

Tuesday 12/08/20

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

'Staggering Numbers': Thanksgiving COVID-19 Wave Emerges as Cases, Hospitalizations Skyrocket
by [Mary F.](#)

The latest data by Worldometer shows that there have been more than 15.5 million cases of the novel coronavirus in the US and more than 292,000 related deaths. Worldwide, there have been more than 68 million cases and 1.5 million deaths.

The United States is beginning to show signs of a post-Thanksgiving surge in [COVID-19 cases](#), with health experts getting increasingly concerned that December may become the deadliest month of the pandemic to date.

According to the [COVID Tracking Project](#), the United States had on average nearly 200,000 new cases a day over the last week, with more than 2,200 people, on average, dying daily in the same time frame.

Specifically, the [latest tally by the New York Times](#) shows that there has been an average of 201,778 cases per day in the last week, which is an increase of 17% from the average two weeks earlier. In addition, the number of hospitalized patients on December 7 was 102,148, the highest figure recorded yet.

Although new case numbers are falling in some states like Wisconsin, Iowa, Michigan and New Mexico, some of the US' largest cities, including areas of the Miami, Florida, and Los Angeles, California, are adding thousands of new cases daily. In fact, over the last week, new case numbers have risen or stayed level in 39 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia, according to the Times tally.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and a member of the White House coronavirus task force, [told CBS' Norah O'Donnell on Monday](#) during the Milken Institute Future of Health Summit that the US has yet to see the entire impact that Thanksgiving gatherings will have on COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations.

"The blip from Thanksgiving isn't even here yet," Fauci told O'Donnell.

"So we're getting those staggering numbers of new cases and hospitalizations before we even feel the full brunt of the Thanksgiving holiday," Fauci added, also warning that cases could spike dramatically due to Christmas and New Year's festivities if Americans ignore medical advice and behave recklessly.

Before the Thanksgiving holiday took place late last month, health experts were already urging people to avoid travel and large gatherings.

"One of our concerns is people over the holiday season will get together, and they may actually be bringing infection with them to that small gathering and not even know it," Dr. Henry Walke, the COVID-19 incident manager for the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [told reporters in a conference call last month](#).

As cases continue to spike, US states are preparing to distribute a vaccine this month. Pharmaceutical companies Moderna and Pfizer have both completed phase 3 clinical trials of their vaccines and have applied for emergency approval for their drugs from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Documents [published Tuesday](#) by the FDA shows that the vaccine made by Pfizer and German company BioNtech provides strong protection against the novel coronavirus within 10 days of the first dose, [the New York Times reported](#).

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Tensions Between US, Iran Rise to 'Terribly Dangerous' Levels as Soleimani Death Anniversary Nears
by [Mary F.](#)

Tension between the US and Iran has been high since the US assassinated top Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force, in Iraq on January 3, 2020.

Relations between Washington and Tehran took a turn for the worse this week as the US imposed terrorism sanctions on Iran's envoy to the Houthis on Tuesday, which may be an attempt to pressure the Islamic political and armed movement to negotiate a halt the five-year civil war in Yemen, [according to Reuters](#).

The Trump administration also imposed stringent sanctions on Iran last year in response to the country's nuclear program and its support for organizations like Hezbollah, Hamas and the Palestine Islamic Jihad, all considered terrorist groups by the US.

Relations between Israel and Iran have also been particularly poor after top Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh was killed east of Tehran on November 27. According to Iran's Supreme National Security Agency, Israeli spy agency Mossad and the People's Mujahedin Organization, an Iranian political-militant organization, were involved in Fakhri-zadeh's killing. Israel, however, has not claimed responsibility for the scientist's death.

Agnes Callamard, the United Nations Human Rights Council special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, [told Newsweek](#) recently that the coming weeks may be "terribly dangerous for the region and beyond" as tensions between the two countries rise and the anniversary of Qasem Soleimani's assassination quickly approaches.

"We are back to a January 3 scenario where everyone — most governments and people like me — were extremely worried about the possibility of escalation," " Callamard noted, referencing Soleimani's January 3 killing.

Last week, [Politico reported](#), citing two US officials, one of whom works for the State Department, that US President Donald Trump is pulling out as many as half of America's diplomats from the US Embassy in Baghdad as tensions with Tehran continue to increase ahead of the first anniversary of Soleimani's assassination.

In a [statement issued last Thursday](#), Israel's National Security Council also warned that there may be [an increase in the threat of terrorism](#) against Israelis abroad, namely those living in

areas near Iran, such as Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and the Kurdish region of Iraq, as well as the Middle East and the African continent more broadly. Sina Toossi, a senior research analyst at the nonprofit National Iranian American Council, told Newsweek that Iran will retaliate for Fakhrizadeh's death, but will avoid war.

"Iran will retaliate for the assassination of scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in a way that will be aimed at demonstrating a cost for such actions against it but avoiding war. Iran will likely bide its time and react in an indirect way and may target Israeli interests and civilians abroad," Toossi said.

"Trump and [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu will continue to up the ante with Iran in the next 50 or so days," he predicted.

"They will be risking a total regional war at the tail end of a president who ran on ending 'endless wars.' If such a conflict erupts, Trump will be bereft of domestic or international support, and will lock the US into yet another needless strategic quagmire in the Middle East," Toossi added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

14 US Soldiers Fired or Suspended After Review Reveals Widespread Sexual Harassment at Fort Hood
by [Mary F.](#)

Fort Hood is a United States Army post located in Killeen, Texas, named after Confederate General John Bell Hood. The base is the headquarters of III Corps and First Army Division West and is also home to the 1st Cavalry Division and 3rd Cavalry Regiment.

Fourteen officers and enlisted soldiers at Fort Hood were fired or suspended Tuesday, following an investigation by the Fort Hood Independent Review Committee that revealed a toxic culture of sexual harassment and other violence at the base, [the Associated Press reported](#).

The committee conducted more than 2,500 interviews with soldiers and civilians, including 503 female soldiers from the 1st Cavalry Division and 3rd Cavalry Regiment, and found that there was a "permissive environmental for sexual assault at the base," [according to an Army news release](#).

In addition, many women revealed that they feared retaliation and ostracism if they reported sexual harassment.

"Fort Hood leadership knew or should have known of the high risk of harm to female soldiers," the release notes.

The latest firings come after the military base has faced a stream of sexual assaults, homicides and suicides this year.

In 2020 alone, [28 soldiers at the base](#) have died due to accidents, suicides, homicides and illnesses. One of the most widely publicized killings was that of Vanessa Guillén, a 20-year-old US Army specialist. She was murdered in April by another enlisted soldier, Aaron David Robinson, who killed himself in July before authorities could arrest him.

The independent review revealed a "deficient climate at Fort Hood, including ineffective implementation of the Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) program

that resulted in a pervasive lack of confidence, fear of retaliation, and significant underreporting of cases, particularly within the enlisted ranks," the Army release reads.

In addition, Chris Swecker, the committee chair, urged for a "dramatic change in culture."

"Soldiers assaulting and harassing other Soldiers is contrary to Army values and requires a dramatic change in culture," Swecker is quoted as saying in the release. "We have recommended changes to the staffing, structure and implementation of the SHARP program at Fort Hood, and possibly beyond, to address deeply dysfunctional norms and regain soldiers' trust."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ivanka Trump, Jared Kushner Purchase \$31 Million Lot on Exclusive Florida Island - Report by [Evan Craighead](#)

The married couple's reported \$31 million real estate purchase is located on "Billionaire Bunker," an island enclave off the coast of Miami, Florida, that is regarded as "the world's most exclusive municipality."

Ivanka Trump, adviser to US President Donald Trump, and senior presidential adviser Jared Kushner are set to close a deal on a \$31.8 million waterfront lot on the high-security Indian Creek Island, or "Billionaire's Bunker," [Page Six reported](#) in a Tuesday exclusive.

Lot 4, the [1.8-acre lot in question](#), is being sold by Spanish singer Julio Iglesias in a deal slated to close on December 17, the outlet said.

The Indian Creek Village [touts itself](#) as "the world's most exclusive municipality" and presently retains a 13-man police force to protect the 29 residences within the private, gated community. Island residents include billionaire Eddie Lampert, the former CEO and chairman of Sears Holdings; Hotels.com co-founder Bob Diener; and businessman Carl Icahn.

Following Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden's projected election victory, the two Trump administration officials are expected to depart their \$15,000-per-month rental home in the Kalorama neighborhood of Washington, DC, within the coming months.

Ivanka Trump and Kushner's alleged purchase signals their potential relocation to Florida.

The president and first lady Melania Trump [filed a declaration of domicile](#) in late 2019, changing their primary residence from New York City, New York, to Palm Beach, Florida.

"I cherish New York, and the people of New York, and always will, but unfortunately, despite the fact that I pay millions of dollars in city, state and local taxes each year, I have been treated very badly by the political leaders of both the city and state," Trump [tweeted in October 2019](#). "Few have been treated worse."

Branding mogul and Manhattan resident Donny Deutsch [argued the New York Times](#) that Kushner and Ivanka Trump would have a difficult time returning to their primary residence of New York City.

"He's despicable but larger than life," he said of the US president. "Those two are the hapless minions who went along."

New York-based comedians Jason Selvig and Davram Stiefler recently made it known that Kushner and Ivanka Trump are "NOT WANTED" and would not be welcomed back to New York City following their White House stints.

Kushner Companies LLC, the New York-based real estate company where Kushner was CEO before taking up his post at the White House, [announced a \\$1 billion apartment project in October](#) that seeks to build a total of 3,000 units in South Florida. A relocation to Florida would put Kushner in closer proximity to the project and the [Bal Harbour penthouse](#) of his parents, Charles and Seryl Kushner.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Brazil Exploring Legal Routes to Ban Huawei's 5G Network - Report
by [Evan Craighead](#)

As Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's government is seeking to exclude Huawei from Brazil's 5G networks, the country's farm state of Goias recently launched a pilot program that relies on hardware and technology from the Chinese telecommunications firm.

Augusto Heleno, Bolsonaro's national security adviser, and Brazil's ministry of communications are examining the necessary security provisions laid out for telecommunications companies in a new presidential decree, [Reuters reported](#) on Tuesday, citing two sources familiar with the matter.

Despite China being Brazil's largest trade partner, Bolsonaro appears to be following US President Donald Trump's lead in opposing Huawei's 5G network.

The Brazilian president has insisted that the Chinese telecommunications company shares its confidential data with Beijing.

Critics of Bolsonaro's push to block Huawei have argued that a presidential decree on the matter could lead to legal fallout with companies already using Huawei equipment.

Goias, for example, [unveiled a Huawei-backed pilot project](#) on Thursday that combines real-time cloud data processing with fast broadband communications to astronomically accelerate the transfer of data for soy farmers.

"We launched this application for soy to show how 5G used with drones can raise productivity and reduce herbicide costs," explained Huawei Brazil marketing director Tiago Fontes.

