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Biden Poised to Embrace US Space Force Goals, Expand NASA's Mission, Experts Claim by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Presumed US President-elect Joe Biden is likely to embrace the new US Space Force rather than seeking to eliminate it because the Democratic Party fundamentally believes defending US space supremacy from Russia and China is a necessary part of US policy. If elected, Biden's greater focus on fighting climate change could become a boom for NASA, too.

Biden has been declared victor in the November 3 US presidential election by much of the US media, and although US President Donald Trump [has not accepted the preliminary results and has issued lawsuits](#) challenging the vote count in several state, the presumed president-elect has already begun consolidating a transition team and elaborating on his plans if inaugurated on January 20, 2021.

Biden has indicated that he plans to immediately shred many of Trump's policies once he takes office, [many of them by executive order](#). However, he's said little about what has been one of Trump's biggest projects: the US Space Force (USSF).

Experts seem to agree: while Biden isn't likely to give the USSF [the adulation and attention to detail seen from Trump](#), he isn't going to discard it, either.

'The Mission and Threat Will Continue'

"If Space Force did not already exist, I think Joe Biden probably would not create it," David Burbach, associate professor of national security affairs at the US Naval War College, [told SpaceNews last week](#). "However I think it's pretty unlikely that Biden would seriously try to eliminate Space Force at this point."

[According to the Defense Space Strategy Summary](#), published in June, "China and Russia each have weaponized space as a means to reduce US and allied military effectiveness and challenge our freedom of operation in space." The document states the USSF's goal is to "establish, maintain and preserve" the US' "comprehensive military advantage in space." Moscow and Beijing have [rejected Washington's claims and accused the US](#) of being the ones militarizing space, [endangering what international cooperation already exists](#) in space.

[Sputnik has previously reported on how](#) the US military has been testing weapons in space for decades that it now derides Moscow and Beijing as aggressive for testing, such as anti-satellite missiles and inspector satellites.

Joshua Huminski, director of the Mike Rogers Center for Intelligence and Global Affairs' National Security Space Program, also told Space News: "I think the important thing to consider is that the intellectual foundation of the Space Force existed well before President Trump - the need for a separate culture, space as a warfighting domain and the threat from Russia and China on orbit."

"That foundation, those needs, and the mission and threat will continue on and perhaps accelerate into President Biden's administration, so you may see more constancy than immediate change," Huminski added.

"Whereas under the Trump administration, national security space, commercial space and civil space, were getting a lot of high-level attention - in some cases, maybe some micromanagement - now, [these entities] will largely be left to their own devices" under Biden, Todd Harrison, director of the Aerospace Security Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies [think tank in Washington, DC, told Military.com](#).

Harrison said the micromanaging seen under Trump will disappear, putting "more of the onus" on Chief of Space Operations Gen. John Raymond to figure out the Space Force's direction. However, there's also precedent for a dramatic shift in priorities. In 2005, then-US President George W. Bush began the Constellation program, intended to complete the International Space Station (ISS) and [return humans to the moon "no later than 2020,"](#) setting the stage for a future Mars mission - in other words, exactly what NASA is working on under Trump. However, after Barack Obama assumed the presidency in 2009 - and Biden the vice presidency - [Constellation got the axe, thanks to a rapidly expanding budget](#).

Biden Quiet on Space Force

Biden has so far been silent on the Space Force and offered limited commentary on space flight in general. A Sunday tweet about [SpaceX's historic launch of a manned Dragon spacecraft](#) carrying three NASA astronauts and one Japanese astronaut to the ISS celebrated the achievement, which will reduce US dependence on Russian rockets.

However, Michèle Flournoy, the former undersecretary of defense for policy who has become the rumored frontrunner for heading the Pentagon in a prospective Biden administration, has defended the necessity of a sixth space-focused branch of the military.

"Space is changing so dramatically based on what the Chinese are investing in, what the Russians are investing in ... that I think we had to take some steps to make this a true profession of arms," [Flournoy said at a September forum hosted by Defense News](#). "We need to focus on growing a professional cadre of space thinkers, concept developers, writers, technologists and get on with really understanding how we're going to operate and defend [US assets] in space."

NASA's Role Could Expand

One document in the Democratic Party platform [titled "Building a Stronger, Fairer Economy"](#) notes the party supports "NASA's work to return Americans to the moon and go beyond to Mars, taking the next step in exploring our solar system."

The document further notes Democrats support "strengthening NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Earth (NOAA) observation missions to better understand how climate change is impacting our home planet."

More than ever, the telltale signs of climate change and its causes [are being monitored by space assets](#), including satellites that watch polar ice cap size, methane and carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere and the size and scope of hurricanes, wildfires and other natural disasters, as well as oil spills and deforestation.

Retired Maj. Gen. Charles Bolden, who [ran NASA under the Obama-Biden administration, told Politico](#) last month that a Green New Deal - [which Biden has flip-flopped on explicitly supporting](#)

- would “rely heavily on NASA to be a part of getting that implemented using technology in orbit.”

That points to a continuation of the Artemis program, NASA’s plan to return humans to the moon by 2024, and an expansion of NASA’s responsibilities. The Trump administration has [pumped billions into the space agency’s budget](#), giving it a 12% increase in February 2020 - although [by September, NASA was already asking](#) for even more support for Artemis.

Bolden also noted Biden is “a big fan of Mars,” meaning [that Trump administration obsession might stick around](#) as well.

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Sudanese Rebel Holdout Reportedly Preparing to Join Peace Talks in Juba

Many of the rebel groups that refused to lay down arms after the 2019 overthrow of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir have recently signed peace agreements with the new government, but others with more hardline positions have remained ambivalent about giving up the fight. [According to a Monday report by Sudan’s Radio Dabanga](#), Sudan Liberation Movement-Abdul Wahid (SLM-AW) leader Abdelwahid El Nur is preparing to join the peace talks with Khartoum other rebel groups entered earlier this year.

South Sudanese chief negotiator Tut Gatluak reportedly told Sudan TV in a recent interview that Nur had accepted an invitation from South Sudanese President Salva Kiir to join the talks, and flown from Paris to Kampala, Uganda, with the intention of arriving in Juba later this week.

Several other rebel leaders from the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), a loose alliance between rebel groups in Darfur and the Blue Nile-based Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), penned a peace deal with Khartoum in October that Nur rejected at the time.

[The BBC called him “a serial naysayer.”](#) noting the SLM-AW’s position that it [would not negotiate until peace was established in Darfur](#) and those responsible for the violence, which has included genocide, are handed over to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and their militias disbanded.

Abdelwahid Muhamed El Nur of the main rebel Sudan Liberation Army in front together with other members walk out of the meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, Friday, May 5 2006.

