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'Stand Our Ground': US Lawmakers Call to Resist Chinese Communist Party's 'Quest to Exert Dominance'

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Top US intelligence officials have sounded the alarm in recent days about the supreme danger posed by China and the Communist Party of China to the United States. While their rhetoric casts the US as a victim of China's unfair rise, in reality the US' climb to world leadership was helped by its own sabotage of Chinese development.

[In a joint statement on Friday](#), Senate Select Committee on Intelligence acting Chairman Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Vice Chairman Mark Warner (D-VA) said they agree with US Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe "that China poses the greatest national security threat to the United States. Our intelligence is clear: the Chinese Communist Party will stop at nothing to exert its global dominance."

The day prior, [Ratcliffe penned an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal](#) in which he argued that "the People's Republic of China poses the greatest threat to America today, and the greatest threat to democracy and freedom world-wide since World War II."

Ratcliffe claimed "Beijing intends to dominate the US and the rest of the planet economically, militarily and technologically" through a vast espionage plan to steal intellectual property from the US, replicate the technology, then edge those same firms out of the market - a strategy he called "rob, replicate and replace."

Ratcliffe's article isn't limited to attacking the Communist Party of China, however: he also warns of the dangers "Chinese nationals" pose to intellectual property and to "research and development secrets," noting the FBI is "frequently arresting" them. This kind of language poses a further danger to the [roughly 5.1 million Americans of Chinese descent](#), who have already become [the targets of racist attacks over the past year](#) thanks to US President Donald Trump's quest to [blame his government's catastrophic handling](#) of the COVID-19 pandemic on China. Rubio and Warner hit similar notes in their statement, claiming that "Beijing's infiltration of US society has been deliberate and insidious as they use every instrument of influence available to accelerate their rise at America's expense."

"This is our watershed moment and we must stand our ground. The United States must not and cannot accept Beijing's quest to exert dominance, while dismissing international legal norms and committing egregious human rights abuses to further their goals," they added. "We have made considerable progress in rebalancing the US-China relationship and laying a clear marker for US policy going forward, and we will not stand idly by as the Chinese Communist Party attempts to undermine our economic and national security."

Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA), who chairs the House Intelligence Committee, also said in [a Thursday statement quoted by the WSJ](#) that "it's imperative the Intelligence Community rebalance its focus and funding to more effectively address the vast array of challenges that

China poses to our national security. This is an area of substantial bipartisan agreement, and a challenge we must rise to meet.”

Their comments follow a US State Department paper’s publication last month that called for [a decades-long “containment” approach to China](#) akin to that pursued against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The document calls for restructuring American society around the struggle, including revamping the US education system to inculcate in American children the necessity of confronting and halting China’s rise.

Long US History of Destabilizing China

However, the edifice being built by these three pillars of the US intelligence community is ahistorical. While they position the United States as an unwitting victim of China, which is playing dirty in an unfair bid to get the upper hand and should simply accept its place as Number 2 World Power, they ignore the decades in which the US made every effort to “accelerate their rise” at China’s expense.

For example, the US intervened in China twice in the 19th century, helping the British to take the key trading city of Guangzhou in the Second Opium War and sending troops as part of the multi-national imperialist effort to crush the Boxer Rebellion, a widespread 1899-1902 rebellion against the Western powers that had all but taken over China.

At home, in 1882, the US also passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned all immigration from China - again, on the argument that such immigrants posed a threat to the integrity of American society. The law was not fully repealed until 1965.

In China, the period between 1842 and 1949, when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was founded and the country ceased to march to the beat of a Western drum, is called the “century of humiliation.” Even now, Chinese President Xi Jinping only expects [China to have caught up with the West once again by 2049](#), a century after the country resumed its course of development.

After the Communist Party of China won the civil war against the Republic of China, which then became Taiwan, [the CIA reportedly spent nearly \\$100 million funding a guerrilla force](#) inside the new PRC. The CIA also had an entire program [aimed at destabilizing Tibet by funding guerrilla forces](#) there - a program US President Richard Nixon only abandoned in 1971 - and the US has provided extensive support to the rump Republic of China state in Taiwan, even after legally acknowledging the PRC as the sole legitimate government of all of China in 1979.

CIA-linked groups like the National Endowment for Democracy have also played key roles in [supporting dissident groups in Xinjiang](#) and Hong Kong that have staged violent attacks, including riots in Urumqi in July 2009 by al-Qaeda-aligned Uighur separatists that killed 197 people and injured more than 1,700. More recently, the protests that have rocked Hong Kong were revealed to be almost entirely US-backed after China’s new national security law implemented earlier this year banned political groups from receiving outside funding, [and they almost immediately closed shop](#).

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Venezuela’s Parliamentary Elections Are December 6, Here’s What to Expect

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Venezuela's parliamentary elections are scheduled for December 6. The election will be the 26th held since Hugo Chavez's 1998 election ushered in a new era for the country, but since each has its own unique features, Sputnik has assembled an easy guide to the basics of the event.

Some 20.7 million voters will elect 277 deputies to Venezuela's National Assembly on Sunday. Without mail-in ballots, the results are expected to be known before Monday morning, and the event is expected to return the country to some sense of normal political functioning, since the present National Assembly was ruled in contempt of the constitution in 2018.

Nuts & Bolts

Venezuelan lawmakers are elected for five-year terms; the last election was in 2015, and those elected on Sunday will be sworn in on January 5, 2021, and serve until January 5, 2026.

However, not all delegates are selected the same way, with 48 elected on a new national list system and 96 based on regional lists. Another 130 will be elected based on a first-past-the-post system, and three delegates are required to come from the country's Indigenous communities.

It is important to note that the new National Assembly will have 110 more delegates than the present legislature - [a June decision by a new electoral board](#) increased the body's membership from 167 to 217.

Even the way in which Venezuelans will cast their ballots has changed. Thanks to [a catastrophic arson attack in March, nearly 50,000 voting machines](#) and 582 computers belonging to the civil registry were destroyed. As a result, the country will be deploying new electronic voting machines that produce a paper receipt for auditing purposes.

Last weekend, representatives from all 107 political parties running candidates in the election joined members of the National Electoral Council in an audit of the voting machines [in Mariche, Miranda state, TeleSUR reported](#). The machines [scan each voter's ID and fingerprint in order to verify](#) their identity and prevent double-voting.

New Political Lines

There are a huge number of parties posting delegates on Sunday: 107 groups broken up into roughly five political blocs - three on the right and two on the left.

A split left vote is a first for the Bolivarian movement, which has largely remained united behind the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), an umbrella group founded by Chavez in 2007. This time, however, the Communist Party of Venezuela is putting up its own candidates in a new political bloc it calls the Popular Revolutionary Alternative (APR).

Communist Party General Secretary [Oscar Figuera told Venezuelanalysis in September](#) that APR is "a tactical opportunity to regroup forces, revolutionary currents, and other expressions of grassroots Chavismo. It's about building a space for the joint construction of a popular agenda." However, he noted they are not opposed to President Nicolas Maduro or calling for his ouster, since they "see imperialism as the main enemy of the Venezuelan people."

While parts of the opposition close to self-declared interim president Juan Guaido have followed his call to boycott the election, others will still be running candidates, including Venezuela First, Popular Will and United Venezuela, which have formed a united bloc, and a slew of smaller parties on the right that lack substantial cohesion.

In all, the pro-Maduro parties are expected to command a majority in the legislature after Sunday.

Opposition Boycott

Immediately after the elections were announced, Guaido said he would boycott them, and his absence has been used by governments that support his claims to be president as proof the elections aren't legitimate.

On Tuesday, [Guaido used the opportunity of an interview with Agence France-Presse](#) to call for even more sanctions on Venezuela, saying "it would be a tragedy" if the international demands for Maduro's ouster were to slacken.

In September, [some of the opposition parties split on the question of a boycott](#), with Henrique Capriles, an opposition leader who has stood for president several times, opening negotiations with Maduro in the hopes of winning EU observation of the vote.

In the 2015 elections, the opposition mounted a shocking victory when it took 65% of the seats in the National Assembly. However, the tensions between the opposition-controlled assembly and Maduro's government exploded in 2017, when the Supreme Tribunal of Justice declared the legislature to be in contempt, nullifying its decisions after it allowed three lawmakers accused of electoral fraud to be sworn in and passed. Later that year, [the National Constituent Assembly stripped the National Assembly of its powers](#) after it refused to discuss coordination between the two bodies as the former looks to rewrite the Venezuelan constitution.

Since then, the Constituent Assembly has functioned as the country's legislature, although the National Assembly has continued to meet and pass its own measures, which have no legal bearing in the country at present.

International Observers

The US and dozens of its allies have long called into question the legitimacy of Venezuela's democratic processes, but each election has been carefully watched by international election observers, and Sunday's will be no different. Delegations from the African Union, Caribbean Community [and United Nations have all been invited](#), as well as the Council of Latin American Electoral Experts, among other groups.

However, the European Union declined Maduro's invitation, [saying in September that "time is already too short"](#) for them to deploy. Brussels asked the election to be delayed, but Maduro, [who announced the date of the elections in early July](#), has pledged they will go on regardless of "rain, thunder or lightning."

Pre-Emptive International Rejection of Results

Despite the presence of impartial observers and moves such as Maduro's September pardoning of 110 opposition affiliates of Guaido, a number of governments and international bodies positioned against Maduro and Chavismo have already stated they will not recognize the results of the election.

The EU's rejection of the election timeline contained an implicit rejection of the results of that election, and the 14-nation Lima Group, a right-wing bloc of mostly Latin American nations but led by the US, whose sole raison d'être is the removal of Maduro from power, [pledged in August to ignore the election](#).

A hotly contested October [resolution by the US-controlled Organization of American States \(OAS\) denounced](#) the election, saying there was a “lack of minimum democratic conditions to guarantee free, fair, and transparent elections.”

The Trump administration in the [United States has pledged since June not to recognize the results](#), but presumed US President-elect Joe Biden isn't likely to change from that policy. Advisers to the Democratic candidate [told the Washington Post on Friday that Biden](#) wouldn't recognize any vote that is not “free and fair” and would continue to recognize the “democratically elected National Assembly” - i.e., the opposition-controlled one and the self-proclaimed interim presidency of Guaido, its former head.

COVID-19 Precautions

[According to Venezuelanalysis, there are extensive safety precautions](#) at all voting sites to ensure they don't facilitate the spread of COVID-19.

Face masks are required at all polling locations, and each location has a disinfecting station. Moreover, workers will clean each touchscreen after each person casts their vote. Social distancing at the centers and in lines outside will be enforced by the local Bolivarian militias, and all poll workers must test negative for COVID-19 before going to work that day.

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Videos: Los Angeles Area Wildfire Forces 25,000 to Evacuate as Homes Burn
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A new wildfire sprang up in Southern California earlier this week and has already grown massively, destroying several homes and endangering many more. It's just the latest in dozens of fires that have scorched the Pacific state in 2020.

On Wednesday evening, a blaze of unknown cause broke out in a house in Silverado Canyon, a gorge in southern California's Santa Ana Mountains southeast of Los Angeles. However, by Friday morning it had already burned 6,400 acres of land, destroying at least four homes and damaging seven more, according to local reports.