The decree's resulting legal battle also threatens the planned June 2021 auction of 5G spectrum frequencies.

"Regulator Anatel needs legal provisions to set the rules for the 5G auction," a source told Reuters on Tuesday. "Instructions from the president's security adviser is not enough, so they're looking at a presidential decree to back up any restriction on Huawei."

"If set rules restrict one company without a plausible justification, it would not be upheld in court," the second source explained to the outlet. "That would not only delay technological advance but impact other areas of Brazil's trade relationship with China."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Five Dead After Helicopter Crashes in France's Savoie Department - Report
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The Service Aérien Français chopper pilot reportedly sounded an emergency alarm and was able to eject from the aircraft before it crashed at an altitude of 1,800 meters in the Bonvillard sector of France's Savoie.

Forty search-and-rescue personnel and three helicopters were deployed to the prefecture of the Savoie department Tuesday evening after a chopper transporting four Service Aérien Français employees and two first-aid workers crashed in the French Alps.

Responding authorities scanned the area for the Service Aérien Français pilot, who ejected from the helicopter around 7:10 p.m. local time, and the other five occupants of the craft.

Rescue personnel reported dense fog as an immediate hindrance to responding helicopters' search of the crash site.

"A doctor and a rescue team arrived at the zone at [8:20 p.m. local time]. Contact was established with one of the vehicle's occupants," the prefectural government's statement read, [as reported by EuroNews](#).

It was [later confirmed](#) that the pilot was the only passenger to survive.

"To save lives, they take all the risks. This evening in Savoie, 3 members of the French Air Rescue and 2 CRS Alpes succumbed to a helicopter crash," French President Emmanuel Macron tweeted late Tuesday night.

"A wounded person fights for a living. Support from the Nation to the families, friends and colleagues of these French heroes," he concluded.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Air Force Gives Three Firms Contracts to Build 'Skyborg' Drone AI Prototypes
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US military is looking toward fielding more advanced artificial intelligence systems in future conflicts, including autonomous drones flying under the command of a human pilot. AI pilots have already bested humans in dogfights.

In its quest to develop an autonomous unmanned "loyal wingman" system to accompany manned fighters into combat, the US Air Force Life Cycle Management Center (AFLMC) has handed out contracts to three firms to build prototypes for testing by next summer.

On Monday, [the Air Force announced it had awarded three contracts](#) "to produce missionized prototypes" by May 2021. Boeing was given \$25.7 million; General Atomics was given \$14.3 million; and Kratos Unmanned Aerial Systems was given the largest amount at \$37.8 million. Atomics GA-ASI Avenger Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS), formerly the Predator C drone

[The three firms, plus Northrop Grumman](#), were given \$400 million contracts in July that advanced them [past the opening phase of Air Force selection](#).

The unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) won't be controlled by a remote operator on the ground, however: they'll be governed by the Skyborg Vanguard program, an artificial intelligence system that will one day be able to work alongside human pilots up in the sky.

According to the Air Force, the loyal wingman system will be an "attributional" asset over the battlefield, able to scout ahead of manned aircraft, focus on specific targets and even take an incoming missile intended for a manned aircraft.

In addition to the trio of contracts intended to develop the aircraft component of Skyborg, the Air Force has [handed out contracts to more than dozen other firms](#) to develop all the components of the Skyborg AI, such as navigation, targeting, communication and other functions.

Computer pilots are becoming skilled enough to outwit their human counterparts, too. In August, the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) [hosted a competition for dogfighting algorithms on a flight simulator](#), with the winning program getting to fly against a real human F-16 fighter pilot. Stunningly, the AI bested the veteran aviator in all five matches.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Beijing's Not the Only One: Vietnam's South China Sea Island Reclamation Expanding, Think Tank Says
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A Beijing-based think tank has called attention to extensive land reclamation efforts and military upgrades on a set of islands in the South China Sea controlled by Vietnam. While China is often faulted by the US and its allies for similar efforts aimed at solidifying its claims over the area, Hanoi or Taiwan aren't given the same attention.

Vietnam's land reclamation on several South China Sea islands has continued in recent years, and reclaimed land is being fitted out with new military installations, too, the South China Sea Probing Initiative (SCSPI), a think tank connected to Peking University, has revealed.

A set of recent tweets by SCSPI has brought attention to recent changes on Sand Cay and Storm (Spratly) Island, two islands occupied by Vietnam in the Spratly Islands archipelago. The satellite images show both islands are still being expanded and built upon, with a helipad and wharf appearing on Sand Cay in the last few months and continued harbor dredging, a large 3D radar station and a missile launch site being built on Storm Island.

Since 2011, Vietnam has doubled the size of both islands, adding 9 acres to Sand Cay and 40 acres to Storm Island. In all, Hanoi occupies 27 "features" in the Spratly Islands, 10 of which are islets; the rest are platforms mounted on submerged rocks and reefs, [according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) (CSIS), a Washington, DC think tank.

The islands are two of the largest in the Spratly Island chain, a set of tiny islands that span the central South China Sea. Several nations have laid claim to all or part of the Spratlys, due to the valuable fishing waters surrounding them and the high possibility of petroleum deposits under

the seafloor, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China, better known as Taiwan.

Trung Nguyen, international relations dean at Ho Chi Minh University of Social Sciences and Humanities, [told US state-owned Voice of America in 2019](#) that Hanoi has deliberately kept its actions quieter and smaller in scope.

"The Vietnamese government has made it very clear they just reclaim the islands for self-defense, and they do not expand massively for other purposes," Nguyen said. "I don't think the Vietnamese government wants to draw a lot of attention from other countries on their reclamation, so that's the reason they want to do it quietly."

Similar Behavior, Dissimilar Treatment

China, too, has moved to solidify its claims in the region, building up nearby islands such as Fiery Cross Reef, 90 miles northeast of Spratly Island, and several others across the South China Sea with reclaimed land and military installations. Taiwan's claimed Taiping Island, 115 miles northeast of China's Fiery Cross Reef and just 7 miles west of Vietnam's Sand Cay, is the largest in the Spratly chain and has been similarly fortified. [Last week, Hanoi protested after Taiwanese forces](#) conducted live-fired drills near Taiping Island, which they call Ba Binh Island.

Dow areas where China has conducted construction work above ground during 2017. However, Washington has almost totally ignored the parallel actions of Taiwan and Vietnam, focusing its criticisms on China. While the US has not yet articulated a position on the competing land claims, it has explicitly rejected most of China's sea claims, and the US Navy in particular goes out of its way to show contempt for China's artificial islands with its freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs).

During such drills, a US warship sails through the territorial waters claimed by China around the island as if the island were not there and no such claims existed. China often musters ships or aircraft to ward off the encroaching warship, [which has led to some tense situations](#).

The islands, it must also be said, are more than 2,000 miles away from the closest US territory, which is Guam, and nearly 6,000 miles from Hawaii, the closest US state. In other words, the US has made no claims on territory or waterways in the South China Sea and has nothing at stake in the outcome of the dispute, just an interest in the strategic gains it would make from the victory of its regional partners, [as US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has stated](#).

The US bases its attitude on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in particular a 2016 ruling by an Arbitral Tribunal that dismissed China's and Taiwan's land claims in favor of those of the Philippines, finding that many of the reclaimed islands are legally "rocks." Beijing rejected the ruling, but so did Taipei, and such a description no doubt fits Vietnam's reclaimed islands as well.

rgo ship that forced crew members to seek safety on Taiping in the Spratly island group.

Despite this, Washington carries out no FONOPs flouting Hanoi's claims, and Vietnam's and Taiwan's fortifications, if mentioned at all in the Western press, are portrayed as necessarily defensive against Chinese encroachments, even though the issue of competing claims has not been settled and, from the point of view of each nation involved, the others are the aggressive violators.

In August, [Washington took direct aim at China's artificial islands](#), with the US Commerce Department blacklisting two dozen Chinese firms it accused of being part of the "militarization of disputed outposts in the South China Sea to undermine the sovereign rights of US partners in

the region.” The US State Department began sanctioning individuals connected to the reclamation projects at the same time.

ASEAN, China Commit to Finalizing Code of Conduct

Despite this framing of a Chinese bully, Beijing has repeatedly turned to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei are all members, as the vehicle by which land and sea claims between them must be settled.

In July, [China committed to reopening negotiations on a Code of Conduct](#) of Parties in the South China Sea, which would create a legal structure in which issues such as fishing, mining, and military drills could be settled.

At the annual ASEAN summit in Hanoi last month, [Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc said the member states](#) look forward to the early conclusion of the code of conduct which is effective, substantive and consistent with international law, particularly the 1982 UNCLOS.”

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte likewise committed to fast-tracking a code of conduct, saying he is “one with ASEAN in transforming the South China Sea into a sea of peace and prosperity for all. We are committed to the immediate conclusion of a substantive and effective Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. And if I may add, it has been a long time and it is a long wait.”

Fear of such a peaceful resolution, which would preclude the military response Washington has long been posturing for, has motivated US policy-influencing think tanks [like the Council on Foreign Relations to suggest](#) that the US head Beijing off and establish its own code of conduct with the ASEAN nations it could then impose on China.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Air Force to Rechristen Two Facilities as ‘Space Force Bases’ Amid Confederate Renaming Debate

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The first anniversary of the US Space Force’s foundation is just days away, and Air Force figures seem intent on giving the service its first specialized military bases in time for the celebration. However, the effort is hampered by several contemporary political quarrels. The Department of the Air Force plans to rename two of its bases in Florida from Air Force Bases to Space Force Bases. While the move is not new, the timing has raised eyebrows, since US President Donald Trump has threatened to veto the Pentagon’s 2021 spending bill over controversial provisions for rechristening US military bases named after Confederate figures. Several US officials anonymously [informed Defense One on Monday of the Air Force’s plans](#), which they said will unfold at a Wednesday ceremony at the Kennedy Space Center on Florida’s Atlantic coast. The two bases to be renamed are Patrick Air Force Base and Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, which will become Patrick Space Force Base and Cape Canaveral Space Force Station, respectively.

Patrick was due to be renamed earlier this year, but the Air Force put off the move until after the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the decision to rename it now, amid the worst phase of the pandemic yet, seems strange.

However, the more controversial aspect of the name change is that it reportedly violates a “gentleman’s agreement” not to push ahead with the move until Trump signs the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). Objecting to two parts of the massive spending bill that funds the Pentagon, [Trump has promised to veto it if it crosses his desk](#) without his demanded changes.

On the one hand, Trump has called for a line that would repeal Section 230 of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which protects internet companies from liabilities created by content users post. [Trump has called it “So bad for our National Security and Election Integrity,”](#) and presumed US President-elect [Joe Biden told the New York Times last year](#) that it should be revoked as well. If the section were revoked, it would make sites like YouTube and Twitter [legally the publishers of content users post on their sites](#), prompting them to tightly police that content, lest they be potentially sued for it later.

