During the insurrection, other Republican lawmakers also cheered on the rioters, including Sen. Josh Hawley (R-AR), [who was photographed](#) giving the crowd a raised fist outside the Capitol. In the days after the assault, dozens of Democratic lawmakers spearheaded an investigation into [tours of the Capitol](#) building allegedly given to the insurrectionists by Republican lawmakers in the days before the January 6 storming.

Five people died in the assault, including a police officer beaten to death with a fire extinguisher and a female rioter who was shot by a guard outside the Senate chamber. While the legislative building was damaged and looted, they failed at their goal of capturing either the Electoral College ballots or key lawmakers, and after police cleared the rioters from the building, lawmakers reconvened and finished certifying the results.

A separate investigation is underway into the poor preparations for the attack by the authorities, including why there were so few Capitol Police defending the building and why the National Guard [took so long](#) to respond to the violence. Guardsmen only arrived in the hours after the attackers had been cleared from the building, but tens of thousands flooded into the capital city to secure the January 20 inauguration against further violent plots rumored to be threatening the peaceful transfer of power.

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Satellite Photo Purports to Show First Hint of China's New Submarine Class Under Construction by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

China's naval fleet is already larger than the US Navy, but its quick pace of shipbuilding has strained existing assembly facilities, spurring a major construction boom as advanced new classes of warship are introduced.

Satellite imagery has captured part of what is likely one of the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) forthcoming nuclear-powered submarines, which will be directly comparable to the best boats in the US Navy.

According to a report by [Naval News](#), a photo taken by a Maxar satellite for Google Earth has revealed the engine section of an advanced new submarine being built at China's Bohai shipyard in Huludao, Liaoning Province. The photo dates to November 2020.

The only shipbuilding facility in China capable of producing nuclear-powered submarines, the Bohai shipyard has been expanding since 2014, the most recent project of which is a [second construction hall](#) that will likely be used for building either the forthcoming Type 095 or Type 096 submarines.

According to Naval News, the engine section in the photo likely belongs to one of these new models. The Type 095 is a fast attack submarine that will be tasked with hunting down enemy subs and ships alike, and the Type 096 is a ballistic missile or “boomer” submarine, responsible for [carrying nuclear missiles](#).

The long propeller shroud seen in the image would help conceal the cavitation sounds generated by its propellers as they cut through the water, making it quieter and harder to detect - an advance of which [Chinese naval engineers](#) have boasted in recent years.

However, the outlet concedes it could also be an upgraded engine for a new version of the Type 093, an [attack submarine class](#) introduced in 2002 that has recently been modified to carry cruise and anti-ship missiles.

The hull section measures in at 30-32 meters long and 11-12 meters wide, further suggesting one of the new subs, which will be considerably larger than existing Chinese submarines.

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Legal Scramble - Political Cartoon

US Senate lawmakers will be holding a second impeachment trial against former US President Donald Trump in the coming week, determining whether or not the 45th commander-in-chief is guilty of inciting an insurrection.

Over the weekend, Trump announced a new line-up for the legal defense team that would be representing him next week during the Senate impeachment trial, raising concerns among Washington insiders over the last-minute changes.

The Sunday revelation indicates lawyers David Schoen and Bruce Castor, Jr. would be heading the defense, and comes after reports indicated that Butch Bowers, who was expected to take the lead on the case, bowed out. Legal representatives Deborah Barbier, Josh Howard, Johnny Gasser and Greg Harris have also left Trump's defense team, according to [media reports](#).

Reports suggest that the final hour switches were prompted by Trump's insistence that the defense argument focus on unsubstantiated voter fraud allegations, instead of the legal aspects of convicting a president after he's ended his term in the White House.

With just a few days to go before the trial starts, one wonders how well Trump's defense team will manage. Will the self-avowed master dealmaker win out against the accusations or will he be the first president ever to be convicted?

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Videos: New York Cops Under Investigation After Pepper-Spraying 9-Year-Old Girl  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Video showing Rochester Police Department (RPD) officers violently restraining a minor has led the department to come under renewed scrutiny, as it was also at the center of the 2020 death of Daniel Prude, who stopped breathing after officers placed a mesh hood over his head and pressed his face into the pavement.

An investigation into police in Rochester, New York, was recently launched after footage surfaced showing the aggressive takedown of a nine-year-old girl by RPD officers who were initially responding to a report of “family trouble” in the area.

The announcement came on Sunday when authorities held a pair of news conferences that offered insight into the incident as the police department released body-worn camera footage of the officers’ interaction with the unidentified minor.

Video footage of the initial Friday interaction between police and the minor shows an officer chasing her down a street; however, within moments, the officer apprehends the individual and begins asking the youth why she ran away from her mother. The nine-year-old later explains that she believed her mother stabbed her father, a statement which promptly causes her mother to begin lashing out.

The recording eventually shows the officer repeatedly urging the mother to return home when she appears to argue with individuals inside a nearby vehicle. Although the parent does comply, the situation quickly escalates between the officers and the minor once additional cops arrive on the scene.

Warning: Videos may be disturbing to some viewers.

Seconds after directing a responding officer to place the young girl inside a patrol car, the minor refuses and begins to repeatedly call out for her father. At one point in the recording, the youth falls to the ground and officers are seen placing her facedown on the snow in order to place her in handcuffs. At the time, temperatures were far below freezing.

“I want my dad, I want my dad,” she continues to yell out as officers place her in restraints.

Although the video feed briefly cuts off in the first recording issued by the department, it later resumes with the minor sitting in the patrol car, but refusing to fully enter the vehicle.

The first video cuts off after an officer calls for the responding cop to detain the child’s mother as a female officer is overheard urging the minor to comply with orders to sit inside the squad car.

A total of six patrol cars are seen in the area.

The second video released by the agency offers more insight and documents the female officer, who was initially seen trying to work with the minor, suddenly losing her patience and threatening to pepper-spray the child if she continues to not work with the officers.

“I’m going to pepper-spray you, but I don’t want to, so sit back,” the officer is heard saying. “Sit back, come on. This is your last chance otherwise pepper spray is going into your eyeballs.”

At one point, an officer remarks the girl is “acting like a child,” to which she responds, “I am a child.”

With the minor continuing to call out for her father, another officer eventually tells the female officer to “just spray her at this point.” Video shows the female cop shaking the bottle of pepper spray and deploying the irritant, prompting the youth to cry out for someone to wipe her eyes as both doors to the patrol car are then shut.

The second video cuts off as an officer calls the situation “unbelievable.”

It’s presently unclear under what grounds the mother was arrested and if the child’s father was in touch with the officers. Following the altercation, the child was transported to the Rochester General Hospital and released from police custody.

According to [NBC News](#), in addition to the RPD investigation, Rochester’s police accountability board is initiating its own probe into the events that unfolded. None of the officers who responded to the scene have been identified, and it’s uncertain whether they are still on active duty amid the investigation.

Mike Mazzo, president of the Rochester Police Locust Club - the union representing the department, commented on the detainment and told the [Rochester Democrat and Chronicle](#) that it was “not a simple situation.”

“I’m not saying there are not better ways to do things,” he said, adding, “It’s not TV, it’s not Hollywood. We don’t have a simple [situation], where we can put out our hands and have somebody be instantly handcuffed and comply.”

Mazzo has noted that no department policies were violated during the police interaction. Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren [told reporters](#) at a conference that although the minor’s mother had later indicated her daughter was suicidal and was attempting to run away from her home, a response from the division’s Person in Crisis (PIC) team was not necessary since the 911 call was labeled “family trouble” and involved a possible stolen vehicle.

The PIC initiative was only [announced days](#) before the Friday altercation. The program intends to provide a non-police response to emergency situations that involve individuals experiencing emotional or behavioral difficulties.

The incident highlighted the longstanding problem within many police departments across the US that lack effective, non-violent de-escalation tactics. In many instances, officers have been poorly equipped to handle such incidents or those involving an individual with a mental illness.

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‘Saved by the Bell’ Actor Dustin Diamond Dead at 44 After Cancer Battle  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The child star was best known to a generation of fans for his portrayal of the quirky-yet-lovable high schooler Samuel “Screech” Powers, one of six main characters on the 1990s hit sitcom “Saved by the Bell.”

