

Friday 12/11/20

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Videos: Several People Injured as Vehicle Drives Into Manhattan Black Lives Matter Protest by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

According to reports, a vehicle has crashed into a Black Lives Matter protest in New York City, injuring at least seven people.

According to local media reports, a BMW car crashed into a group of roughly 60 Black Lives Matter protesters demonstrating in midtown Manhattan on Friday evening.

At least seven people are reported injured, with four people receiving minor injuries and three others receiving more serious wounds, according to the Fire Department of New York (FDNY). According to New York police, the driver remained on the scene and was subsequently detained for questioning but not arrested. [CBS also reported that one of the protesters](#) was arrested "for obstructing governmental administration."

One of the demonstrators told reporters after the incident that the march's police escort should have seen the car coming before it struck the crowd.

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'We Knew She Was a Fraud': Gabbard Blasted for Anti-Trans Bill After Claiming to be LGBTQ Ally by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Just last year, the Hawaii representative co-sponsored a bill designed to ban the kind of exclusion that this bill introduced on Thursday aims to engineer, and critics aren't letting go of the contradiction in her positions.

US Representative Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI) is facing backlash after introducing a bill aiming to exclude trans women from competing in women's sports, contradicting a longstanding claim she was a supporter of LGBTQ rights. Gabbard, who did not seek reelection, has just weeks before she leaves office.

On Thursday, Gabbard and Rep. Markwayne Mullin (R-OK) introduced a bill they claim would strengthen Title IX of the Education Amendment Acts of 1972, a federal civil rights law that protects against discrimination or exclusion based on a person's sex. [Titled the "Protect Women's Sports Act," the bill would amend](#) the 1972 law to make it a violation of its protections "to permit a person whose biological sex at birth is male to participate in an athletic program or activity that is designated for women or girls."

A similar bill was [introduced in the Senate in September by Sen. Kelly Loeffler \(R-GA\)](#), and similar bills have been [introduced in more than a dozen state legislatures](#) this year. In March,

[Idaho became the first to pass the bill into law](#), but in August, a federal judge in Idaho blocked its implementation.

“Title IX is being weakened by some states who are misinterpreting Title IX, creating uncertainty, undue hardship and lost opportunities for female athletes. Our legislation protects Title IX’s original intent which was based on the general biological distinction between men and women athletes based on sex,” [Gabbard said in a Thursday statement](#). “It is critical that the legacy of Title IX continues to ensure women and girls in sports have the opportunity to compete and excel on a level playing field.”

The question of whether or not Title IX includes transgender people, whose gender is not the one they were assigned at birth, has become a political tug-of-war in the last few years. In 2016, when Barack Obama was still US president, the US Department of Education issued new guidance saying that Title IX protected the right of trans people to use the bathroom of their chosen gender. The following year, when Donald Trump became president, he quickly reversed the decision.

However, in June 2020, the US Supreme Court settled the issue by [ruling on a trio of cases that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects](#) LGBTQ people against workplace discrimination. The ruling used the law’s sex-based language to include protections against bigotry based on sexuality and gender as well. The Idaho District Court’s ruling mentioned above referenced the decision. “The State has not identified a legitimate interest served by the Act that the preexisting rules in Idaho did not already address, other than an invalid interest of excluding transgender women and girls from women’s sports entirely, regardless of their physiological characteristics,” [US District Judge for the District of Idaho David Nye wrote](#).

At issue is the question of whether or not trans women have an unfair athletic advantage over cisgender women due to aspects of their physiology that would seemingly violate the fairness prescriptions at the heart of legislation like Title IX. While firm conclusions are still out, those studies that have been done point to hormone replacement therapy (HRT), by which testosterone production is suppressed and replaced by estrogen, reducing the physical performance of trans women to well below that of cis men.

“Ultimately, the trans athlete debate rubs against the sexist social belief that men are born physically superior to women,” [journalist Katelyn Burns wrote in Vox in October](#), noting that the spectrum of height alone contains enough overlap between men and women as to make generalizations about trans people’s physical attributes impossible.

“Part of the problem on the anti-trans side is that they’re starting from the base assumption that trans women are men, and substitute cis male physical traits when discussing whether trans women may have competitive advantages,” she wrote. “They’ll argue that men have bigger hearts and more lung capacity, or produce more red blood cells on average than cis women, and then assume trans women’s bodies would be the same. But initial scientific findings don’t necessarily support that.”

[One study published in the Journal of Sporting Cultures and Identities](#) in 2015 found that years of HRT can reduce the amount of blood pumped by the heart with each beat, impacting athletic performance. However, [another study found in the shorter term that HRT](#) can take longer than a year to reduce the muscular abilities of trans women athletes to those of cis women, but also found they quickly become inferior to the abilities of the cis men they would be expected to compete against under the rules of Gabbard’s bill.

News of the bill brought no shortage of ire on social media, as critics pointed out Gabbard's longstanding claim to have rejected her past anti-LGBTQ beliefs was now rendered invalid and noted this was just one more issue on which she was out of step with the Democratic Party.

"Tulsi Gabbard: assigned Republican at birth," wrote Delaware Senator-Elect Sarah McBride, who last month became the first trans person elected to a state senate in US history.

"Tulsi Gabbard is now introducing a blatantly transphobic piece of legislation aimed at trans and non-binary young people," Charlottle Clymer, a former press secretary at LGBTQ rights group Human Rights Campaign, wrote on Twitter. "Of course, that's hardly surprising for a Republican."

