

Wednesday 11/18/20

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Barack Obama Had to Quit Coaching Daughter's Basketball Team Due to Parent Complaints, Book Reveals

Former US President Barack Obama this week published a memoir titled "A Promised Land," the first of a planned two volumes the former president has written to disclose insights into his tenure as the president from 2009 to 2017.

In his memoir, [Obama shares the story](#) of how he and his aide, Reggie Love, in 2010 began coaching basketball practices for his daughter Sasha's team, called the Vipers, at Sidwell Friends School in Washington, DC.

Despite a successful run coaching Sasha's team, Obama reveals in his book that he gave up the coaching role after parents of children on rival teams began complaining that their kids were not being trained by the 44th president.

"After observing an adorable, but chaotic, first couple of games, Reggie and I took it upon ourselves to draw up some plays and volunteered to conduct a few informal Sunday afternoon practice sessions with the team. We worked on the basics: dribbling, passing, making sure your shoelaces were tied before you ran onto the court," Obama recounts in an excerpt obtained by the [Sunday Times](#).

"And although Reggie could get a little too intense when we ran drills — 'Paige, don't let Isabel punk you like that' — the girls seemed to have as much fun as we did," he adds, also revealing that when the team beat their rival in the school league championship, he and Love "celebrated like it was the NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] finals."

[Obama also notes that](#) after a year of coaching, fellow parents from a rival Sidwell team started complaining about him being a Vipers coach.

"But of course nothing about our lives was completely normal anymore as I was reminded the following year, when, in true Washington fashion a few of the parents from a rival Sidwell team started complaining to the Vipers coaches and presumably the school that Reggie and I weren't offering training sessions to their kids, too," Obama recounts.

Obama also describes in his book that he explained to the school that there wasn't anything special about their practices and that he and Love even offered to help other parents organize their practices. Obama also recalls Love joking that the other parents "must think being coached by you [Obama] is something they can put on a Harvard application."

Eventually, Obama notes he gave up coaching because it was "simpler for all concerned."

Sasha is currently a sophomore at the University of Michigan, while her older sister Malia is currently a senior at Harvard University.

Obama's 768-page memoir describes the president's political life, his presidential campaign and even the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011. The book has been released in 25 languages, including Chinese, Arabic, Czech and Vietnamese, [the New York Times reported](#).

In 2018, former first lady Michelle Obama published her own memoir, titled "Becoming." The book has been widely successful, selling more than 8.1 million copies in the US and Canada since its release, the Times noted.

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'Happy Outcome': Wreaths Across America Applauds Decision to Go Forward With Annual Event

The annual Wreaths Across America event, in which volunteers recognize veterans by placing wreaths at their tombstones across cemeteries in the US, will take place this year despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Wednesday, the Wreaths Across America co-founder Karen Worcester applauded the US Army's Tuesday decision to go on with the event on "Fox & Friends" [after it was canceled Monday evening](#) due to concerns related to the novel coronavirus.

"So many people that were just devastated," she revealed, referring to the initial cancellation of the event, [Fox News reported](#).

"It was a gut punch," Worcester told "Fox & Friends" on Wednesday, describing her first reaction to the news.

"We knew there had to be more information than we had, because we had been working so closely with them to make sure that we were going to have a safe wreath-placing to conform with all the COVID regulations," she added.

She also remarked on the "outpouring" of support from around the country on Wednesday after it was decided that the event to honor fallen soldiers would go on.

In addition, Worcester confirmed on "Fox & Friends" that the wreath-laying ceremonies across the US "will follow the safety standards" and that she has been working with the staff at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, DC, to ensure the event is as safe as possible.

"Everybody came together for a happy outcome," she added, reaffirming that Arlington National Cemetery's initial decision to cancel the event "was not based against Wreaths Across America" but rather on "protecting the people that work there because they are in the area that's highly affected" by the pandemic.

US President Donald Trump on Tuesday tweeted that the Wreaths Across America event will take place this year, [calling the decision to cancel it "ridiculous."](#)

Trump's tweet followed an announcement by US Secretary of the Army Ryan McCarthy that Arlington National Cemetery would indeed host the event.

"I have directed Arlington National Cemetery to safely host Wreaths Across America," [McCarthy tweeted Tuesday](#). "We appreciate the families and visitors who take time to honor and remember those who are laid to rest at our nation's most hallowed ground."

Wreaths Across America Day, an event to commemorate and honor US veterans, occurs annually in December. This year, volunteers across the nation will place wreaths at the tombstones of veterans at Arlington National Cemetery and more than 2,100 other cemetery locations throughout the US on December 19.

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Climate Change 'Bigger Catastrophe' Than COVID-19 Pandemic, Red Cross Warns

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc across the globe this year, infecting more than 56 million people to date and claiming more than 1.3 million lives, according to the latest tally by Worldometer.

However, a [new report](#) released Tuesday by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) states that climate change is an even “bigger catastrophe” than the pandemic and “has been building for many decades.”

“The impacts of global warming are already killing people and devastating lives and livelihoods every year, and they will only get worse without immediate and determined action. The frequency and intensity of climatological events are increasing substantially, with more category 4 and 5 storms, more heatwaves breaking temperature records and more heavy rains, among many other extremes,” the IFRC warns in its 2020 World Disasters Report.

The report also reveals that the average number of climate- and weather-related crises per decade has surged nearly 35% since the 1990s, while 83% of all disasters over the last decade have been the result of extreme weather- and climate-related events like heatwaves and floods. Such disasters have killed more than 410,000 people and affected 1.7 billion people in the last 10 years, the report notes.

In addition, during the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) alone, there have been more than 100 disasters that have impacted more than 50 million people. Many of those events were climate-related. The World Disasters Report also states that the stimulus packages being developed across the globe in response to the pandemic should be used to make communities safer from and more resilient to the effects of global warming.

“It is also critical to use available resources well – headlines about millions and billions of dollars should not distract us from ensuring that what is allocated is best spent for those people who need it most. At present, the available funding for climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction does not seem to consistently prioritize the countries at highest risk and with the lowest ability to adapt and cope with these risks,” the report warns.

In a virtual news conference this week, IFRC Secretary-General Jagan Chapagain also warned that the COVID-19 pandemic should not distract the world from the dangers of climate change. “Of course, the COVID is there, it’s in front of us, it is affecting our families, our friends, our relatives,” Chapagain [told Al Jazeera](#).

“It’s a very, very serious crisis the world is facing currently,” Chapagain said of the pandemic, but he also noted that “climate change will have a more significant medium- and long-term impact on the human life and on Earth.”

Several major, weather-related catastrophes have plagued the US this year, from a deadly wildfire season on the West Coast that burned [more than 4 million acres](#) across California to one of the [most extreme Atlantic hurricane seasons](#) in more than five decades.

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'Electronic Robin Hood' Jeremy Hammond, Who Passed Stratfor Files to WikiLeaks, Freed From US Prison
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The hacktivist's release was delayed for more than a year after he was arbitrarily transferred from an early release program to Alexandria, Virginia, to testify before a grand jury. When he refused to cooperate with its probe of WikiLeaks, he was held in contempt alongside whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

After eight years in federal prison, Anonymous hacktivist Jeremy Hammond has been released from prison. The Jeremy Hammond Support Committee advocacy group tweeted on Tuesday he had been released from Tennessee's Federal Correctional Institution, Memphis, into a halfway house in Chicago, Illinois.

In 2011, Hammond and a group of hackers with the Anonymous-affiliated group LulzSec hacked their way into the only servers of Texas-based intelligence contracting firm Strategic Forecasting Inc., better known as Stratfor, making away with more than 200 gigabytes of files, including emails, before destroying what remained of Stratfor's database.

The company provided private intelligence services for the CIA and other US intelligence agencies, and the slew of documents LulzSec turned over to WikiLeaks revealed the extent to which the US intelligence community had become intertwined with big business to get around domestic surveillance laws.

The files revealed Statfor had been contracted to peep on activists with the Occupy movement, then in its heyday in cities across the United States, as well as activist groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Anonymous and, of course, WikiLeaks, too.

Then, in March 2012, more than a dozen federal police broke down Hammond's door in southwestern Chicago and arrested him.

'He Wanted to Expose and Confront Injustice'

Prior to the Stratfor hack, Hammond was already a well-known hacktivist and anarchist. In 2007, [he described himself to Chicago magazine as an "electronic Robin Hood,"](#) and he had years of experience protesting against white supremacist rallies, the 2004 Republican National Convention and more, [according to a 2012 spotlight piece by Rolling Stone.](#)

Indeed, Hammond described the Stratfor hack as a similar kind of purloining of information that should belong to everybody.

"I have always made it clear that I am an anarchist-communist – as in I believe we need to abolish capitalism and the state in its entirety to realize a free, egalitarian society," Hammond told Rolling Stone's Janet Reitman in a 2012 letter from jail, adding he hopes his actions would "push the struggle in a more direct action, explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-state direction."

"He knew it was against the law, he knew that it could get him into trouble, but he was doing it because he wanted to expose and confront injustice," [Shadowproof journalist Kevin Gosztola told Sputnik](#) in September 2019.

He eventually pleaded guilty to violating one count of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act in a non-cooperating plea deal and was sentenced to 10 years in prison, plus three more under supervised release.

While in prison, Hammond tolerated abuse by guards and long periods of [solitary confinement, which advocates derided as tortuous](#). Despite this, Hammond stuck with a Residential Drug Abuse Program (RDAP) program for years that would have secured for him an early release. However, [in October 2019, just weeks before the program was concluded](#), Hammond was summoned to Alexandria by a federal grand jury investigating WikiLeaks and its co-founder, Julian Assange, who had been arrested in London several months earlier and charged with a slew of crimes, including violation of the 1917 Espionage Act.

[Hammond, like fellow whistleblower and WikiLeaks source Chelsea Manning](#), refused to answer the grand jury's questions, and the two were held in contempt in Alexandria City Jail. [Sputnik reported from one protest outside the jail](#) in February 2020, where demonstrators showed their support for the principled stands by Hammond and Manning against the grand jury's probe. The following month, Hammond was ordered released from the contempt sentence by US District Judge Anthony Trenga, and he returned to Memphis to serve the remainder of his sentence.

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Watchdog Group Releases Map of Every 'Credible' Civilian Death From US Airstrikes in Anti-Daesh War
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The report is being hailed as a triumph for military transparency, but the watchdog group that published the data catalogued 30% more civilian deaths than the anti-Daesh coalition has admitted to causing.

[A new report by London-based non-governmental](#) watchdog group Airwars has mapped all but four of the 344 publicly confirmed airstrikes by the US-led coalition against Daesh* that resulted in civilian deaths in Iraq and Syria.