US actor Dustin Diamond, who spent 13 seasons portraying the nerdy pal of character Zach Morris, has died after being diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. He was 44 years old.

Roger Paul, Diamond’s longtime talent agent, confirmed the news in [a statement](#) to the Washington Post that explained the child star had died Monday from carcinoma.

“He was diagnosed with this brutal, relentless form of malignant cancer only three weeks ago,” the statement notes. “In that time, it managed to spread rapidly throughout his system; the only mercy it exhibited was its sharp and swift execution.”

“Dustin did not suffer. He did not have to lie submerged in pain. For that, we are grateful,” it adds.

TMZ was the first [to report](#) the development and reported that Diamond was “taken off a breathing machine in an attempt to get him to hospice care.” The outlet also indicated that Diamond’s partner was by his side at the time.

Incidentally, TMZ was also among the first to report that Diamond had been hospitalized several weeks ago in Florida, where health professionals ultimately diagnosed him with late stage cancer.

Diamond’s death has prompted an outpouring of shock from fans and eulogies from celebrities, including his castmates from “Saved by the Bell.”

Actor Mark-Paul Gosselaar, who portrayed the sitcom’s main character Zach Morris, [tweeted shortly](#) after the news broke that he was “deeply saddened” by Diamond’s passing, noting that he would “miss those raw, brilliant sparks that only [Diamond] was able to produce. A pie in your face, my comrade.”

Fellow castmate Mario Lopez, who took up the role of the series’ jock AC Slater, offered his condolences and prayers to the Diamond family.

Tiffani Thiessen, who starred as Kelly Kapowski on the sitcom, lamented her former co-star’s passing [on Instagram](#), writing, “Life is extremely fragile and it’s something we should never take for granted. God speed [sic] Dustin.”

US actor, comedian, writer and producer Marlon Wayans also touched on Diamond’s death and [wrote](#) that he “made many kids that’s now adults laugh.” He added, “Will never forget the celebrity boxing. And I’m still trying to forget that sex tape 🤔 you lived man. Quite entertaining. Gone too f\*\*\*ing soon.”

In his later years, Diamond appeared on various reality shows, including “Celebrity Boxing 2,” “Celebrity Big Brother” and “Celebrity Fit Club,” among others. At one point, Diamond released his own sex tape; however, he later revealed that a “stunt person” had actually stood in for him, and that his face was digitally added.

In 2015, Diamond had a run-in with law enforcement officials after he was convicted of disorderly conduct for stabbing a bar patron in Wisconsin. He served three months behind bars. Diamond’s team noted in the statement that the actor “is not considered reputable by most,” but explained that “his actions, though rebukeable, stemmed from loss and the lack of knowledge on how to process that pain properly.”

“In actuality, Dustin was a humorous and high-spirited individual whose greatest passion was to make others laugh. He was able to sense and feel other peoples’ emotions to such a length that he was able to feel them too - a strength and a flaw, all in one.”

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Photos, Videos: Massive Snowstorm Blankets US East Coast, Halts COVID-19 Vaccine Appointments  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Dubbed Winter Storm Orlena by forecasters, the first nor'easter of 2021 is expected to dump upwards of 20 inches of snow in some parts of the US East Coast and bring with it gusty winds teetering on blizzard conditions.

A powerful winter storm has worked its way across much of the East Coast, shutting down schools, commuter services, flights and even forced cancellations of COVID-19 vaccination appointments that Americans have been eager to snatch up.

The heaviest snow accumulations stretch from parts of Pennsylvania to New Jersey, New York and southern New England, according to the [Weather Channel](#), which also highlighted that in Lehigh, Pennsylvania, [officials reported](#) a "rate of 3 inches in 1 hour."

[Snow totals](#) reported by the National Weather Service indicate the highest figure reported to date was reported early Sunday in Independence, Virginia, with 36 inches of snow. The latest update on Monday shows a high of 26 inches of snowfall accumulated in Mendham, New Jersey.

Marking a first in over five years, the snowstorm even brought over a foot of fresh powder to New York City's Central Park, a welcomed gift for many eager to dust off their old sleds. Officials reported a whopping 15.3 inches of snow in the famous park.

Weather experts have noted that strong winds have been reported mostly near the coast along Delaware and New England, some of which reached over 50 mph. Conditions are expected to worsen throughout the night for some portions of the US coastline.

However, while cities have been blanketed by layers of snow, some communities have been inundated with coastal flooding. Philadelphia-based meteorologist Steven Sosna [warned](#) on Twitter that rising water levels would reach "moderate to potentially major coastal flooding" between 10 p.m. local time and midnight along Delaware and New Jersey.

Over yonder in Chicago, Illinois, residents saw more than 9 inches of snow over the weekend as the storm swept through the area. The storm even provided a picturesque view of churning ice along Lake Michigan.

In New York, the powerful storm went as far as prompting city officials to close all aboveground subway services, effectively closing over 450 of the complex system's stations. The majority of the stations were located in the Brooklyn, Queens and Bronx boroughs.

Amid calls for closures, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo [urged residents](#) to be prepared for "major closures" so as to avoid any chances of becoming "stranded in a location where [locals] can't get home."

"This is a dangerous, life-threatening situation," he stressed.

All commercial flights out of both Kennedy Airport and LaGuardia Airport were also canceled amid the storm, with scheduled flights coming out of Philadelphia International Airport and at Boston Logan International Airport also being suspended.

As the storm has grounded many aspects of life, it also forced many states to put their COVID-19 testing and vaccination appointments on hold. In the Empire State, vaccination appointments were postponed twice as a result of the winter storm.

In Rhode Island, all state-operated testing sites were temporarily closed, with vaccinations at regional facilities postponed until further notice. The [Providence Journal reported](#) that the Ocean State could see up to 18 inches of snow and experience blizzard conditions.

Similar closures were also reported in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and in New Jersey.

The storm has led to several deaths so far. The [Philly Voice reported](#) that one woman died of hypothermia in Pennsylvania "after she wandered from her home." The individual suffered from Alzheimer's disease, and had been found four blocks from her home.

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US Voting Rights Activist Stacey Abrams Nominated for Nobel Peace Prize  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Democratic leadership and mainstream US media have repeatedly proclaimed the 2020 election efforts of Stacey Abrams, founder of voting rights organization "Fair Fight Action" and former Minority Leader of the Georgia House of Representatives, played a crucial role in US President Joe Biden's victory and Democrats' flipping of the US Senate.

Norwegian lawmaker Lars Haltbrekken announced Monday that Abrams, 47, was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize

"Abrams' work follows in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s footsteps in the fight for equality before the law and for civil rights," Haltbrekken said, as reported [by Reuters](#). "Abrams' efforts to complete King's work are crucial if the United States of America shall succeed in its effort to create fraternity between all its peoples and a peaceful and just society."

While the 47-year-old is no stranger to politics, Abrams' recent efforts against voter suppression and voter registration initiatives have catapulted her into a new political bracket.

Abrams Narrowly Lost 2018 Georgia Gubernatorial Election

While Abrams served on the Georgia House of Representatives from 2007 to 2017, she did not gain national notoriety as a Democratic heavyweight until her 2018 gubernatorial campaign against GOP nominee and then-Georgia Secretary of State Brian Kemp.

Abrams notably [made history](#) as the first Black woman to secure a major party nomination for a US gubernatorial race. However, the Democratic nominee was only able to secure 1,923,685 votes, while Republican nominee Kemp received 1,978,408 votes.

Neither candidate received a majority of the votes and the election made history as the closest gubernatorial race since 1966. While Abrams, who failed to meet the runoff threshold, did suspend her campaign following election certification, she adamantly refused to concede. According to Abrams, Kemp, as sitting secretary of state, oversaw the state's voter rolls and stalled some 50,000 votes over voter registration issues.

Kemp maintained that all eligible votes were counted. He [also claimed](#) that Abrams wanted to subvert the "rule of law by letting illegal immigrants vote."

Abrams Heads Voting Rights Organization Fair Fight Action

After sounding the alarm on so-called voter suppression, the former Georgia House Democratic leader used her newfound exposure as backing for the 2018 creation of Fair Fight Action, a group and political action committee dedicated to fighting voter suppression.