The other issue in the NDAA is a proposal for renaming US military installations named after heroes of the Confederacy, a short-lived breakaway state that lost the 1861-1865 US Civil War. The Richmond, Virginia-based rebellion was spearheaded by members of the white Southern planter aristocracy who feared the imminent abolition of slavery and the freeing of 4 million enslaved Black persons.

While slavery was abolished after the war, the planter class wasn’t, and their rapprochement with the Union heralded the return of white supremacy in the form of Jim Crow and a downplaying of the role Confederate political and military leaders had in defending or participating in slavery, resulting in several US bases being named after them on the basis of them being American generals.

The nationwide uprisings against racism and police violence that rocked the United States in the summer of 2020 brought forth new demands for an end to positive remembrances of the Confederacy, such as the naming of streets, public buildings and military bases after Confederate figures, as well as [the removal of public statues of those figures](#). Trump has called the efforts an erasure of history and [an aspect of “cancel culture.”](#)

However, neither base is one of the 10 named after Confederate figures. Patrick AFB is named after Maj. Gen. Mason Patrick, the first commander of the US Army Air Corps, and Cape Canaveral’s name dates to the 16th century, when Florida was a Spanish colony.

[Patrick AFB is also one of six finalists in the race](#) to host the future headquarters of the US Space Force, which is part of the Department of the Air Force. The Space Force was officially formed in December 2019, and the christening of its first dedicated military bases is intended as part of a birthday celebration for the force, Defense One noted.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Photo: Minnesota Rep Ilhan Omar Selling ‘F**k Around and Find Out’ T-Shirts After Democratic Victory

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In the aftermath of a resounding Democratic Party victory in her home state of Minnesota in the elections last month, Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar has begun selling some merchandise to celebrate the inability of US President Donald Trump to turn public opinion in the state against her and her fellow Democrats.

During the campaign for the November 3 US election, Trump pledged that his Republican colleagues would unseat Omar and her fellow Democrats, claiming their progressive politics had alienated voters.

“You know, one of the reasons we’re gonna win Minnesota? Ilhan Omar,” [Trump told a crowd in Pennsylvania on November 2](#).

“I’m gonna win Minnesota because of Ilhan Omar,” [he said at an October 29 rally in Florida](#). However, Trump’s Democratic rival, Joe Biden, won Minnesota handily on November 3 by 7 percentage points. What’s more, both Omar and Minnesota Democratic Senator Tina Smith won their reelection races.

“He effed around and found out, I guess,” Omar told Intercept journalist Ryan Grim [on the November 6 episode of the Deconstructed podcast](#) when asked her opinion about the election results.

The quip is now featured [on a pair of T-shirts and stickers on Omar’s site](#), one in gold and one in blue, but in a slightly more explicit form that stars out some of the letters.

The store features T-shirts, sweatshirts and stickers with other slogans as well, including “organized people beat organized money” and “women of color refused to be muzzled.”

Omar belongs to an informal bloc of Democratic women of color in the US House of Representatives who swept into office in the 2018 elections called “the Squad.” While each of them has aroused conservative anger and even jostled their more centrist Democratic colleagues with their outspoken progressive politics, Omar has attracted unique vitriol from Trump because she is a Somali immigrant and a Muslim who wears a hijab. The only other Muslim in Congress, Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), is also part of the Squad.

Since before he became president in 2017, Trump has attacked both immigrants and Muslims, claiming they form a criminal element in the United States and are hostile to American values and [warning that Democrats will enable such problems to continue](#). After he took office, he quickly moved to ban immigration from a slew of majority-Muslim countries and vastly expanded efforts to [hunt down, prosecute and deport undocumented immigrants](#), especially from the Caribbean and Latin America.

“In 2016 I almost won Minnesota. In 2020, because of America hating anti-Semite Rep. Omar, & the fact that Minnesota is having its best economic year ever, I will win the State! ‘We are going to be a nightmare to the President,’ she say. No, AOC Plus 3 are a Nightmare for America!” [Trump tweeted in 2019, referring to Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) (D-NY), another Squad member. The fourth member of the Squad is Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA). All of them won their reelection campaigns in 2020.

Trump, however, has likely been unseated himself. Although he has contested the ballot count in several US states where the race was close between him and Biden, [recounts have only seen state officials re-certify](#) their earlier reports that Biden had won, and his [lawsuits alleging voter fraud have been thrown out](#) one by one. Most of the mainstream media have declared

Biden the winner, and the presumed president-elect has [moved ahead with building his transition team](#) for a January 2021 assumption of office, but the decision is not official until either Trump concedes or the Electoral College casts its votes, the latter of which will happen next week.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Federal Judge Formally Dismisses Case Against Michael Flynn After Trump Pardon by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Ahead of the Thanksgiving holiday, US President Donald Trump pardoned his former national security adviser Gen. Michael Flynn after claiming that the investigation into the ex-aide was part of a “scam.” Flynn came under the microscope as part of the probe into alleged collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian officials in 2016.

A federal judge formally dismissed the three-year prosecutorial case against Flynn on Tuesday, nearly two weeks after Trump [issued the pardon](#), and stated in parting remarks that the act of clemency does not necessarily mean Flynn is innocent.

US District Judge Emmet Sullivan [indicated in a 43-page opinion](#) that Trump’s “full and unconditional pardon” was “extraordinarily broad,” as it not only touched on the charge of Flynn making false statements to the FBI, but also any charges that may stem from the case in the future.

“The history of the Constitution, its structure, and the Supreme Court’s interpretation of the pardon power make clear that President Trump’s decision to pardon Mr. Flynn is a political decision, not a legal one,” Sullivan wrote. “Because the law recognizes the president’s political power to pardon, the appropriate course is to dismiss this case as moot. However, the pardon ‘does not, standing alone, render [Mr. Flynn] innocent of the alleged violation.’”

Flynn pleaded guilty twice to lying to the FBI during an interview about his past conversations with then-Russian Ambassador to the US Sergey Kislyak prior to Trump’s January 2017 inauguration. However, after hiring a new legal team, Flynn [opted to withdraw his plea](#), explaining that he had not remembered the discussions.

Sullivan expressed skepticism over that claim, highlighting that it seemed out of character for someone serving in the White House to simply forget an incident that occurred not long ago.

“With regard to Mr. Flynn’s alleged ‘faulty memory,’ Mr. Flynn is not just anyone; he was the national security adviser to the president, clearly in a position of trust, who claimed that he forgot, within less than a month, that he personally asked for a favor from the Russian ambassador that undermined the policy of the sitting president prior to the president-elect taking office,” the judge wrote.

Sullivan also noted that he felt troubled by the government’s “ever-evolving justifications” that often seemed irrelevant or contradicted prosecutors’ past statements.

The US Department of Justice [moved to dismiss the case in late November](#) after Trump issued Flynn’s pardon. At the time, the department indicated that the probe’s central argument - that

the former national security adviser had lied to the FBI - was no longer considered material evidence.

The federal judge went on to state that the DoJ's justification is a "newly minted definition of 'materiality' that is more circumscribed than the standard in this circuit." He added, "However, that is not the law."

"Where, as here, the government justifies its motion by ignoring applicable law to now question the strength of its case, substantial doubt arises about the government's stated reasons for seeking dismissal," he said.

Ultimately, Sullivan stated that while he was required to toss the case, he was not persuaded by many of the arguments, writing that they were "dubious to say the least."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Joe Biden Officially Nominates Gen. Lloyd Austin as Next US Defense Secretary
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Four-star US Army Gen. Lloyd Austin retired in 2016 and has more than 40 years of military experience. If cleared by US Congress, his nomination would mark him as the first Black official to serve as the US' secretary of defense.

Projected US President-elect Joe Biden [confirmed on Tuesday](#) that he would be nominating Austin to serve as the 28th secretary of the US Department of Defense.

A statement issued by Biden's transition team noted that Austin "is a trusted and crisis-tested leader who has overseen some of the most complex and impactful operations in the history of the armed services - including serving as the chief architect of the effort to defeat [Daesh] in Iraq and Syria."

In a [separate op-ed piece published in The Atlantic](#), Biden wrote that Austin is a "true and tested soldier and leader," and that as a result of spending "countless hours with him," the former vice president determined that his nominee "is the definition of a patriot."

"He rose through the Army's ranks during his distinguished and trailblazing career. He was the 200th person ever to attain the rank of an Army four-star general, but only the sixth African American," Biden stated. "He built a career grounded in service to this country and challenged the institution that he loves to grow more inclusive and more diverse at every step."

"He was the first African American general officer to lead an Army corps in combat and the first African American to command an entire theater of war; if confirmed, he will be the first African American to helm the Defense Department — another milestone in a barrier-breaking career dedicated to keeping the American people secure," he continued.

However, it's worth noting that Austin's nomination, albeit met with less criticism than those of some fellow nominees, was not taken easily by some congressional lawmakers, since the retired military official has not been out of active military service for a [period of at least seven years](#).

The seven-year rule was implemented so that it could be ensured that the US Department of Defense was in civilian control. Most recently, lawmakers issued a waiver to former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, but sentiment has grown against issuing such a clearance.

Biden acknowledged the issue in his op-ed, but called on lawmakers to issue a waiver "given the immense and urgent threats and challenges our nation faces."

"[Austin] knows what is at stake, and he knows how much work lies ahead. And I know that, under his leadership, the Department of Defense will never fail to advance the security of the American people in ways that honor our highest values and ideals," Biden concluded.

Biden's nominee had been included on a shortlist with defense policy adviser Michèle Flournoy and former Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson. The two fellow candidates were also met with opposition, with critics zeroing in on Johnson's links to the expansion of family detentions and deportation during his time in office.

Flournoy [released a statement](#) following the announcement of the nomination, noting that she herself was looking "forward to helping [Austin] and the president-elect succeed in any way that I can." Flournoy was initially considered the front-runner for the position and would have been the first woman to run the Pentagon.

Austin previously led US Central Command and was pivotal to the removal of US forces and equipment from Iraq during the Obama administration's troop drawdown in 2011. He officially retired from active military service in 2016. Austin's nomination was expected to be announced during a Friday event in Delaware.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Arctic Experienced Its Second-Warmest Year on Record in 2020, Annual Report Reveals by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The 2020 Arctic Report Card is the 15th installment of the environmental report led by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The document is released every year in an effort to inform decisions by local, state and federal officials.

Published Tuesday, the [latest installment of the annual report](#) has revealed that the Arctic region has only continued to drastically change as a result of warming temperatures that melt ice and snow cover in addition to fueling extreme wildfires.

The report, which involved the participation of 133 scientists from 15 countries, found that "the transformation of the Arctic to a warmer, less frozen and biologically changed region is well underway."

Officials explained that the root cause for the Arctic's transformation was the change in the region's air temperature and sea ice, as the region documented its second-warmest year since at least 1900 and recorded increasingly fragile sea ice.