The air war, which was coordinated by Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), ostensibly included more than a dozen nations but in practice was mostly a US operation. It began in October 2014 as Daesh's empire rapidly spread across northern Iraq and central and eastern Syria. The group grew out of the chaos of the Syrian Civil War but [fed on a variety of material and financial](#) support [reportedly provided to Syrian groups from the US and Saudi Arabia](#).

[According to the Washington Post](#), the airstrikes were geolocated using information provided by the coalition, enabling Airwars to give the precise location for many strikes it had learned of through on-the-ground work.

"The Pentagon's disclosure marks the first time any military has provided this kind of detailed information about a major operation, offering a potential blueprint for greater transparency in the future," the Post noted.

“These located events represent the most accurate and comprehensive data ever publicly revealed by the US military about the harm it causes in war,” Airwars wrote. “In a significant number of these events, precise cross matching reveals exactly which civilians died, when and where. Given sometimes limited on-the-ground reporting by local communities during the heat of battle, other cases have only been revealed due to US pilots and analysts coming forward and flagging concerns.”

Col. Myles Caggins, the former chief spokesperson for CJTF-OIR, told Airwars: “We take every allegation of civilian casualties with the utmost sincerity, concern, and diligence; we see the addition of the geolocations as a testament to transparency, and our commitment to working with agencies like Airwars to correctly identify civilian harm incidents.”

However, Airwars notes that for all the Pentagon’s transparency, a significant discrepancy exists between the group’s civilian death count of 2,024 fatalities and the “conceded civilian deaths according to CJTF-OIR,” which has admitted to causing 1,410 such deaths.

One reason for the discrepancy is hinted at by the Post: “Throughout the campaign, strikes took place in crowded urban environments, where it was more difficult to distinguish between civilian and [Daesh] targets,” the paper wrote.

In other words, indiscriminate bombing of urban areas made it impossible to tell how many civilians had been killed by a bomb strike.

This isn’t the first time Airwars has busted the coalition on its confirmed death tolls: [a previous report by the group in conjunction with Amnesty International](#) in 2017 found the death toll from US airstrikes and artillery shelling in Daesh’s de facto capital of Raqqa was 10 times what the coalition claimed, amounting to at least 1,600 civilians.

Earlier this month, the coalition revealed that [since 2014, it has carried out nearly 35,000 airstrikes](#) against Daesh targets across Iraq and Syria. The majority of those operations occurred under former US President Barack Obama, although according to Airwars’ new report, civilian deaths from airstrikes didn’t reach their peak until the middle of 2017, after US President Donald Trump took office.

However, despite Trump’s [declarations that Daesh has been defeated](#), the US is continuing operations against the group. [In September, the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz](#) launched sorties to hit several Daesh targets in Iraq.

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Lawmakers, Activists Urge White House to Halt Federal Executions as Court Dismisses Attempted Stay
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The death penalty is outlawed in 21 US states, and before a July policy reversal by US President Donald Trump, the US federal government hadn’t executed someone in 17 years. Since then, a record number have been killed by lethal injection, and more are scheduled for the next two months.

A federal appeals court struck down attempts to block several federal executions scheduled for the final two months of Trump's first term. On Wednesday, the US Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit [refused to delay two scheduled executions](#), including one set for Thursday.

Death row prisoners and their advocates have pushed for a halting of federal executions until the government agrees to administer the pain reliever pentobarbital alongside the death-inducing lethal injection. While Judges Patricia A. Millett and Neomi Rao refused to delay the scheduled executions, they left the door open to continuing litigation efforts.

As a result of the order, three execution dates have been set: Orlando Hall on November 19, Lisa Montgomery on December 8 and Brandon Bernard on December 10. [Montgomery's case is of special note](#), as she is the only woman on death row and would be the first executed by the US government since 1953.

Activist group Death Penalty Action has accumulated more than 3,600 signatures to a petition urging the Trump administration to stay Hall's Thursday execution, which it delivered to the White House on Wednesday.

"The thousands of people who have signed this petition represent the millions who understand the death penalty is not necessary," Abraham Bonowitz, the director of Death Penalty Action, [said in a release circulating with the petition](#). "We can be safe from dangerous individuals and hold them accountable to their crimes without executions. It's what we do in the vast majority of cases."

For 17 years, the US government carried out no executions, although the few remaining US states that have retained the death penalty have continued to execute those sentenced to death. Then, in July, amid the mass death of the COVID-19 pandemic, [the Trump administration suddenly resumed performing capital punishment](#) at the US Penitentiary in Terre Haute, Indiana.

Since July, the US federal government has executed seven inmates - as many as during the eight years of Harry Truman's presidency - and if any more take place, they will match the number during the administration of US President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Those two presidents presided over the heyday of federal executions.

The seven executions under the Trump administration are already the most carried out by the government in any single year on record, [according to Newsweek](#).

"President Trump is already the most-executing president since the 1950s, so he's got his record as the biggest and the best," Bonowitz noted in the release. "No further executions are necessary for him to hold his record."

However, for some, the rush to execute more inmates in the final months of Trump's first term in office is connected to his likely departure from the White House in January 2021. While the results of the November 2020 presidential election have not yet been decided, Democratic presumed President-elect [Joe Biden has taken a firm stance against capital punishment](#) and promised to outlaw it if he becomes chief executive. Trump has filed lawsuits in several states [contesting the ballot counts, alleging fraud](#).

"[The US Justice Department] is trying to rush through as many federal executions as possible during the 'lame-duck' period between now and January 20, 2021," Sister Helen Prejean, a Roman Catholic sister and prominent death penalty abolitionist, wrote on Twitter Wednesday. "DOJ lawyers have informed federal judges that more execution dates will be announced soon. This shameful killing spree must end."

Actress Susan Sarandon has also spoken out against Montgomery's execution, saying the court was denied essential evidence about her mental illness that should have a mitigating effect on the sentence.

Several Democratic lawmakers have also pressed the DoJ for a halting of executions. US Sens. Dick Durbin (D-IL), Patrick Leahy (D-VT) and Cory Booker (D-NJ), along with Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA), sent [a letter to Attorney General William Barr on November 13](#) urging that Biden and his running mate, Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA), be given the chance to weigh in on the issue, assuming they take office.

"President-Elect Biden's plan for strengthening America's commitment to justice includes the elimination of the federal death penalty and Vice-President-Elect Harris is an original cosponsor of legislation we have introduced to eliminate the federal death penalty," the lawmakers' letter noted.

"A record number of Americans voted in favor of President-Elect Biden and Vice-President Elect Harris and they deserve an opportunity to implement their policy agenda without the Trump Administration rushing to take preemptive and irreversible steps. While you will remain in office for a few more weeks, going forward with executions in the weeks before the new administration takes office would be a grave injustice."

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'Time to Get Out': US Navy Seal Credited With Killing Bin Laden Supports Afghanistan Withdrawal
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The October 2001 invasion of Afghanistan was prompted by the terrorist attacks in New York and Virginia weeks earlier that killed thousands and were carried out by al-Qaeda operatives trained and directed in the country's rugged mountains by Osama bin Laden.

Amid confirmation of the Pentagon plans to [pare US troop levels in Afghanistan down to 2,500 soldiers](#) by mid-January, retired Chief Petty Officer Robert O'Neill, the US Navy Seal credited with killing bin Laden, sounded off about his opposition to the US staying in the Central Asian country any longer.

"A lot of these arguments inside of the Pentagon ... these guys yelling about what we're doing, they haven't won the war in 20 years, so maybe we should do something different," [O'Neill told Fox Business' Neil Cavuto on Wednesday](#).

"It's time to get out, especially of Afghanistan," he flatly stated. However, the former operative didn't seem to feel the US' self-described mission of rebuilding Afghan society as democratic and amenable to Western values had been accomplished.

"We've been working in Afghanistan trying to train their local forces going on two decades now," O'Neill said. "If they don't have it by now, they're never going to get it ... They don't have the infrastructure. They really don't want the infrastructure."

"Whether you like it or not, if you're in a country for that long you're an occupier," he added. US forces have been engaged in Afghanistan since October 2001, when they invaded to overthrow

the Taliban, which had provided shelter to al-Qaeda. In the 19 years since, the US and the new Afghan government it set up have fought a steady Taliban insurgency.

On May 2, 2011, O'Neill and a team of Seals succeeded in hunting down bin Laden at a compound across the border in Pakistan, and [O'Neill has taken sole credit for the shot](#) that killed the terrorist leader.

This past February, the US and Taliban reached a peace accord that would permit the US to pull its troops out. However, a separate peace deal between the Taliban and the Afghan government, which the Islamist militant group has long derided as an illegitimate US puppet, has yet to be achieved.

"If they come up with training sites that need to be bombed, we can bomb them," O'Neill suggested. "We have three-letter agency people in different spots where they can monitor. It doesn't take a bunch of Marines and infantrymen patrolling around very narrow roads and trying to build schools. It hasn't worked before. It's not going to work now."

The former non-commissioned officer's opinion resonates with that of US President Donald Trump, who has said he wants to [bring all US troops in Afghanistan "home by Christmas."](#) However, it contrasts sharply with the [advice of former Pentagon chief Mark Esper](#) and NATO [Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg](#), as well as high-ranking US politicians like Senate Majority Leader [Sen. Mitch McConnell \(R-KY\)](#), all of whom have expressed skepticism at pulling out too many troops too fast.

However, O'Neill also had a few choice words about the US war in Iraq, which began in 2003 and ostensibly ended in 2011, although thousands of US troops remain in the country despite the Iraqi Parliament saying they should leave. Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller also said US troop levels in Iraq will decline under the new plan.

"Iraq was one of those things we shouldn't have invaded, then we shouldn't have left," O'Neill said. "But it's time for us to leave now."

"They're being run by Iran, and us keeping people on the ground is really not going to help that much," he continued. "We should concentrate on bigger stuff, like what's going to happen with China."

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Bipartisan Senate Effort Seeks to Block Proposed \$23 Billion Weapons Sale to UAE, Including F-35s

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

If approved, the weapons could potentially be used in the war in Yemen or spark an arms race in the region. However, US President Donald Trump, who touted the sale of F-35s alongside his negotiated peace deal between the United Arab Emirates and Israel, is almost certain to reject the resolutions.

A group of Republican and Democratic senators have teamed up in an attempt to stop a proposed \$23 billion weapons sale to the UAE over fears it could spark an arms race in the region and hurt the national security of Israel, Washington's chief ally there.

On Wednesday, Sens. Bob Menendez (D-NJ), Chris Murphy (D-CT) and Rand Paul (R-KY) launched four new resolutions aimed at getting the US State Department to reconsider the sale. [According to Politico, Rep. Ilhan Omar \(R-MN\) plans](#) to soon introduce similar legislation in the House of Representatives.

“As I tried to warn the Trump administration, circumventing deliberative processes for considering a massive infusion of weapons to a country in a volatile region with multiple ongoing conflicts is downright irresponsible,” Menendez, who is the top Democrat in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said in a statement.