[According to the Associated Press](#), the October deal provides self-rule for the provinces of Blue Nile, South Kordofan and West Kordofan, where much of the fighting over the last 17 years has taken place, and integrates the SRF militias into the Sudanese military.

As the SRF leaders arrived in Khartoum on Sunday, Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok hailed the “true launching” of the peace process.

“Today, we launch the first steps to end the suffering of displaced people and address their issues,” [Hamdok said, according to AP.](#)

Another major rebel holdout, Abdel-Aziz al-Hilu of the SPLM-N, Sudan’s largest single rebel group, has also entered peace talks. [The Sudan Tribune reported earlier this month](#) that the

secular SLM/A had rejected proposals from the government in Khartoum they felt did not adequately provide for separation of religion and the Sudanese state.

Peace Deal Includes Trial for Ousted Bashir

During the decades of rule by Bashir, the various rebel groups found common cause fighting against his government, and after 2003, defending sedentary towns in western Sudan from the Janjaweed militias deputized by Bashir as a counterinsurgency force. While South Sudan, under the control of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, became independent following a 2011 peace deal, other groups in the border regions fought on.

[According to the United Nations](#), more than 300,000 people are estimated to have been killed and 2.7 million displaced by the wars in Darfur.

When Bashir was overthrown [amid months of sustained mass resistance in April 2019](#), the SRF resisted joining the new government, objecting to the power-sharing agreement with the military - concerns that have since evaporated [with the transition to civilian rule](#).

In late October, ICC chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda told reporters she would be pursuing charges of war crimes and genocide against Bashir and his surrogates "without further delay," [according to Al Jazeera](#).

While the peace deal with the SRF included provisions for setting up a special court to try Bashir, who presently sits in a Sudanese prison, Hamdok has opposed simply handing him over. [He told Financial Times in an October interview](#) he might consider trying Bashir in a "hybrid court," but that he preferred reforming the Sudanese judiciary so that they could hold the trial themselves.

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Photos: Colombian Navy Finds Rare Electric Mini-Submarine During Drug Raid
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The find, made during a November 5 drug interdiction raid, contradicts the trend of drug smugglers using smaller submersibles in recent years. However, another similar vehicle was discovered in the area several years ago.

Earlier this month, officials from the Colombian Navy and US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) raided a boatyard in the Cucurupí River basin on Colombia's western coast and found a rare high-capacity submarine for smuggling drugs.

[According to a news release by the Colombian Navy](#), the vessel had a cargo capacity of 6 tons. The raid was just one of several across the country resulting in the arrests of 11 accused drug smugglers.

Compared to the typical seagoing smuggling vessels found by police, [this one had nearly four times the carrying capacity](#) and had batteries enabling it to truly submerge instead of simply riding very low on the water. [According to USNI News, its batteries would have](#) enabled the submarine to run underwater for as long as 12 hours, but it still would have been towed for most of the sea journey from Colombia to the United States.

While much larger than the typical drug-smuggling semi-submersible, which can carry 1.6 tons of cargo on average, this sub was not the largest ever found, either. [In August, Colombian authorities reported they had](#) discovered a mega-submersible capable of carrying 8 tons of cargo.

[Another electric submarine was found in the same river](#) in 2017 that could have carried four people and had a cargo capacity of 4 tons.

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COVID-19 Pandemic May 'Effectively' End in 2021 if Vaccines Live Up to Early Data - Former FDA Head

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Pharmaceutical company Moderna revealed Monday that their vaccine candidate has a near 95% efficacy in curbing the spread of COVID-19. The revelation is based on interim data analysis of their 30,000-strong phase three trial.

With Moderna becoming the latest firm to reveal promising COVID-19 vaccine results, Scott Gottlieb, the former commissioner of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), stated Monday that the pandemic may "effectively" come to an end by next year.

Gottlieb, in an interview with CNBC morning show "Squawk Box," said that if vaccine candidates from firms Pfizer and Moderna prove to be as effective as early data suggests, "[we could effectively end this pandemic in 2021 with our technology.](#)"

"If these full data sets hold, when the full data comes out, we may have two highly effective vaccines against COVID," Gottlieb, who now serves on Pfizer's board, stressed. He added that "sufficient" doses of the vaccines would have to be made available to the public for the pandemic to end.

Interim data analysis from Moderna revealed earlier Monday that the company determined that its vaccine candidate appeared to be 94.5% effective in preventing the spread of COVID-19, a feat that company CEO Stephane Bancel hailed as a "[game changer.](#)"

Moderna [explained in a news release](#) that its results were based on 95 confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection within its Phase 3 trial that involves some 30,000 participants. Of the cases, 90 COVID-19-positive individuals had been assigned to the placebo group, whereas the five others received the company's two-dose vaccine.

The company's vaccine results come on the heels of news from Pfizer that its own vaccine candidate [was more than 90% effective](#). Similar to Moderna, Pfizer's two-dose vaccine is an [mRNA-based candidate](#) that uses genetic material to trigger an immune response to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

Although early data doesn't specifically show that either company's vaccine is preventing individuals from ever becoming infected with the respiratory disease, Gottlieb did state that both candidates would be effective in combating the virus' spread.

"You have to presume, at these levels of efficacy that we're seeing from these vaccines, the vaccines aren't just reducing signs and symptoms of COVID disease, but they're actually

probably preventing some people from getting infected or maybe reducing the likelihood of people [shedding] the virus,” Gottlieb later noted.

“Hopefully, the data will show that. You have to believe that it will based on these levels of efficacy, but obviously we need to see the full datasets.”

Before either candidate is cleared for public distribution, both vaccines need to be greenlighted by the FDA for emergency use. However, US President Donald Trump indicated during a Friday update on Operation Warp Speed that Pfizer’s vaccine is [anticipated to be ready for mass distribution](#) by April 2021.

At present, over 54 million COVID-19 cases have been confirmed globally, with the death toll surpassing 1.3 million, according to [data from Johns Hopkins University](#). The US alone accounts for over 11 million documented infections.

Although several candidates are still in trial phases, the first registered COVID-19 vaccine was Russia’s Sputnik V, which has been found to be [92% effective against the virus](#), according to recent interim analysis. Most recently, the World Health Organization stated that Sputnik V would be added to its list of [recommended vaccines](#) should it meet the agency’s criteria.

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‘He Came Back From the Dead’: US Hiker Survives Heart Stopping for 45 Minutes

A 45-year-old hiker who was rescued after getting lost overnight in freezing conditions in a US national park managed to survive, despite his heart stopping for 45 minutes.

According to the BBC, Michael Knapinski got lost in Mount Rainier National Park in Washington state on November 7 due to whiteout conditions.

One day later, after a friend Knapinski had started the hike with before the two separated reported him missing, helicopter searchers with the National Park Service eventually located Knapinski a mile upstream from the Glacier Bridge.