Shortly after its founding, the group found itself on the receiving end of a [complaint filed](#) with the Internal Revenue Service by the Foundation for Accountability and Civic Trust (FACT), a GOP-affiliated organization.

The complaint argued that Abrams was violating political 501(c)(4) nonprofit guidelines by using her organization to help her own political ambitions. [FACT argued](#) "the organization has blatantly demonstrated through its leadership, purpose and activities that its primary mission is to advance Abrams' political career."

The GOP-affiliated organization's comments followed a speech in which Abrams proclaimed she would be using the nonprofit as a vehicle to "channel" her work and promote her political agenda.

"It's no surprise that right-wing hit groups allied with Donald Trump are launching bogus attacks against Fair Fight," Fair Fight Action CEO Lauren Groh-Wargo told [Fox News](#) in an emailed statement. "They're afraid of Stacey Abrams and even more afraid that all eligible Georgians will exercise their right to vote."

A spokesperson for Abrams has also proclaimed the former Georgia House Democratic leader will step down from Fair Fight Action.

The group's political action committee revealed last month that some [550,000 donors](#) contributed between the months of October 26 and December 31 alone. Furthermore, [documents filed](#) with the Federal Election Commission in January noted the group and its hundreds of thousands of donors raised some \$95 million.

Abrams' GA Voter Initiatives Widely Linked Biden Victory, Flipping Seats

Biden was handed the Electoral College victory after weeks of legal challenges related to allegations of widespread voter fraud. At least [2,473,633 votes](#) were recorded for Biden, while Trump received a close 2,461,854 votes in the presidential race.

"Let's hear it for Stacey Abrams. Nobody, nobody in America has done more for the right to vote than Stacey," Biden [gushed in Atlanta](#), Georgia, on the eve of the Senate runoff vote. "Stacey, you are changing Georgia. You have changed America."

According to Abrams, with most Americans were focused on the presidential election results, voter registration and community engagement were even more crucial efforts for the Senate runoff races between then-Sens. David Perdue (R-GA) and Kelly Loeffler (R-GA) and Democrat challengers Jon Ossoff and Rev. Raphael Warnock, respectively.

"Joe Biden's been a part of American politics for 40-plus years. And so for a number of new voters they're going to vote only when they're confident," Abrams told ABC's Martha Raddatz ahead of the runoffs. "That's why we spent this time over the last nine weeks educating voters about Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock."

Some [76,000 new](#) voters registered to vote between the November general election and the deadline to register for the Georgia Senate runoffs, according to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Both Ossoff and Warnock beat their Republican opponents, bringing the Senate to a 50-50 Republican-Democrat split. The presence of Vice President Kamala Harris, a Democrat who serves as president of the Senate, has translated to a Democratic majority in the legislative chamber.

Former Democratic National Committee Chair Howard Dean praised Abrams, dubbing her the "LeBron James of American politics."

"She has just an enormous amount of talent, and the ability to focus that talent in a very intense way," [Dean proclaimed](#). "And so when you get somebody like that, of course you want them elevated as much as possible."

Abrams believes that voter registration initiatives by Fair Fight Action and like organizations were responsible for the Democratic wins in the runoffs, as well as Biden's winning of the state's electoral college votes.

"And we know absolutely in Georgia that there was a sea change because we were able to push back against some of the most egregious voter suppression in the nation," [Abrams told](#) PBS News Hour host Judy Woodruff following the Senate runoff results. "And the result was that we were able to deliver 16 Electoral College votes for a Democratic nominee for the first time in 28 years, and, a few weeks later, we were able to flip two U.S. Senate seats."

Former President Trump, His Ex-Aide Kushner Among Nobel Prize Nominees  
[Trump](#) and his former senior adviser [Jared Kushner](#), who is also 45's son-in-law, were also nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

"Donald Trump is the first president of the United States in the last 30 years, whose office the country has not started any war," asserted Estonian MEP [Jaak Madison](#) via Facebook, recounting his nomination of the former US president.

"In addition, several peace agreements have been made under his leadership in the Middle East, which has helped ensure stability in the region and peace."

Famed American attorney Alan Dershowitz, a member of the defense team for Trump's 2020 and 2021 Senate impeachment hearings, nominated Kushner and his adviser, Avi Berkowitz, for the international honor, citing their respective roles in negotiating the historic "[Abraham Accords](#)," which encompasses [four deals](#) between Israel and the Arab nations.

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Videos: Rep. Greene Admits Parkland, Sandy Hook School Shootings Were Real, Not 'False Flag' Ops  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Democrats, who control both US chambers of Congress, are pressuring House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) to remove embattled Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene from her committee assignments in light of the congresswoman's recent string of inflammatory statements.

As lawmakers on both sides of the aisle await McCarthy's meeting with Greene regarding her litany of controversies [and conspiracies](#), the congresswoman appears to be backpedaling on at least one issue: school shootings.

Linda Beigel Schulman - a Florida mother whose son was one of 17 killed in the 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida - revealed earlier this week that she spoke with Greene on Saturday regarding her [past comments](#) regarding the two school shootings.

"When we started our conversation, I was totally upfront and told Congresswoman Greene that I was going to be on MSNBC today," [she detailed](#). "Parameters were set, and the only topic discussed would be the school shootings at Parkland and Sandy Hook and that the conversation would be totally confidential. Our talk went very well."

"My first question to Congresswoman Greene was do you really believe that Parkland and Sandy Hook were false flags and staged?" Schulman recounted. "Her answer to me was 'unequivocally, no, I do not.'"

Greene, has been vocal about her skepticism regarding the Parkland and Sandy Hook shootings. A screenshot obtained by Media Matters for America shows Greene replying in agreement to a netizen who claimed the father of Parkland mass shooting victim was getting a "pay off to keep his mouth shut since it was a false flag planned shooting."

Schulman told MSNBC that while she "very much wanted to" believe the congresswoman, there is a disconnect between Greene's public and private statements.

"Unless she wants to get in front of the public and wants to right the wrong lies being espoused out there and wants to disavow the things that she said, no, I can't believe it," Schulman said.

"Maybe inside of her she believes it. I don't know. I have no idea. I'm not inside of her, but you can — words are very powerful, but actions speak louder than words."

Schulman said Greene rejected her request to disavow the school shooting on MSNBC, a left-leaning outlet. Greene did, however, appear on conservative One America News Network and issue a statement on the matter.

"These are not red flag instances. They are not fake and it's terrible the loss that these families go through ... and it should never happen and it doesn't have to happen if we would protect our children properly," [she stated](#). It's unclear if she meant "false flag" instead of "red flag."

Greene Reposts Video, Reignites Parkland Conspiracy Controversy

Nevertheless, Greene has been highly critical of Parkland shooting survivor-turned-gun legislation advocate David Hogg.

Footage recorded March 2019 shows Greene confronting Hogg in Washington, DC, "for his push to lobby lawmakers to trample on our Second Amendment Rights," according to the congresswoman's YouTube description.

It's worth noting that Greene did not upload the confrontation until January 21 and the clip has received a mere 625 likes against more than 8,100 dislikes.

Be advised, the footage below has themes that may offend some audiences.

"If there had been -- if Scot Peterson, the resource officer at Parkland, had done his job then Nikolas Cruz wouldn't have killed anybody in your high school, or at least protected them," Greene is overheard saying.

"Why are you supporting red-flag gun laws that attack our Second Amendment right and why are you using kids as a barrier? Do you not know how to defend your stance?"

"Can I just point out how ridiculous it is that it's on the survivors of gun violence to stand up to gun violence and be the ones to try end to it? Why do we have elected officials if that's the case? Why can't they do their jobs?" [Hogg stated](#) during his Thursday appearance on CNN's "New Day."

The 20-year-old told host Alisyn Camerota that he believes Greene, who was not an elected official at the time, was "trying to get a rise out of me."

Greene has also referred to Hogg as "#littleHitler."

'Disavow': House Democrats Issue Ultimatum to GOP Minority Leader

Hogg also used his CNN interview to call on House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), urging the GOP leader to strip Greene of her House Education and Labor Committee and the House Budget Committee assignments.