He highlighted how US national security officials have not explained how they “would deal with specific national security risks inherent in the proposed sale,” which would include 50 stealthy F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, 18 MQ-9B Reaper drones and a variety of munitions.

“There are a number of outstanding concerns as to how these sales would impact the national security interests of both the United States and of Israel. As a result, Congress is once again stepping in to serve as a check to avoid putting profit over US national security and that of our allies, and to hopefully prevent a new arms race in the Middle East,” Menendez added.

At present, Israel is the only Middle Eastern country to operate the F-35, flying a specially modified version dubbed the “Adir.” However, on November 10, US Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo said the department had certified the deal](#) with the UAE was appropriate. His announcement was preceded by a visit to the Pentagon by Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz in late October, after which Gantz said he was [satisfied such a deal would not sacrifice Israel’s “qualitative military edge.”](#)

After the State Department’s certification, it passes to Congress to approve the deal.

Murphy also said he objected to the deal being finalized in what he believed to be the “lame duck” period of Trump’s presidency. While most media outlets have declared Joe Biden to be the presumed president-elect, Trump has not conceded the race and [has filed lawsuits contesting the ballot count](#) in several US states.

The deal comes on the heels of an agreement negotiated by Washington that saw the UAE agree to normalize relations with Israel, joining just a handful of Arab nations to have done so. “I support the normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), but nothing in that agreement requires us to flood the region with more weapons and [facilitate a dangerous arms race.](#)” [Murphy added.](#)

Abu Dhabi is presently engaged in a conflict in Yemen as part of the Saudi-led alliance against the Shiite Houthi movement, and [Western-made weapons sold to the UAE](#) have been reportedly spotted in the hands of militia groups fighting in the war, [including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula](#), the terrorist group’s local franchise. US lawmakers have previously attempted to halt US support for Riyadh in the war, but a resolution that would have [barred it was vetoed by Trump in July 2019.](#)

[According to the United Nations Office](#) for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 100,000 Yemenis have been killed by combat operations since 2015, and another 130,000 have died from hunger and disease, as well as another 4.4 million displaced.

The statutory 30-day window for the lawmakers to block the sale ends on December 10. However, it’s unlikely they will be able to garner enough votes not only to pass the bills, but then defeat Trump’s near-certain vetoing of them.

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US Records More Than 250,000 Fatalities Related to COVID-19 - Report
by [Evan Craighead](#)

US health officials are urging Americans to avoid throwing Thanksgiving “superspreader” events as the country continues to see spikes in COVID-19 novel coronavirus cases and, as of Wednesday, has recorded more than 250,000 deaths related to the contagious disease. The 250,000th COVID-19-related death in the US was logged on Wednesday, nearly a year after the world's first known case of the novel coronavirus, [according to NBC News](#).

At least 251,000 deaths have been linked to the contagious disease in the US, and more than 11,561,000 positive cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed in the country as of this article's publication, [according to the outlet's data](#).

Novel coronavirus-related fatalities have quickly climbed in recent weeks. Last week's average reached 1,167 fatalities per day, versus an early October average of 821 fatalities per day. [An early forecasting model](#) used by the White House in late March estimated between 100,000 to 240,000 American deaths would be linked to the contagious disease - even with the implementation of preventative measures.

The figures suggested that some 2.2 million Americans would have died without adherence to mitigation measures, such as social distancing and stay-at-home orders imposed by state and local governments.

While much progress has been made in the realms of [developing COVID-19 vaccines](#) and exploring therapeutics, US health officials have sounded the alarm against large gatherings around the Thanksgiving holiday. As a result, states such as Ohio, Washington, California and New Mexico have imposed various stay-at-home orders, curfews and other mitigation measures.

US President Donald Trump and his administration have pushed back against the idea of such government-enforced mandates throughout the pandemic and will continue to do so, according to White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany's [Wednesday comments](#) to “Fox & Friends.” “The American people know how to protect their health. We've dealt with COVID for many months,” said McEnany, who tested positive for the novel coronavirus in October. “But it's Orwellian in a place like Oregon to say if you gather in numbers more than six, we might come to your house and arrest you, and you get 30 days of jail time. That's not the American way.” At the same time, she said the decisions regarding Thanksgiving Day regulations will be made by “every state.”

“We can make good decisions, we can wash our hands wear masks, socially distance, but we can also decide in our own personal domicile, our own home, whether we can have our family members present at any given time,” McEnany argued.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and a member of the White House coronavirus task force, [told attendees of a USA Today Editorial Board meeting](#) on Wednesday that seemingly “innocent” dinner parties with “10, 12 people” could easily transform into outbreak clusters for the novel coronavirus.

“You're going to start seeing these unanticipated infections related to innocent home gatherings, particularly as we head into the holiday season,” he said, noting that colder weather forces people indoors, which raises the likelihood of COVID-19 transmission.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [have advised against physically coming together](#) and asserted in a November 10 news release that the “safest way to celebrate” is with those in your household.

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Photo: Delaware Police Launch Probe After Couple Finds 'TRUMP' Scrawled on Lawn With Weed Killer
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Vocal supporters of US President Donald Trump are denying the corporate media's projected results of the 2020 presidential election and possibly lashing out in unorthodox ways as 45 continues to allege nationwide voter fraud is responsible for Democratic nominee Joe Biden's forecast victory.

Lewes, Delaware, residents Charlotte King and Aimee West [alleged to the Cape Gazette](#) that an unknown individual or group attacked their property with weed killer and etched “TRUMP” into their front lawn.

“This is no different than a cross burning,” said 83-year-old King, who is black.

Members of the Ku Klux Klan have traditionally burned massive crucifixes on hillsides and yards to intimidate Black Americans and other vulnerable minority groups in the US.

The elderly couple displayed their support for Biden via a campaign sign fixed on their lawn.

King argued she and West were targeted over their pro-Biden sign, Black Lives Matter flag and “Enough is Enough” sign - a reference to their frustrations with the Trump administration.

A probe has been launched into the alleged vandalism, according to Delaware State Police (DSP) spokesperson Sgt. Darren Lester.

“DSP detectives are currently running down active leads with this investigation,” Lester announced earlier this week. “A witness canvass was initiated when the complaint was made known to us, and I understand that is continuing. DSP will follow up on and investigate any and all suspect leads this investigation produces. The investigation remains active and ongoing at this time as we continue to work hard to solve this case.”

King, who serves as chair for the steering committee for the Southern Delaware Alliance for Racial Justice, says she and West have received support from their neighbors and from officials at the local and state level.

[Sputnik reported earlier this month](#) that Ohio authorities were searching for at least two suspects involved in another campaign sign-related crime.

Homeowner Chris Watson claimed his family was awoken by gunfire on November 4 after someone took aim at a “Dump Trump” sign hanging in their front window. Surveillance footage captured another individual snatching up a separate “Dump Trump” sign from the family's yard.

"I don't know if I'm going to wake up in [the] morning and see damage to one of my vehicles or worse," [Watson claimed to 3News](#). "I'm worried he's going to come back and break into the house."

On the other side of the political aisle, a Northern California man was recently denied a temporary restraining order against several pro-Biden neighbors, [the Sacramento Bee reported](#). Michael Mason, a Rocklin, California, resident and Trump supporter, claimed in civil petition filings that he endured constant harassment from neighborhood adults and children via pro-Biden chants and chalk-written messages mocking his political leaning. He also alleged that a Trump campaign sign was stolen from his front lawn.

"I didn't want to do a restraining order. Nobody wants to do that, or to put these people in the limelight. I've asked them multiple times [to stop], and they won't listen," he told the Bee.

While Mason's request for a temporary restraining order was denied, his related civil petitions will be evaluated in court on November 23.

While the US mainstream media has projected Biden as the winner of the election, Trump has continued to accuse Democrats of cheating via the mail-in ballot system.

"I WON THE ELECTION," [The US president tweeted](#) Wednesday morning. "VOTER FRAUD ALL OVER THE COUNTRY!"

Trump has recently focused his efforts on alleged voter fraud in Pennsylvania, Georgia and Michigan.

According to the US president, there were "FAR MORE VOTES THAN PEOPLE" registered to vote in the city of Detroit, Michigan. "Nothing can be done to cure that giant scam. I win Michigan!" [he asserted via social media](#).

Trump has yet to expound on his assertion or provide data to support his claims of fraud within Detroit - a city in which [Black Americans make up 78.6% of the population](#).

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'Overwhelming News': UK Police Arrest Belfast Man Over Deadly 1974 IRA Pub Bombings by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

After the 1974 bombings in Birmingham, England, UK officials convicted six individuals for the deadly incident; however, those convictions were later overturned for insufficient evidence in 1991.

UK police on Wednesday arrested an unidentified 65-year-old man in Belfast, Northern Ireland, who they believe is connected to the deadly 1974 pub bombings orchestrated by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Birmingham.

A [release issued by the West Midlands Police](#) indicates that the arrest was carried out in conjunction with the branch's counterterrorism policing unit and detectives from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). The individual was arrested under the UK's Terrorism Act and also had his home searched by officials.

While offering limited details of the ongoing investigation, the police service did reveal that the individual would be “interviewed under caution at a police station in Northern Ireland.” [The Guardian reported](#) that the suspect is allegedly being held at the Musgrave Street PSNI station. The arrest is believed to be the first carried out in relation to the bombings since the reversal of the convictions of the Birmingham Six - Hugh Callaghan, Paddy Hill, Gerard Hunter, Richard McIlkenny, William Power and John Walker - in March 1991 after a British Court of Appeal concluded evidence initially provided to support a life imprisonment for the group over the bombings was insufficient.

The bombings themselves took place on the evening of November 21, 1974. The first bomb exploded inside the Mulberry Bush pub, and the second erupted a few minutes later in the Tavern in the Town pub. A total of 21 people were killed, with more than 200 others injured. Julie Hambleton, whose 18-year-old sister Maxine died in the explosion, [told the Associated Press](#) that when she was informed of the Wednesday development, she was so shocked that she “couldn’t speak.”

“I was just inconsolable and was just looking at the picture of Maxine,” she recalled. “It’s welcome news. It’s overwhelming news.”

However welcome the news was to Hambleton, she urged that there were still far “wider issues” that needed to be addressed, especially “why six men were arrested for a crime they didn’t commit.”

“How was it that for so long, after 21 people were blown up and more than 200 other innocent souls were injured, nobody was looking for the perpetrators?” she said.

[According to the BBC](#), since the deadly bombings and the release of the Birmingham Six, a handful of investigations have been initiated that have ultimately provided insufficient evidence to determine the identities of those responsible in the case.

The latest push to close the matter came in October, when UK Home Secretary Priti Patel noted that she would consider [holding a public inquiry](#) into the bombings. Patel has yet to announce her decision on the inquiry.