A US Navy helicopter airlifted him to the Harborview Medical Center in Seattle. While he had a pulse upon reaching the hospital, Knapinski’s heart stopped soon after.

“He died while he was in the ER [emergency room], which gave us the unique opportunity to try and save his life by basically bypassing his heart and lungs, which is the most advanced form of artificial life support that we have in the world,” Dr. Jenelle Badulak, one of the doctors who helped treat Knapinski, told the Seattle Times.

Although he remained without a heartbeat for 45 minutes, the medical team continued to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) on Knapinski and hooked him up to an extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) machine, which provided his body with oxygen, bypassing his heart and lungs.

Using the machine, Knapinski’s blood was pumped outside his body to an artificial lung, where it was oxygenated and then sent back into the tissues of his body.

After 45 minutes of performing CPR and using the ECMO machine, Knapinski’s heart restarted.

“He came back from the dead ... Maybe not medically quite correct, but his heart wasn’t beating for more than 45 minutes,” Dr. Saman Arbabi, the medical director of Harborview’s surgical intensive-care unit, told the Seattle Times. “It’s amazing.”

Two days later, Knapinski opened his eyes.

“He was crying, and they were crying, and I’m fairly sure I cried a little bit,” Whitney Holen, a trauma nurse who helped treat Knapinski, told the Seattle Times. “It was just really special to see someone that we had worked so hard on from start to finish to then wake up that dramatically and that impressively.”

“It reminded me of this is why we do this. This is why we are doing the long hours, this is why we’re away from our families, this is why we’re here,” she added.

Knapinski, who is still recovering, revealed that he started hiking after overcoming drug addiction.

“I used to be a very unhealthy, sickly man, and I got into hiking, and it changed my lifestyle,” he said, according to the BBC.

“They did one heck of a job at keeping me alive,” he said of the hospital staff.

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COVID-19 May Have Reached Italy Earlier Than Previously Thought, Study Finds

To date, more than 1.2 million cases of the novel coronavirus have been reported in Italy, with over 45,000 deaths as a result. As the outbreak intensifies, the number of COVID-19 patients in the country's hospitals is on pace to surpass the number of hospitalized patients during the country's initial outbreak.

In addition, recent analyses by Italian researchers indicate that COVID-19 was present in Italy as early as September 2019, suggesting that the coronavirus may have spread outside of China earlier than previously thought.

According to [Reuters](#), Italy’s first COVID-19 case was detected on February 21 in a small town in the northern region of Lombardy.

However, a study conducted by the National Cancer Institute of Milan found that 11.6% of 959 volunteers enrolled in a lung cancer screening trial between September 2019 and March 2020 had developed antibodies to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, before February. Another test conducted at the University of Siena found that four people had tested positive for COVID-19 antibodies in the first week of October, which means the patients most likely became infected in September.

“This is the main finding: people with no symptoms not only were positive after the serological tests but also had antibodies able to kill the virus,” Giovanni Apolone, a co-author of the study, told Reuters.

“It means that the new coronavirus can circulate among the population for a long time and with a low rate of lethality, not because it is disappearing, only to surge again,” he said.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that it was unaware of COVID-19 before the first outbreak was reported in China’s Wuhan late last year. However, the WHO has said that

“the possibility that the virus may have silently circulated elsewhere cannot be ruled out,” Reuters reported.

The WHO on Monday also said that it is reviewing the results from the Italian research and plans to contact the study authors to “discuss and arrange for further analyses of available samples and verification of the neutralization results.”

Italian researchers in March also told Reuters that there was a higher-than-usual number of cases of pneumonia and what appeared to be the flu in Lombardy in the last quarter of 2019, another potential indication that the novel coronavirus spread in the country earlier than previously thought.

The [latest data by Worldometer](#) shows that worldwide, there have been more than 55 million cases of the respiratory illness and more than 1.3 million related deaths.

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Trump Administration Reportedly Readying Proposal to Lower Medicare Drug Prices

US President Donald Trump has been an active proponent against high drug prices and has made several attempts to lower Medicare drug costs during his presidency, citing the fact that the US has some of the highest drug prices in the world.

The Trump administration is now preparing to release a major proposal aimed at lowering Medicare drug prices to those who receive prescription drugs through the program, according to a Monday report.

According to [The Hill](#), which cited sources familiar with the matter, the proposal would lower Medicare drug prices so that they match prices in other wealthy countries. The Medicare program provides health insurance for Americans over the age of 65, as well as some younger Americans with certain health conditions.

The latest update comes after the Trump administration in September [released an executive order](#) calling for the lowering of prescription drug prices, noting that “Americans pay more per capita for prescription drugs than residents of any other developed country in the world.”

The sources who spoke with The Hill said that the administration is taking steps this week to implement the proposal, which will most likely come in the form of an interim final rule, shortening the time needed for it to be approved.

However, many of the supposed proposal’s details are unclear, such as whether the rule will apply to drugs covered by Medicare Part B, Medicare Part D or both. [Medicare Part B](#) covers medically necessary and preventive services, while [Part D provides prescription drug coverage](#).

When asked about the proposal, a spokesperson for the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) said that “we don’t have any announcements at this time,” The Hill reported. In addition, a White House spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment.

Trump’s actions could be met by outcry from drug companies and may also be opposed by members of his own Republican Party, many of whom espouse belief in free-market principles and are against policies like price controls, [the Hill reported](#).

Trump has long condemned high drug prices, and he has previously attempted during his presidency to lower them.

In July, Trump signed four executive orders on drug pricing, directing the HHS to take steps so that Americans could pay the lowest prices possible for their drugs.

"President Trump has already done more than any other president to lower drug costs," HHS Secretary Alex Azar said at the time, referring to the four executive orders.

"No president has ever taken action on drug prices as bold as any one of today's individual actions. Today's executive orders will deliver billions of dollars in discounts directly to patients at the pharmacy counter, safe low-cost imported drugs for Americans, the best deals for America on highly expensive drugs and direct discounts passed on to patients on important drugs from community health centers. The president's new efforts to cut drug costs are about making it affordable for American patients to be in control of their own health, their own health care choices, and the care they decide on with their own doctor," he added.

However, the [Center for American Progress](#) think tank claims that Trump's executive orders "would do little to meaningfully lower the prices of prescription drugs" and would instead increase senior citizens' health insurance premiums, as the orders revive the administration's efforts to eliminate rebates paid by drug companies to pharmacy benefit managers in Medicare transactions.

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US Security and Exchange Commission Chairman to Leave Post by End of 2020 - Statement

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) Chairman Jay Clayton will conclude his tenure as head of the US stock market regulator by the end of 2020, the SEC said in a statement Monday.