"My message to Kevin McCarthy is, take all of her committee assignments away ... also, don't support her when she runs for re-election again and try to get her primaried. If you say this is not your party, actually call it out and hold her accountable," the 20-year-old asserted.

McCarthy stated last week that Greene's alleged "comments are deeply disturbing." McCarthy's spokesperson added that the minority leader "plans to have a conversation with the Congresswoman" concerning the allegations.

[Politico reported](#) Monday that House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-NY) issued an ultimatum to McCarthy: remove Greene from her House committee seats within 72 hours, or the matter will be taken to the House floor.

Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz echoed Hoyer's same-day comments and [told reporters](#) that she intends to push a resolution that would sideline the embattled congresswoman.

Greene has maintained that she has shared and interacted with social media posts that do not necessarily "represent my views." She asserted in a January 26 [statement](#) that CNN and the "Fake News Media" are trying to "cancel" her "because I'm a threat to their goal of Socialism [sic]."

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Rochester Police Officers Suspended for Using Pepper Spray Against Child - Mayor's Office

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The police officers involved in the use of pepper spray against a 9-year-old girl in the city of Rochester, New York, have been suspended, the mayor's office said in a press release.

The Rochester Police Department recently released footage showing a child being handcuffed and pepper-sprayed by officers who were responding to a family disturbance call on Friday.

"After meeting with Rochester Police Department Chief Cynthia Herriott-Sullivan today, Mayor [Lovely] Warren ordered the Chief to immediately suspend the officers involved in the use of pepper spraying of a 9-year-old girl on Avenue B on Friday," the release said on Monday.

The police officers will be suspended until the internal police investigation has concluded, the release said.

The police said the girl resisted attempts to calm her, and her mother asked for her to be handcuffed.

Rochester police came under fire last year when African American man Daniel Prude, who ran naked through the streets at night, was apprehended and died in custody with a spit bag placed over his head.

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US Senator Collins Says Republicans Had Good Meeting With Biden on COVID-19 Relief

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US Senator Susan Collins told reporters that she and her Republican colleagues had a good meeting with President Joe Biden about a new coronavirus relief package and both sides agreed to follow up with further negotiations. "It was a very good exchange of views," Collins said on Monday moments after the meeting. "I wouldn't say that we came together on a package tonight... but what we did agree to do is to follow up and talk further at the staff level and amongst ourselves and with the president and vice president on how we can continue to work together on this very important issue." Collins was part of a group of ten Republican senators that met with Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris in the Oval office Monday evening for a two-hour meeting on a new COVID-19 relief package. Collins said they presented Biden with the provisions proposed in their \$600 billion COVID-19 package. She added that she is hopeful Congress will pass a bipartisan coronavirus relief package. Democrats have proposed a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package.

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Google to Pay \$3.8Mln to Settle Compensation, Hiring Discrimination Claims - US Labor Dept

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - Google has agreed to pay a \$3.8 million settlement to resolve allegations that the company underpaid female employees and discriminated against hiring female and Asian applicants, the US Labor Department said in a press release. "The US Department of Labor has reached a settlement with Google LLC to resolve allegations of systemic compensation and hiring discrimination at the company's California and Washington State facilities and will pay over \$3.8 million to more than 5,500 current employees and job applicants," the release said on Monday. The release said \$1.3 million will be distributed to 2,565 female Google employees in engineering positions who were victims of pay discrimination. In addition, \$1.2 million will be given to 1,757 female and 1,219 Asian applicants who were not hired for software engineering positions with the company. Google will also allocate a cash reserve of about \$1.2 million in pay-equity adjustments for the next five years for US employees in engineering positions at five of the company's locations nationwide, the release said. The release added that Google has hired 51 female and 17 Asian applicants for software engineering positions. Google will review its policies on hiring and compensation and will take corrective action to ensure non-discrimination practices in the workplace, the release said.

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Blinken Tells Ukraine Counterpart US to Keep Sending Kiev 'Robust' Defense Aid - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in his first telephone call with his Ukrainian counterpart promised the Biden administration will continue to provide robust military and economic assistance to Ukraine, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke by phone with Ukrainian Foreign Minister [Dmytro] Kuleba today," Price said in the release on Monday. "The Secretary emphasized strong bipartisan support for Ukraine and the priority the United States places on Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. He pledged to continue robust US economic and military assistance to Ukraine."

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#### SpaceX to Launch First All-Civilian Mission to Orbit No Earlier Than 4th Quarter This Year

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - SpaceX has announced it will launch its first all-civilian mission Inspiration4 to orbit Earth no earlier than the fourth quarter of this year.

"I want to use this moment to bring humanity together, fuel change on Earth and inspire others to follow their dreams," Inspiration4 mission commander Jared Isaacman said via Twitter on Monday. "It's an honor to partner with @StJude @Shift4SHop @SpaceX to make the first all-civilian mission to space happen."

SpaceX in a separate press release said the Inspiration4 crew of four will launch into orbit on a Falcon 9 rocket no earlier than the fourth quarter of this year.

The crew will launch from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida and return to Earth for a soft water landing off the coast of the state.

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#### Young Canadians' Mental Well-Being Declines, Obesity Rises in New Millennium - Study

TORONTO, February 1 (Sputnik) - The mental well-being among young Canadians has dropped since the dawn of the new millennium, while obesity and unhealthy behaviors have spiked, a Statistics Canada study revealed.

"Canadian youth reported worse mental health than older Canadians both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their mental health was also poorer than it was 20 years ago," the Health of Youth in Canada report said on Monday.

Only 54 percent young Canadian women – aged 15 to 30 – reported good mental health, while the number stood at 77 percent in 2003. Mental well-being also fell among young men, with the share of those who classified their mental health as "excellent or very good" falling from 76.5 percent to 66 percent between 2003 and 2019.

The study highlights that the pandemic has only exacerbated this trend. Only 48.7 percent of males and 32.4 percent of females in the 15 to 30 year-old age group reported their mental health as being excellent or very good in a survey conducted between March 19 to April 3, 2020.

The study also sheds light on the growing health issues among young Canadians. While Canadians aged 15 to 30 report being the healthiest among other age groups, the obesity rates rose by 2.2 and 4.7 percent for males and females, respectively, since 2001. Meanwhile, fruit and vegetable consumption and time spent being active have decreased.

The study did note that daily smoking among young Canadians fell by more than double since 2001.

However, the study also found that young Canadians partook in substance abuse at significantly higher rates in the past 12 months compared to those aged over 47.

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Trudeau Raises in Call With Harris Issues of Access to COVID-19 Vaccines, Protectionism

TORONTO, February 1 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau during his first phone call with US Vice President Kamala Harris raised the issues of access to COVID-19 vaccines and protectionism, the Prime Minister's Office said in a statement.

"The Prime Minister looked forward to working with the US administration on shared priorities, including fighting the COVID-19 pandemic through close collaboration on borders and access to vaccines, and to building back better," the statement said on Monday.

Canada is experiencing a vaccine shortage that worsened after producer Pfizer halted delivered to the country last week following an announcement that another producer, Moderna, will deliver 50,000 less vaccine doses this week. The Trudeau government has received the brunt of the criticism for the lackluster vaccine rollout that the opposition has condemned as a failure.

Canada continues to receive its vaccine supplies from European production facilities after former US President Donald Trump signed an executive order to prioritize domestic distribution of vaccines over their shipments to foreign countries.

The two officials also discussed bilateral trade, including "avoiding the unintended consequences of Buy America policies," the statement read.

Current US President Joe Biden signed an executive order last Monday to support domestic businesses and require federal government agencies to buy products made in the United States. The plan has been met with concern in Ottawa, with Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland raising the issue in a phone call with US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen on Friday.

Trudeau also thanked the Vice President for the United States' continued support in seeking the release of two Canadians detained in China on charges of espionage, allegedly in retaliation for Ottawa's continued detention of Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou. The White House said in a statement that United States will work to secure the release of former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor.

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#### Democrats Backing Biden File Joint Budget Resolution to Pass His Stimulus Plan

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - Democrats backing President Joe Biden have filed a joint budget resolution to pass his planned \$1.9 trillion coronavirus stimulus relief amid signs that rival Republicans wanted the package slashed to less than a third of its proposed size, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced.