"Usually, when I've criticized Tulsi Gabbard in the past for her heinous record and positions, I've had her fans bombard me with nonsense. It'll be interesting to see how quiet they remain over this. Because trans people are just bargaining chips, right? All we ever were to them," Clymer continued.

"Remember when Tulsi Gabbard tried to convince us she was an LGBTQ ally?" wrote Zeke Stokes, the former chief program officer for GLAAD, an LGBTQ advocacy group. "We knew she was a liar, a fraud. Here's the proof."

Human Rights Campaign [gave Gabbard a 100% on their voting scorecard for the 115th Congress](#), whose term ran from January 2017 to January 2019 - a fact she made sure to tout at Democratic presidential primary events in September and October of 2019 that focused on LGBTQ rights. However, many expressed skepticism at her claim to have renounced her [prominent anti-LGBTQ views from earlier in life](#).

Ironically, just last year, Gabbard co-sponsored the Equality Act, a sweeping civil rights bill that would have banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in education, employment, housing, credit, federal jury service, public accommodations and the use of federal funds.

"Too often, the LGBTQ community still faces discrimination in the workplace, in education, or when trying to find a home," [Gabbard said in a March 2019 news release](#) accompanying introduction of the Equality Act. "It's long overdue that we extend civil rights protections to the LGBTQ community and ensure equal treatment for all Americans under the law - regardless of race, sexual orientation, gender, religion, disability, or national origin."

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'Build an Inclusive Government': Asian Americans Urge for More Representation in Biden's Cabinet
by [Mary F.](#)

Projected US President-elect Joe Biden is currently in the process of assembling his Cabinet. Over the past week, Biden announced Denis McDonough as his pick for secretary of veterans affairs, Tom Vilsack for agriculture secretary and Rep. Marcia Fudge (D-OH) as secretary of housing and urban development.

On Friday, US lawmakers called on Biden to nominate an Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) to fill one of the remaining “secretary-level” positions.

So far, Biden has selected Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA), whose mother emigrated from India, as his vice president. He also nominated Center for American Progress President Neera Tanden, who is of Indian descent, as director of the Office of Management and Budget, [The Hill reported](#). Capitol Hill staffer Katherine Tai, the daughter of Taiwanese immigrants, has also been chosen by Biden as US trade representative, and Vivek Murthy, the son of Indian immigrants, has been selected to return to his former post of US surgeon general.

However, the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC) noted in a statement this week that this administration could mark the first one since Bill Clinton’s where AAPIs do not have a secretary role in the executive Cabinet. For weeks, CAPAC has urged Biden to increase AAPI representation among Cabinet appointees.

“AAPIs are the fastest growing racial population in the country and came out in record numbers to elect Joe Biden to be our next President of the United States. And yet, for the first time in over two decades, we are facing the possibility that there might not be a single AAPI Cabinet Secretary in a presidential administration. Let us be clear: that outcome is unacceptable,”

CAPAC said in a statement obtained by The Hill.

“President-elect Biden promised to build an inclusive government that reflects the diversity of our nation. To not include an AAPI official as a Cabinet Secretary overseeing a federal department would send the wrong message that AAPIs do not need to be included,” the caucus added. “We already see the exclusion of AAPIs in critical policy conversations regarding the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color, immigration and racial justice that often overlook our community due to the harmful ‘model minority’ stereotype that paints AAPIs as a monolithic group.”

The group has specifically been lobbying for David Kim, California’s transportation secretary, to take charge of the US Transportation Department under the Biden administration. Julie Su, California’s secretary of labor and workforce development, is being considered for labor secretary.

In a Friday call with reporters, Biden’s transition officials said the recent selections of Tanden and Tai demonstrate the team’s commitment to establishing a diverse administration.

“We have not only the most qualified and experienced Cabinet, but also we’re on track to have the most diverse in American history,” Jen Psaki, Biden’s incoming press secretary, said on the call, The Hill reported.

In an [interview with CNN](#) last week, Biden also shared a similar sentiment: “When it’s all over, people will take a look and say, I promise you, you’ll see the most diverse Cabinet, representative of all folks, Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos, LGBTQ, across the board.”

Biden still has several positions to fill. Currently, half of his Cabinet picks have been people of color, including Xavier Becerra for health and human services secretary, Cecilia Rouse for chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, Linda Thomas-Greenfield for United Nations ambassador and Alejandro Mayorkas for homeland security secretary.

During his administration, former US President Barack Obama had a record number of three AAPI Cabinet secretaries: Energy Secretary Steven Chu, Commerce Secretary Gary Locke and Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki. The Trump administration had two AAPI Cabinet

appointees: Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao and Nikki Haley, who served as ambassador to the United Nations before stepping down in 2018.

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Twitter Acquires Screen-Sharing and Video Chat App Squad
by [Mary F.](#)

Squad is a social networking app that allows users to share their screens with friends and family as part of a video call. The app was launched last year.

On Friday, Twitter announced that it is acquiring Squad.

"Excited to share that the @squad team is joining @Twitter to help us bring new ways for people to interact, express themselves, and join in the public conversation," Twitter Vice President of Product Ilya Brown tweeted Friday.

Squad will shut down on Saturday as part of the deal, confirmed the app's co-founders, CEO Esther Crawford and Chief Technology Officer Ethan Sutin.

"We are excited to share that Squad has been acquired by Twitter! We are so grateful for all our customers around the world and are excited to build the future on Twitter. Squad will be shutting down on December 12, 2020," [the company's website states](#).

Both Crawford and Sutin will also join Twitter as part of the team. However, Twitter did not disclose any of the acquisition terms.