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Videos: Hurricane Iota Leaves Path of Destruction in Central America, Kills at Least 11
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Prior to making landfall in Nicaragua earlier this week, Hurricane Iota became the first cyclone to reach Category 5 status in the 2020 hurricane season in addition to becoming only the second storm with the rating to be recorded in the Atlantic basin in November.

Hurricane Iota left a trail of destruction in its wake as the powerful, deadly storm moved through much of Central America, bringing about catastrophic weather conditions and killing at least 11 individuals after making landfall late Monday in Nicaragua.

The [final advisory](#) on the storm from the US' National Hurricane Center (NHC) indicated that Iota dissipated once the system made its way to El Salvador but warned that “heavy rain threat”

is still a concern, as the region is forecast to see between 2 and 12 inches of additional rain through Thursday.

“This rainfall will lead to significant, life-threatening flash flooding and river flooding, along with mudslides in areas of higher terrain,” reads the agency’s bulletin. “Swells generated by Iota will affect much of the coast of Central America and the Yucatan Peninsula during the next day or so. These swells are likely to cause life-threatening surf and rip current conditions.”

Although the system no longer has the 160-mph winds it boasted earlier this week, Iota is still managing to churn out maximum wind speeds of 30 mph, according to the NHC.

The latest death toll count suggests that at least 11 individuals were killed by the storm, which struck the coastline just two weeks after Hurricane Eta destroyed much of the area’s infrastructure and claimed the lives of dozens of residents.

Citing local government officials, [ABC News reported](#) that at least six people were killed in Nicaragua, two died in Colombia, and three others were killed in Panama, Guatemala and El Salvador. Of the deceased in Nicaragua, two were children who were killed while trying to cross a flooded river.

While many of the devastated countries are still assessing damages, images shared on social media captured collapsed trees, destroyed homes and downed power lines. In Nicaragua, which took the brunt of Iota, [nearly 90,000 families remained without electricity early on Wednesday](#), and 63,000 people have remained in state shelters after being urged to evacuate from their homes ahead of Iota’s landfall.

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‘There’s an Enemies List’: Bolton Fears Trump May Fire More Officials - Video
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Former US national security adviser John Bolton was given the boot by US President Donald Trump in early September 2019 after the pair were reported to have repeatedly clashed on how best to handle foreign policy changes, mostly in regards to Iran and North Korea.

Bolton, who served as Trump’s third national security adviser, remarked in a [Wednesday interview with the Washington Post’s Robert Costa](#) that in light of recent administration dismissals, more pink slips were likely to be issued in the coming months.

“What I fear is ... that there’s an enemies list in the White House of people still to fire, and that there’s more to come,” Bolton said, adding “there probably is [a list] in Donald Trump’s head. I doubt that he’s written it out.”

The former Trump administration official also stated that he “thought it was another bad mistake” from his ex-employer to have fired Christopher Krebs, who headed the US Department of Homeland Security’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency.

Krebs was given the pink slip on Tuesday, with Trump [explaining via Twitter](#) that the top US cybersecurity official had given a “highly inaccurate” statement regarding the security of the US presidential election, and alleging that “there were massive improprieties and fraud.” Earlier on

in the day, Krebs had [disputed the fraud claims](#) and said there was no evidence of election interference.

Prior to the November election, Trump and his allies repeatedly refuted the validity of mail-in ballots, as the president often took to Twitter to discredit the voting option and urge his supporters to submit their ballots in person amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following the projected results of the 2020 election, Trump only doubled down on his stance by claiming that the [election was rigged](#) and that some ballots had [even been discarded](#) after being marked in his support.

In another instance, Trump [pushed claims that in Detroit, Michigan](#), ballots were being submitted under the names of deceased Americans. Similar [allegations were also peddled](#) about Georgia, where the Trump campaign claimed that a ballot was submitted by a woman named Deborah Jean Christiansen, who they alleged died in May 2019; however, [that was not true](#).

In an effort to bolster the claims even further, the Trump campaign launched a voter fraud hotline where Americans could submit reports on what they perceived to be fraudulent actions. Within moments of the hotline's activation, it was [inundated with prank calls](#), a move that ultimately saw it transition to an online forum, [according to the Business Insider](#).

"There is absolutely no justification for [firing Krebs]," Bolton stressed, also saying that "there wasn't any justification to [fire \[former US Defense Secretary\] Mark Esper](#)" either.

"There is no reason to decapitate your national security team with less than 10 weeks to go until the transition. That will inevitably cause disruptions in the agencies themselves, let alone their ability to hand off smoothly," he added.

Reiterating his stance, Bolton further remarked that Trump's allegations of voter fraud suggest that the president is living in a "fantasy world."

"That there's a conspiracy so vast and so successful that it's proceeding without leaving any evidence behind, and under that kind of theory, you can posit evildoing forever," he said.

An [analysis by the research group Brookings Institution](#) recently found that the turnover rate among the Trump administration's most-senior-ranking officials is roughly 91%. As of November 9, the group counted a total of 65 administration shuffles.

At present, the main concern for emergency response officials on the ground are the risks associated with heavy flooding, wind damage and landslides, said Matthew Cochrane, a spokesperson for the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, [in a statement](#).

Prior to Iota, Hurricane Eta's wrath created severe landslide conditions and saw an entire village destroyed in central Guatemala, prompting fears that hundreds had perished after nearly two dozen homes were buried underneath mud.

Early on in the 2020 hurricane season, officials had forecast that the season would be one of most active in recorded history, a prediction which has since come to fruition. During a recent UN briefing in Geneva, Clare Nullis, spokesperson for the World Meteorological Organization, remarked that it is "record-breaking in every sense of the word."

"We're running out of superlatives for this Atlantic hurricane season," Nullis stated. "We are currently, with Iota, on the 30th named tropical storm."

The 2020 hurricane season does not officially end until November 30, and the NHC is already in the midst of monitoring at least one system, which has been [dubbed Tropical Storm Polo](#).

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Photo: Newly Discovered Chalk Sketch of Jesus Christ Attributed to Leonardo da Vinci by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci's noted use of red chalk and drawing style have prompted a gaggle of scrutiny after a striking drawing was recently unearthed in Italy.

The recently discovered chalk drawing of Jesus Christ has prompted speculation that the artwork may have been created by none other than Leonardo, according to researchers who have studied the artist's works.

Currently in the possession of two collectors from Lecco, Italy, the drawing is believed to be the unfinished work of Leonardo as a result of several similarities to his confirmed works, especially as it was sketched with the red chalk he is famously known for using.

Annalisa Di Maria, an art historian who has studied the image, [told The Telegraph](#) that other characteristics that confirmed the links to Leonardo include the drawing style of Jesus' eyes and beard, both of which match up with the artist's own self portraits.

Additionally, the subject's posture is in line with Leonardo's frequent use of three-quarter perspective, in which he drew figures from a side angle, as is seen in the "Mona Lisa" painting and in "The Head of the Virgin" drawings.

"It is a remarkably beautiful and refined work, and I'm absolutely convinced it is a sketch by Leonardo," di Maria said. "It has that dynamism and sense of movement that is typical of Leonardo."

Laboratory tests have also indicated that the paper reportedly dates back to the early 16th century, at which time Leonardo, who was born in 1452, is believed to have been in the midst of creating the "Mona Lisa."

It's presently unclear where the artwork had been stored and whose possession it had been in throughout the years before it was eventually discovered in a Lombardy bank vault.

A group of art historians [are expected to hold a news conference](#) and release a detailed, 60-page study of the work in Florence, Italy, in the following months after officials are able to curb the spread of COVID-19.

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US Applauds UK for Significantly Boosting Defense Spending - Acting Pentagon Chief

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The United States praises the United Kingdom's substantial increase to its defense spending and effort to reaffirm its commitment to the NATO alliance, Acting US Defense Secretary Christopher Miller said in a statement.

"The US Department of Defense applauds the announcement by the United Kingdom to significantly increase defense spending. The UK is our most stalwart and capable ally, and this increase in spending is indicative of their commitment to NATO and our shared security," Miller said in the statement on Wednesday.

The United Kingdom will increase its defense budget by \$21.9 billion over the next four years as part of its plan to invest in next-generation military capability.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson will also announce on Thursday the creation of a new agency dedicated to Artificial Intelligence, the creation of a National Cyber Force and a new Space Command, which will be capable of launching UK's first rocket by 2022.

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Mexican Government Threatened to Expel US Agents Over Arrest of Ex-Defense Chief - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The reason the United States dropped charges against Mexico's former defense secretary is because the country's government threatened to expel US federal drug enforcement agents, The New York Times reported.

Earlier in the day, US Attorney General William Barr in a statement issued jointly with his Mexican counterpart Alejandro Gertz Manero, said the United States dismissed drug charges against national defense secretary Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda so that he may be investigated and charged under Mexican law. The Justice Department said it arrested the official in October on charges of conspiracy to distribute narcotics and money laundering.

After the arrest, high ranking Mexican officials were furious for being blindsided by one of their closest allies, the report said on Wednesday, citing two people familiar with the matter. The officials were outraged US law enforcement kept Mexico unaware of the investigation of such an important figure, the report added.

The Washington Post called the dropping of the charges an "extraordinary" decision in one of the highest-profile drug-trafficking cases in decades after a long-term, top-secret US investigation that allegedly revealed the official's ties to Mexico's criminal underworld.

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US Joins 4 Allies in Urging China to Reconsider Actions Against Hong Kong Legislature

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The top diplomats from the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada issued a joint statement calling on China to reconsider its actions to disqualify legislators in Hong Kong and to reinstate them immediately.

"We urge the Chinese central authorities to re-consider their actions against Hong Kong's elected legislature and immediately reinstate the Legislative Council members," the statement said on Wednesday.

The joint statement said that China's actions are in breach the Sino-British Joint Declaration. Four pro-democracy lawmakers - Alvin Yeung, Kwok Ka-ki, Dennis Kwok and Kenneth Leung - lost their seats in Hong Kong's Legislative Council and were barred from running in the future as per a new resolution from China's highest legislative body.

The Chinese authorities in Beijing defended the new resolution as necessary to safeguard China's national security.

In response to mass pro-democracy protests that started in June last year, Beijing introduced a new national security law in Hong Kong in July as part of its efforts to address the activities of "separatist forces."

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COVID-19-Related Deaths in US Exceed 250,000 - Johns Hopkins University

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The number of coronavirus disease (COVID-19)-related deaths in the United States has exceeded 250,000, according to data compiled by the John Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center.

The United States has confirmed more than 11.4 million cases of COVID-19 since the first infection was detected in late January, the data showed on Wednesday.

The United States on Tuesday reported 1,707 virus-related deaths, the highest daily death count since May 13, according to the data.

The Amnesty International rights groups said in a statement earlier in the day that the Trump administration's refusal to cooperate with projected Democrat President Joe Biden is worsening the COVID-19 crisis.

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US Health Secretary Says 40Mln Coronavirus Vaccine Doses Ready by January If Approved

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US Health Secretary Alex Azar says up to 40 million coronavirus vaccine doses will be ready for rollout by the end of December pending approval.