"Congress has a responsibility to quickly deliver immediate comprehensive relief to the American people hurting from COVID-19," Pelosi said in a statement issued jointly with Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer on Monday.

Introduction of a joint budget resolution was the first step to potentially enacting a budget reconciliation bill that would be a legislative tool available to Congress to quickly pass such a bill, the statement added.

The Pelosi-Schumer statement came ahead of a meeting on Monday that Biden was to have with 10 Republican senators who suggested they were willing to work with him instead on a \$618 billion stimulus, versus the \$1.9 trillion package he had proposed.

Biden, who took office on January 20, had expressed hope that his COVID-19 relief plan would get adequate support from the Republicans in the Senate where the Democrats had a majority of just one. However, should negotiations stall, the president has cautioned that the Democrats will use the reconciliation process available to them to push his relief plan through the Senate. Reconciliation is a process that allows the Senate to pass tax and spending legislation with a bare majority vote. Democrats and Republicans both have 50 seats in the Senate now, with Vice President Kamala Harris having an additional vote to break the tie.

The statement said reconciliation has been used 17 times in recent years to pass bills in a bipartisan way.

Congress passed the first Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act under the then Trump administration in March 2020, dispensing roughly \$3 trillion as paycheck protection for workers, loans and grants for businesses and other personal aid for qualifying citizens and residents.

After that, Democrats in the House of Representatives got into a messy partisan fight with the Republicans in the Senate on a successive relief plan despite millions of Americans remaining jobless and being unable to pay for mortgage, rent and sometimes even food. The Trump administration subsequently got a \$900 billion relief passed under a bipartisan effort, its last, in December.

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#### Biden Asks US Supreme Court to Suspend Trump Immigration Cases - Court Documents

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has asked the US Supreme Court to cancel oral arguments scheduled in the coming weeks on Trump-era cases concerning border wall funding and the so-called "Remain in Mexico" asylum program, officially known as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), court documents revealed.

"Pursuant to Rule 21.1 of the Rules of this Court, the Acting Solicitor General, on behalf of petitioners, President Joseph R. Biden Jr., et al., provides this notice of a recent Proclamation by the President affecting this case, and respectfully moves to hold the briefing schedule in abeyance and to remove this case from the February 2021 argument calendar," a court document said on Monday regarding the border wall funding case.

In 2019, the Defense Department provided \$2.5 billion to the Department of Homeland Security to construct a wall on the US-Mexico border.

The Biden administration has also asked the Supreme Court to cancel an oral argument scheduled on March 1 for a case regarding the legality of the MPP program, which required asylum-seeking migrants to temporarily return to Mexico for the duration of their proceedings. About 68,7000 migrants have been subject to the policy.

President Joe Biden on his first day in office on January 20 took executive action to halt the ongoing construction of the border wall and to suspend the MPP program while his team reviews the Trump-era policies.

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Schumer Calls on US Government to Work Productively to Respond to Myanmar Coup

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The US government should work productively and in a bipartisan manner to decide the best course of action that protects its interests in Myanmar and helps the people of that country, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said.

"I hope we can productively work together in a bipartisan fashion to determine the best course of action for America's interests and for the people of Myanmar," Schumer said during the Senate session on Monday.

Earlier in the day, media reported that the Myanmar military detained State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and some members of the country's ruling party. The military had vowed to take action against what they say was voter fraud in the November 8 election. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won the election.

Schumer said the Biden administration is already providing briefings to lawmakers on the situation in Myanmar.

"Congress stands ready to work collaboratively with the administration to resolve the new situation," Schumer said.

President Joe Biden said earlier on Monday the United States may re-impose sanctions on Myanmar in connection with the latest coup there.

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#### US Stocks Regain Some Ground After January Rout Triggered by Hedge Fund Losses

NEW YORK, February 1 (Sputnik) - Wall Street rebounded with tech stocks leading the way after a rout last week triggered by fund losses caused by retail investors acting against such firms.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest gauge of the New York Stock Exchange, gained 0.8 percent to close the day at 30,212. The Dow lost 3.3 percent last and 2 percent for all of January.

The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks, settled up 1.6 percent at 3,773. It lost 3.3 percent last week and 1 percent for January.

The technology-laden Nasdaq index, which counts on the performance of industry giants such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, jumped 2.6 percent to finish at 13,403. The Nasdaq tumbled 3.5 percent last week, but still managed to finish January about 2 percent high.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) -

##### MYANMAR COUP D'ETAT

- \* The Myanmar military should immediately release the 45 people detained during the coup in the country, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said on Monday.
- \* The Kremlin is monitoring the situation in Myanmar but it is too early to draw any conclusions, presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov.
- \* US President Joe Biden said the United States may re-impose sanctions on Myanmar in connection to the recent coup.
- \* The United States has had intensive consultations with its allies regarding the situation in Myanmar following the military coup in that country, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters.

##### US, EU SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- \* The governments of some EU countries have proposed in the past to include Nord Stream 2 in the discussion on sanctions against Russia, but Berlin's position remains unchanged, German Foreign Ministry spokesman Christopher Burger said on Monday.
- \* Viacheslav Volodin, the speaker of the lower chamber of the Russian parliament, condemned on Monday the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK, labeled as a foreign agent by the Russian Ministry of Justice) for calling on Washington to impose sanctions on Russian officials and

business persons, and said that a bill on response restrictions could envision criminal liability for such calls.

\* The Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK, labeled as a foreign agent by the Russian Ministry of Justice), established by Alexey Navalny, demonstrated its status of a foreign agent by calling on Washington to slap Russia with sanctions, Peskov said.

#### UNAUTHORIZED RALLIES IN RUSSIA

\* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that nobody hindered the work journalists during the unauthorized rallies that took place across Russia on January 23 and January 31.

\* Russia is not ready to take into consideration the United States' statements on the unauthorized rallies, Peskov said.

\* Fourteen people were taken to emergency rooms in Moscow hospitals during the course of the Sunday's unauthorized rally, all of them received medical assistance and are already at home, the Moscow Healthcare Department said.

#### COVID-19 PANDEMIC

\* Austria will loosen its strict lockdown beginning on February 8 after seeing the number of coronavirus cases decrease, but will be ready to shut business again if there is an "explosive surge," Chancellor Sebastian Kurz said.

\* US President Joe Biden at a meeting later on Monday will exchange ideas with ten Republican senators who want to slash the administration's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief plan, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters.

\* The US government has awarded \$231.8 million to the Australian biotechnology firm Ellume to scale up production of an over-the-counter COVID-19 home test kit, the Department of Defense said.

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#### New York Attorney General Vows to Probe Police Use of Force Against 9-Year-Old

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The New York State Attorney General Letitia James denounced on Monday as "wholly unacceptable" the use of police force against a 9-year-old girl in the city of Rochester and said that an investigation is underway.

The police department in Rochester released footage showing a child being handcuffed and pepper-sprayed by officers who were responding to a family disturbance call.

"What happened in Rochester on Friday is deeply disturbing and wholly unacceptable. Such use of force and pepper spray should never be deployed against a child, period," James tweeted.

"My office is looking into what transpired, but it's clear that drastic reform is needed at @Rochester NYPD."

The police explained that the girl resisted attempts to calm her, and her mother asked for her to be handcuffed.

Rochester police came under fire last year when African American man Daniel Prude, who ran naked through the streets at night, was apprehended and died in custody with a spit bag placed over his head.

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UK COVID-19 Variant Present in 82 Countries, South African Strain in 39 - WHO Official

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The UK COVID-19 variant has now spread to 82 countries and the South African strain to nearly 40, Maria Van Kerkhove, COVID-19 Technical Lead of the WHO Health Emergencies Programme, said on Monday.

"The variant of concern that was identified first in the United Kingdom... [has been] identified in 82 countries," Van Kerkhove said during a Center for Strategic and International Studies virtual discussion. "The variant that was identified in South Africa has been identified in 39 countries."

The Brazilian strain of COVID-19 has spread to nine countries, Van Kerkhove added.

Earlier, the United States confirmed it has detected 471 variant cases of COVID-19. The US confirmed 467 cases of the UK variant, three of the South African strain, and one case of the Brazilian variant.