"I'm excited to announce that Twitter has acquired Squad! The team will be joining Twitter to broaden the spectrum of conversations people can have on the service," [Crawford wrote in a blog post Friday](#).

"I hope that our exit will tip the scale a bit more toward convincing investors to put money into diverse teams because each success is another proof point that we, the historically under-capitalized and underestimated founders, are a good bet. Invest in women and people of color because we will make you money," Crawford added.

In her post, Crawford also explains that Twitter plans to leverage her team's "expertise in audio and video."

The group is "looking forward to building new formats that allow for fun, meaningful and engaging conversations," she wrote.

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'It's Really Sad': US' Ocasio-Cortez Slams Critics Who Call Her Views 'Radical' - Video
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

US Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) joined the US Congress at the start of the 2019 session and has been adamant about pushing improvements to the US' criminal justice, gun

control and health care policies, among others; however, her stances have largely been met with opposition, with critics often disregarding her initiatives.

Ocasio-Cortez held a Instagram Live Q&A session late Thursday in a bid to provide viewers with an update on the [state of Congress' COVID-19 relief bill negotiations](#), but also used much of the livestream to slam critics who have repeatedly characterized her as a “radical.”

The congresswoman initially began the livestream by zeroing in on US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) over his opposition to providing Americans with stimulus checks similar to those dispersed earlier this year.

“Let’s keep it real,” she told the roughly 40,000 viewers who tuned into the livestream. “This is not a situation of every Republican not wanting a check; this is a matter of Mitch McConnell not wanting a check.”

“Mitch McConnell does not want to cut a check,” she stressed, highlighting that negotiations have buckled as many Republican lawmakers - who are being led by McConnell - are instead demanding a slimmed-down aid package that also includes a liability shield to protect corporations from COVID-19-related lawsuits for a period of five years in exchange for \$1,200 stimulus checks for struggling Americans.

“Why do you need to get something for helping your constituents?” Ocasio-Cortez questioned. “Why do we need to exchange people’s well-being and ability to survive for yet another corporate bailout?”

However, within a few moments, the New York lawmaker quickly turned her attention to calling out critics who have labeled her as a “radical” for simply advocating for a livable minimum wage and wanting to pass an aid package without strings attached.

“The fact of the matter is I recognize we need help, you all need help, and I will do whatever it takes in order to make sure that you all get the help you need - get the money that you need, but also aren’t sent in and made so vulnerable at your job that you get COVID and then have no recourse against your employer,” she remarked.

“It’s really sad what gets called radical these days. I get called radical because I think health care is a human right in the United States.”

“Shout out to my fellow radicals in the United States who believe crazy things like a full-time job should be enough for you to live and believe in crazy radical things like if you kill someone, there shouldn’t be impunity,” she continued.

Offering a lesson to her viewers, Ocasio-Cortez noted that if one were to simply refresh their knowledge of American history, they’d realize that there was more “radicalism in the United States as recently as the ‘60s.”

“We talk about how labor unions started in this country - that was radical. People died in this country. It was almost like a war for the 40-hour work week ... a lot of people died for these basic economic rights,” she emphasized.

Ocasio-Cortez has often faced backlash and disapproval from congressional colleagues on both sides of the aisle, as some believe her political views and initiatives to improve living standards in the Land of the Free alienate some politicians and voters.

Most recently, the [lawmaker found herself at odds](#) with Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT) after he blocked two proposals that would establish new Smithsonian museums highlighting American Latino and women’s history.

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'Sad Sack': Pennsylvania AG Slams Ted Cruz Over Trump Election Lawsuit - Video
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The lawsuit, supported by 18 states, seeks to dismiss the US election results in Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin based on allegations that all four states violated the US Constitution when they administered the November 3 election.

Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro, a Democrat, slammed Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) as a "sad sack" Wednesday night after US President Donald Trump called on the lawmaker to support the election lawsuit filed by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton.

According to the suit, [electors in Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin](#) should be blocked from being able to cast their votes on December 14 because the presidential election was compromised in said states.

"He has proven himself to be neither a genius in the law or a genius, frankly, in terms of an EQ ... He is a sad sack," Shapiro said during his appearance on CNN's "Cuomo Prime Time" with Chris Cuomo.

"I don't know if I need to send you a surgeon to examine your spine or a psychiatrist to examine your head," the Pennsylvania AG added.

While [many GOP lawmakers](#), including the recent addition of five House representatives from Missouri and two from Kansas, have signed on in support of the Texas-led lawsuit, not all Republicans in Congress agree with the suit.

"I'm no lawyer but I suspect the Supreme Court swats this away," Sen. Ben Sasse (R-NE) [said in a Thursday statement](#).

"From the brief, it looks like a fella begging for a pardon filed a PR stunt rather than a lawsuit – as all of its assertions have already been rejected by federal courts and Texas's own solicitor general isn't signing on."

Earlier this week, the Supreme Court rejected a lawsuit filed by Rep. Mike Kelly (R-PA) that sought to nullify the certification of results in the Pennsylvania election.

"This was not my case as has been so incorrectly reported," Trump claimed on Twitter. "The case that everyone has been waiting for is the State's case with Texas and numerous others joining."

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Video: Pence's Prancing Jog Garners Giggles From Netizens
by [Evan Craighead](#)

US Vice President Mike Pence spoke at the "Defend the Majority" rally at the Augusta Regional Airport in Augusta, Georgia, on Thursday, but it was his entrance to the event – not his speech – that ended up catching the eye of countless netizens.

Pence arrived in Augusta around 2:00 p.m. local time on Thursday to join Sens. Kelly Loeffler (R-GA) and David Perdue (R-GA) at the "Defend the Majority" rally.