Scientists noted in their findings that the temperature over the region this year was about 1.9 degrees Celsius above the baseline average for 1981-2010 figures, and that the warmth was driven by "anomalously warm conditions" recorded during the first seven months of 2020 across the Eurasian Arctic.

The report also underscores that conditions in the Arctic regions “are becoming more favorable for fire growth, with more intense burning, more fire growth episodes, and greater consumption of fuels.”

During the month of June, scientists were shocked when the temperature in Verkhoyansk, a city in northern Russia that sits 260 miles from the Arctic coast, managed to [reach an unprecedented 38 degrees Celsius](#). The city is also located in Russia’s Sakha Republic, which endured devastating wildfires in 2020.

A combination of the region’s heatwave at the time and the peat soil found in the area drove many of the wildfires that ravished the Siberian region earlier this year. NASA in July [released satellite data](#) that showed heavy smoke plumes covering much of the area and indicated that the wildfires expelled more carbon dioxide in June and July 2020 “than in any complete fire season since 2003.”

Russia’s wildfires weren’t fully extinguished by the country’s Aerial Forest Protection Service until late September, by which time the blazes had [spread across some 6.7 million acres of land](#).

The report also noted that ocean surface temperatures had warmed by roughly 1 degree to 3 degrees Celsius in August over the 1982-2010 average, adding that the change contributed to record-low sea ice in the Kara and Laptev Seas.

Commenting on the report, Mark Serreze, the director of the US National Snow and Ice Data Center, [told the Washington Post](#) that the year-on-year changes to the Arctic are largely due to humans.

“The Arctic is quickly losing its ice, and as it loses its ice, it loses its soul. In terms of a report card, the Arctic has been failing for a long time, and the blame lies on us,” Serreze said, adding that the altered region began on this path in 2007, when scientists found that sea ice had reached a record low.

. A graphic included in the newly released report shows that over a 20-year period, the age of the majority of the sea ice dwindled to less than two years. “Ice older than 5 years is very rare today; only a small ribbon remains along the islands of the Canadian Arctic,” reads the report. The latest assessment comes as researchers recently revealed that Greenland’s largest glaciers are [likely to lose a sizable amount of ice](#) due to greenhouse gas emissions such as carbon dioxide. The Arctic Report Card touched on Greenland’s ice sheets; however, the [report indicated](#) the country’s ice sheet decline was “substantially lower than the record” losses documented during surveys conducted between 2018 and 2019.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Operation No Clue - Political Cartoon

US President Donald Trump initiated Operation Warp Speed a few months after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in an effort to establish a quick path for the US to develop a vaccine against the respiratory disease that has claimed the lives of over 285,000 Americans.

The White House on Monday indicated that Trump would be [signing an executive order](#) at an event that would prioritize vaccine access for the US; however, when asked about the matter the following day, Operation Warp Speed's chief science adviser had no means to explain the order.

"Frankly, I don't know, and frankly, I'm staying out of this, so I can't comment," Moncef Slaoui said [during a Tuesday interview](#) on ABC's "Good Morning America." "I literally don't know." When pressed, Slaoui remarked that the work was "rolling," and that, simply put, plans are in motion. "We feel that we can deliver the vaccines as needed. So I don't know exactly what this order is about," he said.

The development came amid [reports](#) that the Trump administration [had passed on "multiple" offers](#) to buy more doses of Pfizer-BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Pornhub Bans Downloads, Unverified Uploads After Backlash From New York Times Column by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Adult film site Pornhub recently came under fire after a New York Times column alleged that a concerning portion of the videos on the website "depict child abuse and nonconsensual violence." The op-ed piece subsequently prompted an investigation by financial services provider Mastercard Inc.

Pornhub [announced Tuesday](#) that the company would, effective immediately, start banning unverified content from being posted on its website as well as prohibit users from downloading any of its videos.

The company also noted that a new verification process would be implemented in 2021 that would allow users to upload new content "upon successful completion of identification protocol," and that it would be expanding its operations to have a team dedicated to flagging illegal material.

"The Red Team provides an extra layer of protection on top of the existing protocol, proactively sweeping content already uploaded for potential violations and identifying any breakdowns in the moderation process that could allow a piece of content that violates the Terms of Service," reads the update.

Additionally, Pornhub stated that it will continue adjusting its list of banned keywords and will monitor search terms to better flag video content in violation of its policies.

As part of the new initiative, the company revealed that it will also start releasing a transparency report that will detail its content moderation results and number of reports filed with the nonprofit National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

"Much like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other tech platforms, Pornhub seeks to be fully transparent about the content that should and should not appear on the platform," the company release reads. "This will make us the only adult content platform to release such a report."

The company's first such report is expected to be released sometime in the following year.

Pornhub found itself hit with backlash after the [Times published an op-ed last week by columnist Nicholas Kristof](#) that stated many of the videos uploaded to the website depicted the sexual assault of minors and nonconsenting individuals. Although the company sternly denied the allegations, it wasn't long before Mastercard Inc. announced that it would be [launching an investigation into the matter](#).

This is not the first time that Pornhub has come under fire for its content, as the company has also been accused of dragging its feet when removing videos. Vice [previously reported in 2019](#) that it took the company several months to delete footage [from the site GirlsDoPorn](#), which was accused of tricking women and coercing them into shooting adult films.

To date, [over 2 million individuals have signed a petition](#) to shutter Pornhub over its alleged enabling and profiting of videos that aid sex trafficking.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Mulls Leasing Polar Icebreakers From Finland to Compete With Russia - Coast Guard

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering a plan to lease ice-breaking security cutters from other nations to expand its current fleet of a single icebreaker, to a flotilla capable of protecting American interests in the far north, Coast Guard Vice Commandant Adm. Charles Ray told Congress.

"The strategy that makes the most sense to the Coast Guard is this potential to lease one of these icebreakers," Ray said in an exchange triggered by Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Security Chair Senator Dan Sullivan, who asked whether a friendly Arctic nation such as Finland should be exempted from a law requiring that American military ships be built in the United States.

"It's no secret that Finland has boasted, apparently with some ability to back it up, they can build an icebreaker within two years and they could do it for less than \$300 million," Sullivan said. The United States currently possesses a single heavy-class icebreaker, the 44-year-old Polar Star, plus a medium-duty icebreaker now out of commission due to an engine room fire. In contrast, Russia operates a fleet of more than 50 icebreakers, Sullivan said. "We've seen Russia push all in on controlling the Arctic. Russia has opened 16 deep water ports, 14 airfields, built arctic military bases and even formed a new northern Arctic command."

In August, a Russian military exercise extended into a US zone of the Bering Sea, where American fishing captains were startled and angered to hear Russians warning them to leave the area, according to media reports.

The US Navy and Coast Guard previously awarded a \$750 million contract for the first of three new heavy icebreakers, known as Polar Security Cutters. Construction is expected to begin next year, with completion expected by 2024, according to media reports.

Plans call for a US to eventually operate fleet of six icebreakers, and to open at least two deep water ports in the far north capable of hosting the ships.

At present, the closest ports in the state of Alaska are at least 1,000 miles south of the Arctic Circle, Sullivan said.

A receding polar ice cap due to climate change has set in motion a scramble to develop vast reserves of oil, natural gas and other minerals and to develop commercial shipping routes.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US House Passes Bipartisan \$740Bln Defense Spending Bill for 2021 by Veto-Proof Margin

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives has passed a revised version of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which includes provisions to sanction the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project and Turkey over its acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system.

The House adopted the bipartisan bill with a 335-78 vote on Tuesday, sending it to the Senate for consideration.

More than two-thirds of the House voted in support of the legislation, which is enough votes for the chamber to overturn a veto as threatened by President Donald Trump.

Earlier on Tuesday, the White House Office of Management and Budget in a letter said US President Donald Trump has been advised to veto the bill.

Trump is threatening to veto the NDAA because it fails to repeal a 1996 law that gives social media platforms liability protection for third-party posts and freedom to police the content. The Republican incumbent also took to Twitter last week to express displeasure over the bill provisions that would rename monuments and bases that honor Confederate figures. He also opposes language in the bill that would possibly slow down troop reductions.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US House Passes Bipartisan \$740Bln Defense Spending Bill for 2021 by Veto-Proof Margin

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives has passed a revised version of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which includes provisions to sanction the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project and Turkey over its acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system.

The House adopted the bipartisan bill with a 335-78 vote, sending it to the Senate for consideration, which is expected to pass on Wednesday.

More than two-thirds of the House voted in support of the legislation, which is enough votes for the chamber to overturn a veto as threatened by President Donald Trump.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Abraham Accords Immune to Possible UAE Arms Deal Disapproval in US Congress - Cooper

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The potential disapproval in Congress of the proposed arms exports to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will not disrupt the US-brokered peace agreement between the Gulf monarchy and Israel, Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs R. Clarke Cooper said.

The Senate is expected to vote this week on a legislation to halt a sale to the UAE of 50 F-35 fighter jets, 18 MQ-9B Unmanned Aerial Systems and a variety of munitions in a \$23 billion deal authorized by the Trump administration after the two chief US Middle East allies signed the Abraham accords.

"It would not disrupt the Abraham accords. Abraham accords are much deeper. The root, the foundation of those accords is recognizing Israel's statehood and the sovereignty of the state," Cooper said on Tuesday when asked during a briefing if the Congressional disapproval of the sale jeopardizes the peace deal.

Cooper said the State Department will continue to address the concerns Congress has raised and certainly wants to ensure lawmakers have a wholesome understanding as to the imperatives and the benefits of this sale.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Supreme Court Denies Republican Bid to Challenge Biden's Win in Pennsylvania - Order

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court has rejected a Republican bid seeking to nullify the certification of results in the battleground state of Pennsylvania, a court filing revealed.

"The application for injunctive relief presented to Justice Alito and by him referred to the Court is denied," the court filing said on Tuesday.

US Congressman Mike Kelly had filed a request to the Supreme Court for an emergency injunction seeking to overturn November election results in Pennsylvania over expanded mail-in voting.

Another vital decision from the Supreme Court is pending related to a lawsuit submitted by the state of Texas this week. The lawsuit is asking the Supreme Court to block the swing states of Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin from participating in the electoral college even though they have already certified election results that show projected President-elect Joe Biden as the winner.

The lawsuit argues that the state officials usurped the authority of state legislatures when they enacted election laws to allow for mail-in voting. The Texas officials also argue that the "appearance of voting irregularities" in the four states is consistent with the "unconstitutional relaxation of ballot-integrity protections" in the election laws of those states.

Trump refuses to concede and continues to dispute the validity of the vote in courts, accusing his rivals of massive election fraud in key battleground states.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Cybersecurity Firm FireEye Says Attacked by Nation With 'Top-Tier Capabilities'

WASHINGTON, December 8(Sputnik) - The US cybersecurity firm FireEye said in a statement that it has been attacked by "a nation with top-tier offensive capabilities" that stole its internal hacking tools.