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UN Security Council Will Discuss Ukraine on February 11 - Program of Work

UNITED NATIONS, February 1 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will meet to discuss the implementation of the Minsk agreements on February 11, the program of work of the council for the month said on Monday.

The meeting was requested by Russia and will be held in an open format via video conference, according to the document disseminated by the United Kingdom which takes over the presidency of the UN Security Council in February.

The Minsk agreements include the Minsk Protocol signed by Russia and Ukraine on September 5 of 2014 under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, followed by another agreement on September 19, and the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements (known as Minsk II), agreed upon by Russia, France, Germany, Ukraine on February 12 of 2015.

The agreements outline steps for settling the situation in Donbas, such as the introduction of a ceasefire, prisoner exchange, withdrawal of troops.

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## UK Summons Myanmar Ambassador in London Over Military Coup - Envoy to UN

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The UK government summoned Myanmar's ambassador to discuss London's concerns over the military's seizure of power, British Envoy Barbara Woodward said on Monday.

State Counselor Aung Suu Kyi along other top politicians were detained in the early hours of Monday, with Myanmar's military declaring a one-year state of emergency after weeks of escalating tensions over allegations of vote-rigging in the November election.

"Myanmar's ambassador in London has been formally summoned to hear the UK's concern," Woodward told a press conference at the UN.

The UN Security Council is scheduled to meet on Myanmar on Tuesday, Woodward added. Woodward said her deputy at the UN had held a "useful conversation" with Myanmar's UN envoy, who represented the toppled government.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson earlier condemned the coup and detention of civilians and called on the military to respect the vote of the people.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy emerged victorious in Myanmar's November 8 election, the second since the end of military rule in the country in 2011. Myanmar's military has accused the government of conducting the recent election fraudulently and vowed last week to "take action."

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## Biden, Republicans to 'Share Ideas' at COVID-19 Relief Meeting on Monday - White House

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden at a meeting later on Monday will exchange ideas with ten Republican senators who want to slash the administration's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief plan, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters.

On Sunday, the Republican lawmakers sent Biden an invitation to discuss their virus relief proposal of \$618 billion - which is nearly 70 percent lower than the White House plan.

"He is meeting with the ten Republicans who have sent this letter because he feels they made a good faith effort to [bring] that proposal forward, and he wants to have that engagement and encourages that sharing of ideas," Psaki said.

Biden, who took office on January 20, said it could take a couple of weeks for the Democrat-dominated House of Representatives to finalize his COVID-19 relief plan, expressing hope that the matter would get adequate support from the Republicans in the Senate where the Democrats had a majority of just one.

Republican Senator Susan Collins, one of the ten scheduled to negotiate with the president, tweeted out a joint pledge by the group, saying it wished to work with Biden in "good faith ... to meet the health, economic, and societal challenges of the COVID crisis".

According to the pledge, the group of ten shared many of the Biden administration's priorities such as increasing funding for the production and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, and

providing economic relief for Americans; extending enhanced federal unemployment benefits and nutrition assistance for struggling families; additional assistance for our small businesses; and getting children safely back to school.

Psaki said Biden's priority was to address the needs of Americans above bridging political differences with his rivals.

"When the president talks about unifying the country and bringing the country together, he's not suggesting that he is going to make one party out of the Democratic and Republican parties in Congress," Psaki said. "We are still at a phase where the House and Senate are still working through the plan. We'll see what comes out of this meeting today. We saw this as a good faith proposal they put forward to have a discussion and the president's inviting them here in good faith."

Should the negotiations stall, Biden has cautioned that the Democrats will use the reconciliation process available to them to push his relief plan through the Senate.

Reconciliation is a process that allows the Senate to pass tax and spending legislation with a bare majority vote. Democrats and Republicans both have 50 seats in the Senate now, with Vice President Kamala Harris having an additional vote to break the tie.

Congress passed the first Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act under the then Trump administration in March 2020, dispensing roughly \$3 trillion as paycheck protection for workers, loans and grants for businesses and other personal aid for qualifying citizens and residents.

After that, Democrats in the House of Representatives got into a messy partisan fight with the Republicans in the Senate on a successive relief plan despite millions of Americans remaining jobless and being unable to pay for mortgage, rent and sometimes even food. The Trump administration subsequently got a \$900 billion relief passed under a bipartisan effort, its last, in December.

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UN Security Council to Hold Meeting on Myanmar Tuesday - President

UNITED NATIONS, February 1 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council is moving to Tuesday a meeting on Myanmar that was originally scheduled for Thursday following the military coup there, Chairperson Barbara Woodward said on Monday.

"We are moving the meeting [on Myanmar] forward to tomorrow," Woodward, who chairs the Security Council through February on behalf of the United Kingdom, told a press conference.

"The most important thing is that the Security Council responds to the coup and uses its efforts to help Myanmar back on the path to democracy."

At the closed meeting on Tuesday, Security Council members will discuss an end to the Myanmar coup and military rule, a release of prisoners and the restoration of democracy, Woodward explained.

"We are discussing with Security Council members what measures most fruitfully might lead Myanmar back to democracy. ...The main thing we are looking to do now is to secure her [Suu

Kyi's] release along with that of her Cabinet and others who have been detained and put Myanmar back on the path to democracy," Woodward said.

Woodward also expressed concern about the plight of Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya minority following the coup.

"We remain deeply concerned by the humanitarian plight of the refugees. We very much hope it will be possible for them to return to Rakhine state but that is not a secure solution at the moment. The situation has got worse, not better," she said.

State Counselor Aung Suu Kyi along other top politicians were detained in the early hours of Monday, with Myanmar's military declaring a one-year state of emergency after weeks of escalating tensions over allegations of vote-rigging in the November election.

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US Will Review North Korea Policy to Determine How to Move Forward - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will review the United States' policy on North Korea with respect to denuclearization before deciding how to move forward on the issue, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday.

"The first thing we're going to do is to review the policy across the board, to look at what tools we have, including additional sanctions, especially additional coordination and cooperation with allies and partners, but also to look at diplomatic incentives, so once we do that we'll be able to tell you how we plan to move forward," Blinken said in an interview with MSNBC.

Blinken said North Korea's development of its arsenal has been a "growing problem," adding that the issue has become worse through previous US administrations.

In January, North Korea displayed a submarine-launched ballistic missile during a military parade that commemorated the 8th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea.

Pyongyang held a military parade in October on the 75th anniversary of the Workers' Party of Korea when it also showcased a new intercontinental ballistic missile.

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US Reviewing Relations With Saudi Arabia for Consistency With American Values - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is reviewing its partnership with Saudi Arabia to make sure that it is consistent with US interests and values, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday.

"Saudi Arabia has been an important partner for us in counterterrorism, in trying to advance regional stability and deal with regional aggression. But we also have to make sure that that partnership is being conducted in a way that is consistent with our interests and also with our values," Blinken said in an interview with MSNBC.

Blinken pointed out that President Joe Biden has requested a review of the United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia "to make sure it is doing just that."

"And that's exactly what is happening now," Blinken said.

The Secretary of States denounced the murder of Saudi national and Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi as an outrageous act against someone who was a resident of the United States.

"It was abhorrent and I think it shocked the conscious of the world," Blinken said.

Khashoggi went missing in 2018 after entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The Saudi government initially denied any knowledge of Khashoggi's whereabouts, but eventually admitted that he was killed and dismembered inside the consulate. The government sentenced eight suspects for their role in Khashoggi's death and has repeatedly denied allegations that members of the royal family were involved in the murder.

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#### White House Says Reviewing Whether Trump Will Have Access to Classified Briefings

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The White House is reviewing whether former President Donald Trump should have access to the US president's intelligence briefings amid concerns he may misuse it, Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"It's something obviously that's under review but there was not a conclusion last I asked them [National Security team] about it," Psaki said when asked whether the White House will continue to extend the privilege of intelligence briefings to Trump amid Democrats' concerns that he may misuse it to enrich himself.

Former US presidents have been granted access to classified intelligence briefings on major policy issues.

Democrats and some former intelligence officials have claimed Trump cannot be trusted with classified information because of his companies' outstanding debt, which reportedly stands at \$420 million.