Perdue and Loeffler are presently involved in runoff races against Democrats Jon Ossoff and Rev. Raphael Warnock, respectively. GOP losses in both January 5 runoff races would give Democrat and Republican lawmakers a 50-50 Senate split.

While all eyes have been on Georgia for its upcoming runoff elections, netizens took a brief break from politics on Thursday when they noticed that Pence had a little pep in his step when approaching the podium.

During the rally, the US vice president repeatedly invoked God and described the senators' Democratic challengers as supporters of a "socialist" agenda.

"We need to send them back because the Republican majority could be the last line of defense to preserve all we've done to defend this nation, revive our economy and preserve the God-given liberties we hold dear."

He even appeared to say that God was on the GOP candidates' sides.

"With the support of people all across this state, and with God's help, we're going to keep on winning," Pence said. "We will win Georgia and save America."

Monday marks the first day of early voting in the state.

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Texas Republican Party Chief Calls for Leaving Union Over Supreme Court Election Ruling

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - Texas Republican Party Chairman Allen West in a statement said US states should get together to form a new union of states after the US Supreme Court (SCOTUS) rejected a lawsuit seeking to overturn President-elect Joe Biden's election victory.

"Perhaps law-abiding states should bond together and form a Union of states that will abide by the constitution," West said in the statement on Friday.

Earlier in the day, the US Supreme Court rejected Texas' lawsuit to overturn President-elect Joe Biden's election victories in the battleground states of Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Georgia.

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US Troubled by Mexican Bill to Hinder Law Enforcement Cooperation - Attorney General

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The US government is troubled by new legislation currently before the Mexican Congress that would hinder law enforcement cooperation between the two nations, Attorney General William Barr said in a statement.

Mexican lawmakers are advancing a bill to impose restrictions on operations with the FBI and US drug enforcement agency. The bill is in reaction to a US operation targeting a former Mexican official.

"We are troubled by legislation currently before the Mexican Congress, which would have the effect of making cooperation between our countries more difficult," Barr said on Friday. "This would make the citizens of Mexico and the United States less safe."

Barr said passage of the bill will only benefit violent transnational criminal organizations the US and Mexico jointly need to stop.

In October, US security agents detained Former Mexican Defense Minister Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda in Los Angeles over alleged drug trafficking and money laundering. The incident caused resentment in Mexico, as the US government did not inform Mexican officials about the operation.

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US High Court Rejects Texas Bid to Undo Election, 3 Trump-Appointed Judges Back Majority

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court has rejected Texas' lawsuit to overturn President-elect Joe Biden's election victories in the battleground states of Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Georgia, a court document revealed.

"The State of Texas's motion for leave to file a bill of complaint is denied for lack of standing under Article III of the Constitution. Texas has not demonstrated a judicially cognizable interest in the manner in which another State conducts its elections. All other pending motions are dismissed as moot," the court order said on Friday.

All three judges appointed by President Donald Trump sided with the majority in rejecting the lawsuit.

US President Donald Trump had also joined Texas' lawsuit requesting that the majority conservative Supreme Court bar "the Defendant States," which effectively ensured Biden's win in the presidential race, from using their current voting results to appoint the slate of representatives to the Electoral College.

On Wednesday, 17 Republican states submitted a brief to the US Supreme Court in support of Texas' lawsuit as "amici curiae" - without formally joining the bid.

The District of Columbia and 22 other Democratic states also filed a brief in support of the four battleground states, urging the Supreme Court to reject Texas' lawsuit.

Several of the states sued by Texas have said they did not find evidence of widespread fraud or substantial irregularities. The Trump campaign and the Republican party have lost more than 50 legal battles trying to invalidate Biden's victory in key swing states.

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Trump Signs Measure to Extend Federal Funding for 1 Week - White House

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump signed a one-week extension of government funding through December 18, the White House said in a statement. "The President signed into law: H.R. 8900, the 'Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2021, and Other Extensions Act,' which provides fiscal year (FY) 2021 appropriations to Federal agencies through December 18, 2020, for continuing projects and activities of the Federal Government," the White House said on Friday.

The Senate passed the bill by voice vote earlier in the day.

On Wednesday, the House of Representatives approved it by a 343 to 67 vote to give congressional negotiators time to reach agreement on the longer term appropriations bill.

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US Supreme Court Rejects Texas Lawsuit to Overturn Biden Win - Court Documents

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Car Plows Into New York City Crowd During Protest, Police Say Avoid Area

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - A car drove into a crowd of about 50 protesters in New York City, hitting six individuals, NBC News reported citing a police source.

New York city police in a statement said people should avoid the area of Third Avenue and 39th Street in Manhattan due to a vehicle collision involving multiple pedestrians.

The report said on Friday that none of the protesters have life-threatening injuries.

Two law enforcement sources told NBC protesters surrounded the car and pounded on it. The female driver panicked and drove forward to escape. The car's female driver and female passenger were taken into custody, said police, according to the New York Daily News. New York city police in a statement said people should avoid the area of Third Avenue and 39th Street due to a vehicle collision involving multiple pedestrians. One protester said the demonstration was in solidarity with a hunger strike at the Bergen County Jail in New Jersey. The crash happened about 4:08 p.m. (9:00 p.m. GMT), The New York Daily News said.

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Car Plows Into New York City Crowd During Protest, Hitting Six People - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - A car drove into a crowd of protesters in New York City, hitting six individuals, NBC News reported citing a police source. The report said on Friday that none of the protesters have life-threatening injuries.