FireEye didn't identify suspects, but the Wall Street Journal or the New York Times alleged that the hackers were from Russia.

"Recently, we were attacked by a highly sophisticated threat actor, one whose discipline, operational security, and techniques lead us to believe it was a state-sponsored attack," the company said in a statement. "During our investigation to date, we have found that the attacker targeted and accessed certain Red Team assessment tools that we use to test our customers' security."

It explained that these tools mimic the behavior of cyber threat actors and enable to provide essential diagnostic security services to customers.

FireEye said that it continues the probe in coordination with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other key partners, including Microsoft.

"Their initial analysis supports our conclusion that this was the work of a highly sophisticated state-sponsored attacker utilizing novel techniques," the company said.

FireEye said that it has seen no evidence of attackers using its stolen tools, but "out of an abundance of caution" has developed more than 300 countermeasures for customers and the community at large.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

White House Issues Formal Threat to Veto National Defense Spending Bill

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The White House Office of Management and Budget in a letter said US President Donald Trump has been advised to veto the revised 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).

"If the conference report to H.R. 6395 were presented to the President, his advisors would recommend he veto it," the statement said on Tuesday.

The House of Representatives is expected to pass the bill later on Tuesday followed by the Senate on Wednesday.

Trump is threatening to veto the NDAA because it fails to repeal a 1996 law that gives social media platforms liability protection for third-party posts and freedom to police the content. The Republican incumbent also took to Twitter last week to express displeasure over the bill provisions that would rename monuments and bases that honor Confederate figures. He also opposes language in the bill that would possibly slow down troop reductions.

The bill also includes language that would sanctions companies help facilitate the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project and Turkey over the acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Small Business Owners' Expect Recovery From Pandemic to Begin in Late 2021 - Report

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The introduction of coronavirus vaccines has generated some optimism among US small business owners, even though most anticipated a full-scale recovery not to begin until late 2021, a report based on Gallup polling said.

"While small-business owners are more optimistic about their current and future financial situations and the economy, they do not see a financial recovery for the overall U.S. economy or their own business to happen until well into 2021 and beyond. It is important to note that this survey took place Nov. 6-13 - and during this time, positive vaccine news was announced," a press release explaining the report said on Tuesday.

Gallup's polling combined with data from Wells Fargo Bank measures small business confidence with an index, which stood at 72 in mid-November, about half of a pre-coronavirus pandemic record of 142, prior to the pandemic, the report said.

In response to other questions that are not part of the index, nearly half of business owners said revenues have decreased during the past year and just 13 percent reported the number of jobs in their companies had increased. A year ago, a record 27 percent said their companies were expanding payrolls, the report added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Supreme Court Denies Republican Bid to Challenge Biden's Win in Pennsylvania - Order

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court has rejected a Republican bid seeking to nullify the certification of results in the battleground state of Pennsylvania, a court filing revealed.

"The application for injunctive relief presented to Justice Alito and by him referred to the Court is denied," the court filing said on Tuesday.

US Congressman Mike Kelly had filed a request to the Supreme Court for an emergency injunction seeking to overturn November election results in Pennsylvania over expanded mail-in voting.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Cybersecurity Firm FireEye Says Attacked by Nation With 'Top-Tier Capabilities'

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US cybersecurity firm FireEye said in a statement that it has been attacked by "a nation with top-tier offensive capabilities" that stole its internal hacking tools.

"Recently, we were attacked by a highly sophisticated threat actor, one whose discipline, operational security and techniques lead us to believe it was a state-sponsored attack," the statement said on Tuesday. "During our investigation to date, we have found that the attacker targeted and accessed certain Red Team assessment tools that we use to test our customers' security."

FireEye also said that the attack was done by a nation with top-tier offensive capabilities, but did not name the suspect.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Confirms Choosing Lloyd Austin as US Secretary of Defense

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Projected President-elect Joe Biden confirmed in an opinion-editorial piece on Tuesday that he has selected former Central Command (CENTCOM) head Lloyd Austin to be his Secretary of Defense.

"Today, I ask Lloyd Austin to once more take on a mission for the United States of America - this time as the secretary-designate of the Department of Defense," Biden wrote in an opinion piece in The Atlantic magazine. "I know he will do an outstanding job."

If confirmed, Austin would be the first African American to lead the Defense Department.

Biden praised Austin's role in pulling 150,000 US troops out of Iraq during President Barack Obama's tenure, adding that the general practiced good diplomacy when engaging with Iraq and other US partners in the Middle East.

Biden, whose victory has been officially certified by the states, already announced other picks for his cabinet.

Biden has also picked Antony Blinken to be Secretary of State, Avril Haines to be Director of National Intelligence, Linda Thomas-Greenfield to be US Ambassador to the United Nations and former Federal Reserve chairwoman Janet Yellen to lead the Treasury Department.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

White House Issues Formal Threat to Veto National Defense Spending Bill

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The White House Office of Management and Budget in a letter said US President Donald Trump has been advised to veto the revised 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).

"If the conference report to H.R. 6395 were presented to the President, his advisors would recommend he veto it," the statement said on Tuesday.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik)

NEW US SANCTIONS AGAINST NORTH KOREA, IRAN

* The United States has sanctioned six entities and four vessels over their alleged involvement in the transport of North Korean coal, the Treasury Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

* The United States has imposed sanctions against the Iranian ambassador in Yemen and a university for aiding Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps elite Quds Force, the US Department of the Treasury said.

RUSSIA-NETHERLANDS TAX DEAL

* The Netherlands is ready to revise the double taxation avoidance deal with Russia, and believes that the new agreement should take into account the interests of both sides, the Dutch Ministry of Finance told Sputnik on Tuesday.

* Russia is prepared to continue looking for a compromise on double taxation with the Netherlands for two months, while preparing paperwork to void the current agreement, the Finance Ministry said.

THE SARKOZY CASE

* The prosecutor's office has demanded sentencing former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, accused of corruption, to four years in prison, including two years of a suspended sentence, the BFMTV channel reported on Tuesday.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH CEASEFIRE

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu had a phone conversation about the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Russian Foreign Ministry said Tuesday.

* More than 1,100 refugees have returned to Stepanakert, the capital of the breakaway republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, within the past 24 hours with the assistance from Russian peacekeepers, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* US co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group Andrew Schofer will visit Armenia and Azerbaijan this weekend, Acting Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Reeker said.

IOC SANCTIONS ON BELARUS

* Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said on Tuesday that Minsk had to go to court to protest the sanctions of the International Olympic Committee, which temporarily banned Lukashenko from participating in any events held under the IOC auspices.

* Lukashenko said that he was awaiting Russia's reaction to the International Olympic Committee decisions targeted against the Belarusian Olympic Committee.

* The Belarusian National Olympic Committee considers the position of the IOC, which imposed sanctions against Lukashenko, biased and based on superficial study of the situation, the committee said in a statement.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Confirms Choosing Lloyd Austin As US Secretary of Defense

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Projected President-elect Joe Biden confirmed in an op-ed on Tuesday that he has selected former Central Command (CENTCOM) commander Lloyd Austin to be his secretary of defense.

"Today, I ask Lloyd Austin to once more take on a mission for the United States of America - this time as the secretary-designate of the Department of Defense," Biden wrote in an opinion piece in The Atlantic magazine. "I know he will do an outstanding job."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Vows to Get 100M In COVID-19 Vaccine Shots in First 100 Days of Presidency

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden on Tuesday said his administration will obtain 100 million COVID-19 vaccine shots in the first 100 days of his presidency.

"This team will help get at least 100 million COVID-19 vaccines shots in the first 100 days," Biden told reporters in Wilmington, Delaware.

The former vice president said the outbreak in the United States may get worse before it gets better.

Biden said additional funding from Congress will be needed early next year to fund the rest of the distribution efforts for the vaccine and to prevent the United States' response from stalling. The US public will need to be persuaded to take the vaccine because many have become cynical about its usefulness, Biden said.

Biden also said he wants to have US schools open by the end of the first 100 days of his presidency, depending on whether Congress passes a new COVID-19 relief bill.

The US administration is expected to approve two vaccine candidates in the coming days to administer tens of millions of doses in December with hundreds of millions more in subsequent months. The plan is to vaccinate almost all US citizens by the end of the second quarter of 2021.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Natural Gas Output, Demand to Slow in 2020, 2021 - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Production as well as demand for natural gas in the United States are expected to fall for both this year and next from 2019 highs due to the adverse effects of the coronavirus pandemic, the US Energy Information Administration said on Tuesday.

"EIA forecasts US dry natural gas production will average 90.9 billion cubic feet per day in 2020, which is down from an average of 93.1 bcf/d in 2019," the agency said in its Short-Term Energy Outlook (STEO), which is published monthly. "EIA forecasts dry natural gas production in the United States to average 87.9 Bcf/d in 2021."

If realized, it would be the first annual decline in natural gas production since 2016 and the first time that output of the fuel has fallen back-to-back for two years since 2005.

As for demand, the EIA said it expected residential consumption of natural gas in 2020 to average 12.9 bcf/d (down 0.8 Bcf/d from 2019) and commercial demand in 2020 to average 8.6 bcf/d (down 1.0 Bcf/d from 2019).

Industrial consumption of natural gas was, meanwhile, forecast to average 22.5 bcf/d in 2020 (down 0.5 Bcf/d from 2019) as a result of reduced manufacturing activity. The EIA expected total US natural gas consumption to average 79.4 bcf/d in 2021, a 4.8 percent decline from 2020.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Senate Foreign Relations Chief Calls on Saudis to Overturn Sentencing of Doctor

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Saudi authorities should drop all existing charges and free an imprisoned US citizen Walid Fitaihi who was sentenced to a six year prison term, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jim Risch said on Tuesday.

"I encourage the Saudis to overturn this unjust sentence and drop all charges," Risch said in a Twitter message. "This has been and will remain a challenge to the US-Saudi relationship. I encourage the Saudis to overturn this unjust sentence and drop all charges."

Fitaihi, who founded a hospital in Saudi Arabia, was arrested along with hundreds of business executives, government officials and royal family members in a crackdown in 2017. Members of his family say he was held without trial for nearly two years and subjected to torture, a charge the Saudis deny, The Hill newspaper noted on Tuesday.

Two US diplomats attended the hearing in Riyadh at which Fitaihi was sentenced, The Hill said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Republicans on Inaugural Panel Refuse to Affirm Biden as President-Elect - Top House Dem

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Republican members of the Inaugural Committee of the US Congress blocked on Tuesday the resolution recognizing Joe Biden as President-Elect, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer said in a statement.

"Today, at a meeting of the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies (JCCIC), Republicans voted to reject a motion... that the committee affirm that it is preparing for the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris in coordination with the Biden Presidential Inaugural Committee," Hoyer said.

He added that Senators Mitch McConnell, Roy Blunt and the House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy effectively prevented JCCIC from "publicly accepting that the upcoming inauguration" will be for Biden and Harris.