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#### American Civil Liberties Union Elects First Black Leader - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The American Civil Liberties Union in a statement on Monday said it elected a Black leader for the first time in its more than century of existence. The ACLU is the most prominent civil rights group in the United States with a long history of involvement in the country's most decisive legal cases, such as the Scopes Monkey Trial (1925), the Roe v. Wade (1973) abortion ruling, and Brown v. Board of Education (1954)

segregation decision, to name a few. The ACLU also controversially defended the right of the US Nazi party to march through Jewish-majority Skokie, Illinois in 1978.

"The American Civil Liberties Union announced today that its national board elected Deborah Archer as its new president," the release said. "The election of Deborah Archer marks the first time a Black person will lead the ACLU's board of directors."

The ACLU said Archer had an established record as a civil rights lawyer, scholar, and teacher with extensive experience on racial justice and constitutional matters.

"The ACLU has proven itself as an invaluable voice in the fight for civil rights in the last four years of the Trump era, and we are better positioned than ever to face the work ahead. This organization has been part of every important battle for civil liberties during our first century... I could not be more excited to get to work," Archer said in the release

The ACLU filed 413 legal actions against the Trump administration, took over 100 legal actions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and filed more than 37 lawsuits to ensure access to the polls, the release said.

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**US Awards \$231.8Mln to Biotech Firm to Produce COVID-19 Home Test Kit - Statement**

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The US government has awarded \$231.8 million to the Australian biotechnology firm Ellume to scale up production of an over-the-counter COVID-19 home test kit, the Department of Defense said on Monday.

"On Feb. 1, 2021, the Department of Defense (DOD), in coordination with the Department of Health and Human Services, awarded \$231.8 million to Ellume USA LLC to onshore production capacity of the Ellume COVID-19 home test for the United States," the statement said.

Through the investment the company will be able to manufacture up to 19 million test kits per month by the end of 2021, Andy Slavitt, a senior advisor on US President Joe Biden's COVID-19 team, said speaking to reporters on Monday.

The test is 95 percent accurate and is administered via a nasal swab. The test results are reported in approximately 15 minutes to the person's smartphone app, Slavitt also said.

The development of the home test kit was done in conjunction with the National Institutes of Health (NIH)'s Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics (RADx), the statement said.

Ellume's COVID-19 home test kit is the first over-the-counter home diagnostic approved in the United States, the statement added.

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**Biden Says US May Re-Impose Sanctions on Myanmar Over Recent Actions**

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Monday the United States may re-impose sanctions on Myanmar in connection with the most recent coup there.

"The United States removed sanctions on Burma over the past decade based on progress toward democracy. The reversal of that progress will necessitate an immediate review of our sanction laws and authorities, followed by appropriate action," Biden said in a statement. Biden also said the United States will work with partners around the world to hold accountable the individuals responsible for overturning Myanmar's Democratic transition. The international community should collectively pressure Myanmar's military to immediately relinquish power, lift all telecommunications restrictions, release activists and officials that have been detained and refrain from violence against civilians, Biden said. The White House said the United States has already had intensive consultations with allies and partners on the situation in Myanmar. Earlier on Monday, media reported that the Myanmar military detained State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and some members of the country's ruling party. The military had vowed to take action against what they say was voter fraud in the November 8 election. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won the election.

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US Detects 471 Cases of COVID-19 Variants in Two-Thirds of Jurisdictions - CDC Chief

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The United States has detected 470 variant cases of COVID-19 in two-thirds of its jurisdictions, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Monday.

"Variants remain a great concern and we continue to detect them in the United States, with at least 33 jurisdictions reporting 471 variant cases, as of January 31," Walensky said.

The US confirmed 467 cases of the UK variant, three of the South African strain, and one case of the Brazilian variant.

The US' top infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci said that vaccination will be key in stopping virus mutation.

"Viruses cannot mutate if they don't replicate," the head of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases said. "If you stop the replication by vaccinating widely and not giving the virus an open playing field to continue to respond to the pressures you put on it, you will not get mutations."

Fauci has previously said that the UK strain will become more dominant in the United States as early as the end of March.

UK public health officials in December announced the emergence of the new coronavirus strain that is believed to be up to 70 percent more transmissible. The new strain was first discovered in southeast England in September and subsequently spread rapidly throughout the United Kingdom and continental Europe.

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#### UN Chief Urges Myanmar Military to Respect Will of People, Resort to Dialogue - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - UN-Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has called on the Myanmar military to respect the outcome of the recent elections and solve all the differences with the civilian political leadership through dialogue, United Nations spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Monday.

"Mr. Guterres urges military leadership to respect the will of the people of Myanmar and adhere to democratic norms with any differences to be resolved in peaceful dialogue," Dujarric said during a press conference.

Dujarric said despite the situation in Myanmar being chaotic, the United Nations knows the will of the people had been overturned in an undemocratic way and that needs to change.

"No one that I am aware of on this side has been able to reach the current authorities in Naypyitaw due to communications challenges," he added, noting the large United Nations presence in Myanmar.

Earlier on Monday, media reported that the military detained Myanmar State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint in a morning raid. The move came after the country's military vowed to take action against what it says was voter fraud in the November election. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won the election.

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#### US Holds 'Intensive Consultations' With Allies on Myanmar - White House

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The United States has had intensive consultations with its allies regarding the situation in Myanmar following the military coup in that country, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Monday.

"We have had intensive consultations at multiple levels with our allies and partners in the region and around the world," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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#### Blinken Says US Mulling Sanctions Against Russia Over Navalny

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering sanctions against Russia over the situation with opposition figure Alexei Navalny, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in an interview with MSNBC on Monday.

"We're reviewing that," Blinken said when asked if the United States should sanction Russian officials as punishment for what has happened to Navalny.

On January 23 and 31, protests took place in many Russian cities in support of Navalny, who was detained in Moscow last month upon his arrival from Germany, where he was treated for alleged poisoning. The Russian Federal Penitentiary Service had warned it would arrest Navalny for probation violations given that he was previously found guilty of committing two administrative offenses.

Blinken said the United States is disturbed by the arrest of Navalny and the crackdown on Russian protesters.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has called the organizers of the unauthorized protests provocateurs.

After the first rally, the Russian Foreign Ministry handed a protest note to the US Embassy in Moscow because of its support for the unauthorized rallies, saying that the actions of the diplomatic mission were seen as direct interference in Russia's domestic affairs.

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#### **Blinken Says US Should Accept Hong Kong Refugees**

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Monday that the United States should accept some of the refugees from Hong Kong who are fleeing China's alleged repressions.

"I believe we should. We have seen China act egregiously to undermine the very commitments it made during the handover of Hong Kong from Britain," Blinken said in an interview with MSNBC.

Last June, China adopted a law that adjusts security policies in Hong Kong to Beijing's perception of crime and punishment with respect to separatism, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign countries. Critics of the law in China's special administrative region and abroad have expressed concern the law may limit Hong Kong's exclusive rights and freedoms. "We see people who, again, are in Hong Kong standing up for their own rights, the rights they thought were guaranteed to them. And if they are being the victims of repression from China's authorities we should do something to get them haven," Blinken said.

China insists the law aims to punish illegal activities in the city without harming the fundamental freedoms of the local population.

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#### **Biden Says US May Reimpose Sanctions on Myanmar Over Recent Actions**

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Monday said the United States may reimpose sanctions on Myanmar in connection to the recent coup.

"The United States removed sanctions on Burma over the past decade based on progress toward democracy. The reversal of that progress will necessitate an immediate review of our sanction laws and authorities, followed by appropriate action," Biden said in a statement. Biden said the United States will work with partners around the world to hold accountable the individuals responsible for overturning Myanmar's Democratic transition.

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"We're reviewing that," Blinken said when asked if the United States should sanction Russian officials as punishment for what has happened to Navalny.

On January 23 and 31, many Russian cities were hit by protests in support of Navalny, who was detained in Moscow last month upon his arrival at Sheremetyevo International Airport. Prior to Navalny's return to Russia from Germany, where he was treated for his alleged poisoning, the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service warned it would arrest him for probation violations as he was previously found guilty of committing two administrative offenses.

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#### US Invests Over \$30Mln to Boost Rare Earths Processing Capacity - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The US government is investing more than \$30 million under the Defense Production Act (DPA) to boost domestic processing capabilities for light rare earth elements, the Department of Defense said on Monday.