"Jay Clayton, Chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, confirmed today that after serving for more than three and a half years, he will conclude his tenure at the end of this year," the statement said.

The SEC said Clayton sent a farewell message in which he emphasized that he was leaving with the comfort that the SEC was well-positioned for prolonged success.

Sworn in on May 4, 2017, Clayton will leave the SEC as one of its longest serving Chairs, the SEC noted.

"During Chairman Clayton's tenure the Commission obtained orders for over \$14 billion in monetary remedies, including a record \$4.68 billion in fiscal year 2020, and returned approximately \$3.5 billion to harmed investors," the statement said. "The Commission conducted over 10,000 exams, including a record for the number of investment adviser exams in fiscal year 2018."

The SEC also said that under Clayton's stewardship, it paid approximately \$565 million to whistleblowers, including the largest single award of \$114 million in its history.

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Hurricane Iota Strengthens to Category 5 'Catastrophic Force' - US Weather Agency

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - Hurricane Iota has grown to Category 5 and is predicted to hit Nicaragua and Honduras in Central America on Monday afternoon, the US National Hurricane Center (NHC) said in a warning on Monday.

Iota will make landfall on Nicaragua and Honduras with "catastrophic wind, life-threatening storm surge and torrential rainfall," the NHC warned.

The hurricane may hit areas already suffering from the impact of Hurricane Eta at the beginning of this month, the center warned.

US aircraft flew into the hurricane and measured its top wind speeds at 160 miles per hour (260 kilometers per hour). It was heading west towards landfall in Nicaragua later in the day at a speed of nine miles per hour (15 kilometers per hour), the NHC said.

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Pompeo, French Counterpart Discuss Importance of Libyan Political Process - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian during a meeting in Paris discussed the importance of the UN-led political reconciliation process in Libya, State Department spokesperson Cale Brown said on Monday.

"The Secretary and the Foreign Minister stressed the significance of political reconciliation in Libya under a UN-led political process," Brown said in a statement.

The two diplomats, Brown added, also discussed security in the Sahel, NATO unity, countering China, and Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon.

Pompeo is currently on a trip to seven countries, including France, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, to discuss various issues including promoting peace in the Middle East. Pompeo will also visit Georgia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates during his trip which ends on November 23.

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US Issues Call for Nominations on Oil, Gas Lease Sale in Arctic Refuge - Federal Register

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - The Bureau of Land Management has issued a formal call for nominations and comments on lease tracts for the upcoming oil and gas lease sale in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the US Department of the Interior said in a document released by the Federal Register on Monday.

"The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Alaska State Office is issuing a call for nominations and comments on the lease tracts considered for the upcoming Coastal Plain (CP) Oil and Gas Lease Sale," the document said.

The publication of a call for nominations and comments is a key step the Trump administration has planned to take to complete the lease sale in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in the state of Alaska.

"BLM considers nominations of specific tracts to be proprietary and therefore BLM will not release information that identifies any particular nomination or any particular submitting party, so as not to compromise the competitive position of any participants in the process of indicating interest," the document said.

Drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge was banned under previous administrations, but Republicans removed the ban by passing special legislation in 2017. The Democrats generally oppose oil and gas exploration in the region.

Release of the call for nominations opens a 60-day period before any sales could start.

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O'Brien Says Now 'Things Look' Like Biden Will Be Declared US President

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien said on Monday that at present it looks like Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden will be declared to be the winner of the 2020 presidential election and promised to ensure a professional transition for the new administration if that happens.

"If the Biden-Harris ticket is determined to be the winner, obviously things look that way now, I will have a very professional transition in the National Security Council. No question about that," O'Brien said speaking at the Global Security Forum.

Major US media networks have projected Biden to be the winner of the 2020 presidential election. However, President Donald Trump has disputed the election results, claiming fraud and improprieties, and seeking redress via recounts and lawsuits.

Many of the US states in which Trump has filed lawsuits have rejected the allegations of election irregularities. Biden's campaign has dismissed Trump's claims as "noise" and already announced the launch of transition of power.

O'Brien said Biden would bring to national security positions "very professional folks," many of whom "have been here before and spent a lot of time in the White House with prior administrations."

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US Charges Ex-Harvard Fencing Coach in \$1.5Mln Admissions Bribery Scheme - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - US authorities arrested a former Harvard College fencing coach and a businessman from the state of Maryland for their role in a school admissions bribery scheme, the Justice Department said on Monday.

"The former fencing coach at Harvard College and a Maryland businessman were arrested today and charged with conspiring to secure the admission of the businessman's two sons to Harvard in exchange for bribes totaling more than \$1.5 million," the release said.

Peter Brand, 67, of Cambridge, Massachusetts and Jie Zhao, 61, of Potomac, Maryland were charged by criminal complaint with conspiracy to commit federal programs bribery, the release said, by recruiting Zhao's sons to join the men's fencing team.

"The actions of both Brand and Zhao created an unfair playing field," US Acting Special Agent in Charge of the Internal Revenue Service said in the release.

According to the charging documents, in 2012-2014 Zhao paid \$1.5 million to Brand. He allegedly paid for Brand's car, made college tuition for his son and paid the mortgage on his home.

"The complaint alleges that Brand did not disclose the payments to Harvard when recruiting Zhao's sons," the statement said.

Both defendants may face up to five years in prison and a significant fine, it added. They will appear in federal courts in Massachusetts and in Maryland later in the day.

Harvard College, the undergraduate school for the university of the same name, is the one of the oldest learning institutions in the United States and among the most prestigious worldwide.

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Trump Administration Rescued Over 56 Americans From Captivity Abroad - O'Brien

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration has rescued and brought back home more than 56 Americans who were held in captivity overseas, US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien said on Monday.

"Since we get in the administration we have rescued over 56 hostages and detainees who were in 24 countries and returned them home to their loved ones," O'Brien said in address at the Global Security Forum.

O'Brien praised President Donald Trump for making the issue of US citizens held abroad - regardless of whether taken by terrorist organizations or states like Iran, Syria and Russia - a top priority of his administration.

The National Security Advisor noted that when he first started with Trump in a prior position, the US president referred to the captive Americans as hostages..

"He does not care why they were there," O'Brien said. "He doesn't care about their background, their political affiliation or religion. If they are Americans taken overseas, he wants them home. I think he is personally offended that either a government or a terrorist organization would take an American hostage."

Prior to being promoted to head the US National Security Council, O'Brien served as the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs with the Trump administration.

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US Republican Congressman Walberg Tests Positive for COVID-19, Says Symptoms Mild

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - Republican congressman Tim Walberg on Monday said he tested positive for COVID-19 but his symptoms are mild.