The Democratic candidate Joe Biden was declared winner of the presidential election by major US media outlets. The Republican incumbent Donald Trump refuses to concede and continues to dispute the validity of the vote in courts, accusing his rivals of massive election fraud in key battleground states.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden's Pick for National Security Adviser 'Deeply Concerned' Over Hong Kong Arrests

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Projected US President-elect Joe Biden's pick for US national security advisor Jake Sullivan on Tuesday said he very concerned about the continued detentions of activist in Hong Kong.

"I'm deeply concerned about the continuing arrests and imprisonment of pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong," Sullivan said via Twitter. "We stand united with our allies and partners against China's assault on Hong Kong's freedoms — and to help those persecuted find safe haven." Hong Kong police on Monday announced that they had arrested eight people for taking part in an illegal gathering.

In late June, China adopted a law that adjusts security policies in Hong Kong to Beijing's perception of crime and punishment with regard to separatism, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign countries. The critics of the law in China's special administrative region and abroad fear that it might limit Hong Kong's exclusive rights and freedoms. Meanwhile, China insists the law aims to punish illegal activities in the city without harming the fundamental freedoms of the local population.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Trump Signs Executive Order to Ensure American Citizens Get Vaccines First

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump signed an executive order on Tuesday to prioritize domestic distribution of COVID-19 vaccines over their shipments to foreign countries.

"I sign the executive order to ensure that American citizens have first priority to receive American vaccines. And then we are going to be working with other countries all over the world," Trump said during the Vaccine Summit at the White House.

The president added that exports are also likely to start almost immediately, because "we have millions of doses coming in."

The US administration is expected to approve two vaccine candidates in the coming days to administer tens of millions of doses in December with hundreds of millions more in subsequent months. The plan is to vaccinate almost all US citizens by the end of the second quarter of 2021.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Army to Fire, Suspend 14 Officers After Report Into Soldier's Murder - Secretary

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Fourteen US Army officers including two major-generals will be fired or suspended following an independent report on the murder of Specialist Vanessa Guillen at Fort Hood in April, Secretary of the Army Ryan McCarthy told a Pentagon press conference on Tuesday.

"To restore trust and accountability, I directed the relief and/or suspension of command leaders from the corps to the squad level," McCarthy said. "I have directed the three corps deputy commanding generals for support, the Third Armored Regiment command team and suspended the First Cavalry Division command team."

McCarthy said the base commander Maj. Gen. Scott Efflandt, who was in charge when Guillen was murdered, and Maj. Gen. Jeffery Broadwater leading the 1st Cavalry Division were among those fired or suspended.

McCarthy also said he was going to implement all 70 recommendations made by the five-person independent panel headed by former FBI Criminal Investigative Division Assistant Director Christopher Hickey, especially in response to the issues of missing persons and sexual harassment.

"The issues at Fort Hood are directly related to leadership failure. I am gravely disappointed that leadership failed to act. Without leadership, systems don't matter. ... This report without a doubt will cause the Army to change our culture," McCarthy said.

Hickey said senior officers at Fort Hood the largest US Army base had allowed a permissive environment to develop in which sexual harassments, assaults and other crimes flourished with little response.

US Army Criminal Investigation Command officers at Ford Hood lacked the number, experience, training and resources they needed and had been overwhelmed and ineffectual in dealing with the rapes, murders, assaults, drug crimes and suicides on the base, which were in higher numbers and frequency than at any comparable installation, Hickey added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Judge Dismisses Criminal Case Against Flynn After Trump Pardon - Court Document

(Updates with additional information in paras 4; background in paras 5, 6)

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US federal judge Emmet Sullivan has dismissed the three-year long criminal case against President Trump's former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn after his presidential pardon, a court document revealed on Tuesday.

"Upon careful consideration of the motions, the applicable law, the entire record herein, and for the reasons explained below, the Court DENIES AS MOOT the government's motion to dismiss pursuant to Rule 48(a), and GRANTS the government's consent motion based on the presidential pardon and DISMISSES this case AS MOOT," Sullivan wrote in the order.

In November, Trump issued a pardon for Flynn, who pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI during a probe into perceived Russian meddling in the 2016 election.

Sullivan emphasized that although Flynn was pardoned, it does not render him innocent of violating US law.

Flynn is the only person convicted within the investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into possible collusion between the 2016 Trump campaign and Russia. However, evidence emerged later on that the FBI framed Flynn and the Justice Department dropped the case. The Muller investigation found no evidence of collusion. Russia has repeatedly denied interfering in the US political system.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Trump Legal Team Vows Further Legal Battles Beyond 'Safe Harbor' Deadline - Campaign

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - President Donald Trump's legal team is vowing to continue contesting the results of the 2020 presidential election in court beyond the so-called "Safe Harbor Deadline" on Tuesday, campaign attorneys Rudy Giuliani and Jenna Ellis said in a joint statement.

"The 'Safe Harbor Deadline' is a statutory timeline that generally denotes the last day for states to certify election results," the statement said. "However, it is not unprecedented for election contests to last well beyond December 8... We will continue to champion election integrity until legal vote is counted fairly and accurately."

US law requires all state election disputes, including recounts and legal challenges, to be resolved by Tuesday. It is called "safe harbor" because it provides time to ensure there are no issues when the Electoral College proceedings take place on December 14.

The Trump campaign and the Republican party are seeking redress to their grievances about acts of impropriety and election and voter fraud from the US Supreme Court in the case of the state of Pennsylvania.

Additional lawsuits against battleground states like Michigan, Georgia and Wisconsin - which certified election results - have been filed, including by the state of Texas earlier on Monday.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Vows to Get 100M In COVID-19 Vaccine Shots in First 100 Days of Presidency

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden on Tuesday said his administration will obtain 100 million COVID-19 vaccine shots in the first 100 days of his presidency.

"This team will help get at least 100 million COVID-19 vaccines shots in the first 100 days," Biden told reporters in Wilmington, Delaware.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US, Ecuador Sign Trade Deal to Facilitate Customs Flows, Fight Corruption - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has signed an update of its trade deal with Ecuador to smoothen customs procedures between them and better fight corruption, the Office of the US Trade Representative said Tuesday.

"This Protocol updates the US- Ecuador Trade and Investment Council Agreement (TIC) with four new annexes comprising state-of-the-art provisions on Customs Administration and Trade Facilitation, Good Regulatory Practices, Anti-corruption, and Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises," the statement said. "Once implemented, the Protocol will deliver tangible benefits for traders and investors in all sectors."

US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer and Ecuador's Minister of Production, Foreign Trade, Investment and Fisheries Ivan Ontaneda signed the deal on behalf of their countries, the statement added.

Ecuador is the United States' 41st largest trading partner, with \$12.5 billion in two-way goods trade in 2019.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Judge Dismisses Criminal Case Against Flynn After Trump Pardon - Court Document

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US federal judge Emmet Sullivan has dismissed the three-year long criminal case against President Trump's former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn after his presidential pardon, a court document revealed on Tuesday.

"Upon careful consideration of the motions, the applicable law, the entire record herein, and for the reasons explained below, the Court DENIES AS MOOT the government's motion to dismiss pursuant to Rule 48(a), and GRANTS the government's consent motion based on the presidential pardon and DISMISSES this case AS MOOT," Sullivan wrote in the order.

In November, Trump issued a pardon for Flynn, who pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI during a probe into perceived Russian meddling in the 2016 election.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

United Airlines to Take Delivery of First Boeing 737 Max Since Jet's Grounding - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - United Airlines is set to take delivery of a 737 Max from Boeing as early as Tuesday, becoming the first carrier to receive one of the planes since regulators lifted a grounding order last month after nearly two years, CNBC reported Tuesday. "Nothing is more important to United than the safety of our customers and employees, and as we begin receiving 737 MAX deliveries from Boeing, we will inspect every aircraft, require our pilots to undergo additional training reviewed and approved by the FAA, and conduct test flights before we bring these aircraft back into service," CNBC quoted United as saying in a statement. The FAA, or Federal Aviation Administration, in mid-November lifted their flight ban on the planes, ending the protracted grounding prompted by two crashes in 2018 and 2019 that killed all 346 people on board the flights. The milestone cleared the path for Boeing to resume deliveries to customers.

Since the grounding Boeing changed a flight-control system that was implicated in both crashes to give pilots greater control, and added more redundancies on board. The updates will be included on the plane and others United will receive directly from Boeing. Pilots will also have to go through flight simulator training, a step that wasn't required when the FAA first signed off on the planes in 2017.

The first delivery of a plane off Boeing's Renton, Washington production line is a relief to the company that halted deliveries after the March 2019 grounding, which drove up costs and deprived Boeing of cash. Analysts do not expect Boeing to return to positive free cash flow until the end of 2021, CNBC said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US, Slovenia Sign MOU to Boost Strategic Civil Nuclear Cooperation - State Dept

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States and Slovenia have struck a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on collaboration on civil nuclear matters, the US State Department said on Wednesday.

"Today, the United States and Slovenia signed a Memorandum of Understanding Concerning Strategic Civil Nuclear Cooperation (NCMOU), which improves our cooperation on energy security and strengthens our diplomatic and economic relationship," the spokesperson's office said in a statement.

The deal was signed by US arms control official Christopher Ford and Slovenian Infrastructure Minister Jernej Vrtovec, the release added.

"The United States and Slovenia have been partners in civil nuclear energy since 1975, when construction began on the Westinghouse nuclear power plant at Krsko that has been supplying clean energy to the region since 1983," the State Department said

The MOUs are diplomatic mechanisms aimed at enhancing strategic ties between the Washington and another nation by providing a framework for cooperation on civil nuclear matters and for engagement between experts from government, industry, national laboratories, and academic institutions.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Expects Brent Crude Prices to Average \$49 Per Barrel in 2021 - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Global oil prices set by Brent crude should average \$49 per barrel in 2021, up \$6 from the fourth quarter of 2020, due to lower production and higher economy activity expected from the impact of COVID-19 mitigating vaccines, the US Energy Information Administration (EIA) said on Tuesday.

"EIA expects that Brent prices will average \$49/b in 2021, up from an expected average of \$43/b in the fourth quarter of 2020," the agency said in its Short-Term Energy Outlook (STEO), which is published monthly. "Brent prices increased in November in part because of news about the viability of multiple COVID-19 vaccines, along with market expectations that the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and partner countries (OPEC+) would delay or limit production increases planned for January 2021."

On Tuesday, Brent hovered at just under \$49 per barrel, down \$17 or 26 percent on the year due to the negative impact of the COVID-19. At the height of the oil market collapse in April triggered by the pandemic, Brent traded at just under \$17.

Breaking down its forecast for next year, EIA said Brent was expected to average \$47 in the first quarter of 2021 and rise to \$50 by the fourth quarter.