"By the end of December, we expect to have about 40 million doses of these vaccines available for distribution, pending FDA [Food and Drug Administration] authorization," Azar told reporters on Wednesday.

The number of doses will allow up to 20 million Americans to be vaccinated shortly thereafter, Azar stated, with vulnerable individuals being given priority.

It is anticipated that the vaccines will be procured from either Pfizer and co-collaborators BioNTech or Moderna. Dr. Moncef Slaoui, chief adviser of the Trump administration's Operation Warp Speed, said that the two vaccines will be filed for emergency approval in near future. The Health Secretary said he expects that the two vaccine candidates will be approved within weeks. The vaccine will be ready for distribution within 24 hours after approval, Operation Warp Speed chief operations officer Army Gen. Gustave Perna said. Several vaccine candidates, including Russia's Sputnik V, are reportedly ready for delivery within the next few months.

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US Senators Seek to Prevent \$23Bln Drone Sale to UAE

WASHINGTON, November 19 (Sputnik) - Three US Senators introduced four separate resolutions seeking to prevent a \$23 billion sale worth of drones, F-35 joint strike fighter jets and air-to-air missiles to the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

"There are a number of outstanding concerns as to how these sales would impact the national security interests of both the United States and of Israel," Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, accompanied by Democrat Chris Murphy and Republican Rand Paul, who introduced the measures on Wednesday.

Last week, the US administration has approved the sale of several advanced defense capabilities to the UAE, including up to 50 F-35 fifth generation fighter jets and up to 18 MQ-9B Unmanned Aerial Systems.

Menendez said preventing this sale would help to avert a new arms race in the Middle East. Murphy accused the UAE of violating past similar agreements, which allowed different militia groups to obtain US arms.

"The Emiratis are an important security partner, but their recent behavior indicates that these weapons may be used in violation of US and international law," Murphy said.

If approved, the resolutions will allow US Congress to prohibit sales of certain arms to the UAE. In October, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz announced in a statement that Israel has withdrawn its objections against the planned United States' sale of F-35 jets to UAE after Jerusalem secured guarantees that its qualitative military edge in the Middle East will be maintained.

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Bangladeshi Husband, Wife Plead Guilty of Supporting Islamic State - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - A married couple from Bangladesh who lived in the United States pleaded guilty of providing support and resources to the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia), the US Justice Department said in a press release.

In 2015, Shahidul Gaffar and Nabila Khan, a married couple originally from Bangladesh but living in the US state of Pennsylvania, provided financial support to two of Khan's brothers who traveled to Syria to join Islamic State terrorists, the release said.

Gaffar sent international money transfers to one of his wife's two brothers, I.K, to support I.K's travel to Syria. Meanwhile, Khan asked her sister living in Bangladesh to sell some of Khan's gold and provide the money to their oldest brother, J.K., to fund his travel to Syria, the release said.

The defendants each face a maximum possible sentence of five years' imprisonment, a \$250,000 fine, and three years' of probation, the release added.

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US COVID-19 Deaths Top 250,000 - Johns Hopkins University

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The number of US deaths caused by the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has exceeded 250,000, John Hopkins University data revealed.

The United States has confirmed more than 11.4 million cases of COVID-19 since the first infection was detected in late January, the data showed on Wednesday.

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Two More Republican Congressmen Test Positive for Coronavirus Virus - Statements

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - Two more Republican members of the US House of Representatives, Dan Newhouse and Doug Lamborn, have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, the lawmakers announced in statements.

"I began to feel a little run down yesterday, so I took a COVID-19 test," Newhouse said via Twitter on Wednesday. "Last night [Tuesday], the results came back positive for the virus. My symptoms remain mild ... I am quarantining and will continue to serve the people of Central Washington from home."

Lamborne has also tested positive and is experiencing mild symptoms, his office announced in a press release also on Wednesday.

"Congressman Doug Lamborn (CO-05) has recently tested positive for COVID-19 and is experiencing mild symptoms. He has been in contact with the US House Attending Physician and is following all CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] guidelines and isolating at his home in Colorado Springs," the announcement said.

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US Lawmakers Pass Measure to Oppose Russia's Alleged Religious Violations in Crimea

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US lawmakers have passed a measure calling on the government to oppose Russia's alleged religious freedom violations in Crimea and urging the president to consider any such violation a basis for determining whether Russia may be designated as a country of particular concern for religious freedom.

"It is the policy of the United States to consider any alien who, while serving as an official of the government of Russia, was responsible for or directly carried out particularly severe violations of religious freedom in the sovereign territory of Ukraine that Russia illegally occupies or controls, including through non-state armed groups and illegal entities it commands and supports, to have committed particularly severe violations of religious freedom for purposes of applying section 212(a)(2)(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (8 U.S.C. 1182(a)(2)(G)) with respect to any such alien," the document said on Wednesday.

The lawmakers said that in order to decide on whether to designate Russia as a nation of particular concern for religious freedom, US leaders should consider any particularly severe violation of religious freedom in Crimea.

Crimea, a Russian enclave, was transferred to Ukraine in 1954 by the then-Soviet Communist Party leader Nikita Khrushchev. In 2014, 96 percent of Crimea residents voted in a referendum in favor of rejoining Russia.

Ukraine, as well as the majority of Western countries, have refused to recognize the results of the referendum. Russia has insisted that the referendum was conducted in full compliance with international law and that it expressed in a highest democratic forum the will of the Crimean people to become part of Russia again.

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US Senators Seek to Prevent \$23Bln Drone Sale to UAE

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - Three US Senators introduced four separate resolutions seeking to prevent a \$23 billion sale of drones, F-35 joint strike fighter jets, and air-to-air missiles to the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

"There are a number of outstanding concerns as to how these sales would impact the national security interests of both the United States and of Israel," said Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, accompanied by Democrat Chris Murphy and Republican Rand Paul, who introduced the measures on Wednesday.

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US Senator Tests Positive for COVID-19 Antibodies After Joining Pfizer Vaccine Trial

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US Senator Steve Daines, who participated in a trial of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine, said he has now acquired antibodies against the coronavirus in a press release.

"While this was a blind trial, I have since tested positive for COVID-19 antibodies," Daines said Wednesday.

Daines said he and his wife, Cindy, decided to participate in the trial with more than 100 others from his home state of Montana.

"My goal is to help build confidence and trust for Montanans and the American people wondering if they should take the vaccine when it is approved. This is about saving lives. This is about supporting our healthcare heroes," Daines added.

Earlier on Wednesday, Pfizer announced their vaccine developed with BioNTech had demonstrated 95 percent effectiveness in trials and that they plan to seek emergency use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration within days.

In vaccine trials, half of participants get the vaccine and the other half receive a placebo, with nobody including trial administrators knowing who got what.

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Americans Warm to Coronavirus Vaccine, 58% Now Willing to Try - Poll

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - Americans' fear of coronavirus vaccinations has begun to ease, even before two vaccine makers announced promising results of trials indicating 95 effectiveness, a new Gallup poll revealed.

"Americans' willingness to be vaccinated against COVID-19 rebounded a bit in October, as seen in Gallup polling conducted before Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna made promising announcements about the likely effectiveness of their coronavirus vaccines. Fifty-eight percent of Americans in the latest poll say they would get a COVID-19 vaccine, up from a low of 50 percent in September," a press release explaining the poll said on Wednesday.

The 42 percent of US adults saying they would not get a vaccine is down from 50% in September, but still indicative of significant challenges ahead for public health and government officials in achieving mass public compliance with vaccine recommendations, the release said.

Democrats showed the largest increase in willingness to get a COVID-19 vaccine, with 69 percent willing compared with 53 percent in September. Democrats have been consistently more likely than Republicans and independents to say they would get a vaccine since Gallup first asked about the issue in July, the release added.

Another significant increase in willingness to get a vaccine is seen in Americans aged 45 to 64, with 49 percent now willing, up from 36 percent in September. However, this age group remains the least likely to say they would get a vaccine, according to the release.

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US House Passes Bill to Expand Lukashenko Sanctions, Target Belarus-Russia Ties

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a measure on Wednesday to reject Belarus' August election, expand sanctions on President Alexander Lukashenko and allow for designating Russian individuals allegedly involved in a crackdown on protests.

The bill proclaims the rejection of the August 9 Belarusian presidential election to be the official US policy, blocks recognition of Lukashenko as the legitimately elected president, and calls for a new presidential election that complies with international standards.

The measure also targets integration efforts between Russia and Belarus, stating that the United States refuses to recognize "any incorporation of Belarus into a so-called 'Union State' that is under the control of Russia."

The bill also expands the existing sanctions allowed for under the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004. The changes to the legislation allow for the designation of any "Russian individual that has significantly participated in the crackdown on independent press or human rights abuses related to political repression in Belarus, including the Russian propagandists sent to replace local employees at Belarusian state media outlets."

The legislation requires the US Secretary of State, in coordination with the Director of National Intelligence, to submit two reports to Congress on "Russia's efforts to undermine Belarus' sovereignty and independence and the assets owned by Lukashenko."

Other provisions include calls for the immediate release of all political prisoners in Belarus, increased assistance to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law, expanded media broadcasts in the country as well as continued coordination with the European Union and other US allies.

Lukashenko won his sixth term in office by securing 80.1 percent of the vote in the August 9 election. Belarus's opposition refuses to recognize the results and has since been staging protests throughout the country.

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US House Adopts Resolution to Prohibit Russia's Participation in G7

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) – The US House of Representatives on Wednesday adopted a bill to block federal funds to facilitate Russia's participation in the G7 or the restoration of the G8, along with a separate resolution condemning Moscow for the alleged poisoning of Russian opposition figure Alexy Navalny.

"Notwithstanding any other provision of law, no Federal funds are authorized to be appropriated to take any action to support or facilitate (1) the participation of Russia in a Group of Seven proceeding; or (2) the reconstitution of the Group of Eight to include Russia," the bill on the G7 said.

Russia was disinvented from the informal club of the world's leading nations as part of international response to the reunification of Crimea in 2014 following a political crisis in Ukraine and a referendum.

According to the draft, the prohibition will be in place until the US State Department certifies that "Russia has ended its occupation of Crimea and certain parts of Georgia and is complying with its commitments and taking specified actions related to these areas."

Another precondition requires that the Department of State and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) certify that Russia "has halted all interference into the elections of certain countries, including the United States and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization member states."

Separately, the US House also passed legislation condemning the alleged poisoning of Navalny and calling for a robust US and international response to the situation.

The bill also urges the US State Department and Department of Treasury to use their authority under the Magnitsky Act to designate individuals allegedly involved in the poisoning.