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Michigan Supreme Court Rejects Trump Appeal Regarding Election Irregularities - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The Michigan Supreme Court has dismissed another appeal from the Trump campaign in its attempt to address what it claims were election irregularities in the swing state, a court document revealed.

"The application for leave to appeal the December 4, 2020 order of the Court of Appeals is considered, and it is DENIED, because we are not persuaded that the questions presented should be reviewed by this Court," the court order said on Friday.

The Trump campaign was appealing decisions from lower courts that threw out legal challenges over evidence that was deemed hearsay.

The US Supreme Court is expected to decide later today on whether it will consider a lawsuit filed by Texas that is seeking relief for violations of Election Law by the battleground states of Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Georgia.

Legal scholars have said the relief may be to ask the four states to re-do the election, send the matter back to their legislators to select different slate of electors to the Electoral College or send the matter to Congress for a vote.

The Electoral College will meet virtually on December 14 to cast the official ballots for the US presidential election. All 50 states and the District of Columbia have officially certified their results.

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US Designates Senior Islamic State Member for Terror Attacks in Tunisia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has designated Ashraf al-Qizani, a senior member of the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia), for orchestrating a series of attacks in Tunisia, the US State Department said in a statement.

"Ashraf al-Qizani, also known as Abu 'Ubaydah al-Kafi, serves as the emir of Jund al-Khilafah in Tunisia (JAK-T), an Islamic State affiliate in Tunisia," the statement said on Friday.

The State Department said in the statement that Al-Qizani became the emir of JAK-T after the death of group's leader Yunus Abu-Muslim in 2019.

"Under al-Qizani's leadership, JAK-T has carried out numerous attacks in Tunisia," the statement added.

US law prohibits all blacklisted individuals from entering the country and denies them an access to the US financial system, according to the statement.

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IMF Says Completion of Armenia Review Allows Yerevan to Draw \$37M in COVID-19 Aid

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund said in a statement that it has completed its third review of Armenia's Stand-By-Arrangement that will allow Yerevan to draw additional \$37 million in coronavirus-related aid, bringing to \$332 the total extended to the country since the start of the pandemic.

"The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) completed the third review of the Republic of Armenia's performance under the program supported by the Stand-By Arrangement (SBA)," the IMF said on Friday. "The completion of the review will allow the authorities to draw SDR 25.714 million (about US\$37 million), bringing total disbursements to SDR 231.7 million [about US\$332 million]."

The IMF said in the statement that the impact of the measures to deal with the coronavirus outbreak was expected to force the Armenian economy to contract 7.25 percent in 2020, ending a recent period of high economic growth.

The financial support will help Armenia mitigate hardship from the measures undertaken to address the pandemic, the IMF added.

Armenia's economic outlook was generally positive beyond the impact of the novel coronavirus, according to the IMF.

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UPDATE - Biden Says China to Be Key Priority for US Trade Chief Nominee Tai

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden said commerce with China will be a top priority for his administration and his newly unveiled pick to lead the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR).

Biden made the comments upon announcing new cabinet appointments on Friday, including Katherine Tai to be US Trade Representative. Tai, a Taiwanese American lawyer, played a leading role during the Obama administration in trade disputes including targeting China.

"During the Obama-Biden administration she [Tai] was a chief enforcer against unfair trade practices by China which will be a key priority in the Biden-Harris administration," Biden said, stressing that she understands that the United States needs to be more strategic in its trade.

If confirmed, Tai would be the first Asian American and first woman of color to serve as US Trade Representative, the Biden transition team said in a statement after Friday's event. During her previous work in the USTR she served as Chief Counsel for China Trade Enforcement.

Tai is currently the chief trade lawyer for the US House Ways and Means Committee.

Earlier in December, the vice-president elect said his administration will pursue a trade policy that would actually lead to progress in tackling "China's abusive practices," such as theft of intellectual property, dumping of goods, illegal subsidies to corporations, and forced transfers of technologies from US companies to their Chinese counterparts.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on Monday that Beijing is ready to maintain a dialogue with the United States on strategic and long-term issues, adding that the countries should boost negotiations at various levels.

Relations between the United States and China have been strained since 2017, when Washington updated its National Security Strategy to portray China as a major threat to US interests and President Donald Trump launching a trade.

Biden said earlier in December that he was not planning to remove 25 percent tariffs on \$250 billion worth of Chinese imports, imposed by Trump, immediately after entering the White House.

Beijing has repeatedly denied all US allegations of unfair trade practices.

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Biden Says China to Be Key Priority for US Trade Chief Nominee Tai

WASHINGTON, December 12 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden said commerce with China will be a top priority for his administration and his newly unveiled pick to lead the Office of the US Trade Representative.

Biden made the comments upon announcing new cabinet appointments on Friday, including Katherine Tai to be US Trade Representative. Tai, a Taiwanese American lawyer, played a leading role during the Obama administration in trade disputes including targeting China.

"During the Obama-Biden administration she [Tai] was a chief enforcer against unfair trade practices by China which will be a key priority in the Biden-Harris administration," Biden said, stressing that she understands that the United States needs to be more strategic in its trade. The vice-president elect said his administration will pursue a trade policy that would actually lead to progress in tackling "China's abusive practices," such as theft of intellectual property, dumping of goods, illegal subsidies to corporations, and forced transfers of technologies from US companies to their Chinese counterparts.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik)

NUCLEAR POWER PLANT INCIDENT IN FINLAND

* The incident at Finland's nuclear plant posed no danger to the environment and the radiation levels at and near the station are at a normal level, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said on Friday.