[According to CBS Los Angeles, a notorious regional weather event](#) called the “Santa Ana winds” helped fan what is now known as the Bond Fire into an uncontrolled conflagration. The hot, dry air that rushes down the western slopes of the mountains regularly reaches 40 miles per hour in speed and is known for fueling the area's autumn wildfire season. [San Diego Gas & Electric recorded a 94 mph gust](#) earlier this week.

Videos of the flames and their destruction have been posted on social media by residents as well as the account of the Orange County Fire Authority, which has some 500 firefighters attempting to halt the burn. They present [an image that has become all too familiar](#) in recent years.

"I heard screams, like, 'fire, fire, it's right here so we have to leave right now,'" [Silverado resident Jerry van Wolfgang told KCAL-TV](#) about the blaze's sudden explosion. "I looked out the window and it was already so big."

The fire has already forced 25,000 people from their homes, and firefighters only had the blaze 10% contained as of Friday afternoon, [KTLA reported](#).

The area burned by the Bond Fire had expanded by Friday to near the fire-scarred area destroyed by the Silverado Fire in October, which torched more than 13,000 acres.

The quick Santa Ana Winds also helped the fire to be spotted by NASA satellites, as it blew the smoke out to sea.

At least two US Forest Service firefighters have been injured fighting the blaze. Their conditions are unknown, but CBS reported they were rushed to local hospitals.

Because of the Red Flag warnings prompted by the dry air and high winds, local power provider [Southern California Edison had already cut power to 15,000 homes](#) and businesses in a bid to stop a fire before it starts, but said as many as 263,000 remain under consideration for temporary electrical cuts. However, the power cuts have also limited phone service, meaning that many people issued evacuation orders never received them, CBS noted.

Sparks from power lines and their related facilities have been blamed for a number of destructive wildfires in California, including the 2018 Camp Fire that killed 84 people in northern California - the state's deadliest-ever wildfire.

In March, [Pacific Gas & Electric pleaded guilty to 84 counts of involuntary manslaughter](#) and one count of unlawfully causing a fire. The agreement saw the power company pay out \$3.48 million fines, agree to cover the costs of the investigation, and set up a \$13.5 billion trust to compensate victims of the fire as well as other fires of similar cause going back to 2015.

[According to The Weather Channel, wildfires have consumed](#) more than 6,500 square miles of California this year, damaging or destroying more than 10,400 buildings and killing at least 31 people.

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Israeli Media Claims Ex-PM Olmert Has Tape of Fakhrizadeh Talking About Building 'Five Warheads'

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The revelation could help explain an uptick in US-Israel cooperation against Iran in the late 2000s, as well as providing further context behind the killing of leading Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, whose death has yet to be attributed.

Israeli media published reports claiming former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had a top secret recording of Fakhrizadeh [talking about building nuclear weapons](#). Olmert claims he used the recording in 2008 to win greater cooperation from the US from then-US President George W. Bush.

[According to the Israeli media report](#), based on the recollections of a series of high-level intelligence officials and Ehud Barak, who served as Olmert's defense minister at the time, Olmert played the recording for Bush during the latter's May 2008 visit to Israel to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the country's founding.

He was reportedly so afraid of revealing the source of the recording that he refused to play it while anyone else was around, even the White House national security adviser, Stephen Hadley, who accompanied Bush on the trip.

According to the report, Fakhrizadeh could be heard giving details about the development of Iranian nuclear weapons. The report only quotes selected phrases, however, without the use of the word "nuclear". The scientist complains that the government is not providing him with sufficient funds to carry out his work. On the one hand, Fakhrizadeh says, in an apparent reference to his superiors, "they want five warheads," but on the other, "they aren't letting me work."

Complaining about undue pressure from his superiors, Fakhrizadeh says, in Persian, "They want five warheads," later stating that "they aren't letting me work."

While Barak claimed that Olmert had furnished the recording as proof of the seriousness of Iran's nuclear weapons program, at no point does Fakhrizadeh use the word "nuclear" in any of the quotes.

Bush was reportedly moved enough by the revelation to agree to share intelligence with Tel Aviv about Iran's nuclear activities, and even agreed to joint operations against Iran [that later included the Stuxnet cyber attack](#). However, he stopped short of providing Tel Aviv with the necessary weapons to strike Iran's research facilities, including the purchase of bunker buster bombs that Barak had pressed Bush and Hadley about earlier in their meeting.

Twenty-seven years earlier, in 1981, Israel proved its willingness to carry out military strikes against countries with which it was not at war in order to stop their nuclear weapons programs. The Operation Babylon airstrike on June 9 saw a group of Israeli F-16 fighter-bombers sneak into Iraq undetected and [bomb Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor outside Baghdad](#), which Israel claimed was being used to manufacture plutonium for a nuclear bomb. Ironically, Iranian aircraft struck the same power plant a few months earlier, but failed to disable it.

The operation established what became known as the Begin Doctrine, after Menachem Begin, the Israeli prime minister who ordered the strike. Israel had now begun to carry out pre-emptive strikes against nations in the region with nuclear weapons programs.

"On no account shall we permit an enemy to develop weapons of mass destruction against the people of Israel," Begin said at the time. "We shall defend the citizens of Israel in good time and with all the means at our disposal."

In an interview two years ago, Olmert told Israeli broadcaster Kan that Fakhrizadeh remained a legitimate target, and seemed to boast about the recording and that he had a mole close to the scientist.

"I know Fakhrizadeh well. He doesn't know how well I know him. If I met him in the streets most likely I would recognize him," [he said in 2018, according to Reuters](#). "He does not have immunity, he did not have immunity, and I don't think he will have immunity."

[Fakhrizadeh was assassinated on November 27 in a dramatic ambush](#) on a highway outside Tehran. The attackers reportedly used a car bomb [and robotic machine guns against the scientist's car](#). No nation or group has claimed responsibility for the operation.

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Saudi Arabia, Qatar Near US-Mediated Deal to End Standoff
by [Mary F.](#)

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain all cut their diplomatic ties to Qatar in 2017 and began a blockade against the Middle Eastern country after accusing it of supporting terrorism. Qatar has, however, repeatedly denied all claims that it supports terrorist activity. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are expected to reach an agreement over a dispute that has severed diplomatic and economic ties between the two countries and between Qatar and other Gulf neighbors following US-led reconciliation talks this week, three people with knowledge of the matter [told Bloomberg](#).

However, the tentative agreement does not include the three other countries involved in the dispute, namely the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain. The potential reconciliation has been brokered by Kuwait and the US, with US President Donald Trump's son-in-law and Middle East envoy Jared Kushner traveling earlier this week to the Middle East to meet with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and Qatari Emir Tamim Bin Hamad al-Thani to help mediate a deal between the two countries.

Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser al-Sabah said in a statement read out on Kuwait TV Friday that progress has been made between Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

"Fruitful discussion have taken place recently in which all sides expressed their keenness ... to reach a final agreement," Sabah said, thanking Kushner for his "recent efforts," [Reuters reported](#).

Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud also welcomed "progress" in the Qatar talks and said a "final agreement" appears to be on the horizon, [the Associated Press reported](#).

Meanwhile, Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani said Saudi Arabia and Qatar had taken "an imperative step towards resolving the Gulf crisis," [Axios reported](#). "The interest and security of the people of the Gulf and the region remain our top priority," he added.

According to Bloomberg, which cited two people with insider knowledge, the deal will likely involve reopening air space and land borders.

The Trump administration has been urging the Saudis to make a deal with Qatar as a final diplomatic win before Trump leaves office, as well as pushing Riyadh to normalize relations with Israel, [Axios reported](#). In addition, a former US official told the outlet that Saudi Arabia thought it would benefit the oil-rich region to end the crisis with Qatar.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE were the main actors behind the 2017 boycott, which disrupted trade and business in the region. The boycott consisted of the two nations, along with Bahrain and Egypt, severing diplomatic and trade ties with Qatar and banning Qatari-registered airplanes and ships from using their airspace and sea routes.

The Saudi-led coalition's reason for the boycott was Qatar's alleged support for terrorism and funding of extremist groups. While Qatar has admitted to supporting some Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood*, it has denied claims that it aids militant groups connected to Daesh*. In addition, Qatar did not agree to any of the Saudi-led coalition's demands at the time, which consisted of cutting diplomatic relations with Iran, halting military coordination with Turkey and

shutting down Al Jazeera, a Qatari state-owned news channel which has also been criticized by the Saudi-led coalition. Saudi Arabia in 2017 banned Al Jazeera from the country for being critical of its regime.

The UAE has been more hesitant to improve relations with Qatar and has instead focused on building relationships with Israel while attempting to avoid any confrontations with Iran.

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US House Passes Reform Bill to Federally Decriminalize Marijuana
by [Mary F.](#)

Marijuana, a drug commonly used in the United States, has also been one of the most widely debated substances. While some argue that decriminalization or legalization will help boost the economy and ensure it is safely regulated, others suggest that the drug is addictive and that legalizing it could increase dependence, particularly among teens.

The US House on Friday passed legislation that would decriminalize marijuana at the federal level, marking the first time that either chamber of Congress has voted to legalize marijuana.

The legislation, called the [Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement \(MORE\) Act](#), was passed on a party-line vote of 228-164.

"The MORE Act is a common-sense bill that will make a tangible, real difference in the lives of millions of Americans. I'm proud of this bill centered around ideals of racial, economic, and moral justice and I look forward to the House passing it today," House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerry Nadler (D-N.Y.), who introduced the bill, tweeted before the bill was voted on. The GOP-controlled Senate, however, is not expected to vote for legislation which would remove cannabis from the federal list of controlled substances, expunging some marijuana convictions for nonviolent criminals, and impose a 5% sales tax on cannabis products. The bill would also ban the "denial of federal public benefits to a person on the basis of certain cannabis-related conduct or convictions."

"We're here because we have failed three generations of Black and Brown young people, whose lives can be ruined, or lost, by selective enforcement of these laws. This legislation will end that disaster. It's time for Congress to step up and do its part," Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.), co-chair of the Congressional Cannabis Caucus, said on the House floor on Friday, [the Hill reported](#).

The bill would allow states to individually implement their own regulations on the sale and distribution of medical marijuana. Individuals, however, would no longer be prosecuted on a federal level for marijuana transgressions.

The bill is supported by organizations including the National Cannabis Industry Association, the Marijuana Policy Project and the American Civil Liberties Union.

The bill has been criticized by an anti-cannabis group, Smart Approaches to Marijuana.

"It's an unserious bill that was voted on in an unserious manner and we rest easily knowing there is zero interest in moving this bill in the Senate and zero interest in supporting it in either

the current administration or the incoming one," the organization's president, Kevin Sabet, [said in a statement to the Hill](#).

Earlier this week, Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell criticized the House for passing the cannabis bill instead of focusing on a COVID-19 stimulus bill that both parties reportedly have agreed upon.

"The House of Representatives is spending this week on pressing issues like marijuana. You know, serious and important legislation befitting this national crisis," McConnell sarcastically said this week, [CBS reported](#).

Recreational marijuana is [currently legal in 15 states](#) and Washington DC. Medical marijuana is legal in 34 states.

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Top Health Expert Fauci Warns January Will Be 'Terrible' as US COVID-19 Hospitalizations Spike
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

With a positivity ratio of 10.67%, the US counted an additional 217,664 COVID-19 cases on Thursday, pushing the nation's total case tally since the start of the pandemic past 14 million, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. Health experts have warned that the holiday season is likely to prompt numbers to surge even further.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the US' National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease and who also serves as a member of the White House coronavirus task force, warned on Friday that the month of "January is going to be terrible," largely as a result of families gathering for holiday celebrations.