Navalny was hospitalized in the Siberian city of Omsk on August 20, after falling ill on a plane. Russian doctors found no traces of poisonous substances in his test samples. Navalny was later transferred to a clinic in Germany. The German government then said citing local doctors that he had been poisoned, adding later that these conclusions were confirmed by laboratories in France and Sweden.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, November 18(Sputnik)

PROTESTS IN BERLIN

* Berlin police said on Wednesday that it had detained 190 people during mass protests in the German capital and nine police officers had been injured.

* Police used water cannons and tear gas to disperse protesters who gathered next to the Bundestag building in the center of Berlin, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

NEW US IRAN-RELATED SANCTIONS

* The United States has targeted dozens of individuals and entities in a new round of Iran-related sanctions, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday, as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned that more actions would follow in the coming weeks and months.

* The United States must immediately lift all unilateral sanctions against Iran following its withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018, Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's Permanent Representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), said.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH CEASEFIRE

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov discussed with OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs the coordination of efforts to resolve the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday.

* The ceasefire is in force along the contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh, the spokesman for the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev said that Russia and Turkey would participate in "operations to ensure security" and the Armenian and Azeri nationals in Karabakh.

MOSCOW HOSPITAL INCIDENT

*Emergency services were looking into an incident in Kommunarka hospital in the south of Moscow, which is meant for treatment of COVID-19 and other infections, after reports of equipment explosion emerged on social media.

* There was no fire in the building of the capital's infectious diseases hospital in Kommunarka, there were no people inside, the Russian Emergencies Ministry's headquarters in Moscow told Sputnik.

* Accident damage control after oxygen line depressurization near the infectious hospital in Moscow's Kommunarka has been completed, the Moscow Health Department said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINE

* The final analysis of the Phase III clinical trials of US pharmaceutical company Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine, developed in cooperation with German biotechnology company BioNTech, showed its 95 percent efficiency (while an earlier press release said it was 90 percent effective), Pfizer announced.

* Russia has already produced 58,000 doses of Sputnik V vaccine for general use, with more than 650,000 expected in November, Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova said.

* Russia's research center Vector has received the Health Ministry's authorization for post-registration trials of its EpiVacCorona vaccine and the trials should be completed on June 15, according to the clinical trials register of the ministry.

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August Storms Cause Biggest Monthly Drop in Gulf of Mexico Oil Since 2008 - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - A 15 day shutdown of Gulf of Mexico (GOM) oil rigs in late August due to back-to-back hurricanes created the largest single monthly drop in the region's oil output in more than a decade, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in a report on Wednesday.

"Hurricane Laura and Hurricane Marco, which came through the GOM consecutively, caused shut-ins (in other words, not operating) starting on August 22, 2020, and led operators to reduce output for 15 days. Hurricane Marco (the weaker of the two storms) came through first, making landfall on August 24, which affected the magnitude and timing of shut-ins from Hurricane Laura," the report said.

The report cited US Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement estimates that 14.4 million barrels of crude oil production was curtailed during the 15-day period and that about 84 percent of GOM crude oil production halted at the peak of the disruptions as oil crews evacuated.

So far in 2020, five hurricanes and one tropical depression have caused disruptions to crude oil production in the area. Hurricane Zeta was the most recent storm to hit the GOM, causing production curtailments through November 4. To date, 30 named storms have formed in the Atlantic in 2020, surpassing the 28 storms of 2005 and making the 2020 Atlantic hurricane season the most active on record, according to the report.

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White House National Security Chief Heads to Southeast Asia, Alaska - NSC

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien began visits to Vietnam and the Philippines, with a stop in Alaska added to promote security in the Arctic, the National Security Council (NSC) said on Wednesday.

"NSA Robert C. O'Brien departed today to visit Vietnam and the Philippines where he will meet leaders in both countries to reaffirm the strength of our bilateral relationships and to discuss regional security cooperation," the NSC said via Twitter.

While traveling, O'Brien will also stop in Alaska to promote Arctic security efforts, the release said.

He will also meet US service members at Joint Base Hickam in Hawaii, the NSC added.

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Trump, Other Republicans Undermining Trust in US Election Process - State Official

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump and other elected US political leaders are undermining trust in the country's electoral and democratic processes, Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs, who has received personal death threats, said in a statement on Wednesday.

"There are those including our own president, members of Congress and other democratically-elected leaders who are perpetrating misinformation and are encouraging others to distrust the election results in a manner that violates the oath of office they took," she said. Hobbs, a Democrat, also criticized Arizona state Governor Doug Ducey, a Republican, for not publicly condemning the threats and disparagement. She said the governor's "deafening silence" had contributed to the growing unrest.

Republicans are also trying to block the formal certification of presidential election results giving victories to Presumptive President-Elect Joe Biden in Arizona and in other closely fought states such as Michigan, Nevada and Pennsylvania.

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US Denies 2 Airlines' Requests to Fly Humanitarian Cargo to Cuba - Transportation Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The US refused to exempt two charter airline firms from a ban on flights between the United States and Cuba after the State Department ruled the flights were not eligible for a humanitarian exemption, the Transportation Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

"We received guidance from the Department of State that the applications did not fall within the specified exceptions, and that grant of the requested authority would not be in the foreign policy interests of the United States," the release said. "Accordingly, DOT [Transportation Department] has issued an order denying the requested exemptions."

Skyway Enterprises and IBC Airways, Inc. (IBC) said their proposed flights are humanitarian in nature and therefore should be permitted under the exceptions in the DOT's charter suspension order, the release said.

Both companies requested exemptions from to operate small-aircraft all-cargo charter flights between Miami and Havana, the release added.

The Trump administration largely reversed an opening of commerce between the US and Cuba under the Obama administration, which for a period opened the island to American tourists despite a Cold War-era embargo against the communist ruled island imposed by Congress in the 1960s.

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US Lawmakers Pass Measure Urging Support for NPT Via Cooperation With Other Nuclear States

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US lawmakers passed a measure on Wednesday that urges the government to continue strongly supporting the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), including by stimulating opportunities for collaboration with other nuclear weapons states.

"Resolved, That the House of Representatives... urges the United States to continue to be a leader in supporting the NPT and the global non- proliferation regime, by (A) continuing to encourage all States Party to the NPT to comply fully with the NPT; (B) maintaining support for the International Atomic Energy Agency through its assessed and voluntary contributions and promote the universal adoption of the IAEA Additional Protocol," the bill says.

The resolution also urges the US government to encourage opportunities for cooperation with other nuclear weapons states in order to reduce the number of such weapons as well as develop policies that would prevent states who are parties to the NPT from pulling out from the accord.

In addition, the measure is calling for "discouraging the unlawful spread of uranium enrichment technologies and ensuring such technologies covered under the NPT are properly verified," and "maintaining global moratoria on nuclear explosive testing, which is in the national security interest of the United States."

The Non-Proliferation Treaty, in effect since 1970, is a multilateral agreement aimed at scaling down global nuclear arsenals. It commits the nuclear powers to disarmament and prohibits non-nuclear powers from acquiring nuclear weapons. It does not, however, preclude countries from using nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, such as to generate energy.

The United Nations arranges NPT review talks every five years.

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American Voter Happiness With Trump Loss Exceeds Joy Over Biden Win - Poll

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - More Americans say they are happy that President Donald Trump lost the election than those who are happy that former Vice President Joe Biden won, a poll by Monmouth University said on Wednesday.

"A third of the country is 'happy' that Donald Trump lost the election - which is slightly more than the one-quarter who feels the same about Joe Biden winning," a press release summarizing the poll said.

The poll also found that a majority of Americans believe the election was conducted fairly, although most Trump voters think Biden's victory is due to voter fraud, the release said. Among Trump voters, 26 percent said they are angry that the incumbent lost, but more (36 percent) are angry at the idea that Biden won. While 60 percent of Americans believe Biden won the election fair and square, 32 percent say he only won it due to voter fraud. Three-quarters (77 percent) of Trump backers say Biden's win was due to fraud, the release added.

The poll also showed most Americans (61 percent) disapprove of how Trump is handling the presidential transition process while 31 percent approve, according to the release.

Trump has said he won the election but victory was stolen from him via massive fraud and acts of impropriety by Democrats. Trump has initiated audits and recounts in several states as well as filed lawsuits in state and federal courts. Some states have said they have found no substantial evidence of fraud.

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Apple to Pay Over 30 US States \$113Mln for iPhone Throttling - Missouri Attorney General

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - A coalition of US state attorney generals has secured a \$113 million settlement with Apple for its "throttling" of consumers' iPhone speeds to prevent unexpected shutdown of the devices, Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt said in a statement Wednesday.

"A coalition of over 30 other attorneys general announced a \$113 million settlement with Apple Inc. regarding Apple's 2016 decision to throttle consumers' iPhone speeds in order to address unexpected shutdowns in some iPhones," Schmitt said.

He said Missouri will receive \$3.4 million from the settlement, which also required Apple to provide "disclosures of truthful information" to consumers about iPhone battery health, performance, and power management in various forms on its website, in update installation notes, and in the iPhone user interface itself.

The multistate investigation was led by the attorneys general of Arizona, Arkansas, and Indiana, and supported by an executive committee including the attorneys general of Missouri, Louisiana, Ohio, Texas, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia.

Breaking down the case, Schmitt said Apple discovered that battery issues were leading to unexpected shutdowns in iPhones and rather than disclosing these issues or replacing batteries in the devices, the company concealed the issues from consumers.

He said Apple's concealment ultimately led to a software update in December 2016 that reduced iPhone performance in an effort to keep the phones from unexpectedly shutting down. The attorneys general had also alleged that Apple's concealment of the battery issues and decision to throttle the performance of consumers' iPhones led to the company profiting from selling additional iPhones to consumers whose phone performance Apple had slowed.

Apple has entered into a proposed settlement of class action litigation related to the same conduct, and under that, will pay out up to \$500 million in consumer restitution.

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Trump Campaign Pays Wisconsin \$3M for Partial Ballot Recount - Elections Commission

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump's campaign wired \$3 million to officials in Wisconsin to fund a partial recount of votes in the November 3 US presidential election, the state Elections Commission said in a press release on Wednesday.

"The request is for all of Milwaukee and Dane Counties. No other counties or jurisdictions were requested," the highest state election official Meagan Wolfe said. "It was filed in-person in our office today at 10:58 a.m. and appears, upon facial review, to meet all of the requirements in pairing with the payment that was received late yesterday."

Wolfe said the commission had received \$3 million from the Trump campaign prior to the filing. The commission plans to issue a recount order on Thursday, which will set in motion a 13 day clock with a December 1 deadline to complete the recount and certify the election results, the release said.

The Trump campaign in an earlier statement claimed Wisconsin election "illegally altered absentee ballots, illegally issued absentee ballots, and [provided] illegal advice given by government officials allowing Wisconsin's Voter ID laws to be circumvented."

The campaign also contends that officials sent absentee ballots to "indefinitely confined" voters without requiring that the voters submit identification, as required by state election laws.