"I received news yesterday that I tested positive for COVID-19," Walberg, who represents the state of Michigan, said. "My symptoms are mild, and I remain in good spirits."

Walberg said he is self-isolating and reaching out to individuals he recently had contact with. He said he will discharge his responsibilities from home until fully recovered.

The lawmaker said he had not attended any public events in more than a week.

The virus has infected more than 20 lawmakers, USA Today reported last week. In all, nearly 80 US congressional representatives and senators have been quarantined, tested positive for COVID-19, or came in contact with someone with the disease, according to govtrack.us.

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New Mexico Re-Imposes 'Most Heightened' COVID-19 Restrictions - Governor

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - The US state of New Mexico has re-imposed the strictest public health restrictions in response to the novel coronavirus outbreak, including for residents to shelter in place, Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham said in a statement on Monday. "Beginning Monday, for two weeks, New Mexico will re-enact the most heightened level of statewide public health restrictions," Grisham said.

The governor said she has instructed New Mexico residents to shelter in place with the exception of going out only on "essential" trips and avoid contacts outside their immediate household.

Grisham said those businesses that have been deemed by the authorities to be essential may operate at limited occupancy, while other entities must fully stop in-person activities.

Restaurants and bars are allowed to provide curbside services and delivery, but are prohibited to provide inside dining, she also said.

"We face a life-or-death situation and we cannot fail to act," Grisham added.

The New Mexico authorities reported more than 1,000 people who have tested positive for the novel coronavirus in the past 24 hours, according to the statement.

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US Hate Crimes Rate Reached Decade High in 2019 - FBI

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - Law enforcement agencies reported a total of 7,314 hate crimes in the United States in 2019, the highest figure in a decade, according to a yearly report data released by the FBI on Monday.

"Law enforcement agencies submitted incident reports involving 7,314 criminal incidents and 8,559 related offenses as being motivated by bias toward race, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender and gender identity," the FBI said in the yearly report. The FBI said this is the largest number of hate crimes since 2008 when 7,783 such cases were reported. In 2017, 7,175 hate crime incidents were reported and 7,120 in 2018.

Last year, 5,512 hate incidents were classified as crimes against persons, 2,811 as crimes against property and 236 as crimes against society, the FBI also said.

In 4.4 percent of the cases, the hate crimes took place in churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship.

Of the 6,406 known offenders, 52.5 percent were white and 23.9 percent were African American.

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Philadelphia Imposes New 'Safer at Home' COVID-19 Restrictions - Health Commissioner

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - The city of Philadelphia is imposing sweeping restrictions to public activity, including moving high school and college instruction online and curbing indoor dining at restaurants, to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus, Health Commissioner Tom Farley said on Monday.

"We may be tired of COVID, but COVID's not tired of us," Farley as the city authorities listed new "Safer at Home" restrictions, including extending the shutdown of theaters and other public performance spaces as well as bowling alleys, arcades, game venues, museums, libraries, casinos and gyms.

Outdoor gatherings and events in Philadelphia will be limited to 10 people per 1,000 square feet for venues with an undefined maximum capacity and not exceeding 2,000 people in any outdoor space.

All individuals at outdoor gatherings must wear masks at all times, and - to reinforce mask use - neither food nor beverages may be served.

According to Johns Hopkins University, more than 11 million Americans have contracted the novel coronavirus since February with more than 246,000 virus-related fatalities.

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Pentagon Expects Trump to Order Afghan, Iraq Troops Halved by January 15 - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - The United States Department of Defense anticipates that President Donald Trump will issue an order as early as this week to cut the number of troops in Afghanistan and Iraq in half by mid-January, CNN reported, citing two US officials. The Pentagon has already issued a "warning order" notice to commanders to start planning the reduction of forces in Afghanistan to 2,500 troops and 2,500 in Iraq by January 15, the report said.

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Earlier this month, shortly before being "terminated" by Trump via Twitter in the wake of the election, then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper sent a classified memo to the White House warning against a rapid withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, The Washington Post reported last week.

Trump tweeted in October that all US troops should be home by Christmas, only to be disavowed by US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien who said that thousands of troops were "on path" to remain there into early next year.

Esper raised concerns about zeroing out US military presence in the country amid peace talks with the Taliban insurgency, according to senior US officials, the report said. He drew Trump's attention to a rise in violence by the Taliban and a possible danger to the remaining troops and allies.

Trump has been in a hurry to deliver on his pledge to end the longest war in US history. After the US reached a deal with the Taliban in February the number of troops was drawn down to

8,600 in July, with another 4,000 troops expected to leave in fall. By early next year the contingent may be reduced to 2,500 servicemen.
Trump replaced Esper with Director of the National Counterterrorism Center Christopher Miller.

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Trump Must Pay Wisconsin \$7.9Mln by Wednesday for Recount - Elections Commission

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump must pay Wisconsin \$7.9 million by Wednesday if he wants a recount of the ballots cast in the state where he trails challenger Joe Biden by more than 20,000 votes, the Wisconsin Elections Commission said on Monday.

"These estimates are significantly higher than the actual costs of the 2016 recount, but they take into account factors not present four years ago, including the need for larger spaces to permit public observation and social distancing, security for those spaces, the higher number of absentee ballots, a compressed timeframe over a holiday, and renting high-speed ballot scanning equipment," the commission said in a statement. "November 18 by 5:00 p.m. (is) the deadline for the aggrieved presidential candidate to file for a recount and submit payment."

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) -

MOLDOVA ELECTION

* Maia Sandu, who appears to have won the Moldovan presidential election, pledged on Monday to maintain balanced foreign policy with a pragmatic dialogue both with Russia and the United States.

* Sandu said she wanted to meet with the parliamentary factions to address key issues.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated Maia Sandu on winning the Moldovan presidential runoff and expressed hope that her effort would contribute to developing constructive bilateral relations.

* The breaches that were registered during the second tour of Moldovan presidential election were not systemic and could not have impacted the results, Commonwealth of Independent States observer mission head Viktor Guminsky said.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH CEASEFIRE

* Another 482 refugees arrived in Stepanakert, so that the number of residents who had previously left their homes and then returned exceeded 1,200, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Monday.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, held a telephone conversation on the developments in Nagorno-Karabakh and confirmed their readiness to coordinate effort of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs, the Kremlin said.

* Since November 14, 725 people have returned to their homes in Nagorno-Karabakh after being forced to leave because of the ongoing clashes, the Russian Defense Ministry's spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said.

INSTABILITY IN ARMENIA

* Opposition party Prosperous Armenia said on Monday that Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan had invited parliament factions to meet, but they would agree only to discuss his resignation.

* Armenian President Armen Sarkissian announced the inevitability of early parliamentary elections in the country, but noted that a national unity government should rule the country until then.