"I think January is going to be terrible because you're going to have the Thanksgiving surge superimposed upon the Christmas surge," Fauci said [during an interview with Newsweek](#). "So it's entirely conceivable that January could be the worst."

"At least two to 2.5 weeks, maybe even three, between two and three weeks from when the travel [for Thanksgiving] started, that's when you're going to see the peaks," Fauci explained, adding that he has no doubts that COVID-19 hospitalizations and the death toll will worsen in the coming weeks.

"I hate to say that, but it's the truth and the reality."

Fauci's warnings come as the US spent much of the week breaking records in regards to COVID-19 tallies. The latest data [compiled by the COVID Tracking Project](#) notes that the US recorded all-time highs in daily new case count and in hospitalizations on Thursday, as about 100,667 individuals were in hospitals.

Of the hospitalizations, an estimated 19,442 individuals have been transferred to intensive care units, and another 6,867 Americans have been placed on ventilator assistance.

However, Fauci isn't the only health official painting a dire picture of what's to come.

Forecasts submitted to the [US Centers for Disease Prevention and Control \(CDC\)](#) earlier this week by 25 modeling groups found that anywhere between 690,000 and 1.7 million new COVID-19 cases may be documented during the week ending December 26.

As for COVID-19-related deaths, forecasts from 37 modeling groups predicted that over the next four weeks [the overall death toll in the US could rise to between 303,000 and 329,000 individuals](#), with as many as 19,500 deaths being reported in the week ending December 26.

At present, California remains to be the US state with the highest daily tally of documented COVID-19 cases, [recording some 21,368 cases on Thursday](#). In order, the Golden State was followed by Texas, Pennsylvania, Illinois and Florida.

In fact, with California becoming the nation's latest coronavirus hotspot, Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom [issued a statewide stay-at-home order on Thursday](#), with hopes that the measure would hinder the disease's spread as well as provide relief to the state's hospitals, which have increasingly been approaching capacity limits.

Delayed Tokyo Olympic Games to Cost Japanese Organizers Nearly \$3 Billion
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Amid the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic earlier this year, the anticipated Tokyo Olympic Games were postponed by officials over growing concerns about the highly infectious virus, marking a first in the tournament's history. The 2020 Games are now expected to start on July 23, 2021.

The postponement of the Tokyo Olympics until 2021 is set to cost its Japanese organizers an additional \$2.8 billion, according to [new figures released Friday](#) by the games' organizing committee and the island nation's government.

The majority of the costs, some \$1.1 billion, will be covered by the Tokyo metropolitan government, and the games' organizing committee is expected to cover nearly \$1 billion. The remaining costs, estimated to be about \$700 million, will be picked up by the Japanese government.

Organizers explained in their latest release that the costs incurred by both the government of Japan and the Tokyo metropolitan government will largely be a result of COVID-19-prevention measures.

The release further states that the Japanese government will be responsible for covering the costs for the tournament's "inspection system for athletes," since the administrative body will "serve as the central function for infectious disease control at the games as well as supporting the border control measures."

Although games had [already received more than \\$3 billion](#) in private, domestic sponsorship prior to the pandemic, Toshiro Muto, the CEO of the organizing committee, [indicated during a Friday conference](#) that the board would be seeking new partnerships to cover the rising expenses.

He further noted that he did not anticipate [receiving the \\$650 million sum](#) that International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach had promised earlier this year in a bid to help cover postponement costs.

"There was an expectation that maybe this was for Tokyo," [Muto said](#). "But Tokyo's costs are Tokyo's costs."

Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike later stated that the group's "biggest challenge is the additional costs," but that they also needed to "gain the understanding and sympathy of the people of Tokyo and the people of Japan."

A [Kyodo News poll released earlier this year](#) revealed that only 23.9% of surveyed residents were in favor of holding the Olympic Games in July 2021, with 33.7% of respondents agreeing that the games should be completely canceled amid the pandemic.

The nationwide survey found that an overwhelming majority of the respondents believed it was best for the games to either be postponed a second time or canceled altogether, as it seemed SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, could not be contained.

The 2020 Olympics were the first to be postponed in modern times; however, the games were canceled three times in the past on account of World War I and World War II. Yoshiro Mori, the president of Tokyo 2020, [previously stated in April](#) that the games would be "scrapped" if the pandemic didn't subside by the summer of 2021.

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CDC Calls for 'Universal Face Mask Use' Indoors as US Shatters COVID-19 Records
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Although the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has encouraged individuals to wear masks in public spaces since early in the pandemic, a newly released report marks the first time that the health agency has called for their "universal" use.

In its Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, the [CDC issued new guidance](#) on Friday that urged Americans to adopt "universal face mask use" within "indoor (nonhousehold) settings" as a key step in combating the COVID-19 pandemic.

The guidance warned that the US has "entered a phase of high-level transmission" as the nation heads toward much colder weather and into a season that sees many stuck indoors as families gather for holiday celebrations.

The agency advises state and local officials to implement mask mandates for indoor settings, also calling for individuals to wear masks inside their home when a member of the household has been infected or possibly exposed to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

"Compelling evidence now supports the benefits of cloth face masks for both source control (to protect others) and, to a lesser extent, protection of the wearer," the report states, highlighting the need for a multipronged approach to reduce the risk of transmission. "A community-level plan for distribution of face masks to specific populations, such as those who might experience barriers to access, should be developed."

While wearing a mask is the first option outlined by the CDC, the agency also states that social distancing, limiting one's contact with other people and avoiding nonessential indoor spaces are among several top measures to help slow the spread of the respiratory disease.

"No single strategy can control the pandemic; rather, a multipronged approach using all available evidence-based strategies at the individual and community levels can break transmission chains and address high levels of community transmission," the report adds.

“Full implementation of and adherence to these strategies will save lives.”

The guidance comes as projected US President-elect Joe Biden [told reporters on Friday](#) that he would do “everything in [his] power” to convince Americans to take a COVID-19 vaccine and wear a mask, stopping short of calling for a nationwide mandate.

“No, I don’t think it should be mandatory. I wouldn’t demand it be mandatory,” Biden said of vaccination during a news conference in Delaware. “But I would do everything in my power - just like I don’t think masks have to be made mandatory nationwide - I will do everything in my power as president of the United States to encourage people to do the right thing.”

The day prior, Biden gave a [similar remark during a CNN interview](#) in which he said he intends to call on the nation to wear masks for his first 100 days in the White House. Biden added that the move would prompt a “significant reduction” in COVID-19 case counts.

As the US’ COVID-19 case count blows past the 14-million mark, the Land of the Free reported an astounding 2,706 coronavirus-related deaths on Thursday and marked yet another record with nearly 101,000 individuals currently hospitalized with the virus as of that day, according to the [COVID Tracking Project](#).

To date, the US’ COVID-19 death toll has surpassed 278,000, and the count is only expected to increase. Recent forecasts submitted to the CDC predict that within the next four weeks, the country’s tally will rise to [anywhere between 303,000 and 329,000](#).

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Photo: Vandal Spray-Paints ‘Jesus Wins’ on Synagogue, Holocaust Monument in Greece
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Prior to the World War II Holocaust, an estimated 80,000 Jews lived within some 28 communities scattered throughout Greece, according to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which notes that only roughly 5,000 practicing Jews currently live in the Hellenic Republic. Local law enforcement officials in Larissa, Greece, opened an investigation on Thursday into an incident involving an unidentified vandal who spray-painted the words “Jesus Wins” on a Holocaust monument and on the walls of a local synagogue.

Though police were called to the scene, the suspect had fled before they could be apprehended, [according to the Jerusalem Post](#). Witnesses reportedly told officials that the individual appeared to be a middle-aged man who had been holding a sign riddled with religious symbols.

The Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece (KIS) [issued a statement Friday](#) calling on law enforcement to track down and arrest the offender, adding that “religious fanaticism and intolerance exudes the new vandalism of holy Jewish sites in Larissa.”

“Using religious symbols, [the individual] expressed their anti-Jewish hatred on the exterior of the Larissa Synagogue, as well as on the Holocaust memorial, expressing their disdain for the sanctity of the sites and trampling on the memory of the Holocaust victims,” KIS stated.

Incidentally, the act of vandalism comes just two days after Margaritis Schinas, a Greek politician who serves as the vice president for the European Commission's [Promoting Our](#)

[European Way of Life mission](#), [issued a statement](#) on the body's continued commitment to fighting anti-Semitism.

Citing reports by KIS, [the ADL has reported](#) that there are multiple attacks against Holocaust monuments and Jewish cemeteries every year, indicating that the "incidents have grown more frequent."

Similar to the incident in Larissa, reports emerged earlier this year that vandals [had defaced a Holocaust monument](#) in the Greek port city of Thessaloniki. At the time, reports noted that the memorial, dedicated to 50,000 Jews from the area who were killed in the Holocaust, was spray-painted with the phrase, "With Jews you lose."

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Security Concerns Loom as Germany Readies Six Mass Vaccination Sites in Berlin
by [Evan Craighead](#)

While Germany awaits the European Medicines Agency's (EMA) approval of a vaccine created by US pharmaceutical company Pfizer and German firm BioNTech, the UK has already clinically approved the vaccine for use.

Albrecht Broemme, the former head of Germany's civil protection agency, spoke with reporters on Friday and revealed that while several vaccination sites are being set up in the German capital, some "intense conversations" need to occur regarding the centers, which are more vulnerable than hospitals.

"[W]ith the centers it's indeed possible that people opposed to vaccination or others willing to use violence might say 'Let's set this on fire because we think vaccinations are stupid,'" he expressed, [as reported by the Associated Press](#).

Markus Lammert, a spokesman for Germany's Interior Ministry, told reporters in Berlin that he is "not aware of a concrete threat scenario" for such an event.

At the same time, officials "can't provide information about operational details and facts," Lammert added.

EU regulators with the EMA Committee for Medicinal Products for Human Use [are slated to finalize their review](#) of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine by December 29.

Likewise, the committee's review of a Moderna vaccine is scheduled for completion on January 12 at the latest.

Citing Thomas Mertens, head of the German Standing Committee on Vaccination, [Deutsche Welle reported](#) it will take until 2022 to vaccinate Germany's entire population against COVID-19.

"If you can administer shots on 150,000 to 200,000 people a day, so on five or six days a week – assuming vaccines are available and people are willing to be vaccinated – then you can calculate how long it will take," Mertens said.

"Then you would need 100 days to vaccinate 15 million people."

The UK was seemingly scolded by European regulators this week after the British Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency [moved to approve the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine](#) for widespread use.

A spokesperson for the European Commission [argued on Tuesday](#) that the EMA's procedure was based on more evidence than Britain's and, therefore, "the most effective regulatory mechanism to grant all EU citizens' access to a safe and effective vaccine."

Germany logged nearly 23,500 new cases of the novel coronavirus and 432 related deaths on Friday. At least 1,130,237 COVID-19 cases and 18,034 associated deaths have been logged in the country since the pandemic began, according to the Associated Press.