US SANCTIONS AGAINST TURKEY

* The United States is planning to announce sanctions against Turkey over its purchase of Russia's S-400 air defense system on Friday, the Wall Street Journal reported, citing a person familiar with the matter.

* US sanctions against Turkey over its purchase of S-400 show disrespect toward an important NATO ally, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said.

US SENATE LEGISLATION

* The US Senate on Friday passed a defense spending bill for fiscal year 2021, which includes sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project and against Turkey for its acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system.

* The US Senate approved a one-week extension of government funding through December 18.

EAEU MEETING

* Russia has sent coronavirus test systems to its partners in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and is discussing supplies of the vaccine with them, President Vladimir Putin said Friday.

* Uzbekistan and Cuba were granted the status of the EAEU observers, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko announced at the online conference of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council.

* The next meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council (SEEC) is scheduled for May 2021, Mikhail Myasnikov, the head of the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), said.

US, CANADA, MEXICO CORONAVIRUS MEASURES

* The United States has reached an agreement with Mexico and Canada to extend border restrictions that limit the so-called "non-essential" travel until January 21 amid the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Acting Secretary Chad Wolf said on Friday.

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White House Tells FDA Chief to Approve Vaccine on Friday or Submit Resignation - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The White House has told US Food and Drug (FDA) Commissioner Stephen Hahn to provide emergency use authorization for the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine by the end of Friday or resign from his post, the Washington Post reported citing anonymous sources.

White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows spoke with Hahn as the FDA deliberated on whether the approval for the vaccine given by an agency panel vouched for its safety. The FDA issued a draft report on Tuesday noting more than 20 side effects from the use of the vaccine, including death, stroke, heart attack, autoimmune disease and facial paralysis.

Earlier in the day, President Donald Trump tweeted that the FDA is "a big, old, slow turtle" in its handling of vaccines, while exhorting Hahn to "get the dam vaccines out NOW" and "stop playing games and start saving lives."

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US Has to Push New START Extension, Negotiate Longer Term Deal - Congressman

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has to pursue a short term extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and continue negotiating a longer term agreement, chairman of the US House Armed Services Committee Adam Smith said on Friday.

"I would push the short term extension and get back to try negotiate a longer term deal," Smith said during an online discussion at the Center of the Strategic and International Studies. "The correct plan at this point is - extend it through negotiations. "

New START, set to expire on February 5, is the last major arms control treaty between the United States and Russia that caps their nuclear warheads and delivery systems stockpiles. The lawmaker said the current administration is actively engaged in negotiations on the New START extension.

"Something is better than nothing," he added.

Smith urged the US government to continue attempts to include China in arms control discussions.

"It is not going to be easy," he acknowledged.

Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested extending the bilateral arms deal for one year, without any conditions, so that the two sides could discuss all the parameters of arms control during this period.

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US Senate Approves Measure to Extend Federal Funding for 1 Week

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Friday approved a one-week extension of government funding through December 18.

The Senate passed the Further Continuing Appropriations bill by voice vote, sending it to President Donald Trump to sign before the current funding expires later today.

On Wednesday, the House of Representatives approved in a bipartisan 343 to 67 vote to extend current government funding measures by an extra nine days to December 18 to give congressional negotiators time to reach agreement on the longer term appropriations bill.

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Pompeo Condemns Iran's New Law on Nuclear Activities, Urges Penalties

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The United States is urging the international community to punish Iran for passing a new legislation that paves the way for increased uranium enrichment and reduced cooperation with the world's nuclear watchdog, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Friday.

"The international community must not reward the regime's dangerous gamesmanship with economic appeasement," Pompeo said.

The legislation, which was recently approved by Iran's Majles and Guardian Council, is "nothing more than the regime's latest ploy to use its nuclear program to try to intimidate the international community," Pompeo added.

The secretary of state warned that the legislation would result in Iran enriching uranium to the 20 percent level and in reducing what the United States considers to be "already unacceptable" levels of cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"The international community has been clear that Iran must begin to fully cooperate with the IAEA without further delay. Failure to do so should not be met with concessions from the international community, but rather with continued diplomatic and economic pressure and isolation of the Iranian regime," Pompeo said.

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US Senate Approves \$740B In Defense Spending Bill, Sending it to President

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Friday passed a defense spending bill for 2021, which includes sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project and Turkey for its acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system.

The 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) passed in the Senate by a veto-proof margin vote of 84-13, sending it to President Donald Trump for signature.

On Tuesday, the House of Representatives also passed the defense spending bill by a veto-proof margin, which puts Congress in place to overturn Trump's veto.

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.

Moreover, Trump has expressed concern 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 at bases overseas.

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FDA Says Has Notified CDC of Working Rapidly to Issue Vaccine Emergency Use Authorization

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The US Food and Drug Administration has informed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Trump administration's Operation Warp Speed that it is working on quickly issuing emergency use authorization for the coronavirus vaccine, FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn said in a release on Friday.

"Following yesterday's positive advisory committee meeting outcome regarding the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, the US Food and Drug Administration has informed the sponsor that it will rapidly work toward finalization and issuance of an emergency use authorization," the release said. "The agency has also notified the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Operation Warp Speed, so they can execute their plans for timely vaccine distribution."

Earlier on Friday, US Health Secretary Alex Azar has said the federal authorities intend to authorize the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine so that Americans may start getting vaccinated as early as next week.

An FDA advisory committee approved the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine on Thursday. However, the FDA also published a draft report on the vaccine on Tuesday acknowledging that it may cause more than 20 side effects, including seizures, strokes, heart attacks, meningitis, and others. Six people have died during the vaccine trials.