OIL MARKETS DEVELOPMENTS

* Russian oil producers understand the complexity of the situation on the oil market and are ready not to increase production as part of the OPEC+ deal, which implies weakening the alliance's restrictions by almost 2 million barrels per day from the beginning of 2021, industry sources told Sputnik.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

* Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said he had reached an agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin on building a plant in Kazakhstan where the Russian coronavirus vaccine would be produced.

* Indian biotechnology company Bharat Biotech announced on Monday the start of Phase III trials of the COVAXIN coronavirus vaccine.

* The United Kingdom government said that it is in advanced discussions to get access to the coronavirus vaccine candidate being developed by Moderna.

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Biden Calls on US Congress to Quickly Pass New COVID-19 Relief Package

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - Projected US President-elect Joe Biden called on Congress to pass a new COVID-19 relief package as soon as possible.

"We can deliver immediate relief and it need be done quickly," Biden told reporters in Wilmington, Delaware, after conducting a call with CEOs of various US businesses. Biden expressed readiness to work with people of throughout the political spectrum in order to reach the goal of approving the COVID-19 relief package.

"We can bring Democrats and Republicans together, work with business and labor to deliver those necessary resources," Biden said.

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Biden Warns More People May Die if Trump Does Not Coordinate COVID-19 Efforts

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - Projected US President-elect Joe Biden urged President Donald Trump to start coordinating plans for nationwide coronavirus vaccination and warned that more people may die unless Trump stops obstructing the transition of power process.

"More people may die if we don't coordinate," Biden told reporters during a press conference on Monday.

US media networks have projected Biden to be the winner of the 2020 election. However, Trump says he won but victory was snatched from him by a massive election fraud and improprieties. Trump has been seeking remedy by initiating recounts and filing lawsuits in court. Some states have said they have not seen evidence of systemic fraud.

Biden said the development of a coronavirus vaccine is important, but is of little use until one is vaccinated.

"So how do we get the vaccine, how do we get over 300 million Americans vaccinated, what's the game plan? If we have to wait until January 20 to start that planning it puts us behind over a month and a half. It's important that it be done in coordination now. Now or as rapidly as we can get that done," Biden said.

Trump has said that as part of his Operation Warp Speed, he has made all necessary preparations for the US military to start distributing millions of vaccine doses across the United States as soon as the vaccine is ready.

However, Biden said that is a huge undertaking to get it done.

"If we have to wait until January 20 to start that planning, it puts us behind over a month and a half. It's important that it be done in coordination now - or as rapidly as we can get that done," Biden said.

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Over 1Mln Children in US Tested Positive for Coronavirus - Academy of Pediatrics

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - More than 1 million of children in the United States have tested positive for the novel coronavirus since the beginning of the pandemic, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) said in a statement.

"As of Nov. 12, a total of 1,039,464 children have tested positive for COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic," the AAP said on Monday. "In the one-week period ending Nov. 12th, there were 111,946 new cases in children, which is substantially larger than any previous week in the pandemic."

AAP President Sally Goza said they have not seen a virus flash through the communities in this way since before the vaccines for measles and polio were available.

Goza said the AAP is calling on the US government to immediately implement a new national strategy to reduce the spread of the virus and address other related issues.

In addition, Goza cited a national survey noting that 14 percent of parents reported worsening behavioral health of their children.

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Brazil to Do Business as Usual With US Once Biden Victory Made Clear - Vice President

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - The business between Brazil and the United States will be done as usual once it is clear that Joe Biden has won the presidential election, Vice President Hamilton Mourao said at a Council of Foreign Relations virtual event.

"Once it's very clear that Mr. Biden is the winner, we are going to do... business as usual between our countries," Mourao said Monday. "I see that he is waiting for some kind of official declaration... whether Mr. [President Donald] Trump accepts that he was defeated or December 14 when people join together to vote, the final votes of representatives from every American state."

Brazil, along with China, Mexico and Russia, is among the nations that have so far not congratulated Biden on his projected victory in the US presidential race despite every major US media outlet projecting him as the winner.

Trump, who has yet to concede, has filed several legal challenges, citing alleged voter fraud.

However, a coalition of US federal and state agencies in a joint statement disputed Trump's claims and said the 2020 election was the most secure in the country's history.

Mourao said he could not speak for Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's regarding his position on the issue.

Every major US media networks have projected Biden to be the winner of the 2020 presidential election. Many of the US states in which Trump has filed lawsuits have rejected the allegations of election irregularities. Biden's campaign has dismissed Trump's claims as "noise" and already announced the launch of transition of power.

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COVID-19 Pandemic Cut Nuclear Propulsion Fleet Staff by 80% - Admiral

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - The COVID-19 pandemic reduced US nuclear submarine staff levels by 80 percent, Director of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Admiral Frank Caldwell said at a symposium.

"COVID 19 reduced US submarine planning command and engineering to 20-30 percent of manpower at one point," Caldwell said on Monday.

The Navy was able to reduce or eliminate delays on nuclear propulsion construction and development programs by using such expedients as staggering shifts and having staffers telecommute, Caldwell said.

Later in the symposium, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) for Operations, Plans & Strategy Vice Admiral Philip Sawyer said that he believed COVID-19 could not be completely eliminated although it would be greatly reduced in frequency and risk. The Navy would have to learn to live with it and manage it as it had done with the flu, he added.

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US, France Recognize Russia's Role in Karabakh Ceasefire - State Dept. Official

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - The United States and France recognize Russia's contribution to achieving a ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh, but seek clarity on the parameters of the deal, including Turkey's role in it, a senior State Department official told reporters.

"We are... recognizing the actions that Russia took which has led to a ceasefire that's actually held now for about a week, but also acknowledging that there were still a lot of questions that needed clarity from the Russians as to the parameters of that agreement, and that included the role of the Turks," the diplomat said Monday.

He was briefing a traveling pool after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Paris and held there on Monday talks with his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian.

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Pompeo Discusses Iran, China With French President - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo discussed with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris Iran's "destabilizing behavior," efforts to counter China and the importance of NATO unity, State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Cale Brown said in a statement.

"Secretary Pompeo and President Macron discussed significant threats to global security, efforts to counter violent extremism, Iran's destabilizing behavior, and Hizballah's malign influence in Lebanon," Brown said on Monday.

Pompeo emphasized the importance of maintaining unity in NATO and highlighted the strong cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region as well as efforts to counter China.

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US Now Building Nuclear Submarines at Fastest Rate in Past 20 Years - Admiral

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - The United States is currently building new nuclear submarines at a faster rate than it has done in the past 20 years, but the undersea fleet still lacks the capabilities and potential it had decades ago, Director of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Adm. Frank Caldwell told the Naval Submarine League's annual symposium.