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US Theater Shares Tumble as Warner Bros. Unveils At-Home Distribution Plan With HBO Max by [Evan Craighead](#)

The Warner Bros Pictures Group (WBPG) is receiving industry backlash after it revealed on Thursday morning that it would release its entire 2021 film slate both in theaters worldwide and via the HBO Max streaming platform.

AMC Entertainment, the largest movie theater chain in the world, saw shares drop by nearly 16% on Thursday after AT&T's WBPG announced that movie watchers with an HBO Max subscription could bring the theater to their homes.

American movie chain Cinemark also saw its shares plummet by 22%, according to the outlet.

"We're living in unprecedented times which call for creative solutions, including this new initiative for the Warner Bros. Pictures Group," Ann Sarnoff, chair and CEO of WarnerMedia Studios and Networks Group, [announced on Thursday](#).

Through the "hybrid distribution model" those with a \$15/mo. HBO Max subscription can access the newly-released films in 4K Ultra HD and HDR during the one-month period following its theatrical release.

"No one wants films back on the big screen more than we do. We know new content is the lifeblood of theatrical exhibition, but we have to balance this with the reality that most theaters in the US will likely operate at reduced capacity throughout 2021," Sarnoff said.

She suggested this "unique one-year plan" would be a way for WBPG to "support our partners in exhibition with a steady pipeline of world-class films, while also giving moviegoers who may not have access to theaters or aren't quite ready to go back to the movies the chance to see our amazing 2021 films."

Movies included in the WBPG anticipated 2021 slate include: "The Little Things," "Judas and the Black Messiah," "Tom & Jerry," "Godzilla vs. Kong," "Mortal Kombat," "Those Who Wish Me Dead," "The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It," "In The Heights," "Space Jam: A New Legacy," "The Suicide Squad," "Reminiscence," "Malignant," "Dune," "The Many Saints of Newark," "King Richard," "Cry Macho" and "Matrix 4."

"We see it as a win-win for film lovers and exhibitors," Sarnoff stated.

Adam Maximilian Aron, chairman and CEO of AMC Entertainment, [told Deadline](#) that AMC would "aggressively pursue economic terms that preserve our business."

"We have already commenced an immediate and urgent dialogue with the leadership of Warner on this subject," he added. "As this issue gets sorted out, we are nonetheless encouraged that vaccines protecting society at large against the coronavirus are very much at hand."

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Volunteer Mauled by Tiger at Sanctuary Belonging to Carole Baskin of 'Tiger King'
Facebook/Big Cat Rescue
by [Victoria Teets](#)

The wildly popular Netflix show "Tiger King" featured an employee of star Joseph "Joe Exotic" Maldonado-Passage whose hand was torn off by a wildcat. While Exotic is in prison after being convicted of a murder-for-hire plot against his archnemesis, Carole Baskin, it seems as though similar misfortune has now struck a volunteer at her establishment

Candy Couser, a longtime volunteer at Baskin's Big Cat Rescue animal sanctuary in Tampa, Florida, nearly had her arm torn off by a tiger. Emergency crews say she is hospitalized with serious injuries, and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission confirmed it has opened an investigation.

"We have received a report of an incident that took place at Big Cat Rescue this morning and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Captive Wildlife section is investigating," a spokesperson for the agency said. "We will provide additional information as it becomes available."

The sanctuary for exotic cats, which was also featured in the Netflix docuseries, [announced the news on Facebook](#), revealing that Couser, a volunteer of five years, was bitten by a tiger named Kimba.

The attack took place on Thursday around 8 a.m. local time, [according to WFLA-TV](#).

"It is against our protocols for anyone to stick any part of their body into a cage with a cat in it," Big Cat Rescue wrote in a statement, according to [WTSP-TV](#).

"Kimba grabbed her arm and nearly tore it off at the shoulder," the sanctuary's Facebook post stated.

Another worker heard the commotion and came running as Kimba loosened his grip. A nurse helped stop the bleeding while another person used a belt as a tourniquet, with an ambulance arriving in 15 or 20 minutes.

Couser was rushed to St. Joseph's Hospital with "serious injuries," WTSP-TV reported.

"Candy was still conscious and insisted that she did not want Kimba Tiger to come to any harm for this mistake," Big Cat Rescue wrote in its statement. "He is being placed in quarantine for the next 30 days as a precaution, but was just acting normal due to the presence of food and the opportunity."

Couser was expected to undergo surgery Friday. According to Big Cat Rescue, she can move her fingers, but her arm is broken in three places, and her shoulder is badly damaged. The organization said Couser was conscious but sedated at the hospital, noted WTSP-TV.

"Kimba Tiger's rabies and other vaccines are all up to date but he's being kept on quarantine for 30 days anyway to keep an eye on him," Big Cat Rescue [wrote in an update](#) Friday morning.

"While it's our understanding that the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] could demand he be killed and tested for rabies, that's unlikely given the fact that he's vaccinated and Candy does not want him to be killed for doing what comes naturally."

According to [Variety](#), "Tiger King" reached a US audience of 34.3 million unique viewers within the first 10 days of its March 20 release, according to Nielsen estimates, making it one of Netflix's biggest-ever original shows.

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REVIEW - US Congress Targets Nord Stream 2, Turkey S-400 Purchase in New Defense Bill

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The US Congress is taking aim at Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline and Turkey over its acquisition of the S-400 air defense system in the new National Defense Authorization Act for 2021 that has been finalized and is expected to pass in both houses as early as next week.

The compromise legislation, which authorizes some \$740 billion in defense spending, was unveiled on Thursday after lawmakers from both chambers made final modifications to the package. The leaders of the US Senate and House Armed Services committees began talks on Wednesday to reach a deal.

US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell are reportedly trying to schedule the bill for a vote in the coming days.

President Donald Trump earlier this week threatened to veto the bill if it did not include restrictions on social media companies. However, the House and Senate reportedly have enough votes to override Trump's veto, with lawmakers in both parties complaining that the provision Trump wants added has nothing to do with defense.

NORD STREAM 2

Nord Stream 2 is a planned 745-mile-long twin pipeline that will carry nearly 2 trillion cubic feet of gas annually from Russia to Germany. The US opposes the project and has been seeking to export more liquefied natural gas to Europe. Moscow has described Washington's actions, including the threat of sanctions, as a desire for unfair competition.

The NDAA includes language that expands sanctions designed to disrupt the Nord Stream 2 project, according to a joint explanatory statement released by the conference committee.

"The House bill contained a provision (sec. 1248) that would amend subsection (a)(1) of section 7503 of the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act of 2019 (title LXXV of Public Law 116-92)

to clarify and expand sanctions relating to the construction of Nord Stream 2 or Turkstream pipeline projects. The Senate amendment contained a similar provision (sec. 6231)," the joint statement said on Thursday.

Expanded restrictions target a wider variety of companies, including those that render insurance, reinsurance, underwriting, testing, inspection, or certification services "necessary or essential for the completion of such a project."

Providers of services or facilities for technology upgrades or installation of welding equipment for, or retrofitting or tethering" of pipe-laying vessels are also in danger of US sanctions, according to the bill.

About 120 companies from more than 12 European countries will reportedly be affected.

TURKEY

The Congress would also require the US federal government to impose sanctions on each individual involved in Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system within 30 days after the new defense spending bill is signed into law.

The legislation also includes a provision that would authorize US Air Force Secretary to use the six Turkish F-35A aircraft that were never delivered to Ankara because Turkey was suspended from the F-35 program.

Since 2018, the United States has introduced a number of measures to pressure the Turkish government into canceling the S-400 purchase, including removing Turkey from the F-35 aircraft supply chain despite the added costs to the program. The United States has proposed buying the S-400s from Ankara in a bid to break the deadlock.

Washington has claimed the S-400 is incompatible with NATO security standards and might compromise the operations of the F-35 jets.

On Thursday, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Turkey's purchase of Russia's air defense systems S-400 is no "trap" for NATO as the systems will be fully controlled by Ankara,

TROOP DRAWDOWNS OVERSEAS

The new legislation would also require the Pentagon to meet additional requirements provided by Congress before moving forward with a drawdown of troops in Afghanistan and Germany.

The US plans to drawdown troops to 2,500 in Afghanistan by mid-January as a result of the agreement struck with the Taliban earlier this year. After reaching the agreement with the Taliban in February, the US reduced troop levels from 10,000 to 8,600 by July, before drawing down to 5,000 by November in a second phase.

Trump, to punish Berlin for underpaying NATO dues, ordered the withdrawal of troops from Germany. In July, then-US Defense Secretary Mark Esper announced the United States planned to withdraw 12,000 troops from Germany. Most of those troops or 6,400 people were planned to return to the United States. The move would reduce the number of US troops stationed in Germany to 24,000.

US lawmakers are also seeking to prohibit the Department of Defense from using any of its financial resources to transfer or free any of the remaining prisoners from the so-called "Global War on Terror" held in Guantanamo Bay.

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Digital Euro in Demand But Timeline Probably In A Few Years - Lagarde

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - A digital euro is certainly in demand with the spike in contactless payment amid the coronavirus pandemic, but it will probably take a few years for such a cryptocurrency to launch given the security requirements, European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde said at a virtual event.

"We have noticed throughout Europe, there is accelerated demand for instant payment, for contactless payment [and] significant use of digital payment of all sorts," Lagarde said on Thursday. "Sovereignty as well as a good control of monetary policy... are all good reasons to explore the opportunity. If you're asking me what is the timetable for that, I would say the job has begun. But equally, I don't think we should move too fast for the sake of, you know, being the first out of the gate. It will probably take a few years before we are safe with it and we can launch."

The ECB has previously said that a digital euro would be an electronic form of central bank money accessible to all citizens and firms – like banknotes, but in a digital form – to make their daily payments in a fast, easy and secure way. It would complement cash, not replace it. The Eurosystem will continue to issue cash in any case.

In a statement released in October, the central bank said the launch of global private means of payment that might raise regulatory concerns and pose risks for financial stability and consumer protection, and a broad take-up of digital currencies issued by foreign central banks.

Lagarde said at Thursday's event that protecting the privacy of the users of the proposed digital euro would be one of the ECB's main concerns, aside from maintaining the sovereignty monetary policy channels.

She disagreed that the ECB was moving too slowly with its digital currency and might allow other foreign central banks, like the People's Bank of China, to get way ahead in the game.

"What I understand is that the PBOC are piloting on a Chinese scale a digital currency which includes, you know, hundreds of millions of users, as is often the case in that situation, and linking up with a service provider. Is it to say that they are about to launch? I don't think so. I think it's still in the experimental stage."

The PBOC has finished building the infrastructure for its Digital Currency Electronic Payment (DCEP) system and has been carrying out local testing in cities, including Shenzhen and Suzhou, although no date has been set for its official launch.

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US, Huawei CFO in Talks Over Plea Deal That Would Allow Her to Return to China - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - US Justice Department officials and Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou are currently negotiating a possible plea deal that would allow her to return to China from Canada, the Wall Street Journal reported citing people familiar with the situation. The report on Thursday said that in exchange for going home, Meng would have to admit wrongdoing in her criminal case related to alleged violations of US sanctions on Iran on Huawei's behalf. She faces wire and bank fraud charges.

The report said, according to the sources, US federal prosecutors could drop charges against Meng if she cooperates in the case. However, so far Meng has refused to cooperate, claiming she is innocent.

The report said Meng through her Huawei spokesman declined to comment. The Justice Department also declined to comment, the report added.