"Lynas Rare Earths, the largest rare earth element mining and processing company outside of China, has been awarded a Defense Production Act Title III technology investment agreement to establish domestic processing capabilities for light rare earth elements (LREE)," the Defense Department said in a press release.

LREEs are critical to numerous defense and commercial applications, including petroleum refining, glass additives, and magnets used in electric vehicle drivetrain motors and precision-guided munitions, the release said.

"Upon completion of this project, if successful, Lynas will produce approximately 25 percent of the worlds' supply of rare earth element oxides. Through its wholly-owned subsidiary Lynas USA, Lynas will establish LREE separation capacity in Hondo, Texas," the release added.

Under the technology investment agreement, the Department of Defense is contributing \$30.4 million to the project. The Hondo, Texas facility will complement Lynas' existing Australian and

Malaysian operations and is expected to be co-located with the proposed Heavy Rare Earths separation facility, according to the release.

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US Republicans Ask Biden to Reduce \$1.9 Trillion COVID-19 Relief Plan to \$618Mln - Senator

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - Ten Republican senators will meet with President Joe Biden later Monday to try and convince him that his \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief plan needs to be slashed to \$618 million, Republican Senator Susan Collins said in a statement.

"In advance of today's meeting with President Biden, our group unveiled the details of our sixth COVID-19 relief proposal," Collins said via Twitter and attached the Republican proposal estimating that the Biden administration needs less than a third of the sum it sought.

Collins included a joint pledge by the ten Republican senators that they wished to work with Biden in good faith "to meet the health, economic and societal challenges of the COVID-19 crisis."

The senators pointed out they shared many of the Biden administration's priorities such as increasing funding for the production and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and providing economic relief for Americans, among others.

Last week, Biden said it could take a couple of weeks for the Democrat-dominated House of Representatives to finalize his COVID-19 relief plan, expressing hope that the matter would get adequate support from the Republicans in the Senate where the Democrats hold a majority of one.

If negotiations do not go well, Democrats will use the reconciliation process, Biden added.

Also on Monday, Republican Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said Biden's \$1.9 trillion relief plan "misses the mark." McConnell noted that the Senate just approved an additional \$900 billion in pandemic relief in December and any further action "should be smart and targeted, not just an imprecise deluge of borrowed money that would direct huge sums toward those who don't need it."

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Yellen, Japanese Deputy Prime Minister Discuss US-Japan Alliance, COVID-19 - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen discussed with Japanese Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Taro Aso bilateral cooperation and major global economic challenges, US Department of Treasury said in a statement on Monday.

"Secretary Yellen underscored the importance of the US-Japan alliance and conveyed her intention to deepen economic and financial cooperation with Japan to strengthen both economies," the statement said.

Yellen expressed the United States' readiness to cooperate closely with Japan to address key regional and global challenges such as the economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, the statement added.

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US 2021 Growth Seen at 4.6% After 2020 Contraction of 3.5% - Congressional Budget Office  
WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US economic growth is expected to rebound to 4.6 percent in 2021 from an estimated contraction of 3.5 percent in 2020 caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) said on Monday.

"Over the course of the coming year, vaccination is expected to greatly reduce the number of new cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. In its new economic forecast, which covers the period from 2021 to 2031, the Congressional Budget Office therefore projects that the economic expansion that began in mid-2020 will continue," the CBO said in a report that forecast the 4.6 percent growth for 2021 after last year's estimated contraction of 3.5 percent.

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UN Rights Chief Calls for Immediate Release of 45 People Detained in Myanmar Coup

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The Myanmar military should immediately release the 45 people detained during the coup in the country, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said in a statement on Monday.

Earlier on Monday, media reported that Myanmar's State Counselor, Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and some members of the country's ruling party were detained. The military vowed to take action against what they say was voter fraud in the November 8 election. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won the election.

"I am alarmed by reports suggesting that at least 45 people have been detained – including elected parliamentarians under confinement - and I call for their immediate release," Bachelet said. "There are also disturbing reports of journalists being harassed or attacked, and restrictions on the Internet and social media - which will restrict access to information and freedom of expression at this critical and frightening time for the people of Myanmar."

Bachelet expressed concern over the crackdown on protests and urged the nation's military to abide with international laws.

"I remind the military leadership that Myanmar is bound by international human rights law, including to respect the right to peaceful assembly, and to refrain from using unnecessary or excessive force," she said.

The UN human rights chief also called on the international community to support Myanmar's people and take steps to prevent the crumbling of recent democratic and rights gains made by Myanmar during its transition from military rule.

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#### US House Committee Probes COVID-19 Outbreaks at US Meatpacking Plants - Chairman

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - Congress has launched an investigation into widespread COVID-19 infections and deaths at meatpacking plants across the United States, the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis announced in a press release on Monday.

"Today, Representative James Clyburn, Chairman of the Select Subcommittee ... sent letters to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Tyson Foods, Smithfield Foods and JBS USA launching an investigation into coronavirus outbreaks at meatpacking plants nationwide, which have resulted in the deaths of more than 250 employees," the release said. Tyson, Smithfield, and JBS are three of the largest meatpacking companies in the United States and have each had multiple outbreaks. Yet despite these hundreds of outbreaks, the Trump administration issued just eight citations, with fines as low as \$11 per infected worker, the committee said.

"Public reports indicate that under the Trump Administration, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) failed to adequately carry out its responsibility for enforcing worker safety laws at meatpacking plants across the country, resulting in preventable infections and deaths," Clyburn wrote to the OSHA.

The Select Subcommittee's investigation follows reports that nearly 54,000 workers at 569 meatpacking plants in the United States have tested positive for the coronavirus, and at least 270 have died. More than two-thirds of employees at meatpacking plants are Black or Hispanic, and almost half of employees live in low-income families, the release noted.

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#### US Senate Minority Leader Urges Myanmar's Military to Restore Democracy

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell called on Monday for an immediate release of Myanmar's civilian political leadership and for restoring of democracy following a military coup in the country.

"I call on Burma's [Myanmar's] military to immediately release the civilian political leaders of the country and turn back from this abyss," McConnell said in a statement and threatened to impose cost on those who impede Myanmar's "journey toward democracy."

Earlier in the day, media reported that State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint were detained in an early morning military raid. It came after Myanmar's military vowed to take action against what it says was voter fraud in the November election. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won the election.

McConnell urged the Biden administration to take a strong stand "in condemning this authoritarian assault on democracy" and called on "all democracies around the world" to follow suit.

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**Biden Postpones Foreign Policy Speech Over Inclement Weather - White House**

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has postponed his planned speech on foreign policy matters due to the snowy weather in Washington, a White House official said on Monday.

"He looks forward to visiting later this week when the agency's staff and diplomats can more safely commute to attend," the official said, as cited by the White House pool report.

Biden during a scheduled visit to the State Department on Monday was expected to give remarks presenting his foreign policy plans, the first such speech since his inauguration.

NBC reported on Saturday that the speech would outline Biden's foreign policy vision, aimed at "restoring America's place in the world."

A senior administration official also told NBC that Biden would sign several executive actions related to "his efforts to demonstrate a new US approach on the world stage," including one to form a task force to reunite migrant families.

Last week, Biden held his first phone conversation of his presidency with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the talks, during which the two leaders agreeing to extend the New START treaty, were businesslike and frank. Peskov also said it was too early to speak of any potential reset of the US-Russian relations.

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**UN Rights Chief Calls for Immediate Release of 45 People Detained in Myanmar Coup**

WASHINGTON, February 1 (Sputnik) - The Myanmar military should immediately release the 45 people detained during the coup in the country, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said in a statement on Monday.

Earlier on Monday, media reported that Myanmar's State Counselor, Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and some members of the country's ruling party were detained. The military vowed to take action against what they say was voter fraud in the November 8 election. Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won the election.

"I am alarmed by reports suggesting that at least 45 people have been detained – including elected parliamentarians under confinement - and I call for their immediate release," Bachelet said. "There are also disturbing reports of journalists being harassed or attacked, and

restrictions on the Internet and social media - which will restrict access to information and freedom of expression at this critical and frightening time for the people of Myanmar."