The Pfizer vaccine is expected to be rolled out as soon as Friday to healthcare workers and long-term nursing home residents via a massive mobilization effort carried out by the US Army under the Operation Warp Speed project.

People who get a coronavirus vaccine should get a second vaccine shot 21 or 28 days after the first one, according to the manufacturers.

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Wisconsin Judge Rejects Trump's Bid to Overturn Biden Win in State - Court Document

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - A judge in the battleground state of Wisconsin has dismissed a Trump campaign lawsuit seeking to invalidate a substantial number of voter ballots in two key counties, a court document revealed on Friday.

President-elect Joe Biden won Wisconsin by more than 20,600 votes overall. The Electoral College will meet virtually on December 14 to cast the official ballots for the US presidential election. All 50 states and the District of Columbia have officially certified their results.

"The court cannot draw any conclusions based upon this tenuous and inadmissible evidence and cannot extrapolate from the evidence a conclusion that over 28,000 Dane and Milwaukee County residents fraudulently identified themselves as indefinitely confined," the court document said regarding the Trump campaign's claim of voting irregularities.

The court document said the Trump campaign unreasonably delayed taking legal action to address concerns over the absentee ballot application, adding that action could have been taken prior to the November 3 election because the application has been used in the state for more than 10 years.

Moreover, the court document said invalidating the votes contested in this lawsuit while counting votes in other counties with similar issues on the absentee ballot application would violate Equal Protection Clause.

President Donald Trump has claimed mass voter irregularities and fraud occurred in the key swing states, however, US state and federal judges have repeatedly rejected allegations due to failures in their legal proceedings or lack of credible evidence.

As of Friday, Trump and his allies have now lost 55 of 56 election legal challenges, according to a count by Democracy Docket, a legal and voting rights advocacy group.

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US, Canada, Mexico to Extend Non-Essential Travel Restrictions Through January 21 - DHS

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The United States has reached an agreement with Mexico and Canada to extend border restrictions that limit the so-called "non-essential" travel until January 21 amid the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Acting Secretary Chad Wolf said on Friday.

"In order to continue to prevent the spread of COVID, the US, Mexico, and Canada will extend the restrictions on non-essential travel through Jan. 21," Wolf said via Twitter.

Prior to the announcement, the restrictions at US land border crossings with Canada and Mexico were set to expire on December 21.

All non-essential travel between the United States and Canada has been halted since March 20.

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OPCW Awaiting Russia's Reply to Deploy Technical Assistance Visit on Navalny Poisoning

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is still waiting on Russia to reply about the request for a technical assistance visit regarding the poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, OPCW Director-General Fernando Arias said on Friday.

"On October 6, we received a request from the Russian Federation concerning their same incident [Navalny] for technical assistance visit," Arias said. "We suspect the Secretariat is still awaiting elements from the Russian Federation in order to deploy a technical assistance visit to Russia the same way it was done in January."

Arias noted that the OPCW has been engaged with Russia to resolve the outstanding legal, technical and operational matters necessary for such a visit to take place and emphasized the organization looks forward to assist in the same manner it has been done with other parties. On Friday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said there were preliminary verification procedures regarding Navalny's alleged poisoning and an investigation would require substantive materials. Putin said he asked that Russian specialists are allowed to join the investigation and noted that nobody has invited Russia to join in.

On August 20, Navalny fell ill on a domestic flight in Russia. He was initially treated in the Siberian city of Omsk, where the plane made an emergency landing. Two days later, when the doctors determined that he was fit for cross-border transportation, Navalny was taken to the Berlin-based Charite hospital for further treatment.

The German government said doctors found evidence of a poisonous nerve agent from the Novichok group. Russia disputed these allegations, noting that its doctors had found no toxic substances while Navalny he was treated in Omsk.

Following the incident, some German politicians began accusing Russia of being responsible for the alleged poisoning and demanded that the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline be included in Germany's and European Union's response against Russia.

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White House to Use Whatever Powers Needed to Boost COVID Vaccine Output - Health Secretary

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration will use whatever legal powers it has to boost production of COVID-19 vaccines and ensure Americans get them first, Health Secretary Alex Azar said on Friday.

On Thursday, a US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advisory panel approved Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine for emergency use to curb the spread of a pandemic that has infected more than 15 million people in the country and killed almost 300,000.

"We're very optimistic about our ability to enhance production from Pfizer and Moderna to get additional commitments," Azar told Fox News. "We'll use whatever powers we need, but I'm sure it's going to be cooperative."

Earlier this week, President Donald Trump signed an executive order compelling US vaccine producers to prioritize Americans for use over other countries. However, senior administration officials said the action had no real teeth and would not expand the US supply of doses, the New York Times reported. Azar, disputing the report, said the United States will be at the front of the line and expects to see 100 million doses by the end of February.

Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine, developed under a joint-venture with Germany's BioNTech, was given earlier this week to UK healthcare workers, even before Thursday's approval by the US FDA panel.

The administration reportedly passed on an initial Pfizer offer for 100 million doses after clinical trials showed it would require two shots.

The White House, the health chief said, has contracted for 800 million COVID-19 vaccines from five candidates with options to get up to 3 billion doses.

Aside from Pfizer and Moderna, the other manufacturers in the administration so-called Operation Warp Speed for COVID-19 vaccines are US-based Johnson & Johnson and Novavax and British-Swedish company Astra-Zeneca.

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US, Kazakhstan Discuss COVID-19 Response, Counterterrorism - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - The United States and Kazakhstan discussed during a virtual Strategic Dialogue session the response to the novel coronavirus outbreak, economic relations and issues concerning security and counterterrorism, the US State Department said in a statement on Friday.