Meng is wanted by the US authorities for her alleged role in violating sanctions against Iran. The US Justice Department alleges that Meng committed financial transgressions by misleading multinational financial conglomerate, HSBC, into approving more than \$100 million in transactions that contravened US sanctions on Iran from 2010 to 2014.

Canadian Member of Parliament Paul Manly said on Tuesday that the incoming Biden administration may be more inclined to drop charges against Meng.

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Ivanka Trump Accuses Prosecutors in US Capital of Targeting Her for Political Reasons

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - Ivanka Trump, daughter to the US president and an adviser to the White House, accused Democrat-led Attorney General's office in the US Capital of targeting her over hotel charges incurred for Donald Trump's 2017 inauguration.

"This week, I spent 5 hours in a deposition with the Democrat D.C. AG's Office, where they questioned the rates charged by the Trump Hotel at the inauguration," she tweeted Thursday. "I shared with them an email from 4 years ago, where I sent instructions to the hotel to charge 'a fair market rate' which the hotel did. This 'inquiry' is another politically-motivated demonstration of vindictiveness and waste of taxpayer dollars."

The probe of the president's use of the hotel under the Trump brand, which is being conducted by the Washington, DC Attorney General's office, comes after his loss in the November 3 election to Democrat Joe Biden.

Over the four years of his presidency, Trump has regularly labeled Congress hearings and other probes led by Democrats into his conduct as politically-motivated and done in bad faith, including his impeachment in 2019 that failed to remove him from office.

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US Envoy Abrams Urges Incoming Biden Administration to Maintain Pressure on Venezuela

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden's administration when it takes over must maintain pressure on Venezuela until Caracas is ready to engage in real negotiations, US Special Envoy Elliott Abrams said during a virtual discussion.

"The people of Venezuela have to have a free choice. And I think it will matter if the incoming administration makes it clear that they're going to continue the pressure until the regime is willing to do a real negotiation that leads to a presidential election," Abrams said on Thursday. Abrams renewed calls for President Nicolas Maduro's allies in government and the military to rethink their commitment to the Venezuelan president, saying that previous regime changes in the region have involved amnesty campaigns and indicating that a return to public service is a possibility, if the Venezuelans so choose.

The incoming Biden administration would be inclined to continue the Trump administration's Venezuela policy, Abrams said, explaining that the pressure campaign on official Caracas has been a bipartisan effort.

Venezuela is in the midst of a political quagmire, which began last year after Juan Guaido, then head of the opposition-controlled National Assembly, proclaimed himself an interim president of Venezuela in a bid to oust reelected Maduro from power.

Tensions between the United States and Venezuela reached new heights after the United States recognized Guaido as the president of Venezuela. Russia, China and a host of other nations recognize Maduro as the only legitimate leader of the country.

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Bechtel Receives 2 US Navy Nuclear Propulsion Orders Totaling \$1.1Bln - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The Bechtel Corporation has won two US Navy modification contracts worth more than \$1.1 billion for naval nuclear propulsion components, the Department of Defense announced in two press releases.

"Bechtel Plant Machinery [of] Monroeville, Pennsylvania was awarded a \$662,216,798 ...modification to [a] previously-awarded contract for naval nuclear propulsion components," the first release said on Thursday.

Bechtel Plant Machinery was also awarded a second \$482,417,574 modification contract for naval nuclear propulsion components, also on Thursday, a second press release said. The total value of both contracts comes to more than \$1.144 billion.

All the work on both contracts will be performed in Monroeville, Pennsylvania and Schenectady, New York, the Defense Department stated. No completion date or additional information was provided on either of the Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program contracts, the releases noted.

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US House Speaker Pelosi, Senate Chief McConnell Resume COVID-19 Fiscal Talks - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell have resumed negotiations for a coronavirus economic relief package after an earlier breakdown in talks between the two sides, Pelosi's office announced in a statement.

"The Speaker and Leader McConnell spoke at 12:45 pm today by phone about their shared commitment to completing an omnibus and COVID relief as soon as possible," Drew Hammill, deputy chief of staff for Pelosi, said via Twitter on Thursday.

The talks commenced after a bipartisan group of US lawmakers unveiled on Tuesday a \$908 billion COVID-19 relief bill aimed at breaking a months-long deadlock between Democrats and Republicans over new emergency assistance for small businesses, unemployed people and industries.

Congress reached agreement with the Trump administration in March to pass the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, dispensing roughly \$3 trillion as paycheck protection for workers, loans and grants for businesses and other personal aid for qualifying citizens and residents.

Since, Democrats in the House of Representatives led by Pelosi have been locked in a stalemate with the administration and Republicans in the Senate led by McConnell on a successive relief plan.

Presumed President-elect Joe Biden has also said that getting a COVID-19 relief package passed was his number one priority.

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US Congress Requires Sanctions on Persons Engaged in Turkey's S-400 Purchase- Defense Bill

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - Congress will require the US federal government to impose sanctions on each individual involved in Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system within 30 days after the new defense spending bill is signed into law, according to a copy of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for fiscal year 2021.

"Not later than 30 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the President shall impose five or more of the sanctions described in section 235 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (22 U.S.C. 9529) with respect to each person that knowingly engaged in the acquisition of the S-400 air defense system referred to in subsection (b)," the NDAA said on Thursday.

The final version of the 2021 NDAA also includes provisions that would expand sanctions against Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline and the Turkstream pipeline project.

The legislation also includes a provision that would authorize US Air Force Secretary to use the six Turkish F-35A aircraft that were never delivered to Ankara because Turkey was suspended from the F-35 program.

The leaders of the US Senate and House Armed Services committees met on Wednesday to reach a deal on a new defense spending bill.

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US, Huawei CFO in Talks Over Plea Deal That Would Allow Her to Return to China - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - US Justice Department officials and Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou are currently negotiating a possible plea deal that would allow her to return to China from Canada, the Wall Street Journal reported citing people familiar with the situation. The report on Thursday said that in exchange for going home, Meng would have to admit wrongdoing in her criminal case related to alleged violations of US sanctions on Iran on Huawei's behalf. She faces wire and bank fraud charges.

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US Congress to Extend Ban on Using Funds to Transfer, Release Gitmo Prisoners - NDAA

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The Republican-controlled US Senate is seeking to prohibit the Department of Defense from using any of its financial resources to transfer or free any of the remaining prisoners from the so-called "Global War on Terror" held in Guantanamo Bay, a US House explanatory statement said.

"Extension of prohibition on use of funds for transfer or release of individuals detained at United States Naval Station, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to the United States (section 1041)," the US House explanatory statement on the 2021 National Defense Appropriations Act (NDAA) said on Thursday.

The Senate amendment contained a provision (section 1031) that would extend until December 31, 2021, the prohibition on the use of funds provided to the Defense Department to transfer or release individuals detained at US Naval Station at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to the United States, the statement said.

The parallel House of Representatives legislation for the NDAA contained no similar provision, the statement added.

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US Centers for Disease Control Backs Panel Proposal for Initial COVID-19 Vaccine Doses

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) adopted recommendations from an advisory panel that the first doses of a coronavirus vaccine be reserved for elderly care residents and health workers, according to a press release. "[CDC Director Robert] Redfield supports their recommendations and has signed the memo and accepted these interim recommendations," the release said on Thursday.

On Tuesday, the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommended that initial vaccinations target 3 million residents in elderly care facilities and a portion of the nation's 21 million healthcare workers.

Health workers such as nurses, whose jobs routinely place them within six feet of other people, would be first to receive the vaccine followed by workers able to follow CDC social distancing guidelines, the Advisory Committee said.

Vaccines made by Pfizer and Moderna have applied for emergency use authorization from the US Food and Drug Administration amid expectations of quick approval with first doses administered later this month.

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US Lawmakers Include Expanded Nord Stream-2 Sanctions in 2021 Defense Bill - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - Negotiating teams from both chambers of the US Congress said in a joint statement that they included expanded sanctions against Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline in the final version of the 2021 defense spending bill.

"The House bill contained a provision (sec. 1248) that would amend subsection (a)(1) of section 7503 of the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act of 2019 (title LXXV of Public Law 116-92) to clarify and expand sanctions relating to the construction of Nord Stream 2 or Turkstream pipeline projects. The Senate amendment contained a similar provision (sec. 6231)," the joint statement said on Thursday.

The Nord Stream 2 project aims to lay a 745-mile-long twin pipeline that will carry up to 1.942 trillion cubic feet of gas annually from Russia to Germany, passing through the territorial waters or the exclusive economic zones of Denmark, Finland, Germany, Russia and Sweden.

The United States seeks to block the pipeline's construction, which is nearing completion, and imposed sanctions against pipe-laying contractors a year ago, forcing the Swiss company Allseas to abandon the project.

Expanded restrictions target a wider variety of companies, including those that render insurance, reinsurance, underwriting, testing, inspection, or certification services "necessary or essential for the completion of such a project."

Providers of services or facilities for technology upgrades or installation of welding equipment for, or retrofitting or tethering" of pipe-laying vessels are also in danger of US sanctions, according to the bill.

About 120 companies from more than 12 European countries will reportedly be affected. The House of Representatives and the Senate are expected to vote on the final bill next week.

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Biden Asks Fauci to Stay on Job, Lead His COVID-19 Response Team - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - Presumed President-elect Joe Biden has asked Dr. Anthony Fauci to join his administration and to lead his novel coronavirus team of medical advisers, CNN reported.

Biden told CNN's Jake Tapper on Thursday that he met with Fauci earlier in the day and asked him to continue his current role as director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and to serve as his Chief Medical Adviser on the novel coronavirus response team. Biden also said he will ask the US public to wear masks for the first 100 days of his administration.

Fauci is a member of the Trump administration's Coronavirus Task Force, which is responsible for coordinating national efforts to combat the pandemic.

President Donald Trump has authorized the General Services Administration to allow transition for the Biden team, but continues to dispute the results of the November 3 election due to alleged massive fraud and acts of impropriety. The Trump campaign has asked for recounts and filed lawsuits to seek redress.

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Pentagon to Brief Congress Before March 15 on New Lethal Assistance to Ukraine - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The fiscal year 2021 defense spending bill directs top Defense Department officials to brief Congress by mid-March on new lethal military assistance to Ukraine, negotiators from both chambers of the Congress said in joint statement.

"The conferees direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy... to brief the congressional defense committees not later than March 15, 2021, on the Department of Defense's planning and capacity to provide lethal assistance to the Government of Ukraine given the current structure of this authority," the statement said on Thursday.

Lawmakers explained that they demand the briefing to include description of defense articles and services to be provided to Ukraine.

The defense budget allocates \$250 million for overall military assistance to Ukraine, including \$75 million in lethal weaponry.

However, it provides for the possibility "to modify the categories of appropriate assistance, broaden the types of reforms intended to decrease corruption, increase accountability, and maintain sustainability of combat capability enabled by such assistance," the statement said.

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US Lawyer Charged in \$12.5Mln Somalia Assets Fraud Scam Case - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - A lawyer in the US state of Maryland faces 11 charges of seeking to defraud financial institutions to obtain control over \$12.5 million of Somali sovereign assets, the Department of Justice said in a press release.

"A Maryland lawyer was charged in an 11-count indictment for his alleged role in a scheme to fraudulently obtain control of more than \$12.5 million that was held by financial institutions on behalf of the Somali government, to improperly take part of those funds for fees and expenses," the release said on Thursday.