"The first quarter 2021 average is \$5/b more than forecast in last month's STEO, and the fourth quarter average is \$1/b more, it said. "The higher expected first quarter prices reflect steeper expected global oil inventory draws as a result of the December 3 OPEC+ decision to limit its previously planned production increases in January 2021."

The EIA, however, added that it expected high global oil inventory levels and surplus crude oil production capacity to limit upward pressure on oil prices through much of 2021.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

World Oil Demand Down 8.8Mln Barrels in 2020 Compared to Last Year - US Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - World oil demand is expected to fall by 8.8 million barrels this year as compared to 2019 due to the adverse effects of the novel coronavirus pandemic, the US Energy Information Administration said in its monthly Short-Term Energy Outlook on Tuesday.

"EIA forecasts that global consumption of petroleum and liquid fuels will average 92.4 million b/d for all of 2020, which is down by 8.8 million b/d from 2019," the monthly outlook said. "Reduced economic activity related to the COVID-19 pandemic has caused changes in energy demand and supply patterns in 2020 and will continue to affect these patterns in the future."

EIA said it expected demand for oil to rise in 2021, citing support from a likely rebound in the US economy.

The agency also said it forecasts the global consumption of petroleum and liquid fuels will increase by 5.8 million barrels per day in 2021.

US gross domestic product began rising in the third quarter of 2020 and the outlook assumes it will grow by 3.1 percent annually in 2021 from 2020, EIA added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Co-Chair of OSCE Minsk Group to Travel to Baku, Yerevan This Weekend - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US co-chair of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group Andrew Schofer will visit Armenia and Azerbaijan this weekend, Acting Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Reeker said on Tuesday.

"He [Schofer] will be going this weekend with the other co-chairs to both capitals - Baku and Yerevan - to see where we can get the co-chairs back into a role to try to move forward on a diplomatic solution," Reeker said.

Reeker also said that the United States will continue to watch closely the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and considers the OSCE to be the right platform to raise the matter with the other countries.

The leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, Vladimir Putin, Ilham Aliyev and Nikol Pashinyan signed a joint statement on the complete cessation of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh from November 10. According to the statement, Armenia and Azerbaijan stop at their occupied positions, then a number of regions come under Baku's control, the sides exchange prisoners; Russian peacekeepers are deployed along the contact line and Lachin corridor linking Karabakh and Armenia.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Envoy Visits Northeast Syria to Meet With Coalition, SDF - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for Syria Joel Rayburn visited the country to meet with counter-terrorism coalition leaders and with Syria's opposition, the State Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

"On December 7, Special Envoy Rayburn traveled to northeast Syria for meetings with Coalition military counterparts, senior officials of the Syrian Democratic Forces, and ranking council members and tribal leaders from the Deir ez-Zour region," the statement said.

Rayburn reaffirmed the United States' commitment to help meet humanitarian needs and build the stability and security necessary for a better future for the Syrian people, the release said.

On the way to Syria, Rayburn has discussed situation there, while visiting Israel, Turkey and Egypt. He underscored the need to achieve a lasting, peaceful, political resolution to the Syrian conflict in line with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254, the release added.

On December 4-5, Rayburn attended the International Institute for Security Studies Manama Dialogue in Bahrain. He conducted consultations on Syria with the foreign ministers of Bahrain, Iraq and Jordan, according to the release .

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US House Republicans Warn of Consequences of Failing to Enact Defense Budget

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Republicans from the US House Armed Services Committee warned on Tuesday that a possible failure to enact the 2021 defense spending bill by the end of the year would freeze troop pay and hamper the response to the pandemic.

Earlier in the day, President Donald Trump called on House Republicans not to pass the measure and repeated his threat to veto the bill without provisions that preserve monuments and repeal social media protections. The \$740 billion bill, which guarantees US armed forces can continue to operate without interruption, is expected to pass in both chambers as early as this week.

"Unlike other pieces of legislation, conference reports cannot be reintroduced and immediately taken up in a new congress. The process, which could be expected to take several months, would need to begin all over again," the committee said in a statement.

Failure to enact would halt troop pay, hamper the COVID-19 response, and delay support for military families, the release said.

Trump threatens to veto the NDAA because it fails to repeal a 1996 law that gives social media platforms liability protection for third-party posts and freedom to police the content. The Republican incumbent also took to Twitter last week to express displeasure over the bill provisions that would rename monuments and bases that honor Confederate figures. He also opposes language in the bill that would possibly slow down troop reductions.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Backs Europe's Anti-Lukashenko Sanctions Until Change of Government in Belarus - Envoy

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States supports its European partners' sanctions against Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's government as a means to press for a change in administration, senior State Department official Philip Reeker said during a hearing with the US Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe on Tuesday.

"We join with our European partners to focus on sanctions and other activities and we will continue and we will continue to focus on that until they make the changes and provide to the Belarusian people the government they deserve, that delivers for them," Reeker said.

Reeker said the United States would like to see a better relationship with Belarus on the condition that Minsk addresses Washington's concerns.

Protests began in Belarus after the opposition disputed the results of the August 9 presidential election. According to the official results, incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko won the election and secured a sixth consecutive term in office.

The European Union has since imposed sanctions on 55 Belarus officials, accusing them of repression against peaceful demonstrators and opposition members. In November, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia imposed sanctions on 28 more Belarusians allegedly involved in violence against protesters.

The Belarusian authorities have said that the anti-government demonstrations were coordinated from abroad and insisted the election was legitimate.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Envoy Visits Northeast Syria to Meet With Coalition, SDF - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for Syria Joel Rayburn visited Syria to meet with counter-terrorism coalition leaders and opposition, the State Department said on Tuesday.

"On December 7, Special Envoy Rayburn traveled to northeast Syria for meetings with Coalition military counterparts, senior officials of the Syrian Democratic Forces, and ranking council members and tribal leaders from the Deir ez-Zour region," the department said in a statement.

Rayburn reaffirmed the US commitment to help meet humanitarian needs and build the stability and security necessary for a better future for the Syrian people, the release added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Sanctions Iranian Envoy in Yemen, University - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions against the Iranian ambassador in Yemen and a university for aiding Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps elite Quds Force, the US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is designating Hasan Irlu, an official in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) and the Iranian regime's envoy to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, for acting for or on behalf of the IRGC-QF," the statement said.

The Treasury Department has also sanctioned the Qom-based Al-Mustafa International University, which the US authorities allege is a recruitment facility for the Quds Force. In addition, the Treasury Department designated Iranian-based Pakistani national Yusuf Ali Muraj, who is alleged to have contributed to the Quds Force's recruitment and execution of operations across the Middle East and in the United States.

The United States had designated the IRCG-QF as a terrorist organization.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement that Irlu's appointment signals reinforcement for the Yemen's Shia rebel Houthi movement and will complicate peace negotiations in Yemen.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Sanctions 6 Entities, 4 Vessels Over Transport of North Korean Coal - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has sanctioned six entities and four vessels related to the transport of North Korean coal, the Treasury Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The DPRK continues to circumvent the UN prohibition on the exportation of coal, a key revenue generator that helps fund its weapons of mass destruction programs," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in the statement that referred to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. "The North Korean regime often uses forced labor from prison camps in its mining industries, including coal, exploiting its own people to advance its illicit weapons programs."

The six sanctioned entities were Weihai Huijiang Trade Ltd, Always Smooth Ltd, Good Siblings Ltd, Korea Daizin Trading Corporation and Thinh Cuong Co Ltd. All six were found to have loaded and transported coal for the North Korean regime, according to the Treasury statement. The four vessels sanctioned were Calm Bridge, Asia Bridge, Lucky Star and Star 18.

"All four vessels loaded coal directly from North Korean ports and transported their cargo throughout the region," the statement said. "For many of the vessels, this activity dates back several years."

US sanctions against North Korea's coal itself goes back to 2017 when it began targeting individuals and entities responsible for financing and supporting Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Wants OSCE to Increase Military Security, Transparency - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States would like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to boost military security and transparency, US Acting Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Reeker said on Tuesday. "We want to see OSCE strengthen military security and transparency in the OSCE region," Reeker said at a virtual Helsinki Commission hearing. Reeker said the United States also wants the OSCE to also advance efforts on border security, counterterrorism, as well as trafficking. Last week, foreign ministers from the 57-nation OSCE participated in online two days of talks on existing and emerging challenges. The ministerial council is the OSCE's main decision-making and governing body. It routinely meets in the capital of the presiding country. Due to the pandemic, this year's 27th edition is being held in a virtual setting for the first time, under the chairmanship of Albania.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

White House Denies Rejecting Offer of Additional Pfizer Vaccine Doses - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration did not reject offers of additional doses of the new COVID-19 vaccine from the Pfizer Corporation, White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany said on Tuesday. "That just simply is not true," McEnany told a reporter outside the White House. "This administration didn't pass [on purchasing more of the vaccine]."

Earlier on Tuesday, Pfizer board member Scott Gottlieb said his company had offered additional supplies of the new vaccine in addition to the 100 million doses - enough for 50 million people - that the US government has already committed to purchase. The current US government deal with Pfizer already includes an option to purchase as many as 500 million additional doses of the vaccine.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US House Freedom Caucus Backs Trump in Opposing 2021 Defense Spending Bill - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives Freedom Caucus, a group of conservative Republican congressmen, said in a statement on Tuesday that it stands with President Donald Trump in his opposition to the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and will support his efforts to veto it. "The Freedom Caucus will hold a press conference this afternoon to oppose the NDAA and back Donald Trump's decision to veto it. No House Republican should move to override the president's veto," the statement said.

The Freedom Caucus consists of 37 out of 435 members of the House of Representatives. According to media estimates, their vote against the 2021 NDAA could drop the support for the bill below veto-proof margin.

The \$740 billion bill guarantees US armed forces can continue to operate without interruption and includes increased funding for the housing of military families, among other critical needs. Trump has said he would veto the NDAA if it does not scrap Section 230, which effectively protects big technology companies for censoring content on social media platforms, does not preserve national monuments and does not allow US troop reductions in foreign lands.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Sanctions Iranian Envoy in Yemen, University - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions against the Iranian ambassador in Yemen and a university for aiding Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps elite Quds Force, the US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Tuesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is designating Hasan Irlu, an official in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) and the Iranian regime's envoy to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, for acting for or on behalf of the IRGC-QF," the statement said.

The Treasury Department has also sanctioned the Qom-based Al-Mustafa International University, which the US authorities allege is a recruitment facility for the Quds Force. The United States had designated the IRGC-QF as a terrorist organization.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Wants OSCE to Increase Engagement in Belarus 'Crisis' - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States wants the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to get more involved in "ongoing crisis" in Belarus, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Reeker said on Tuesday. "We do want the OSCE to increase engagement in the ongoing crisis and violent crackdown in Belarus," Reeker said. "We stand with the Belarusian people in their determination and really what they seek is a government that simply delivers for them as anyone should expect and is clearly enshrined in the Helsinki principles."