"The United States is building submarines at a rate not seen in 20 years," Caldwell said on Monday. "Construction [was] speeded up by doing advanced electronics not in the ship but in self-contained modules later fitted into the hull."

Caldwell explained the US Navy and Electric Boat, the prime contractor on all US nuclear submarines had shifted the installation of advanced electronic components from inside the hulls to modules that were completed before being fitted into place in the vessels, a process that had vastly sped up rates of completion.

"We are building more and more components ... on modules long before we slide them into the hull. We refer to this as continuous build, not disrupting the assembly line," he said.

The new process maintained work at a sustainable pace far more quickly, efficiently and for longer periods of time permitting far faster rates of construction, Caldwell added.

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US Planning More 'Black Widow' Tactical Exercises to Target 'Enemy' Subs - Admiral

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - The US Navy is planning a new series of "Black Widow" undersea tactical exercises to develop its capability to destroy prime target submarines

of potential enemies in time of war, Submarine Forces Commander Vice Admiral Daryl Caudle told the Naval Submarine League's annual symposium, "We are in planning for the second 'Black Widow' tactical exercise, the preeminent exercise designed to go after our adversaries' highest-end submarines," Caudle said on Monday. The Navy had also set up a "Task Force Turing" named after pioneering computer and artificial intelligence genius Alan Turing who died more than 65 years ago to advance its undersea sonar detection capabilities, Caudle told the symposium. Task Force Turing is developing new AI algorithms to enhance the sonar systems of US nuclear submarines "where we are data rich and analyst poor, we need AI algorithms in the background in an integrated undersea surveillance command. ... That is the tip of the spear," he said. Caudle also said he was "very excited" about the enhanced capabilities that the use of AI would bring to the detection of submarines underwater.

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US, France Recognize Russia's Role in Nagorno-Karabakh Ceasefire - State Dept. Official

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"We are... recognizing the actions that Russia took which has led to a ceasefire that's actually held now for about a week, but also acknowledging that there were still a lot of questions that needed clarity from the Russians as to the parameters of that agreement, and that included the role of the Turks," the State Department official said on Monday.

The official briefed a traveling pool after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Paris and held talks with his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian.

Last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin brokered a ceasefire agreement signed by Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan after weeks of hostilities in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Per the agreement, Azerbaijan would retain control of the territories it captured during the conflict, while Russia would deploy peacekeepers along the line of contact of the warring parties and in the Lachin Corridor connecting Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia.

The official said that the US and France remain committed to their roles in resolving the conflict as co-chairs, alongside Russia, of the OSCE Minsk Group.

Pompeo and Le Drian both noted that the Russians have invited American and French diplomats to Moscow for more clarity, and there have been phone calls "between and among the co-chairs," the official added.

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US Diplomat Tours Muslim Nations to Promote Women Entrepreneurs - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - A senior US diplomat has flown out to several Muslim nations in the Gulf, Central Asia and North Africa to promote women entrepreneurs and several educational initiatives, the Department of State said in a media note.

"Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) Marie Royce will travel to Abu Dhabi and Dubai, United Arab Emirates; Rabat and Tangier, Morocco; and Nur Sultan and Almaty, Kazakhstan, from November 16-28, 2020," the note said on Monday.

While in the United Arab Emirates, Royce will meet with senior UAE officials to discuss bilateral cooperation on educational exchange programs including EducationUSA and the Fulbright Program, the note explained.

"She will also meet participants and partners of the Academy for Women Entrepreneurs and the Stevens Initiative. Additionally, she will attend a ceremony marking the substantial completion of the US pavilion for Expo 2020 Dubai along with senior officials of the US. and Emirati governments," the note said.

In Morocco, Royce will meet with senior members of the Moroccan government to discuss bilateral cooperation on education and culture, the note added.

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California Pulls Brake on Reopening, Assesses Re-Imposing Curfew - Governor

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - California has decided to pull an "emergency brake" on loosening the coronavirus-related restrictions and is currently assessing imposing curfews amid a surge of cases across the state, Governor Gavin Newsom said in a press conference.

"We are sounding the alarm. California is experiencing the fastest increase in cases we have seen yet. . . That is why we are pulling an emergency brake in the Blueprint for a Safer Economy," Newsom said on Monday. "The notion of a curfew: we are assessing that as well." Newsom said California has had experienced in the past two weeks an increase in the number of people who tested positive for the coronavirus from 3.2 percent to 4.6 percent. The number of hospitalizations has increased up to 48 percent from November 2.

A total of 41 counties that comprise 94 percent of California's population are now in the most restrictive "purple tier." Under this tier, indoor gatherings, including in restaurants, places of worship, movie theaters, museums and gyms, are not allowed. Retail and shopping centers can stay open at only 25 percent capacity.

Newsom also mandates that Californians wear masks at all times outside their homes, limit intermingling with people, practice social distancing and keep windows open when possible.

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Biden Faces Uphill Battle to Reverse Trump's Environmental Damage - Activists

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik), Barrington M. Salmon - Projected President-elect Joe Biden will be challenged to undo the damage wrought by the Trump administration's roll back of crucial environmental protections, climate change activists told Sputnik.

Over the past four years, President Donald Trump carried out his initial promise coming into office to "dismantle the administrative state" by easing or removing a host of environment regulations that protected drinking water, clean air and prevented the release of toxic chemicals. According to a Harvard University tracker, the administration introduced rules to eliminate at least 80 environmental regulations, most of which have been implemented, are in process, or are being fought in court.

Eco-Equity advocacy group Co-Founder Vien Truong, winner of the White House Champion of Change award, is hopeful steps can be taken to deal with Trump's assault on clean air, water, and wildlife.

"The Trump Administration caused significant setbacks on climate. His Administration reversed over 100 environmental rules," Truong said. "There's no way to track the damage Trump has done because it's still ongoing. The prospect of getting back on track to protect families' right to clean air and clean water, to prioritize people and planet, is a major relief."

Truong, whose firm, Truong and Associates, advises lawmakers on environmental policies, believes Biden can point the way forward.

"Biden has committed to the strongest environmental policies and climate protections than any other incoming president," Truong said. "He supports clean energy solutions and has committed 40% of investment benefits for underserved communities. These investments will create good jobs and improve the quality of life for families across the nation. It's exciting."

Tiffany Aziz, a DC Clean Energy environmentalist and social justice activist, however, does not share Truong's optimism.

"Where I live, the environment is related to technology. I have been fighting power sub-stations constructed in low-income communities," Aziz said. "It's causing a lot of health concerns because it's not environmental-friendly. This has, in the past, caused cancer and childhood leukemia. There have also been cases of brain and breast cancer and high rates of fetal deaths. People are also getting headaches because of high radiation. And there are cases of dogs whose fur has been eaten off by electromagnetic fields."