Lawyer Jeremy Schulman, 47, of Bethesda, Maryland, was also charged with seeking to launder a portion of those funds to accounts for the benefit of his co-conspirators, the Justice Department said.

"Schulman ... was charged in an indictment filed in the District of Maryland with one count of conspiracy to commit mail fraud, wire fraud and bank fraud; three counts of wire fraud; one count of mail fraud; one count of bank fraud; one count of conspiracy to commit money laundering; and four counts of money laundering," the release added.

The indictment alleges that from 2009 to 2014, Schulman conspired with others to fraudulently obtain control of financial assets held on behalf of the Somali government around the world and enrich himself and his co-conspirators by taking a portion of those assets in fees and expenses, according to the release.

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US Congress Requires Sanctions on Persons Engaged in Turkey's S-400 Purchase- Defense Bill

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - Congress will require the US federal government to impose sanctions on each individual involved in Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system within 30 days after the new defense spending bill is signed into law, according to a copy of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for fiscal year 2021.

"Not later than 30 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the President shall impose five or more of the sanctions described in section 235 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (22 U.S.C. 9529) with respect to each person that knowingly engaged in the acquisition of the S-400 air defense system referred to in subsection (b)," the NDAA said on Thursday.

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California Governor Imposes New Stay-at-Home Order Amid Rising Coronavirus Cases

WASHINGTON, November 19 (Sputnik) - California is imposing a Stay-at-Home order on the entire nearly 40 million population of the state to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus, Governor Gavin Newsom told a press conference.

"To slow the surge of COVID19 and save lives, California is introducing a Regional Stay-At-Home Order," Newsom said. "Regions where Intensive Care Units (ICU) capacity fall below 15 percent will be placed into this Stay-at-Home Order."

Newsome said four out of the state's five regions would hit that threshold in a few days on current trends.

California was facing an increased number of coronavirus transmissions generating fast rising death rates and the ICUs across the state hospital system were rapidly approaching maximum level, a crisis that had been feared in the spring but that had failed to materialize then, Newsom acknowledged.

"Our ICUs are climbing quickly toward their capacity. Our death rate is rising," the governor said. Newsom said that a first tranche of 327,000 units of the first of the newly developed coronavirus vaccines was being sent to California and that eventually 40 million doses would be sent.

"The message of the day is, as much as you can, stay at home, reduce your interactions so that we can get this transmission rate down," he said.

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Biden told CNN's Jake Tapper on Thursday that he met with Fauci earlier in the day and asked him to continue his current role as director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and to serve as his Chief Medical Adviser on the novel coronavirus response team.

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US Adds Four Chinese Firms to List Banning Access to Military Technology - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration labeled four more Chinese companies as being controlled by the country's military, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Today, the Department of Defense released the names of additional 'Communist Chinese military companies' operating directly or indirectly in the United States," the release said on Thursday.

The companies are China Construction Technology Company (CCTC), China International Engineering Consulting Corp. (CIECC), China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) and Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation (SMIC), the Defense Department said.

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US House Passes Resolution Calling on Russia to Release American Citizen Trevor Reed

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives has passed a resolution calling on Russia to release Trevor Reed, a US citizen who has been sentenced to nine years in prison by a Moscow court allegedly for assaulting a police officer.

In addition, the House of Representatives on Thursday also passed another resolution calling on Russia to release all political prisoners while condemning its practice of politically-motivated imprisonment and urging the US government to impose sanctions on individuals engaged in such activities.

The two resolutions, passed by voice vote, are not legally binding but serve as an expression of the House of Representatives' sentiment.

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US Intel Chief Urges Biden to Let Special Counsel Finish Russia Probe Investigation

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - US Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe called on President-elect Joe Biden to allow an investigation into the origins of unsubstantiated charges of Russian meddling in US politics run its course.

"I certainly hope that whoever is running the Justice Department in 2021 will allow these answers to be fully accounted for before the American people," Ratcliffe told Fox News on Thursday. "My hope is that John Durham... will provide the full accounting."

Durham, the US Attorney for the state of Connecticut, has been investigating origins of the Russia probe for more than a year. Earlier this week, outgoing Attorney General William Barr announced he had appointed Durham as a "special counsel."

The appointment presumably protects the investigation from being terminated in a Biden administration because a special counsel appointed by the attorney general cannot be easily removed from the post.

As director of National Intelligence, Ratcliffe declassified a slew of documents that appear to show senior FBI officials improperly obtained warrants to spy on officials in the 2016 Trump presidential campaign.

Charges of Trump-Russia malfeasance ultimately collapsed with former Special Counsel Robert Mueller concluding at the end of a two year probe that no collusion had taken place.

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US Defense Spending Bill Requires Strategy to Deliver Hypersonic Weapons Within 3 Years

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The US defense spending bill for 2021 calls for a strategy to deliver hypersonic weapons within three years with an increased flight test rate, negotiators from both chambers of the Congress said in joint explanatory statement.

"The Senate amendment contained a provision (sec. 219) that would express a sense of Congress regarding the importance of hypersonic capabilities, require the Secretary of Defense to increase the flight test rate as necessary to expedite maturation and fielding of hypersonic technologies, and require a report from the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering regarding a strategy to deliver air-launched and air-breathing hypersonic weapons within 3 years," according to the document released Thursday.

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White House Communications Director Alyssa Farah Resigns - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - White House Communications Director Alyssa Farah has resigned, the Washington Post reported.

The report said Farah submitted her letter of resignation to the White House on Thursday, following her three-and-a-half years working in the Trump administration.

Other Trump administration officials also announced their departures this week.

Scott Adams resigned from his position of special adviser on the coronavirus pandemic to US President Donald Trump.

Federal Communications Commission (FCC) head Ajit Pai said in a statement on Monday that he has handed in his resignation and will step down on January 21.

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Pfizer to Only Get Half of COVID-19 Vaccines Out This Year Due to Logistics - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - US drug giant Pfizer expects to ship just about half of the COVID-19 vaccines it originally planned for this year because of supply-chain problems, although it still expects to roll out more than a billion doses in 2021, the Wall Street Journal reported.

Scaling up the raw material supply chain took longer than expected, a Pfizer spokesperson told the newspaper on Thursday. The outcome of the clinical trial, the spokesperson added, was somewhat later than the initial projection.

New York-headquartered Pfizer and Germany-based partner BioNTech SE had hoped to roll out 100 million vaccines world-wide by the end of this year, a plan that has now been reduced to 50 million, the report said.

The United Kingdom on Wednesday granted emergency-use authorization for the vaccine, becoming the first Western country to start administering doses.

The two-shot Pfizer vaccine is also being reviewed by the US Food and Drug Administration, where a similar authorization could come later this month and a rollout before the end of the year. The US regulator also is considering a vaccine developed by Cambridge, Mass.-based Moderna Inc. that could begin shipping before Christmas.

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US Lawmakers Include Expanded Nord Stream-2 Sanctions in 2021 Defense Bill - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - Negotiating teams from both chambers of the US Congress said in a joint statement that they included expanded sanctions against Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline in the final version of the 2021 defense spending bill.

"The House bill contained a provision (sec. 1248) that would amend subsection (a)(1) of section 7503 of the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act of 2019 (title LXXV of Public Law 116-92) to clarify and expand sanctions relating to the construction of Nord Stream 2 or Turkstream pipeline projects. The Senate amendment contained a similar provision (sec. 6231)," the joint statement said on Thursday.

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US House Passes Resolution Expressing Security Concerns Regarding Russia's Prigozhin

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives has passed a resolution recognizing Russian Businessman Yevgeniy Prigozhin and his affiliated entities as a threat to the United States' and its allies' national security.

Resolution 996, passed by voice vote on Thursday afternoon, is not binding, but serves as an expression of the House of Representatives' sentiment.

Prigozhin is accused of having ties to the private military company Wagner Group, which is said to have been involved in the armed conflict in Libya and in other countries.

Prigozhin has denied having any links to the company.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik)

OPEC+MEETING

* OPEC+ has confirmed its agreement on the need to gradually return 2 million barrels per day to the oil market, but the easing of output cuts should take into account market conditions, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on Thursday.

* The OPEC+ countries plan to hold a general meeting of all alliance's states in Vienna on June 25, 2021, in addition to monthly meetings, the draft communique of the OPEC+ meeting said.

* The agreed increase in the oil output by OPEC-non-OPEC producers is too minuscule and short-term to impact crude prices on the global market, Iranian Minister of Petroleum Bijan Zangeneh said.

* Restrictions introduced in connection with COVID-19 pandemic continue to affect oil demand, and the winter months cause particular uncertainty, according to the draft communique following the OPEC+ meeting seen by Sputnik.

CHARGES AGAINST JOURNALISTS IN LATVIA

* Employees of the Baltnews and Sputnik Latvia portals were charged with violating the EU sanctions regime, were searched and given a written undertaking not to leave, Sputnik reported on Thursday.

* By its actions against employees of Baltnews and Sputnik Latvia, Riga grossly violates OSCE commitments on freedom of speech, the Russian permanent mission to the organization said.

AFGHANISTAN INCIDENTS

* An explosion hit the central square of the Afghan town of Gardez, Governor of Paktia province Halim Fadaï said on Thursday.

* A car bomb explosion in the Afghan province of Paktia killed three soldiers and injured 14 civilians, Abdulrahman Mangal, a spokesman for the local governor, told Sputnik.

RUSSIAN ENERGY MARKETS

* Gazprom Neft hopes to return hydrocarbons production to almost 100 million tonnes of oil equivalent in 2021, Vadim Yakovlev, the company's deputy general director for exploration and production, said.

* Russian oil major Rosneft discovered two fields, gas and gas condensate, as a result of drilling in the Kara Sea, the company told reporters.

EXPLOSION IN BRISTOL SUBURB

* A powerful explosion at a warehouse in Avonmouth, an industrial suburb of the southwestern UK city of Bristol, has left multiple casualties, Sky News reported on Thursday.

* A major incident was declared in Avonmouth after an explosion, apparently involving a chemical tank, the Bristol police said.

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US Branch of Vitol Energy Group Pays \$135Mln to Resolve Bribery Case - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - Vitol Inc., the US affiliate of Vitol Energy Group, agreed to pay \$135 million to settle charges of bribing public officials in three Latin American nations to win contracts, the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"Vitol paid bribes to government officials in Brazil, Ecuador and Mexico to win lucrative business contracts and obtain competitive advantages to which they were not fairly entitled," acting US Attorney for the Eastern District of New York Seth DuCharme said in the release.

The bribes were paid over a 15-year period. In addition to the \$135 million, Vitol also agreed to disgorge more than \$12.7 million to the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) in a related matter and to pay the CFTC a penalty of \$16 million related to trading activity not covered by the deferred by the Justice Department agreement, the release said.

The resolution also includes a deferred prosecution agreement with the Justice Department in connection with a criminal information filed today in the Eastern District of New York charging the company with two counts of conspiracy to violate the anti-bribery provisions of the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), according to the release.

The Vitol Group is one of the world's largest energy and commodity trading companies.

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Maduro Calls on UN, WHO to Declare COVID-19 Vaccines Global Public Goods

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The United Nations and the World Health Organization (WHO) should declare COVID-19 vaccines global public goods, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro said at the UN General Assembly on Thursday.