Protests in Belarus have been ongoing since mid-August amid the country's opposition contesting the results of the election in which incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko won. Many Western countries have refused to recognize Lukashenko as legitimate president and

imposed targeted sanctions against Belarusian officials, citing alleged election fraud and violence against protesters.

The Belarusian authorities have repeatedly said that anti-government demonstrations in the republic were being coordinated from abroad.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Sanctions 6 Entities, 4 Vessels Over Transport of North Korean Coal - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States has sanctioned six entities and four vessels over their alleged involvement in the transport of North Korean coal, the Treasury Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The DPRK continues to circumvent the UN prohibition on the exportation of coal, a key revenue generator that helps fund its weapons of mass destruction programs," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in the statement, in reference to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. "The North Korean regime often uses forced labor from prison camps in its mining industries, including coal, exploiting its own people to advance its illicit weapons programs."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Productivity Falls to 4.6% in Third Quarter - Bureau of Labor Statistics

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US productivity declined in the third quarter to 4.6 percent from 4.9 percent in the second quarter as a result of the novel coronavirus pandemic, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) said in a statement accompanying the quarterly productivity data on Tuesday.

"The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is affecting daily life for the entire country," the statement said. "How COVID-19 pandemic and response efforts may affect key economic indicators produced by BLS will depend, in part, on efforts taken by our various data partners." The BLS said gains in output, or share of goods and services produced, was little changed at 43.5 percent.

In addition, the BLS said hours worked were revised up slightly to 37.1 percent from 36.8 percent and the decline in unit-labor costs was lowered to 6.6 percent from 8.9 percent. 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.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Pandemic Drops Global Air Travel 70%, Despite Rebound in Domestic Flights - Trade Group

WASHINGTON, November 12 (Sputnik) - Passenger demand for international airline flights remained depressed with a year-over-year decline of more than 70 percent in October, a result of heavy-landed lockdowns on arriving visitors by many nations, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Total demand (measured in revenue passenger kilometers or RPKs) was down 70.6 percent compared to October 2019," the release said.

The coronavirus pandemic took an even greater toll on demand for seats on international flights, down 87.8 percent in October compared with the same month in the previous year, the release said.

Domestic demand drove what little recovery there was, with October domestic traffic down 40.8 percent compared to the prior year, the release added, citing a rebound in China which experienced an October drop in air travel of just 1.4 percent compared with October 2019 due in part heavy fair discounts.

In Russia, domestic air slipped back into negative numbers in October, down 10 percent after two months of growth, with new coronavirus cases undermining travelers' confidence, despite few domestic travel restrictions, according to the release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Trump Administration Declined Offer to Purchase More Pfizer Vaccines - Board Member

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration rejected an offer from the Pfizer company to purchase additional doses of COVID-19 vaccine in the second three-month period of 2021, Pfizer board member Scott Gottlieb said in an interview on Tuesday.

"Pfizer did offer up an additional allotment coming out of that plant, basically the second-quarter allotment, to the United States government multiple times and as recently as after the interim data came out and we knew this vaccine looked to be effective," Gottlieb said.

However, the Trump administration repeatedly turned down the offers to purchase more than the 100 million doses of the vaccine it had already bought, he said.

The company has since told the Trump administration that it cannot provide a substantial number of more doses of its vaccine until late June or July, because other countries have rushed to buy up most of its supply.

"Pfizer has gone ahead and entered into some agreements with other countries to sell them some of that vaccine in the second quarter of 2021," Gottlieb said.

In July 2020, the US agreed to buy from Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech for 100 million doses of their COVID-19 vaccine if it passed its safety testing, CNBC noted. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is scheduled to meet on Thursday to review an emergency use application from the two companies.

Also on Tuesday, the FDA published Pfizer and BioNTech's clinical trial data, which showed no specific safety concerns. If approved, Pfizer's entire supply of vaccine produced in its Michigan

manufacturing facility in December and the first quarter of 2021 will be used in the United States, Gottlieb said in the interview.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Chinese Spy Suspect Fang Had Ties With US politicians, Congressman - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - A suspected Chinese intelligence agent called Christine Fang developed extensive ties with both local and national US politicians, including a congressman, in what US officials believe was a political intelligence operation run by China's main civilian spy agency, a US media report said on Tuesday.

Fang carried out her activities over a four year period from 2011 to 2015 during the Obama administration, Axios reported after a year -long investigation.

Fang targeted emerging local politicians in the Bay Area in northern California, close to San Francisco and Silicon Valley as well as across the United States, the report said.

Fang had romantic or sexual relationships with at least two Midwestern mayors and also was active in campaign fundraising, extensive networking and practiced personal charisma, the report also said.

One of Fang's efforts was Democratic Congressman Eric Swalwell and she was involved in fundraising activities on his behalf, the report added.

Swalwell had not seen Fang in more than six years, according to the report.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Defense Chief Discusses S. China Sea With Senior Philippines Officials - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Acting US Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller has held talks with the Philippines foreign secretary and secretary of defense on boosting military cooperation and keeping the South China Sea open, the Department of Defense announced in a press release on Tuesday.

"Acting Secretary of Defense ... Miller met with Philippines Secretary of National Defense Delfin Lorenzana and Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin in Manila today," the release said.

"The secretaries also discussed opportunities for deepening bilateral defense cooperation and advancing a shared interest in a free and open South China Sea."

Miller emphasized the importance of the bilateral alliance between Washington and Manila and the value the US-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement brings to both countries, the release added.

Miller also participated in a capabilities display of recently-delivered US sniper and counter-improvised explosive device (IED) equipment, according to the release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Texas Asks US Supreme Court to Block 4 States From Electoral College - Court Document

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The state of Texas has filed a lawsuit in the US Supreme Court in a bid to block the states of Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin from participating in the electoral college after they certified projected President-elect Joe Biden's victory in the election, a court document showed on Tuesday.

"This Court should first administratively stay or temporarily restrain the Defendant States from voting in the electoral college until further order of this Court and then issue a preliminary injunction or stay against their doing so until the conclusion of this case on the merits," Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton and other state officials said in the Supreme Court filing.

The legal filing argues that state officials usurped the authority of state legislatures when they enacted election laws to allow for mail-in voting.

The laws created a system in which voters were treated differently, with more favorable circumstances allotted to local governments under Democrat control, the court filing said.

The Texas officials also argue that the "appearance of voting irregularities" in the four states is consistent with the "unconstitutional relaxation of ballot-integrity protections" in the election laws of those states.

Trump refuses to concede and continues to dispute the validity of the vote in courts, accusing his rivals of massive election fraud in key battleground states.

US law requires all state election disputes, including recounts and legal challenges, by Tuesday.

The so-called "safe harbor deadline" aims to provide time to ensure there are no issues when the Electoral College proceedings take place on December 14.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Data From Pfizer-BioNTech Vaccine Trial Suggests Favorable Safety Profile - FDA

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Clinical trials involving approximately 38,000 participants suggest that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine has a positive safety profile and poses no concerns that would prevent emergency use authorization, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said on Tuesday.

"Safety data from approximately 38,000 participants ≥ 16 years of age randomized 1:1 to vaccine or placebo with a median of 2 months of follow up after the second dose suggest a favorable safety profile, with no specific safety concerns identified that would preclude issuance of an EUA," the FDA said in a briefing document.

The briefing document, released ahead of a scheduled meeting on Thursday to discuss emergency use authorization (EUA) for the vaccine, concludes that the clinical study "met the prespecified success criteria," an indication that the FDA will likely grant approval for the drug. The FDA document revealed, however, that two patients who received Pfizer-Biontech's coronavirus vaccine during the trials died after receiving the injections.

"A total of six (2 vaccine, 4 placebo) of 43,448 enrolled participants (0.01%) died during the reporting period from April 29, 2020 (first participant, first visit) to November 14, 2020 (cutoff date)," the FDA said in briefing documents released ahead of a scheduled Advisory Committee meeting on Thursday to discuss emergency use authorization for the vaccine.

Both of the vaccine recipients were over the age of 55 years old, the documents said. One patient experienced a cardiac arrest 60 days after receiving a second dose of the vaccine and died three days later. The other patient with baseline obesity and pre-existing atherosclerosis died from arteriosclerosis three days after receiving a first vaccination.

However, the FDA document largely praised the safety results of the trial and said vaccination could even benefit individuals previously infected with COVID-19.

"Only 3% of participants had evidence of prior infection at study enrollment, and additional analyses showed that very few COVID-19 cases occurred in these participants over the course of the entire study," according to the documents.

Data, according to FDA, suggest that "previously infected individuals can be at risk of COVID-19 and could benefit from vaccination."

Last week, the UK became the first country in the world to grant emergency use approval to the candidate vaccine produced by US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and German firm BioNTech. In mid-November, Pfizer announced that their candidate vaccine concluded phase 3 clinical trials, with a declared efficacy level of 95 percent.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Data From Pfizer-BioNTech Vaccine Trial Suggests Favorable Safety Profile - FDA

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Clinical trials involving approximately 38,000 participants suggest that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine has a positive safety profile and poses no concerns that would prevent emergency use authorization, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said on Tuesday.

"Safety data from approximately 38,000 participants ≥ 16 years of age randomized 1:1 to vaccine or placebo with a median of 2 months of follow up after the second dose suggest a favorable safety profile, with no specific safety concerns identified that would preclude issuance of an EUA," the FDA said in a briefing document.

The briefing document, released ahead of a scheduled meeting on Thursday to discuss emergency use authorization (EUA) for the vaccine, concludes that the clinical study "met the prespecified success criteria," an indication that the FDA will likely grant approval for the drug.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Individuals Previously Infected with COVID-19 Could Benefit From Vaccination - FDA

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Vaccination can benefit individuals previously infected with COVID-19, US Food and Drug Administration said in a briefing document on Tuesday. "Only 3% of participants had evidence of prior infection at study enrollment, and additional analyses showed that very few COVID-19 cases occurred in these participants over the course of the entire study," according to the document derailing the trials of the Pfizer-BionTech vaccine.

Data, according to FDA, suggest that "previously infected individuals can be at risk of COVID-19 and could benefit from vaccination."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Two Patients Injected with Pfizer-Biontech COVID-19 Vaccine Died in Trials - US FDA

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Two patients who received Pfizer-Biontech's coronavirus vaccine during safety trials died after receiving the injections, documents released by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) showed on Tuesday.

"A total of six (2 vaccine, 4 placebo) of 43,448 enrolled participants (0.01%) died during the reporting period from April 29, 2020 (first participant, first visit) to November 14, 2020 (cutoff date)," the FDA said in briefing documents released ahead of a scheduled Advisory Committee meeting on Thursday to discuss emergency use authorization for the vaccine.

Both of the vaccine recipients were over the age of 55 years old, the documents said. One patient experienced a cardiac arrest 60 days after receiving a second dose of the vaccine and died three days later. The other patient with baseline obesity and pre-existing atherosclerosis died from arteriosclerosis three days after receiving a first vaccination.