"Participants discussed COVID-19 cooperation and economic recovery, counterterrorism and security, trade and investment, as well as women's economic empowerment," the statement said. "They also discussed the importance of protecting democratic freedoms, the growing importance of the C5+1 format, and education and cultural exchange."

Both sides emphasized the positive trends in bilateral relations this year, including cooperation on the construction of a border guard training center designed to serve the whole of Central Asia, the statement said.

The participants in the Strategic Dialogue also emphasized the developments on the bilateral economic partnership and the support for rehabilitating and reintegrating returned family members of foreign terrorist fighters, the statement added.

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US Health Secretary Says Americans May Start Getting Coronavirus Vaccine Next Week

WASHINGTON, December 11 (Sputnik) - US Health Secretary Alex Azar has said on Friday the federal authorities intend to authorize the coronavirus vaccine produced by Pfizer and Americans may start getting vaccinated as early as next week.

"Just a little bit ago the FDA informed Pfizer that they do intend to proceed towards an authorization for their vaccines, so in the next couple of days probably as we work to negotiate with Pfizer the information doctors need to prescribe it appropriately we should be seeing the authorization of this first vaccine," Azar said. "[W]e will work with Pfizer to get that shipped out and so we could see people getting vaccinated Monday, Tuesday of next week."

Azar said some 20 million Americans may be vaccinated in the next coming weeks and up to 50 million by the end of January.

"We believe we could have 100 million vaccinations in arm by the end of February," Azar added.

On Thursday, a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advisory panel approved Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine. However, the FDA also published a draft report the vaccine on Tuesday acknowledging that it may cause more than 20 side effects, including seizures, strokes, heart attacks, meningitis, and others.

The Pfizer vaccine is expected to be rolled out as soon as Friday to healthcare workers and long-term nursing home residents under a massive mobilization effort carried out by the US Army under the Trump administration "Operation Warp Speed" project.

People who get one of the two coronavirus vaccines should get their second shot 21 or 28 days after the first one, according to the manufacturers.

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Trudeau Announces Amended Climate Plan With \$11.7Bln in Additional Funding, Tax Hikes

TORONTO, December 11 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau revealed on Friday an amended climate change plan that includes nearly \$12 billion in additional federal funding and changes to the carbon tax program.

"Today, we are announcing a new, strengthened climate plan ... to accelerate our efforts we are investing \$15 billion [US\$11.74 billion] through this plan with more to come," Trudeau said.

The announced funding comes on top of the \$4.7 billion commitment made by the state-run Canada Infrastructure Bank (CIB) in the earlier version of the plan.

The government said in a press release that the plan allocates \$4.7 billion for the construction of energy-efficient buildings and retrofits to commercial buildings and private residences.

The plan also includes a carbon tax hike, which will see the price-per-ton on emissions rise by \$11.74 annually, topping out at \$133.10 by 2030. According to reports, the tax hike will see prices at the pump spike by at least 30 cents in the next decade.

However, the plan can be derailed by ongoing lawsuits against the federal carbon tax program.

Currently Alberta's, Ontario's and Saskatchewan's challenges against the carbon tax, questioning its constitutionality, are before Canada's Supreme Court. Trudeau sidestepped questions about the future of the program should the carbon tax be ruled unconstitutional.

The Trudeau government has made combating climate change a priority, signing onto the Paris climate accord and even vowing to exceed targets set at the 2016 summit prematurely. The government's efforts have faced strong criticism from both the political left and right, with Trudeau being concurrently accused of consistently missing existing climate targets and undermining the Canadian resource sector.

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Canada Health Agency Projects Up to 134,931 New COVID-19 Cases, 1,811 Deaths by Christmas

TORONTO, December 11 (Sputnik) - Canadian health officials project up to 134,931 additional novel coronavirus cases and more than 1,811 coronavirus-related deaths by Christmas, an updated epidemiology and modelling report revealed on Friday.

The number of Canadians who have tested positive for the novel coronavirus will range between 531,000 and 577,000, while the number of deaths is expected to fall in the 14,410 to 14,920 range by December 25, the Public Health Agency of Canada said.

The agency projects that if current trends hold, Canada could see the daily case count rise to 10,000 up from an average of 6,500 this week.

As of Friday, the agency has reported more than 444,000 coronavirus cases and more than 13,100 coronavirus-related fatalities.

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First Doses of Pfizer's Covid-19 Vaccine Set to Arrive in Canada in 'Few Days' - Trudeau

TORONTO, December 11 (Sputnik) - The first 30,000 doses of Pfizer and BioNTech's COVID-19 vaccine are due to arrive in Canada in a matter of days, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told reporters.

"The first 30,000 doses are expected to arrive on Canadian soil in just a few days," Trudeau said on Thursday, a day after health regulators approved the country's first vaccine against the novel coronavirus, granting emergency authorization to the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine candidate. The federal government will cover the cost of the vaccine, Trudeau added.

The prime minister also announced that his government will create a federal vaccine support program to address the unintended adverse effects of vaccines, including the COVID-19 vaccine.

Canada is expected receive up to 249,000 doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech before the end of December, which will allow up to 124,500 Canadians to be vaccinated before the end of the year, Trudeau said on Monday.

Public health officials say the plan is to vaccinate 40 to 50 percent of Canadians by next summer and complete the COVID-19 immunization program by September 30, 2021. As of Tuesday, Canadian authorities have reported over 440,000 coronavirus cases and more than 13,000 virus-related fatalities.