"President, it is crucial that the vaccine or vaccines to address coronavirus be declared by the United Nations and by the World Health Organization as global public goods," Maduro, speaking virtually, said at the 31st Special Session of the General Assembly in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Global Public Goods (GPGs) are non-excludable goods that benefit all countries and/or deal with issues like global warming that require collective international action, according to WHO experts.

Maduro said the pandemic can only be overcome through a joint response from humanity and based on science.

After becoming the first country in the world to approve the US-German vaccine candidate, the UK authorities announced on Wednesday that the immunization campaign will begin as early as next week.

Other countries, including Russia, have also developed vaccines. Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday ordered his government to begin a large-scale vaccine campaign next week.

Russia emerged as a leader in vaccine development with two of its products, Sputnik V, developed by Moscow's Gamaleya Institute, and EpiVacCorona, developed by Siberia's research center Vector, completing Phase 3 clinical trials.

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US Intelligence Chief Calls China Greatest Threat Since World War II

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - China is the greatest global threat since the end of World War II, US Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe said in an opinion-editorial piece published on Thursday.

"If I could communicate one thing to the American people... it is that the People's Republic of China poses the greatest threat to America today, and the greatest threat to democracy and freedom world-wide since World War II," Ratcliffe wrote in the piece published in The Wall Street Journal.

Ratcliffe pointed to intelligence indicating that China's ultimate goal is global economic, military and technological domination and warned that a bipartisan response is needed to curb Beijing's growing influence.

China not only inflicts \$500-billion worth of economic damage to the United States through intellectual property theft but uses the stolen technology to supplant US businesses across the world, Ratcliffe said.

US intelligence community is shifting resources - to the tune of \$85 billion - to counter the threat posed by China and is embarking on a culture shift with previous generations of intelligence apparatchiks having devoted the bulk of their attention to the Cold War with the Soviet Union or the War on Terrorism, he added.

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US Sues Facebook for Allegedly Discriminating Against American Workers - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department sued Facebook on Thursday for allegedly discriminating against American workers during the hiring process for thousands of positions filled by temporary visa holders.

"The lawsuit alleges that Facebook refused to recruit, consider, or hire qualified and available US workers for over 2,600 positions that Facebook, instead, reserved for temporary visa holders it sponsored for permanent work authorization (or "green cards") in connection with the permanent labor certification process," the Justice Department said in a statement accompanying the lawsuit.

The release also alluded to a broader practice that is readily described by American technology workers: A foreign worker not only requires less pay, a worker on company sponsored H-1B visa cannot change jobs, thereby allowing a company to avoid turnover common in the tech industry.

"Temporary visa holders often have limited job mobility and thus are likely to remain with their company until they can adjust status, which for some can be decades," the release said. "Our message to all employers - including those in the technology sector - is clear: you cannot illegally prefer to recruit, consider, or hire temporary visa holders over US workers."

Facebook told The New York Times the company is cooperating with the Justice Department but disputes the allegations.

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Facebook to Remove 'False Claims,' Conspiracy Narratives About COVID-19 Vaccines

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - Facebook and its subsidiary, Instagram, plan to remove posts with what they consider to be false information or conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccines, such as one claiming the inoculation contains a tiny microchip, the company said in a press release on Thursday.

"Given the recent news that COVID-19 vaccines will soon be rolling out around the world, over the coming weeks we will start removing false claims about these vaccines that have been debunked by public health experts on Facebook and Instagram," the release said. "For example, we will remove false claims that COVID-19 vaccines contain microchips, or anything else that isn't on the official vaccine ingredient list."

The release cited another allegedly false claim - that groups are being infused without their consent to test the vaccine's safety - as another example of the kind of posts targeted for removal.

Since facts about COVID-19 vaccines will continue to evolve, the release emphasized the need to regularly update its policies as information from public health authorities becomes available, the release said.

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Pennsylvania Supreme Court Again Denies Republican Bid to Invalidate Some Votes - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The Pennsylvania Supreme Court has rejected a Republican Congressman's bid to stay the court's order not to invalidate some votes in the November 3 US presidential election in the state, a court filing revealed on Thursday.

"And now, this 3rd day of December, 2020, the Emergency Application for Stay of this Court's Order of November 28, 2020 is denied," the court filing said.

On Wednesday, the Republican party asked the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to reverse its dismissal of a lawsuit seeking to invalidate a number of votes pending a decision from the US Supreme Court in the matter.

US Republican Congressman Mike Kelly on Tuesday filed the request in the US Supreme Court for an emergency injunction to prevent the Pennsylvania authorities from taking any additional actions to perfect the certification of the election results.

Pennsylvania officials have certified the election results, declaring that Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden had won by more than 80,000 votes in the state.

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Wisconsin Supreme Court Declines to Hear Trump Suit Challenging 200,000 Votes - Order

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The Wisconsin Supreme Court has declined to hear a Trump campaign lawsuit seeking to invalidate more than 200,000 votes in the November 3 US general election in the state, a court order revealed on Thursday.

"IT IS ORDERED that the petition for leave to commence an original action is denied. One or more appeals from the determination(s) of one or more boards of canvassers or from the determination of the chairperson of the Wisconsin Elections Commission may be filed by an aggrieved candidate in circuit court," the court document said.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled 4-3 that the Trump campaign must bring its lawsuit to a lower court.

President Donald Trump has challenged the election result in Wisconsin and demanded recount in the state's two largest counties. The recount confirmed the outcome, showing Democratic nominee Joe Biden won in the two counties by more than 360,000 votes combined.

Biden won Wisconsin by more than 20,600 votes overall and the state has certified the results.

Major media networks have projected Biden to be the election winner, but Trump has said he won and victory was stolen from him via massive election and voter fraud and acts of impropriety. Trump has sought recounts in some states and launched lawsuits to seek redress. Several states said they found no widespread evidence of election fraud and substantial irregularities.

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US Court Reschedules Russian National Tyurin's Sentencing, Date to Be Determined Later

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - A US federal court rescheduled the sentencing of Russian national Andrei Tyurin over hacking charges due to technical problems encountered during a telephonic hearing on Thursday.

"We will resume as quickly as possible," Judge Laura Taylor Swain said during the call.

The judge, from a New York-based federal district court, urged prosecutors and defenders to find out the acceptable day and reach out to the court to schedule the new time of sentencing.

The conference started with a delay of nearly one hour as parties were trying to connect to each other. Swain warned from the very beginning that they may be forced to interrupt a conversation due to lack of time.

Tyurin's lawyer Florian Miedel recommended postponing the sentencing due to the inability to talk to his client before the hearing, so the judge agreed to provide them a separate line to conduct conversations.

"Tyurin... believes that he has contracted COVID-19 but would like to proceed by phone," the lawyer said after the conversation.

US prosecutors also asked to postpone the sentencing because of newly discovered circumstances.

"The government just received [a] warrant from one additional victim who would like to seek restitution as well, so the government would seek the additional 90 days to finalize that restitution," Assistant US Attorney Eun Young Choi said.

Tyurin was arrested in Georgia in 2017 at the US government's request. The US authorities alleged that Tyurin was involved in a global hacking campaign targeting financial institutions that resulted in the theft of personal data from more than 100 million users.

Georgia extradited Tyurin to the United States in September 2018.

In 2019, Tyurin pleaded guilty to six counts, including conspiracy to commit computer hacking, wire fraud, conspiracy to violate the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act, and conspiracy to commit bank fraud, the Justice Department said in a statement.

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AT&T Settles Gender Pay Allegations in 2 US States for \$173,000 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 4 (Sputnik) - The telecommunications giant AT&T will pay \$173,000 to correct pay disparities in the US states of California and Nevada for 27 female employees, the Labor Department's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) said in a press release on Thursday.

"During a routine compliance review, OFCCP found that, as of Feb. 1, 2019, AT&T paid 27 female employees who worked in manager network services positions less than their male counterparts. OFCCP contends that these disparities violated Executive Order 11246, which prohibits federal contractors from sex-based employment discrimination," the release said.

While not admitting liability, AT&T agreed to pay back wages, adjust salaries and to take proactive steps to ensure its compensation practices do not discriminate based on sex, race or ethnicity, disability or protected veteran status, the release also said.

The company also agreed to conduct annual compensation analyses across its entire Technical Field Services-West workforce, making salary adjustments as necessary, the release added. The 1965 Executive Order and subsequent labor laws, as amended, make it illegal for contractors and subcontractors doing business with the federal government to discriminate in employment because of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability or status as a protected veteran, according to the release.

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Biden Taps Close Allies Zients, Murthy to Oversee COVID-19 Response - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - Presumed US President-elect Joe Biden has tapped two former Obama-administration officials, Jeff Zients and Vivek Murthy, to oversee the novel coronavirus pandemic response, Politico reported on Thursday.

"Transition co-chair and former Obama administration official Jeff Zients is set to serve as the White House's COVID-19 Coordinator and Vivek Murthy, the former US Surgeon General under Obama, will return to that role, but with a broader portfolio that will include serving as the top medical expert and public face of the work," the report said.

Biden's COVID-19 Advisory Board co-chair Marcella Nunez-Smith will reportedly curate the response-team's pledge to address the impact of the pandemic on minorities, the report also said.

The Biden campaign has begun assembling the next cabinet after US President Donald Trump authorized the General Services Administration to allow transition for the Biden team, despite continuing to dispute the results of the November 3 election.

Trump has said he is the winner of the November 3 election but victory was stolen from him via massive election and voter fraud and acts of impropriety. Trump is currently seeking redress via recounts and lawsuits in state and federal courts.

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Trump Administration Sets January 6 Auction for Drilling Rights in Arctic Refuge - Notice

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump's administration will hold an auction for drilling rights in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge on January 6, the Bureau of Land Management announced in a release on Thursday.

Trump fast-tracked the process to get the sale done before the January 20 inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden, who opposes drilling in the refuge, media reported earlier in November.

"Today, the BLM (Bureau of Land Management) announced its Notice of Sale for the Coastal Plain Oil and Gas Leasing Program in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR)," the release said. "The Federal Register Notice is scheduled to publish on December 7, setting up the lease sale to be conducted on January 6, 2021 via video livestream."

Drilling in the ANWR was banned under previous administrations until Republicans passed legislation in 2017 that opened up 800,000 acres for lease to oil and gas companies.

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US Sentences Romanian Hacker, Counterfeiter to 40 Months in Prison - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - A US court has sentenced Daniel Gologan, a Romanian national living in Pennsylvania, to a 40-month prison sentence for bank fraud and identity theft and he will be deported from the United States upon serving the sentence, the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"Gologan pleaded guilty to obtaining counterfeit debit cards bearing stolen account numbers and PINs in New York, and transporting them to South Abington Township, Pennsylvania. In Pennsylvania, Gologan and his coconspirator, Costel Aparaschivei used the counterfeit debit cards at Penn East Federal Credit Union and attempted to withdraw approximately \$144,620," the release said.

The operation netted \$66,520 and Judge Robert Mariani ordered the sum to be paid as restitution, the release added.

Aparaschivei awaits sentencing after pleading guilty to fraud- and identity-theft charges, according to the release.

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Trump Refuses to Express Confidence in Attorney General After Failure to Find Vote Fraud

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump on Thursday declined to comment on whether he continues to have confidence in Attorney General William Barr, who recently announced the Justice Department found no sign of major election fraud in the November 3 vote.