A state website defines indefinitely confined voters as people with restricted mobility due to age, physical illness, infirmity or disability.

The Trump campaign claimed the number of confined voter ballots surged from 72,000 in 2019 to 240,000 in the November election and that a "substantial number" of those ballots were returned without proper identification.

The latest tally shows Biden beat Trump in Wisconsin by more than 20,000 votes.

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US House Adopts Resolutions Condemning China's Actions in Hong Kong, Tibet

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US House lawmakers passed on Wednesday two bills to condemn China's actions in Hong Kong and Tibet.

"[US House] condemns the action by the People's Republic of China's National People's Congress to advance national security legislation for Hong Kong through irregular procedures, which constitutes a violation of the letter and spirit of the Joint Declaration [of China and the UK

on Hong Kong], and the Basic Law which is the implementing document of the Joint Declaration," the Hong Kong resolution said.

Both non-binding resolutions have been adopted by voice vote.

US lawmakers condemned actions of authorities in Beijing and the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, accusing them of violating fundamental rights and freedoms of Hong Kong residents and undermining its autonomy.

The international community stands in solidarity with the people of Hong Kong, who face "grave threats "to their rights and freedoms," legislators said.

The second resolution underscored the need to hold Chinese officials responsible for religious freedom abuses targeting Tibetan Buddhists.

Chinese authorities repeatedly insist that they "must control" the selection of the next leader of Tibetan Buddhism, the resolution noted, acknowledging that followers of this religion live all over the world.

US House supported the efforts of the Buddhist leader Dalai Lama and the Tibetan leadership to achieve genuine autonomy for Tibetans through negotiations without pre-conditions with the People's Republic of China, the resolution said.

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US Drops Drug Charges Against Ex-Mexican Defense Chief - Attorney General Barr

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department has dropped drug and money laundering charges against former Mexican general and national defense secretary Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda to enable Mexico to pursue its own investigations in the matter, Attorney General William Barr said on Wednesday.

"In recognition of the strong law enforcement partnership between Mexico and the United States, and in the interests of demonstrating our united front against all forms of criminality, the US Department of Justice has made the decision to seek dismissal of the US criminal charges against former Secretary Cienfuegos, so that he may be investigated and, if appropriate, charged, under Mexican law," Barr said in a Justice Department statement issued jointly with his Mexican counterpart Alejandro Gertz Manero.

Zepeda was arrested in Los Angeles, California, on October 15 on charges of conspiracy to manufacture, import, and distribute narcotics into the United States and money laundering, according to the statement.

The Mexican Fiscalia General de la Republica, Mexico's counterpart to the Justice Department, launched its investigation into the matter upon learning of the arrest and charges, the statement said.

Zepeda's US lawyer Edward Sapone told reporters that he expected his client to return home to Mexico later on Wednesday.

The Washington Post called the dropping of the charges an "extraordinary" decision in one of the highest-profile drug-trafficking cases in decades after a long-term, top-secret US investigation that allegedly revealed Zepeda's ties to Mexico's criminal underworld.

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US House Democrats Tentatively Re-Elect Pelosi as Speaker, Hoyer as Majority Leader

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi tentatively won another term as leader with the rest of her leadership also re-elected in a virtual election by Democrats, Chairman of the House Democratic Caucus Hakim Jefferies told reporters on Wednesday.

"The House Democratic Caucus elected Nancy Pelosi as our speaker designee for the 117th Congress, Steny Hoyer as our majority leader for the 117th Congress, Jim Clyburn as our majority whip for the 117th Congress and Katherine Clark as our assistant speaker," Jefferies said.

The speakership position will require a vote by the entire House of Representatives when the next Congress convenes in January, with Pelosi likely to be selected since she is the only candidate for the post.

Pelosi acknowledged having said earlier that the next Congress would likely be her last as speaker but she remained noncommittal when asked about future plans.

"I consider this a gift and I can't wait to be working with Joe Biden," Pelosi said.

The assistant speaker's position was the only contested leadership race, with Clark defeating Congressman David Cicilline.

As No. 4 in the House leadership, Clark is the highest ranking woman in the House, apart from Pelosi.

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US Judge Orders Immigration Enforcement to Stop Expelling Migrant Children - Filing

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - A federal judge has ordered US immigration enforcement to stop expelling migrant children who arrive alone at the southern border, court documents revealed on Wednesday.

The Trump administration had previously expelled migrant children at the US-Mexico border under an order from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that barred entry in order to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

"For the foregoing reasons the court ADOPTS the Report and Recommendation, ECF No. 65 and PROVISIONALLY GRANTS Plaintiff's Motion to Certify Class, ECF No. 2, and GRANTS Plaintiff's Motion for Preliminary Injunction, ECF No. 15. The Government's request to stay the Court's Order while it decides whether to appeal and/or pending appeal is DENIED for substantially the same reasons as those articulated in this Opinion," the court document said.

The judge said expelling children would cause irreparable harm and that hardships posed to them would outweigh the hardships endured by the US government. The US government has restricted court hearings for asylum seekers in the United States due to the coronavirus pandemic.

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All Michigan Counties Certify US Presidential Election Results - Official

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - All of Michigan's counties have voted to certify the results of the November 3 US election, the state's Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson said on Wednesday.

On Monday, the canvassing board of Wayne County, Michigan's most populous, was initially unable to certify the results of the election due to malpractices alleged by two Republican members of the 4-person panel. However, hours later the board members reached a compromise to overcome the 2-2 partisan deadlock.

"All 83 counties have voted to certify the results of the Nov. 3 election," Benson said in a tweet. "Next, the Board of State Canvassers is scheduled to meet Nov. 23 to issue final certification of the Nov. 3 election. The meeting will be open to the public. More information to follow."

Democratic party candidate and projected President-elect Joe Biden won 68 percent of the vote in Wayne County, which includes the city of Detroit and where more than 850,000 ballots were cast, according to official results posted by Fox News. Biden won the state by roughly 146,000 votes, or 2.7 percent of the total.

Michigan, which represents 16 electoral votes, was one of the most critical battleground states in the 2020 race. Trump narrowly defeated Hillary Clinton in Michigan in 2016. Biden has won the electoral college vote 306-232 while capturing 51% (79.3 million) of the national popular vote.

Trump pounced on Benson's remarks on Wednesday to buttress his allegations of widespread cheating in the election.

"The Great State of Michigan, with votes being far greater than the number of people who voted, cannot certify the election. The Democrats cheated big time, and got caught. A Republican WIN!," he tweeted.

On Monday, Trump fired the country's top election security official, Chris Krebs, for disputing the president's claims of vote fraud.

Benson defended the integrity of the Michigan result in another tweet, praising the hard work of the state's electoral workers.

"One reason the 2020 Presidential elections were the most secure in American history is in no small part due to @C_C_Krebs & his team. He is the ultimate, consummate professional & leaders on both sides of the aisle appreciate (h)is integrity, experience, and commitment to democracy," Benson said.

Trump has refused to concede his defeat to Biden and has filed multiple lawsuits in various states and jurisdictions where votes show he lost, in an attempt to overturn the results.

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Ex-Raytheon Engineer Jailed for Sending Military Technology to China - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - A Washington, DC judge sentenced a former Raytheon engineer to more than three years in prison for sending sensitive military-related technology to China, the US Department of Justice said in a press release on Wednesday. "Today, Wei Sun, 49, a Chinese national and naturalized citizen of the United States, was sentenced to 38 months in prison by District Court Judge Rosemary Marquez. Sun previously pleaded guilty to one felony count of violating the Arms Export Control Act (AECA)," the release said.

The Justice Department said that Sun traveled from the United States to China from December 2018 to January 2019 and brought along unclassified technical information in his company-issued computer, including data associated with an advanced missile guidance system that was controlled and regulated.

"Sun was employed in Tucson for 10 years as an electrical engineer with Raytheon Missiles and Defense. Raytheon Missiles and Defense develops and produces missile systems for use by the US military and during his employment with the company, he had access to information directly related to defense-related technology," the release said.

Some of this defense technical information constituted what is defined as "defense articles," which are controlled and prohibited from export without a license under the Arms Export Control Act and the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR), the release added.

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Lunar Space Base HALO Living Module Passes First Design Review - Northrop Grumman

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The Habitation and Logistics Outpost (HALO) module to house astronauts at the Gateway space station orbiting the Moon has passed its first design review, Northrop Grumman announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"Northrop Grumman Corporation has successfully completed its initial preliminary design review (PDR) event for the HALO," the release said. "The module will serve as living quarters for astronauts at the Gateway during lunar exploration missions."

The design for HALO is based on Northrop Grumman's Cygnus spacecraft that currently delivers supplies, equipment and experiments to the International Space Station, Northrop Grumman noted.

"Design upgrades for HALO include command and control systems, as well as environmental control and life support systems," the release said.

The HALO module will serve both as a crew habitat and docking hub for vehicles navigating between Earth and the Moon. With NASA's Orion spacecraft docked, HALO will be able to sustain up to four astronauts for up to 30 days as they travel to and from the lunar surface, Northrop Grumman added.

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Georgia Expects to Complete Hand Recount by Midnight Wednesday - Election Official

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The US state of Georgia expects to have its hand recount of ballots for the 2020 presidential election done by the Wednesday midnight deadline, Voting System Implementation Manager Gabriel Sterling said during a virtual news conference on Wednesday.

"We anticipate hitting our mark at midnight tonight to finish the audit," Sterling said on Wednesday afternoon.

Sterling said he expects the state to announce the final results of the recount by Thursday morning. Georgia's deadline to certify the election results is Friday.

State election officials have so far uncovered a cache of 2,600 more votes that should have been counted, which are expected to reduce President Donald Trump's state-wide deficit to Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden that currently stands at 14,000 votes.

US media networks have projected Biden to be the winner of the presidential election held earlier in November. Trump has said he won but the election victory was stolen from him via massive fraud and acts of impropriety. Trump has subsequently sought redress by seeking recounts and filing lawsuits in state and federal courts.

Some states have said they found no substantial evidence of massive election fraud. In addition, a coalition of US federal and state agencies said in a joint statement that the 2020 election was the most secure in the country's history.

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Ex-Raytheon Engineer Jailed for Sending Military Technology to China - US Justice Dept.

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US Imposes New Iran-Related Sanctions on Dozens of Individuals, Entities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has targeted dozens of individuals and entities in a new round of Iran-related sanctions, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday, as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned that more actions would follow in the coming weeks and months.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control took action today against a key patronage network for the Supreme Leader of Iran, the Islamic Revolution Mostazafan Foundation (Bonyad Mostazafan, or the Foundation), an immense conglomerate of some 160 holdings in key sectors of Iran's economy, including finance, energy, construction, and mining," the Treasury said.

Iran's Minister of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) Mahmoud Alavi is among those newly designated by the Treasury, along with members of the Mostazafan Foundation's board of directors, Amir-Mansour Borghei, Javad Ghana'at, Khosro Mokhtari, and Mohammad-Ali Yazdan Joo.