Aziz - founder and president of the NOMA H Street Civic Association who works for the DC Medicaid Office - said she is also worried about 5G towers in her neighborhood.

"They are also removing agricultural land and free space," she said. "Mayor [Muriel] Bowser and the DC Council ignore these issues because they are utilizing it as a way to make money, bring more revenue for the city. They are making deals with PEPSCO and other companies.

Meanwhile, high electromagnetic fields are ruining the environment for animal and humans." She is concerned that Biden may be too focused on national crises to address critical local issues.

"I want to think it will make a difference to the Biden administration but it will be more of a low-end issue. They will look at wildfires and the global pandemic. I don't think an electronic substation will be on their radar," Aziz said.

Every major news outlet has projected Biden as the winner of the presidential election held earlier in November. Trump, who has yet to concede, has filed several legal challenges, citing alleged voter fraud. However, a coalition of US federal and state agencies in a joint statement last week disputed Trump's claims and said the 2020 election was the most secure in the country's history.

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'Premature' US Military Exit From Afghanistan to Have Disastrous Consequences - McConnell

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - A premature US military exit from Afghanistan could have disastrous consequences, US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said in a statement.

Earlier on Monday, media reported that the US Department of Defense is anticipating an order from the White House as early as this week that will cut the number of troops in Afghanistan and Iraq in half by mid-January.

"The consequences of a premature American exit would likely be even worse than President Obama's withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, which fueled the rise of ISIS [Islamic State terror group, banned in Russia] and a new round of global terrorism. It would be reminiscent of the humiliating American departure from Saigon in 1975," McConnell said on Monday evening. McConnell claimed that a US retreat would reverse years of human rights accomplishments, embolden the Taliban and be proclaimed as a victory by those the United States has deemed to be bad actors in the region, including Iran.

According to McConnell, former US officials see the withdrawal as a "symbol of US defeat and humiliation and of victory for Islamist extremism."

Earlier this month, then Defense Secretary Mark Esper said a classified memo to the White House warning against a rapid withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, media reported.

Trump tweeted in October that all US troops should be home by Christmas, only to be disavowed by US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien who said that thousands of troops were "on path" to remain there into early next year.

Trump has sought to deliver on his pledge to end the longest war in US history. After the United States reached a deal with the Taliban in February, the number of troops was drawn down to 8,600 in July, with another 4,000 troops expected to leave in fall. By early next year the contingent may be reduced to 2,500 servicemen.

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US State of Georgia Recount Finds 2,600 New Votes in Trump-Leaning County - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - Officials in the US state of Georgia have uncovered a cache of 2,600 more votes that should have been counted but were not in the November 3 presidential election, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported.

The 2,600 ballots were discovered in rural Floyd County. When tallied, they are expected to reduce President Donald Trump's state-wide deficit to Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, which currently stands at 14,000 votes, the report said citing officials. Trump had garnered 70% of the vote in the rural northwest county.

Gabriel Sterling, a state election official said the error occurred because county election officials had not uploaded votes from a memory card in a ballot scanning machine. He described the mistake as amazing and said the county election director should resign over it.

However, Georgia's Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger has said other counties' recounted figures across the state closely followed their original numbers, the report added.

Every major US media outlet has projected Biden as the winner of the presidential election held earlier in November. Trump, who has yet to concede, has filed several legal challenges, citing alleged voter fraud. However, a coalition of US federal and state agencies in a joint statement last week disputed Trump's claims and said the 2020 election was the most secure in the country's history.

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Pence, Pompeo Urged Trump Not to Attack Iran Before Leaving Office - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 16 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and other senior US officials urged President Donald Trump not to attack Iran during the closing weeks of his administration to set back its nuclear program, The New York Times reported.

Trump asked Pence, Pompeo, acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Mark Milley in the Oval Office last Thursday whether there were moves he could take to try and cripple the Iranian nuclear program during the next few weeks, the report said on Monday.

Trump held the meeting the day after International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) inspectors reported Iran's uranium stockpile had grown to 12 times the amount permitted under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that Trump had pulled the United States out of in 2018, the newspaper said.

However, the senior US officials told Trump such actions could rapidly escalate into a wider conflict, the report said. Any US attack would likely be focused on Natanz as well other suspected sites in Iran, it added.

Concern that Trump may seek to launch military operations against presumed enemies before leaving office have grown since he fired Secretary of Defense Mark Esper last week, the report

said. Presumed President-Elect Joe Biden has pledged to try and return the United States to the JCPOA, the newspaper also noted.

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Belarusian Association of Journalists Wins Canada-UK Media Freedom Award – Raab

TORONTO, November 16 (Sputnik) - The Belarusian Association of Journalists has won the 2020 Canada-UK Media Freedom Award for its role in covering ongoing protests in the country, UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab announced on Monday.

"I am pleased to announce that... the winner of the 2020 UK-Canada Media Freedom Award is the Belarusian Association of Journalists," Raab said during the Global Conference for Media Freedom.

Raab and conference co-host Canadian Foreign Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne commended the association for their coverage of the protests that have followed the re-election of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.

Belarus has been facing massive opposition protests following the presidential election on August 9 that saw Lukashenko reelected for a sixth term. While electoral authorities maintain that Lukashenko collected over 80 percent of the vote, the opposition insists that his key contender, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, won the election. Opposition figures also accuse the security forces of resorting to excessive violence during the protests.

Lukashenko has repeatedly accused Western nations of direct interference in the internal affairs of Belarus. Russia has also voiced concerns over foreign interference in the neighboring country.

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Canada Allots \$1.1Mln to Fight COVID-19 Misinformation - Foreign Ministry

TORONTO, November 16 (Sputnik) - Canada is contributing \$1.15 million towards fighting misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, Global Affairs Canada said in a statement at the conclusion of the Global Conference on Media Freedom.

"[Foreign Minister Francois-Philippe] Champagne ... announced \$1.5 million [\$1.15 million USD] for the Lifeline Project to Tackle the COVID-19 Infodemic, a BBC Media Action project working with journalists in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Indonesia to create clear, fact-based COVID-19 content," the statement said on Monday.

The second Global Conference for Media Freedom was co-hosted by Canada and Botswana. The summit coalesced world leaders, media experts and advocates to explore solutions to what experts referred to as growing distrust in traditional media sources, a tide of disinformation and misinformation among other issues.

During the six-hour event, experts rankled over striking the right balance between competing principles of censorship, objectivity and freedom of the press and expression in the context of growing social media influence and amid the deadly global pandemic.

The policy- and decision-makers also urged governments to ensure the independence and freedom of the press and called for greater access and security for members of the media.

Champagne later told reporters that Estonia will be hosting next year's edition of the conference.