On Tuesday, the Attorney General said the Justice Department has not seen any fraud on a scale that could have changed the outcome of the US presidential election.

"Ask me that in a number of weeks from now. They should be looking at all of this fraud. This is not civil. This is criminal stuff. This is very bad criminal stuff," Trump said when asked if he still had confidence in Barr.

In early November, Barr authorized federal attorneys to launch inquiries into credible allegations of voting irregularities before the 2020 presidential election results were certified.

Trump on November 17 ousted Christopher Krebs from his position as the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) five days after CISA distributed a statement from a group of federal and state officials who called the 2020 election "the most secure in American history" and said that they found no evidence of votes being tampered with.

The Trump campaign has filed several lawsuits in key swing states in an attempt to overturn the results of the November 3 presidential election. Trump has failed to prevent key swing states from officially certifying the results while his legal team continues to push allegations of widespread voter fraud.

US media networks have projected Joe Biden to be the winner of the November 3 presidential election.

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US Reduces Visitor Visa Length for Chinese Officials From 10 Years to 1 Month - State Dept

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration has reduced the US visitor visas validity period for Chinese Communist Party officials and their immediate family members from ten years to one month, a State Department official said in a statement to Sputnik on Thursday.

"The Department of State is reducing the maximum validity of B1/B2 (visitor) visas for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members and their immediate family members from ten years to one month," the official said in the statement.

The official said in the statement that the move is related to national security concerns given that CCP officials engage in activities to influence the US public through propaganda and economic coercion, among other malign activities.

In addition, the statement said the CCP sends agents to the United States to monitor Chinese national and Chinese-American groups.

In February, the United States designated as foreign missions a number of Chinese state media that led to forcing out about 60 Chinese journalists. The US authorities also required the Chinese media outlets to notify the State Department of their current personnel and real property holdings in the United States.

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US Urges Armenia, Azerbaijan to Resume Work With Minsk Group - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling on Armenia and Azerbaijan to continue their work with the Minsk Group in order to achieve a lasting end to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun said on Thursday.

"We urge the Governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan to resume work with the Minsk Group Co-Chairs to reach a lasting, peaceful end to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict," Biegun said at the OSCE Ministerial Council Plenary Session. "This dispute will not be resolved on the battlefield." Biegun also said he welcomed the cessation of hostilities, adding that this is just the first step.

"Any enduring solution must be based on the principles in the Helsinki Final Act," he said.

In November, Russian President Vladimir Putin together with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and the president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, signed a joint statement on the cessation of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh. The ceasefire agreement paved the way for the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the region. Russian peacekeepers are helping to rebuild power lines, gas pipelines, communication lines and transformer substations in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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US Sanctions Shahid Meisami Group in Iran - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on a chemical engineering and research group in Iran as well as its director over the organization's alleged involvement in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Thursday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated Shahid Meisami Group and its director," the statement said. "Shahid Meisami Group is involved in Iran's chemical weapons research and is subordinate to the Iranian Organization of Defensive Innovation and Research, also known as SPND. The United States designated SPND in 2014 in connection with the Iranian regime's proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) or their means of delivery."

The Treasury Department said in the release that Shahid Meisami Group has been in charge of many SPND projects worth millions of dollars that include testing and producing chemical agents and optimizing them for effectiveness and toxicity for use as incapacitation agents.

"The United States has longstanding concerns that Iran maintains an undeclared chemical weapons program," the statement said.

The Treasury Department pointed out that Mehran Babri used to work at Iran's Defense Chemical Research Laboratory before taking his current position.

"Mehran Babri is being designated pursuant to E.O. 13382 for acting or purporting to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Shahid Meisami Group, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 13382," the statement said.

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US Penalizes Power Company 137.5Mln Penalty for Cheating Investors - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - SCANA, an electric utility firm in the US state of South Carolina, agreed to pay at least \$137.5 million in fines and disgorgement over the failed expansion of a nuclear power plant, the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"The proposed settlement, which remains subject to court approval, would require SCANA to pay a \$25 million penalty and require SCANA and SCE&G [a subsidiary] to pay \$112.5 million in disgorgement plus prejudgment interest," the release said.

The settlement stems from a February 2020 complaint by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) against SCANA, its subsidiary and two former senior executives charging that a project to build two nuclear units would qualify the company for tax credits, despite knowing the project was so far behind schedule it was not eligible for the credits.

The false statements and omissions boosted SCANA's stock price, enabled it to raise rates on customers and sell more than \$1 billion in bonds prior to mid-2017, when SCANA announced it was scrapping the project. As a result, investors lost hundreds of millions of dollars, the SEC said.

SCANA agreed to the settlement without admitting or denying the allegations, the Justice Department said.

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Fauci to Discuss Coronavirus Pandemic With Biden Transition Team Thursday - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci on Thursday will discuss the novel coronavirus pandemic with presumed President-elect Joe Biden's transition team, CNN reported.

Fauci confirmed the virtual meeting with the Biden transition team will take place later on Thursday, the report said.

Fauci is a member of the Trump administration's Coronavirus Task Force to coordinate efforts to combat the novel coronavirus.

Trump has authorized the General Services Administration to allow transition for the Biden team, but continues to dispute the results of the November 3 election due to massive fraud and has asked for recounts and filed lawsuits to seek redress.

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IMF, Argentina Make 'Good Progress' in Talks on Economic Program - IMF

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund and Argentina made "good progress" in their latest talks on a new aid program, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"We recently had an IMF staff team in Buenos Aires to begin formal discussions with the Argentine authorities regarding a new IMF-supported program. As the team said at the conclusion of that visit, there has been good progress in defining the initial elements of Argentina's economic program," Rice said during a virtual press briefing.

He declined to provide specific timeframe for possible agreements, but noted that both sides continue constructive talks.

"As part of these ongoing discussions, a small team from the Argentine economy ministry is indeed coming to Washington for meeting in the coming days [with the IMF staff]," Rice said. Both sides share the view that Argentina needs to implement a carefully balanced set of policies that foster stability, restore confidence, protect the most vulnerable people, he added.

The Argentine economy is suffering significant strains, particularly in light of the coronavirus-related shocks. For the first nine months of the year alone, inflation gained 22.3 percent. Argentina's GDP dropped 19.1 percent in the second quarter of 2020 year-on-year. The share of Argentine citizens beyond the poverty line has increased to 40.9 percent — or 11.7 million people — in the first half a year. This includes around 3 million people living in extreme poverty.

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US Envoy Khalilzad Travels to Turkey, Qatar to Discuss Afghan Peace Process - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad is traveling to Turkey and Qatar to meet with Afghan government and Taliban delegates to discuss the next steps in the peace negotiations, the State Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"In Qatar, Ambassador Khalilzad will meet with the two Afghan parties as they move into the next phase of negotiations following the successful conclusion of an agreement on rules and procedures," the release said.

Khalilzad will also meet with Turkish officials to discuss Ankara's role in the ongoing negotiations and make undisclosed stops in the region to galvanize support for the peace talks. On Wednesday, Nader Nadery, a member of the Afghan government's negotiating team, announced that both sides had agreed on the rules and procedures governing the ongoing peace negotiations, adding that items on the agenda could now be discussed.

The long-awaited peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban movement have been launched in Doha, Qatar, in mid-September. Progress has been slow amid a series of disagreements and a surge in violence, including armed clashes and bomb blasts, in a number of Afghan provinces.

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US Weekly Jobless Return to Falling Trend, Complicating Stimulus Efforts

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - US weekly jobless filings returned to a falling trend, according to government data on Thursday that bodes well for economic recovery but complicates lawmakers' efforts to reach consensus for a coronavirus fiscal stimulus.

Some 712,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, about 10 percent lower than the previous week, Labor Department data showed on Thursday, as the US job market continued to struggle nine months into the pandemic. “In the week ending November 28, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 712,000,” the department said in a news release. It revised upward claims in the previous week to November 21 to 787,000 from a previously published 778,000. That dropped the latest week's claims by 75,000, or about 10 percent. Claims rose in the previous week to November 21, rising by 30,000, or 4 percent, to break four weeks of declines prior to that.

Data on the latest filings came after a bipartisan group of US lawmakers unveiled a \$908 billion COVID-19 relief bill aimed on Tuesday at breaking a monthslong deadlock between Democrats and Republicans over new emergency assistance for small businesses, unemployed people and industries.

Congress reached agreement with the Trump administration in March to pass the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) stimulus, dispensing roughly \$2.2 trillion as paycheck protection for workers, loans and grants for businesses and other personal aid for qualifying citizens and residents.

Since then, Democrats in the House of Representatives have been locked in a stalemate with the administration and Republicans in the Senate on a successive relief plan to CARES. The dispute has basically been over the size of the next stimulus as thousands of Americans, particularly those in the airlines sector, risked losing their jobs without further aid. With

President-Elect Joe Biden set to take office on January 20, talks have, however, resumed for a new stimulus package.

Continuous jobless claims for the latest week in review showed fewer filings from the previous week. Some 5.52 million Americans were on continuous claims for the week ended November 28, versus 6.09 million during the week to November 21. The unemployment rate for last week, meanwhile, stood at 3.8 percent, down 0.4 percentage point from the previous week.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of lockdowns forced by the COVID-19. A rebound of 2.5 million jobs was logged in May and 4.8 million in June, before the recovery began slowing. For both September and October, fewer than 700,000 jobs were added.

The US economy grew by 33.1 percent in the third quarter, after shrinking by 31.4 percent in the previous three months and 5 percent in the first quarter.

Despite the rebound, the economic outlook for the United States remains dire with a rash of new coronavirus infections reported across a nation with nearly 14 million COVID-19 cases since January and more than 273,000 fatalities from that. Hospitalization has also hit daily record highs of above 100,000 in recent weeks, even as vaccine development efforts have been showing promise.

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Harris Appoints Senior Members of White House Staff – Transition Team

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) – Presumed US Vice President-elect Kamala Harris has appointed senior members of her team including a chief of staff and a national security adviser, the transition team said in a statement on Thursday.

“Leading my office as Chief of Staff will be Tina Flournoy, whose deep experience, public policy expertise, and accomplished career in public service make her uniquely qualified for this important position,” Harris said in the statement.

Nancy McEldowney will serve as Harris’ national security adviser, while Rohini Kosoglu will take the position of domestic policy adviser, she added.

“Together with the rest of my team, today’s appointees will work to get this virus under control, open our economy responsibly and make sure it lifts up all Americans, and restore and advance our country’s leadership around the world,” Harris said.

Flournoy currently serves as chief of staff to former President Bill Clinton. Prior to that appointment, she held a number of positions in the Democratic Party, including under the Clinton administration.

Kosoglu currently serves as senior adviser to the Harris team, while McEldowney held the positions of US ambassador to Bulgaria and as charge d’affaires and deputy chief of mission in Turkey and Azerbaijan.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Fall to 712,000 for Week to Nov. 28 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - Some 712,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, about 10 percent lower than the previous week, Labor Department data showed on Thursday, as the US job market continued to struggle nine months into the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending November 28, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 712,000," the department said in a news release. It revised upward claims in the previous week to November 21 to 787,000 from a previously published 778,000. That raised/dropped the latest week's claims by 75,000, or about 10 percent.