Pompeo said the US "maximum pressure" campaign was working and would continue in the coming weeks and months. He also announced that two Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps members - Brigadier General Heidar Abbaszadeh and IRGC Colonel Reza Papi - have been designated. "These individuals and their immediate family members are ineligible for entry into the United States," Pompeo said

The Treasury Department said Mahmoud Alavi has been involved in human rights abuses while the ministry's agents are responsible for beatings, sexual abuse, prolonged interrogations and coerced confessions of prisoners.

"MOIS has employed mock executions and forms of sexual violence in its interrogations of prisoners, and its agents have arrested and detained members of the Baha'i religion without charges," the release said.

The Treasury Department also said that the State Department sanctioned Abbaszadeh and Papi over human rights violations.

"Abbaszadeh and Papi were involved in the killing of nearly 150 individuals in the city of Mahshahr as part of the Iranian regime's crackdown on the November 2019 protests," the release said. "These individuals and their immediate family members are ineligible for entry into the United States."

The Treasury Department said the Islamic Revolution Mostazafan Foundation, its leadership and 50 Bonyad Mostazafan subsidiaries have been sanctioned pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13876, that targets Iran's Supreme Leader and his office.

"Bonyad Mostazafan was created in the wake of the Islamic Revolution to confiscate and manage property, including that originally belonging to religious minorities such as Baha'is and Jews," the release said. "The Foundation has since emerged as a source of power, wealth, and influence for the Supreme Leader and his inner circle. Bonyads are opaque, quasi-official organizations controlled by current and former government officials and clerics that report directly to the Supreme Leader."

The Treasury Department pointed out that Bonyads receives benefits from the government, including via tax exemptions.

"They account for a significant portion of Iran's non-petroleum economy, with the Foundation itself estimated to account for over one percent of Iran's gross domestic product," it said.

"Bonyad Mostazafan's vast economic wealth is partly the result of asset expropriation and business with human rights abusers and those involved with Iran's support of international terrorism... Bonyad Mostazafan is being designated pursuant to E.O. 13876 for being owned or controlled by, directly or indirectly, the Supreme Leader of Iran."

Among the sanctioned companies that are owned or controlled by Bonyad Mostazafan are Sina Energy Development Company, Bahran Oil, Kaveh Pars Mining Industries Development Company, Sina Financial and Investment Holding Company and Bank Sina and Parsian Tourism and Recreational Centers Company, according to the release.

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Trump Campaign Pays Wisconsin \$3M In for Partial Ballot Recount - Elections Commission

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump's campaign wired \$3 million to officials in Wisconsin to fund a partial recount of votes in the November 3 US presidential election, the state Elections Commission said in a Twitter statement on Wednesday.

"The Wisconsin Elections Commission has received a wire transfer from the Trump campaign for \$3 million. No petition has been received yet, but the Trump campaign has told WEC staff one will be filed today. We have no further information at this time," the commission said.

The Trump campaign in a separate statement said it would file a petition later in the day for a recount in two counties, Milwaukee and Dane, "citing illegally altered absentee ballots, illegally issued absentee ballots, and illegal advice given by government officials allowing Wisconsin's Voter ID laws to be circumvented."

The campaign contends that officials sent absentee ballots to "indefinitely confined" voters without requiring that the voters submit identification, as required by state election laws.

A state website defines indefinitely confined voters as people with restricted mobility due to age, physical illness, infirmity or disability.

The Trump campaign claimed the number of confined voter ballots surged from 72,000 in 2019 to 240,000 in the November election and that a "substantial number" of those ballots were returned without proper identification.

The latest tally shows Biden beat Trump in Wisconsin by more than 20,000 votes.

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Trump Campaign Pays Wisconsin \$3M for Partial Ballot Recount - Elections Commission

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump's campaign wired \$3 million to officials in Wisconsin to fund a partial recount of votes in the November 3 US presidential election, the state Elections Commission said in a Twitter statement on Wednesday.

"The Wisconsin Elections Commission has received a wire transfer from the Trump campaign for \$3 million. No petition has been received yet, but the Trump campaign has told WEC staff one will be filed today. We have no further information at this time," the commission said.

The Trump campaign in a separate statement said it would file a petition later in the day for a recount in two counties, Milwaukee and Dane, "citing illegally altered absentee ballots, illegally issued absentee ballots, and illegal advice given by government officials allowing Wisconsin's Voter ID laws to be circumvented."

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Former US Green Beret Pleads Guilty to Russian Espionage Conspiracy - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - Former Army Green Beret Peter Rafael Dzubinski Debbins pleaded guilty on Wednesday to conspiring with Russian intelligence operatives to provide them with national defense information, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"Debbins today acknowledged that he violated this country's highest trust by passing sensitive national security information to the Russians," John Demers, Assistant Attorney General for National Security, said in the release.

"Debbins betrayed his oath, his country, and his Special Forces team members with the intent to harm the United States and help Russia. Debbins's guilty plea represents another success in the Department's continuing effort to counter the national security threat posed by our nation's adversaries, including Russia," he added.

Debbins is scheduled to be sentenced on February 26, 2021. He faces a maximum penalty of life in prison, but actual sentences for federal crimes are typically less than the maximum penalties.

According to court documents, Debbins visited Russia periodically from 1996 to 2011 and met with local intelligence officials, who encouraged him to pursue an officer career with the Special

Forces after serving in Army chemical units. In 1997, Debbins was assigned a code name and signed a statement attesting that he wanted to serve Russia, the prosecution alleged.

"Over the course of the conspiracy, Debbins provided the Russian intelligence agents with information that he obtained as a member of the US Army, including information about his chemical and Special Forces units," the release said.

Debbins also allegedly provided the Russian intelligence with information about a number of his former Special Forces team members "so that the agents could evaluate... if they would cooperate with the Russian intelligence service," the release added.

The Justice Department announced Debbins' arrest and unveiled charges against him in August.

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US Imposes New Iran-Related Sanctions on Dozens of Individuals, Entities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has targeted dozens of individuals and entities in a new round of Iran-related sanctions, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday, as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned that more actions would follow in the coming weeks and months.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control took action today against a key patronage network for the Supreme Leader of Iran, the Islamic Revolution Mostazafan Foundation (Bonyad Mostazafan, or the Foundation), an immense conglomerate of some 160 holdings in key sectors of Iran's economy, including finance, energy, construction, and mining," the Treasury said.

Iran's Minister of Intelligence and Security Mahmoud Alavi is among those newly designated by the Treasury, along with members of the Mostazafan Foundation's board of directors, Amir-Mansour Borghei, Javad Ghana'at, Khosro Mokhtari, and Mohammad-Ali Yazdan Joo. Pompeo said the US "maximum pressure" campaign was working and would continue in the coming weeks and months. He also announced that two Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps members - Brigadier General Heidar Abbaszadeh and IRGC Colonel Reza Papi - have been designated. "These individuals and their immediate family members are ineligible for entry into the United States," Pompeo said.

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US Defense Secretary to Command Special Forces Independent of Military Branches - Miller

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The US Special Operations Forces have been elevated to a status equal to that of the Army, Navy and other military services in a

reorganization intended to bypass existing command structures, acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller announced on Wednesday.

"I have directed the Special Operations civilian leadership to report directly to me instead of through the current bureaucratic channels," Miller told guests at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. "This historic step finalizes what congress has authorized and directed and will put the Special Operations Command on par with the military services for the first time."

Miller suggested the Special Operations Forces would play an expanded role in plans to reduce US deployments in both Afghanistan and Iraq to 2,500 service members by January 15, 2021, which were announced by President Donald Trump on Tuesday.

The reason for the reorganization, Miller said, is that "transitions and campaigns are fraught with risk."

The US government will not hesitate to respond militarily to any attempts to undermine efforts to end its military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Debbins is scheduled to be sentenced on February 26, 2021. He faces a maximum penalty of life in prison. Actual sentences for federal crimes are typically less than the maximum penalties, the Justice Department said.

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Pompeo Underscores Free, Fair Elections in Talks with Georgia's Leaders - State Dept

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo during talks with senior officials in Georgia underscored the need for free and fair elections in the Eastern

European country, Principal Deputy Spokesperson Cale Brown said in readouts of his meetings in Tbilisi on Wednesday.

Pompeo earlier in the day met with Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia and Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani during a visit to Georgia as part of a seven-country tour from November 13-23

"Secretary Pompeo and President Zourabichvili discussed the importance of US-Georgia security cooperation," Brown said. "Secretary Pompeo reiterated the importance of free and fair elections and the essential role of an independent judiciary in a democracy and urged Georgia to take strong measures against the spread of COVID-19."

Pompeo thanked Zourabichvili for Georgia's support of the OSCE Minsk Group process aimed at solving the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Brown added.

During his meeting with Gakharia and Zalkaliani, Pompeo also spoke about COVID-19 and cyber security.

"Secretary Pompeo also reiterated unwavering US support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russian occupation," Brown said.

Georgian opposition parties have challenged the outcome of the October 31 parliamentary election, which gave the victory to the governing party. Georgian Dream of billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili was declared the winner with 48.22 percent of the vote and is expected to form a new government.

Pompeo arrived in Georgia for a two-day visit on Tuesday. Other destinations on the US top diplomat's tour include France, Turkey, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

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US Clears Boeing 737 MAX To Resume Flights - Federal Aviation Administration

WASHINGTON, November 18 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said in a statement on Wednesday that it rescinded an order that grounded the Boeing 737 MAX after two fatal crashes, but mandated a series of additional steps that must be taken before the aircraft returns to service.

"FAA Administrator Steve Dickson today signed an order (PDF) that paves the way for the Boeing 737 MAX to return to commercial service. Administrator Dickson's action followed a comprehensive and methodical safety review process that took 20 months to complete," the statement said.

After two fatal accidents involving 737 MAX - a Lion Air crash in Indonesia in October 2018, and the Ethiopian Airlines crash in March 2019 - the FAA and other regulators around the world grounded the aircraft, and manufacturer Boeing suspended production of the jets. Investigations into the crashes revealed errors in the functioning of the jet's piloting system, lapses in Boeing's safety standard procedures and cover-ups by company officials.

"In addition to rescinding the order that grounded the aircraft, the FAA today published an Airworthiness Directive specifying design changes that must be made before the aircraft returns to service, issued a Continued Airworthiness Notification to the International Community (CANIC), and published the MAX training requirements," according to the FAA statement.

"These actions do not allow the MAX to return immediately to the skies."

The FAA must approve 737 MAX pilot training program revisions for each US airline operating the MAX and will retain its authority to issue airworthiness certificates and export certificates of airworthiness for all new 737 MAX aircraft manufactured since the FAA issued the grounding order.

Airlines that have parked their MAX aircraft must also take required maintenance steps to prepare them to fly again, the FAA said.